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SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY, AND HORROR

Fantasy Scroll mag

ISSUE
04



Cat Rambo • Rachel Pollack • William Meikle • Charity Tahmaseb • Seth Chambers

Fantasy Scroll Magazine
Speculative Fiction - Issue #4 – December 2014

**Featuring works by Anaea Lay, Anna Zumbro, Cat Rambo, Charity Tahmaseb,
Erin Cole, Henry Szabranski, James B. Willard, Rachel Pollack, Richard Zwicker,
Seth Chambers, William Meikle, William Reid**

This collection is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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First Readers: M.E. Garber, Day Jamison, Jennifer McGinnis,

Alex Hurst, Rachel Aronov

Cover Art: Kuldar Leement

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Editorial, December 2014

Iulian Ionescu

Welcome to Issue #4 of Fantasy Scroll Magazine.

Woo-hoo! We've done it! The first year is behind us. Let me take just a moment to recall what we've accomplished in this first year. We have published 4 issues, 52 total stories, 41 of which were original stories and 11 were reprints. In addition, we featured 18 interviews with authors, editors, and artists, 4 book reviews, and 4 movie reviews. Besides giving a voice to a lot of awesome, new writers, we've also included well-known names, such as Ken Liu, Mike Resnick, Piers Anthony, Cat Rambo, KJ Kabza, Alex Shvartsman, and more.

Our website has slightly morphed into something bigger and better each month as we've listened to your comments and suggestions on how to improve it. Our readership and traffic is growing, and we're doing our best to keep you all entertained!

As we are approaching the end of this year, our first year, I want to take this opportunity to thank everyone who helped along the way. I want to thank the staff—editors, first readers and proofreaders—for doing a great job. This magazine would not be possible without the help of these awesome volunteers. I want to thank the writers who relentlessly send us their works

and I want to thank the readers for reading our magazine and spreading the good word around.

Now, before I talk about our future plans, let me delve into the meat of Issue #4.

As always, we have a pretty diverse selection of fantasy and science fiction stories. I feel like this issue in particular is a little bit on the light side, the stories are more uplifting than before; maybe we just wanted to end this year on a slightly positive note.

We start the issue with Cat Rambo's "*Circus in the Bloodwarm Rain*," a story that deals with teenage struggle, with being misunderstood and unable to find your place in the community, all wrapped in a shroud of magic and fantasy. And since I'm here, I'd like to congratulate Cat on her new role of Vice President of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. Way to go, Cat!

Next is a reprint from Rachel Pollack, "*Forever*," originally published in F&SF. This is a story where the fantastic blends with reality and the boundaries between them get diluted. It's a story of love and struggle, and dealing with loss.

Henry Szabranski's "*The Dragonmaster's Ghost*" is a classic-feel fantasy story, filled

with spells, ghosts, unusual places, and a strong female character.

After this fantasy overload, we move to "Restart," a science fiction story by William Reid describing a world where time can be controlled by certain people. "Feeling All Right" by Richard Zwicker flows right in, and discusses the effects of artificially-programmed emotions.

Seth Chambers lights up the mood with his funny "Universe in a Teacup," followed by the more serious "Skipping Stones," by Erin Cole.

Charity Tahmaseb comes next with a poignant flash story called "Incriminating Evidence." Next is James B. Willard with his paranormal story, "Posthumous," that borders horror in a very subtle way.

"Your Cities," is a reprint by Anaea Lay, depicting a strange future where cities come alive.

We finish on a lighter note with Anna Zumbro's "Seaside Sirens, 1848," and William Meikle's "#Dragonspit," a story based on Twitter.

In addition to these stories, we have interviews with Cat Rambo, Charity Tahmaseb, William Meikle, and award winning editor Lynne Thomas of ex-Apex fame and current editor of a new speculative magazine called *Uncanny*. We have our usual artist spotlight featuring the cover artist for this issue, Kuldar Leement. The book review in this issue is written by Jeremy Szal for Joe Abercrombie's "Half a King," the first book in *The Shattered Sea*

series. Lastly, we have our movie review by Mark Leeper—"Interstellar," directed by Christopher Nolan.

On top of all of this, we are experimenting with something new in this last issue of 2014: games. We did an interview with the founders of *Awaken Realms*, a Polish design company who created a new fantasy-based game called "The Edge." The game will be available in 2015, so in this article we are talking with its creators about the idea, the process, and the goals for the future. We hope you enjoy this segment and if we find enough traction perhaps we'll make this a permanent feature.

So, that's it for our Issue #4! But before I say goodbye, let me tell you a few words about what 2015 will be for *Fantasy Scroll Magazine*.

First of all—ta-da!—we are turning bi-monthly. Our readers told us they'd rather read us more often, so in 2015 we will have 6 issues instead of 4, with the first issue being published on or around February 1st. Our hope is that during 2015 we will strengthen our processes, become closer to a well-oiled machine, and improve our finances, all as a setup to becoming a monthly publication in 2016. So far, we are on track!

The second big news is that we are launching our own podcast! We think that the stories we publish are so cool that they deserve an actual voice. So we partnered with a few voice actors and loaded a room with recording and editing equipment, and we're ready to go! Each of the stories for

which we obtain audio rights will be produced as an audio file and distributed on the site with the corresponding issue. Then, on a weekly basis we will push the podcast episodes to the various podcast libraries, such as *iTunes*, *Soundcloud*, *Downpour* and so on. We hope that the listeners will enjoy our podcast and will help grow our subscription base.

Also, sometime in 2015 we will release an anthology containing all stories we have published in 2014. We don't know when yet, but you'll be the first to know. We will do our best to do an e-book and a print version of this anthology, but the time and the finances will tell...

Last, but not least, we wanted to remind everyone that our magazine survives through paid subscriptions and through donations from the public. So, even though you have access to all stories for free, online, we urge you to subscribe or donate to help our magazine. It's still our goal to become a pro-zine, paying professional rates to writers, but we are not there yet. Our issues sell for \$2.99 and only \$9.99 for annual subscriptions, which is a really good deal. I hope you'll subscribe and we promise to keep doing what we're doing! Thank you!

Enjoy this issue and see you all in 2015!

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Magazine site: <http://www.fantasyscrollmag.com>

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Circus in the Bloodwarm Rain

Cat Rambo

I'm practicing juggling again, because it's raining outside and there's nothing else to do. Big fat bloodwarm drops drum on the tent's waxed canvas.

In an hour, as the day's light vanishes, the circus's light will flicker to life, powered by the ancient turbine/treadmill pulled by three ponies and a servobot. Townsfolk will wander the maze of entrance gates and aisles, hesitant and eager all at once, pockets full of silver slugs and bits of circuitry and other tradeable metal.

They'll stroll through the booths, looking at the freakshow and trying their luck at the games, winding their way toward the big top, ready to clamber up the creaking bleachers and sit to watch marvels unfold.

This time we're within earshot of the ocean, a jungle-hugged glade near two different villages.

I drop a beanbag and curse. I've worked my way up to four at a time, but keeping five aloft continues to elude me.

Roto the Tiger Boy sticks his head in the flap in time to catch the last words. His whiskers twitch. He holds out a tin silently and I take it, gesture at him to sit on the floor.

He does, closing his eyes as I apply the orange greasepaint that colors his dun fur, turning him from an ordinary cat-man to something exotic.

What can I apply to myself, what will turn me into the exotic thing the circus just hasn't realized it needs yet? Every day I feel more out of place here. I'm a luckchild, abandoned to find my own way, and most luckchildren don't survive that first night, let alone be picked up by a traveling show. But I'm not a child anymore, and now I need to find my role or move on.

Roto rumbles against my bare knees, warm and furry. "You're never going to make it as a juggler, Stella. Pick something else."

I stripe my fingers through his fur. "Maybe yes, maybe no." I shrug and push him away. "You're set."

"June wants to see you," he tosses over his shoulder. He flips a poncho over his head to shield his make-up on the way to the shelter of the P.T. Barnum Memorial Exhibit of Mythological Animals, where he'll stand inside the entrance, plastic bars between himself and the jostling patrons on their way to stare at Beulah the Snake Lady and The Amazing Brain in a Jar, finally being led out by the sign, "This way to the egress."

I make a few more tries at keeping five beanbags going, but finally give up and head out into the rain, not bothering with a poncho. I'm not part of the circus's face; it doesn't matter whether or not my hair is wet.

June wants to see me. What do I want? Mainly, not what June wants. She's the closest thing to a mother I have, but that doesn't mean I have to do whatever she wants.

Still, I slap the canvas on her tent in greeting and wait.

"In," she calls.

When I enter, her tent smells of complicated things, of cedar dust and sandal-wood and tiger balm, of extinguished flames and the waking sea. Her trunk is unfolded into its more natural state, a set of squat chest-of-drawers, dozens of slots and labels, and the brass scale used to weigh out ingredients for her brews.

I scowl at her. It's what everyone expects of me lately, with all their patient looks and whispers when I'm on the edge of earshot.

Infuriatingly, she just grins at me.

I fold my arms and look down my nose at her. She's crouched beside her cot, pulling something out. It rasps across the canvas flooring. A pack, tight-buckled.

"Do you know what this is?" she asks.

"Of course I don't!" This is the infuriating thing about June. She asks questions like that all the time: *Do you know what will happen tomorrow?* or *What do you think that elephant is thinking?* tilting her head to examine my face as if to pluck some truth from it that I don't know. She's been that way all the time I've known her, ever since I was a little girl.

She ignores my tone, coaxes the buckles open. Says, "Your mother gave it to me for you," as she slides something out, wrapped in a piece of dull grey suede.

It takes my breath away like a blow to the gut. I don't answer. Everyone here has told me over and over that they don't know who my parents were. It's like the whole world realigns but it's colored red with anger. They all know how desperately I've wanted to know where I came from. There can be no possible reason to keep it from me, other than sheer cruelty.

I feel the roaring inside me, a spark of irritation fanned into a flame that seems to consume me. I don't say anything. I know from experience that anything I say right now will come out wrong: heavy-handed or mis-aimed or the opposite of what I meant to say.

June looks at my face and without saying a word, slides the piece of whatever it is that into the pack. She says, "Maybe this is the wrong time."

"Any time would be the wrong time!" I snap. "How do I even know you're telling me the truth now? Maybe this is just some sort of joke or test."

She studies me. I can't tell from her expression what she's thinking. June is better at a totally blank face than anyone else I know. I unfold my arms and lean forward. "Are you going to give it to me or not? There's no point in talking about it, just do it or don't."

She says, "Your mother asked me not to give it to you until you were ready."

"And I suppose you're the one who decides whether or not I'm ready."

She shakes her head. "No. Your mother had certain specific criteria."

"And what changed in how I matched those criteria in between the time you open that pack and then closed it?"

"You got angry."

June won't say much more to me, just brushes me off and says that we'll talk again later. I hang around for a few minutes, feeling the questions bubble up inside me. What was my mother like? What did she do? How did she die? Why did she leave me here, in a circus? And who and where was my father? And, importantly, why did you keep this all from me?

But June doesn't invite any of those questions. She starts opening drawers and taking out pinches of this and that. She puts them in a dish and gets a mortar and pestle out from a box. She's working on some cure, some medicine or preventative needed by someone here in the circus, who may or may not know they need it. That's what June does. She takes care of all of us, keeps our humors balanced and our bodies well.

I go back out into the rain.

It flattens my hair to my scalp, and runs down my back, tracing my spine with cold fingers. My mood is as gray as the sky, although I can feel that anger still smoldering somewhere underneath, ready to flare up again.

Right now we are into full out evening, and the air is rich with the smell of popcorn and pork rinds and beer. The fairy lights flicker all around me, frayed wires handed down by generations since the Last War, glowing cold and casting shadows in lilac and pink and gold and blue.

Did any of those long ago people dreamed that it would come to this? When they were conquering the world and designing the under people to serve them, did they ever wonder if one day their descendents and the litter of those cat and dog and cow people would coexist, trying to get by in a landscape they would find barely recognizable?

Did they think some of those children would become mutant mages, capable of changing reality? What does it say about humanity that now we've got wizards and demons and all sorts of magery?

Carrie's got a boombox going, blasting out *The Rolling Stones*, twitching a crowd of dancers into motion inside her charmed circle. She wears her performer's outfit, bits of gauzy, spangled tulle and silver spray-painted slippers, looking like a storybook princess, dancing under an enormous umbrella, also painted silver. All around her, the rubes are dancing in the rain, shoes squelching through the mud, giving way to her siren magic. Tomorrow morning they'll wake sleepy and full of happy memories of that dance.

I want coffee. I duck behind the fortune teller's tent and start making my way toward the old silver airstream trailer that holds an always steaming urn. At least here in the southern lands, coffee's plentiful.

I'm about to round a corner when words stop me. Not someone hailing me, but my name spoken out loud, followed by, "She could be a danger."

I don't want to stick my head around the corner, but I'm pretty sure I know who that voice belongs to anyhow. Edo the circus accountant is always trying to cut costs. He doesn't think I pull my weight, that I don't earn my share of each evening's take.

I try to fill in where I can. But this circus is such a well-oiled machine, that often there is no place that I can fit. Maybe Edo is right.

If my mother was a circus performer, she might have been one of the ones that held a share in the circus overall. If she did, that would be mine, and Edo wouldn't be able to contest my presence here.

Anyway, what did he mean that I was a danger? I knelt down, pressing against the side of the tent, despite the raindrops that transferred themselves to me in the process, and peeked around the corner.

"I know."

Those words came from someone with a great deal more to say about things than Edo. Lorelei inherited the circus recently, under tragic circumstances when we'd gone off the road in an area down south much less policed than here. She was still feeling her way through things.

But if she knew this secret, that my mother had been a circus member, then what did that imply? Did that mean that everyone except me knew what was going on?

Anger flares in me again. I feel it move, incandescent, through my veins. I feel lighter, harder. As though I am made of fire and metal and air.

Screw this. If June won't give me what I want, I will take it.



June goes on during the third act. She shoots flaming arrows at an LED-lit circle while standing on top of a galloping horse. When I was little, I thought she was one of the most amazing things I had ever seen.

Now that we are both older, I see the imperfections in the act, where a shot almost goes short and a few paces later where the horse shies and June hops forward just a little to maintain her balance.

I slip out of the main tent and go to hers.

Pausing in the entrance, I consider. June is an alchemist, after all. Circuses sometimes have a sneak thief or two, but everyone knows that an alchemist is capable of all sorts of subtle but lethal tricks to guard their things.

I proceed with caution. I have a thin wooden wand with me, and I use it to tap around the backpack, looking for cords or other triggers. I find nothing.

I kneel beside the bed and pull the pack out. I had expected it to feel heavier.

The package itself is brick-sized but not heavy enough to be made of stone.

I pull the suede away from the rectangular object. Up close I can see where the leather is burned in irregular patterns that look like fingerprints. I close my eyes and tried to match my fingers to the marks. They're almost perfect in their alignment.

Inside the suede is a box, hollowed out of some white milky stone. I open the lid and see a circlet and necklace. The metal is as intricately wrought as though it came from an older time, but it is set with thumbnails of roughly polished ruby. I stare into their depths, red as rage, mesmerizing.

"Your mother didn't want you to have that until you learned to master your anger," June says. She stands unexpectedly close, in the doorway of the tent.

My hands fall, almost dropping the box. "Why aren't you finishing your act?" I stammer.

She blinks. "I finished a good fifteen minutes ago. You've been staring at those stones without moving your eyes."

I don't care what my mother thought about my anger. Everyone gets angry. I'm a normal person. I may be having trouble finding my place in the circus, but that doesn't mean I don't have a place.

"What was my mother?" I asked.

"You mean what did she do for the circus?" June says. "She was a flame eater."

"And my father?"

June shakes her head. "Your mother decided she wanted a child. She didn't much care about who fathered the baby, because she figured she'd be well away before she even started to show. He was someone that came through the circus, back in the northern parts, way back when. Exactly when you were conceived, I don't know. Your mother was very good at keeping things to herself."

"So what are these things?" I hold the box up.

"Artifacts of your family. They increase a flame eater's powers."

"Powers?" I try to put all the scorn and disbelief that I can into the words.

She shrugs.

"Who are you to say whether or not I deserve my mother's legacy?"

"I was one of her best friends."

I feel a pang of guilt at that, because her face seems genuinely pained when speaking of my mother.

Still the squeeze of anger around my lungs makes me bluster. "Well, you're not my friend." My fists clench, forcing more words out. "I hate you!"

"I don't care how you feel, one way or another. I like you," she says, eyes patient but flickering with humor, laughing not at me, but at both of us, faced off like this.

"Why didn't anyone ever tell me about my mother?"

June sits down on the cot, folds her hands in her lap, and looks at me as though trying to convince me that every ounce of her attention is being devoted to this conversation. The rain has picked up; it patters urgently on the canvas. "You have to understand, your mother did more than eat flames. She was an elementalist."

"An elementalist?" People said that there were mutants who were aligned with the forces of the earth, but you never ran into anyone who had actually met one, let alone had one for a parent.

"The flames couldn't harm her because she was one with them." June's face is still serious. She says, "Would you like me to make you a calming tea?"

"Screw that!" I say. "What are you telling me? That my mother is some kind of mutant? That she's left me some sort of magical jewelry?"

"Not magic. Old tech." June reaches over to take the tiara from my fingers. I let her, resisting the urge to slap her hand away. She traces with her finger around the lumps of ruby, to the underlying silver circuitry. "Very old."

I reach to take it back from her, and she resists for a second, before relinquishing it to me. She looks at me as I settle it on my head. I am prepared for something amazing to take place when I do so, but the moment is actually anticlimactic. I feel nothing, no rush of power.

"Your mother wasn't around to teach you. So we didn't want you to know what you were capable of, until you were of an age where you could listen and learn from us. An elementalist calling on their powers without knowing how to temper them can kill everyone around them."

I want to want to scoff at all that she is saying. But I can feel the anger inside me, reaching up to the machinery contained in the metal lying against my scalp and setting it into an oscillating blaze perceptible only inside my skull. I can feel my powers, feel the fields of energy and heat all around me, through several tents away.

And I can feel the people all around me. There is Roto, flirting with two townies, and Carrie with her dancers and Lorelei wondering and worrying how much longer she can keep the circus afloat.

I could set fire to them all.

Even as I think that, I can feel the fire racing out of me, ready to land wherever I want to send it. Ready to turn the humans and under-people around me into burning candles in the night.

My fingers twitch. This might have been what my mother feared, that I'd take this thing and do something terrible with it. And I could. I could take what I wanted from this place, take Roto and whatever supplies I wanted, and leave them all behind, burning.

I look at June.

Her face is placid as she returns my stare.

Trusting me to do the right thing.

I don't feel as though she is trusting me for my mother's sake, that her memories of an old friend are what makes her stand there without moving, even as the air inside the tent grows thick and oppressive and hot. No, she is trusting me for my own sake. For the sake of the person who she has watched grow up.

And that trust helps me grapple the flames back inside myself.

It's not that I don't still feel the anger. It may linger inside me till my dying day. But I am in control of it. Can use it, can let it fuel my actions. And my powers. I take the tiara off and slide it back into the box with the necklace.

"Do you want me to hold onto that for you?" June offers.

"That's okay," I say.



At least I have a better sense of my place here now. If my mother was a flame eater, there's nothing to say I can't follow in her footsteps as I explore my new power. As for the necklace and tiara, they can wait until the time that they are needed. For something tells me that my mother thought they would be.

At least I don't have to practice juggling anymore.



© 2014 by Cat Rambo

Cat Rambo often lives, writes, and teaches in the pacific Northwest. Her 150+ fiction publications include stories in *Asimov's*, *Clarkesworld Magazine*, and *Tor.com*. Her short story, "Five Ways to Fall in Love on Planet Porcelain," from her story collection *Near + Far* (Hydra House Books), was a 2012 Nebula nominee. Her editorship of *Fantasy Magazine* earned her a World Fantasy Award nomination in 2012 and she edited *Lightspeed's* Women Destroying Fantasy issue in 2014. For more about her, as well as links to her fiction, see www.kittywumpus.net or www.patreon.com/catrambo.

Forever

Rachel Pollack

It happened one day that the Blessed Lady of Dark Forever went for a walk in her garden of black leaves, past the Seven Broken Doorways, and down to the ferries, where the refugees arrive in endless outpourings. She was watching her servants—"facilitators" they called themselves these days—play a game of Snatch The Bone when she heard whispers behind her, then laughter, then more whispers. When she looked around she saw no one but the endless rolling landscape of the dead. She tried to tell herself it was just the usual back and forth between the oldtimers and newcomers, but the sound stayed with her, itchy under her long gray dress. Finally she had to admit it. Her sisters were meeting somewhere. Without her.

Forever called Gatekeeper Number 7, a young man with blond hair, creased striped pants, sharp teeth, and satin buckled shoes. "I'm going away for awhile," she told him. "Take care of things." He smiled, pushed the tip of his finger against an upper tooth until a single drop of lavender blood appeared, then flicked it on the ground, outwardly a sign of obedience, but really—She said "No re-decorating. No parades. And no puppets to frighten the children. I won't be gone very long." The servant bowed his head.

She found her sisters in an abandoned library of burnt books. She flung open the door, but instead of embarrassment, her sisters clapped their hands. "You came!" Ocean said, and Sky added, "Now we can start."

"Start?" Forever said, and wondered if they'd sent some invitation the staff had managed to forget. That crowd of dead beetles the other day—they had seemed determined to reach her. She should pay attention to such things.

Ocean said, "The game. The contest."

Of course. What else but another competition? It was Sky's doing, it always was. Ocean, as innocent as foam, just thought it was fun, and a memory of their childhood, but Sky always had to win. It was what drew her back from the edges. Forever told herself she should leave. Go back to work. But if she didn't play when would she ever see her sisters? "What is it this time?" she said.

It was simple. They would choose a skin woman and try to predict what would happen to her over the course of a single year. The loser, the one who strayed furthest from the truth, would have to spend a day among the humans, disguised as one of them. How easy, Forever thought. Fortune-telling was her domain after all, for what prediction was more certain than death? "Who chooses?" she said.

Sky waved a hand. "You can choose. You were always the most trustworthy."

Forever cast her mind across the world, spotted a young woman whose body was two-thirds eaten by cancer. A wave of her hand summoned a picture of the woman in front of

them. "A year from now," she said, "this girl will be settled down below, and her family will be already bored from weekly visits to her grave to pull weeds and scatter poppies."

Ocean smiled. "I don't think so," she said. "I say, a year from now, she will put down fresh roots."

Sky added "And reach up to the Sun." Forever laughed. Sky said, "Oh, and skin people will come to her with seeds and offerings, asking for help to escape, well, *you*." The Mother of Silence laughed louder. They sat down to watch.



The Kindly Ones (as people sometimes called cancer, hoping to placate it) ate more and more of the girl, gnawing their way from the inside out. The doctors offered more medicine, more cutting, more invisible fire, but she refused. She began a journal, a record of everything she loved. A friend read it and told her to let others know the wonders they ignored as they rushed through life. She wrote a blog, *Chronicle of the World's Beauty*, that every day was read by more and more people.

One day her parents carried her out to a grassy bank at a place where three rivers meet. A group of sick children had gathered there to meet her. "Please don't leave us," they said. "We need to know you're here."

"That's not up to me," she said. "I wrote about that last Tuesday, don't you remember?"

The children stretched themselves on the dirt, as much as their diseased bodies could manage. "Please," they begged the Heavens, the Earth, and all the worlds between, "let us keep her. *We* need her more than Death." A flash of light made them close their eyes, and when they looked again the sick girl had vanished. In her place stood a lilac tree, tall and fragrant. If the children looked closely they could spot excerpts from the *Chronicle of the World's Beauty* on every leaf.

Word spread, and within a year the sick had begun to come from across the world to touch the leaves to their sores and broken places. They left flowers and seeds as offerings, and more and more came every day.



"You cheated," Forever whispered, too angry to shout.

"And how did we do that?" Sky asked. "*We* didn't change her. It's not our fault her whining and moaning hit the right frequency." Sky smiled sweetly and shrugged.

Forever didn't answer. She blamed herself. If she hadn't been so *certain* she might have been *careful*. She sighed. She'd lost the game, but it was only one day. She would walk into some mud woman body, let the Sun flicker across the sky, then return to her work, while her sisters gloated. They'd get over it, and so would she.

She chose a young woman in a small city, healthy enough so her possessor wouldn't have to suffer any pain, smart because Forever didn't want to be bored, friends but no husband, parents, or children to make annoying demands or notice the difference under the mask. "Karen," the woman's name was, and just before Forever was about to walk into her, she thought how silly it was to worry so much for just one day.

But what if she got lost, or something distracted her? She summoned Gatekeeper Number 3, whose creased pants and slicked black hair and ruby cufflinks made her want to call him Rudolph. She told him what she was about to do and instructed him to make sure her skin body got some kind of reminder.

She entered Karen in a booth in a restaurant, where the woman was having lunch with her boss, a publicist for area artists. It was a little like floating and then being sucked down by a heavy weight. For a moment she thrashed about inside, and must have made the body jerk, because a glass of ice tea spilled all over a plate of French fries, and a notebook, and a proposal in a yellow folder. It was 3:12 in the afternoon.

Karen's boss took her hand. "Hey, are you all right?" he said, as a blank-faced Mexican man came over with a cloth.

Forever wanted to leap at the boss, cut through his neck with these Karen teeth that had just ground up bits of dead cow. Instead she seemed to back away, go somewhere deeper inside. The Karen voice said "Sorry. I don't—I don't know what happened there." She looked down at the blur of tea and ink. "Oh God, I'm sorry," she said.

Her boss, who was named Phillip, waved his hand. "Don't worry about it."

Karen stared at her own hand, wiggled the fingers, looked at the lines, imagined she could see the web of blood under the skin. Embarrassed, she put her hand in her lap and focused on Phillip.

As they left the restaurant a little boy with shiny black hair held out his hand towards her. A piece of soft wood lay on it, a crude carving of a boat. "Would you like this?" he said politely. Karen stared at him. "I made it in art class. The teacher said we had to give it to someone."

Karen smiled. "Why don't you give it to your mother? I'm sure she would really like it."

The boy shook his head. "It's supposed to be a stranger."

"Oh, well okay. I mean, thank you. It's very nice." The boat felt warm and almost sharp, as if he'd carved it out of nettles. As the boy ran off, Karen dropped the toy in her purse.

Phillip said "Well, that's really weird."

"We should get back to work," Karen said.

That night Karen squinted at her face in the bathroom mirror. She just couldn't shake the sense that something was wrong. It was like—like she was looking at someone else, or someone else was looking at her. She should go to the doctor. Call for an appointment first thing in the morning. But she woke up late, with just enough time to put her makeup on and grab a coffee on the way to the office. There she stared at endless streams of emails until she could think of nothing else.

At twelve minutes after three she picked up the carving of the boat the boy had given her, turned it over in her hand, rubbed it with her thumb. Something about it—then Phil called to discuss an account and she dropped the boat back in her purse.

Over the next few weeks she found herself too busy to think of much besides the next appointment. Except, every day, at 3:12, a queasiness came over her, like a cyclic fever, so strong that she began to make sure she was always somewhere she could sit down and not say anything for a minute or so. After a month of this, including two check-ups by her doctor, she decided to go see a therapist.

Dr. Connell suggested the strange sensations might stem from a forgotten childhood trauma that had taken place on some long ago afternoon, at 3:12. Maybe her mother did something one day when Karen came home from school, something innocent that the child misinterpreted as fearful. But why would it come up now, Karen asked. Who knows, Dr. Connell said. Some perfectly innocuous incident might have pushed the old trauma just a little closer to the surface.

For the next month Karen did her best to bring her secret trouble to the surface. But nothing came to her. One of Phil's clients, an astrologer pianist (or was it pianist astrologer?) told her of a medium who could go into a trance and "journey" inside you. Karen dismissed the idea at first, but finally called for an appointment. Andrew Crow-Talker, as the young man called himself, had an office in his white two story home. He led her to a pleasant room with large windows overlooking woods and asked her to lie down on a massage table, fully clothed, he assured her.

"Relax" he told her. "You don't have to do anything, I do it all." He half closed his eyes and murmured something to himself as he moved his hands back and forth about four inches from her body. At 3:12 he touched her chest above her breasts and the top of her head. For a moment nothing happened, then he cried out "Sisters!" and a moment later passed out.

Karen got off the table and nervously shook his shoulders until his eyes opened and he stared at her, looking perplexed. Before she could ask "What happened? What did you see?" he said to her "What are you?"

Karen jumped up, grabbed some money from her purse, and set it on the massage table. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'd better go. I hope you're okay."

Over the next couple of days she thought she should call Mr. Crow-Talker, but couldn't make herself do it. When her next visit with Dr. Connell came she didn't say anything about the encounter until nearly the end of the hour. Finally she got up her courage and told him what had happened, leaving out only the man's strange question at the end. "Do you think he'll sue me?" she asked.

"I wouldn't think so, Dr. Connell said. "He goes into trances professionally. I would think what happens there is his risk." Karen nodded. "I'm interested in what he said, though. Didn't you tell me you were an only child?"

"I am" Karen said. "I don't know why he said that."

Dr. Connell made that hmm sound they must teach in therapy school. "Maybe you have a shadow-self. A kind of psychic twin, or sister, whom you've hidden away and need to release." He smiled. "Apparently she's very powerful."

"What about the 3:12 thing?"

He shrugged, "Maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe once you free the shadow, the sister, the outward symptom will go away and we'll never actually find out. Would that be a problem?"

"I guess not."

Over the next few sessions they looked at possible secret selves, from mythological images of fierce warriors and beloved mother spirits, to high school characters, like cheerleaders and prom queens. Sometimes they were actual pictures Karen was supposed to stare at and see if she reacted. At other times she had to make up stories about an imaginary life. None of it seemed to trigger anything.

Finally, Karen decided that maybe all her problems just came from working too hard. Maybe what was missing from her life was just old-fashioned romance. When she'd first started with Dr. Connell he'd asked about relationships, and she'd just said she didn't have one. Now she admitted she'd been hurt, by someone named Bart, and ever since had avoided even the chance of connecting with anyone.

Only, she could hardly remember Bart's face or anything about him except that he liked model trains. Her memory lapse bothered her, but she didn't tell Dr. Connell.

She went to a singles retreat, in a center that promised romance and spirituality (it sounded safe, she thought). The first apparently came in a cocktail party Friday evening, the second in a chant and drum ceremony late Saturday night. She took the wooden boat with her. Lately, she'd been taking it everywhere, and panicked if she thought she left it behind.

At the retreat a man named Bobby Hand took an interest in her. She liked Bobby, he was funny, and handsome, with black hair and deep eyes, and he knew about books and movies, not just television. Most of all she liked his name, it meant something, it was not just a designation. He joked with her that he was a Secret Master, one of those saints that pretend to be ordinary humans so they can help people in need. "And what help do you give them?" Karen asked.

Bobby smiled. He had a nice slow grin. "I help women. With my hand. Late at night."

Karen laughed, but she was blushing too. "Better not spread that around too much," she said. "The government will investigate you for unlicensed salvation."

"Hey, I've got a license. I just keep it secret. Remember? My sacred mission?" She didn't answer, only looked down, her eyes wet. "What's wrong?" Bobby said. "What'd I say?"

"Nothing. I'm just—I don't know, I'm just being silly." She wiped below her eyes delicately, with her thumb and finger, then tried to smile away her embarrassment.

"Hey," he said, "suppose you discovered you had a secret calling. A spiritual mission of some sort. What name would you choose?"

She said "If my calling is supposed to be secret, wouldn't I have to not tell anyone?" He rolled his eyes, and she laughed. "Okay," she said. "Let me think. Forever."

"What?"

"Karen Forever. That's what I'd call myself."

"Karen Forever" he repeated, his voice soft, almost solemn. Anger flashed in her, she had no idea why, but for a second she wanted to hit him just for saying her name, as if he had no right. But she hid it, and it passed, and when he kissed her she was able to soften her lips into his.

After the retreat they traveled back to the city together. As they left the wooded center and waited for the shuttle to take them to the train station Karen heard a far-off noise, weeping and yells of pain. When she looked around, flashes of darkness seemed to black out pieces of the world. She found herself staring at something very far away, lines and lines of stooped people clutching small packages against their bodies. She made a soft noise, gripped the wooden boat in her jacket pocket. "Are you all right?" Bobby asked. "Is something wrong?" She couldn't think what to say so she said nothing, and then seconds later everything was back to normal.

She told Dr. Connell that Bobby Hand didn't really excite her but she felt comfortable around him. The therapist asked "Is that so bad?" and she said "No, of course not. I guess."

They were dating for seven weeks, and sleeping together for two, when Karen went to a late-season family barbecue at his parents' house. She'd met them before, at an outdoor concert—"safe space," Bobby had called it—so there wasn't a lot of pressure. They made salmon for her, which was thoughtful, because for some reason she could not seem to eat

meat, not since that day in the diner. As she later told Dr. Connell, she wasn't expecting any trouble. And then she met Eleanora, Bobby's sister.

Eleanora Hand wasn't trouble, she was exhilaration. Very thin, with long blond hair and delicate quick fingers, and hazel eyes that seemed as large as a child's, she talked about dead poets as if they were friends, and television vampires as if they lived down the block. She tossed salad as if she was creating a new universe, and played volleyball as if she was destroying an old one. Karen laughed with her, and stared at her, and at one point had to take Bobby's hand to stop herself following Eleanora into the bathroom. 3:12 came and passed with only the slightest crackle on her skin. That night she told Bobby she wanted to make an early night, and after he dropped her off she called Eleanora and talked with her for two hours.

"Oh God," she told Dr. Connell, "do you think I'm a lesbian?"

"That's something no one can tell you but yourself. But would it be so terrible if you were?"

"No. No, I don't—I mean, I was never like that. I had friends, you know, but—we talked about boys."

She spent more and more time with El (only Karen called her that, her family called her Nora), and when Bob asked her to marry him her first thought was how she couldn't wait to call Eleanora to ask her to be her maid of honor.

Dr. Connell frowned when she told him. "Are you marrying this man just to get closer to his sister?"

"No, of course not." The doctor said nothing and she added, "Well, maybe a little bit. If I'm married to Bob, then El and I will be sisters."

"What's wrong with just being her friend?"

Karen felt like she was trying to work something out. "I don't know," she said. "It feels like we have to be actual sisters. And like...like someone has to pay a price somehow."

"What kind of price?"

"I don't know."

"And that 'someone' would be Bob?" Karen didn't answer, didn't look at him. Dr. Connell said "Why not just be close to Eleanora and leave Bob out of it? Why use him that way?"

She shook her head, softly. "He's just a man," she said.

Dr. Connell's eyebrows rose. "Now you do sound like a lesbian."

"I don't mean it that way." She was staring at the floor. "He's just a *man*. A person. A human being." When Dr. Connell didn't answer she said "Sometimes it feels like no one else exists but me and El. Everyone else are just, I don't know, shadows. What does it matter what happens to a shadow?"

She looked at him, suddenly ashamed. "Oh God," she said. "I'm horrible."

"That's just a label," Dr. Connell said. "A judgment. The thing we all need to do is look beyond that, see who we really are."

Karen knew it was just a platitude but she found herself squinting, as if she actually could see a vision of herself that was far off, or small, or hidden. The office wall, with its tribal masks and paintings, seemed to shimmer, and beyond it—endless gray hills, crowds of people, sullen, slow... She made a noise, like someone startled suddenly from a dream.

"What is it?" Dr. Connell said. "What happened?"

"Nothing," Karen told him. "I was just—I don't know, it was like I fell asleep or something. Sorry."

For their honeymoon plans Bob surprised her with a booking on a cruise ship, and was himself surprised when she recoiled, as if he'd offered her a snake. Karen told herself it was because she'd be out of range of El, whom she called every day, sometimes two or three times. But there was something else—the thought of being on a boat made her queasy, she couldn't say why. Lately, since meeting Bob and Eleanora, her 3:12 "appointment" (as she and Dr. Connell called it) seemed to weaken, but now the feeling came back stronger than ever, and it was only mid-morning.

Bob thought it was fear of seasickness, and told her "Just think of it as a gigantic ferryboat." The spasm of terror that seized her was something Bob had never seen before. He reached out to comfort her but she ran from the room.

Bob canceled the trip and they went to Paris. Karen got a global cell phone and called Eleanora every afternoon, often from the ladies' room in a museum or café, so her new husband wouldn't notice. Sometimes Eleanora called her at night, when Bob was asleep, and Karen would step onto the balcony of their elegant hotel room, talk for an hour or more, and then tell Bob the next morning that she was tired from jet lag.

The day after Karen and Bob returned, Eleanora called Karen at work to tell her she felt dizzy. The next day she felt faint, and the day after that as well. Karen told her to rest, said she'd be over later that day. After they hung up she thought maybe she should insist El go to the doctor. She could go with her to make sure she did it.

She called back and got no answer. Less than five minutes had gone by, had El gone out to the store or something? Karen interrupted her boss in a phone call to tell him she had to take care of an urgent errand. When Eleanora didn't answer the bell, Karen let herself into the apartment. She found her sister-in-law on the floor, unconscious and bleeding from the side of her mouth.

The doctors called it a rare brain parasite, and gave it a name even they couldn't seem to pronounce. Incurable, they said. Waste away, they said. No terrible pain, they said. And, three months, they said.

After the diagnosis came, Karen sat with unconscious Eleanora all night, held her hand long after Bob and El's parents had gone home to rest. When her sister-beyond-all-laws finally opened her eyes, Karen whispered "I love you, El."

"Forever?"

"And ever."

Eleanora's family wanted to make her comfortable. Bob found a hospice called JourneyCare, but Karen refused to give up. She bullied the parents and the doctors to send Eleanora to a clinic where they could try exotic and experimental drugs. She went into debt to bring in doctors from Europe, she found shamans who waved dog bones up and down Eleanora's body, and rubbed her bald head with some sort of animal grease. Bob argued with Karen, said his sister needed peace, not torture by false hope and quack medicine.

"I'm not giving her up" Karen said.

"It's not about you," Bob said. "Who the hell put you in charge of the sick and dying?"

Every day, at 3:12 pm, the queasiness returned. *I don't have time for you* Karen told it and tried to push it away. One afternoon, just after she'd given Eleanora some juice, the sick feeling hit her so hard she had to sit down on the metal chair at the foot of the bed. Looking through the jumble in her purse for Tums she came across the wooden boat. She held it in her hand, stared at it, then closed her fist around it so hard she could feel it cutting her palm.

"It's okay," Eleanora said. "I'm all right."

"No. You're not. You can't die. There's no point if you die." El didn't answer. Karen kissed her cheek, her forehead, her lips. "Take my body," she said. "I never wanted it. It's all a mistake." She had no idea what she was talking about.

El smiled. "Aren't I the one who's supposed to get delirious?"

The next morning, Dr. Connell emailed her. She'd stopped seeing him when he started talking about acceptance, and stages of grief, and almost didn't read his message. But no, he told her how he'd been cleaning out old magazines from his waiting room when he came across an article about a Healing Tree. There was a sick girl, and she went to a place where three rivers meet, and there people prayed for her, and instead of dying she'd turned into a tree. Now sick people went there to touch the trunk or the branches, and sometimes they were healed. Not always, of course, probably most people went away disappointed, but still...

Karen had to stop reading. It was the first sign of hope, and yet, just the thought of it somehow made her sick, she wanted to trash the email, get El from the nursing home, and just go—somewhere. Instead, she called Bob and told him they needed to arrange for nurses so they could take Eleanora on a trip.

They flew to a newly constructed airport some fifteen miles from the Tree. There they hired a white limousine converted to a hospital room on wheels and traveled straight to the site. Crutches and other aids lined the road, many of them, the driver said, left by people who had not yet been healed, but who wanted to show their commitment. There were long lines of

people standing (or sitting in wheelchairs) behind ropes with guards, but the limousines were allowed to pull to the front, for its passengers to mingle with the people who came off the private yachts in the river. No one seemed to mind. Almost everyone had come from far away, and there were performers to tell the Tale of the Tree, and food, and spiritual healers to pray over people and promise them health ("No connection to Tree" their leaflets read, apparently a legal requirement). Everyone seemed to believe they'd come to a place of safety, where sickness just stopped, as if it had given up and now just waited to be destroyed. They believed this even though they could see people faint on line, or cough blood, or worst of all, leave the Tree still covered in sores. *Those* people, they told themselves, didn't believe. They didn't want to be healed. It wasn't the Tree's fault.

When Eleanora and her family reached the front of the line, men in white nurses' uniforms offered to carry El to the trunk. No, Karen said, she would do it, she didn't need any help. But she just stood and stared at the Tree. It was so much bigger than she had thought it would be. The lilacs were in full bloom even though it was way after the season. The smell made her nauseous.

When Bob suggested they let the nurses do it, Karen lifted El into a tight embrace against her body and walked forward. Karen was wearing a long gray dress, with big pockets for medicine, and something in one of them pressed sharply against her thigh. The boat, she realized. She didn't remember taking it. *I have to get rid of it*, she thought. She and Eleanora would be safe if she could bury it some place, or just throw it away. But Eleanora felt so empty, if Karen set her down for just a moment a breeze might lift her right out of her body, to drop her in the river.

The river. There was something out there, among the crowded boats, something big, and gray, and patient. Don't look, Karen thought, look only at the Tree.

The branches waved, and a voice seemed to come from the rustling leaves. It spoke softly, only for Karen. "So," it said. "You've come."

Karen didn't know where the sound came from, or if others could hear it, but she didn't care. "Please" she said. "You have to help her. She is my life, my heart."

"You who are called Heartless in every tongue?"

"I don't understand what you mean." But as she spoke the words—or thought them, she wasn't sure—a fear swept through her that she was lying, that she knew exactly what the voice meant. Images came to her, endless mounds of colorless dirt, black stones, crowds and crowds of people with downcast eyes. And boats. Squat ferryboats on a dark river.

Karen turned her head, she couldn't stop herself. There it was, among the yachts and cruise ships, something only she could see, a gray ferryboat, heavy in the water, filled with more people than you would think it could hold yet none of them touching each other. Karen looked away but the image stayed. She could still see the one figure that stood out, a young man with slick black hair and ruby cufflinks.

"Please," Karen said to the Tree. El felt weightless against her now, an origami doll. "Heal her and we'll go away and never bother you again."

"You have a choice," the Tree said.

Hope lifted Karen's heart. "Tell me what to do."

"Either you go on the boat or she does."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. It's time to return."

The memories came clearer now. The hills, the shadows, the lines and lines of dead shuffling off the boats. She said "I won't go back."

"Then she goes. I will heal her but only if you return. So you see, it is you who is killing her."

"Why are you doing this to me?"

"You wanted to be human. To escape. Why shouldn't you suffer what all humans suffer?"

Karen looked away. She could feel her body shift, become longer, freer in some terrible way. She remembered it all now, her sisters, the contest. "It wasn't my idea, I just lost a contest. That's all. And then I forgot."

The Tree said "If you hadn't wanted to run away you would have remembered. You had the reminder, every day." Still holding El against her, Karen took the boat from her pocket, stared at it. The Tree said, "And now you have a choice."

Karen threw the boat at the Tree. It disappeared among the branches. "Choose," the Tree said.

"*Why?*"

"There is always a price. Choose."

For an instant she could see her life as Karen, everything that would come if she chose herself over Eleanora. El would die, and Karen would create a memorial. She would live a long time—a flicker of a moment, really, but it would feel like forever. She and Bob would entwine together, the memory of Eleanora kept warm between them. And then?

She set El down against the trunk. Immediately the branches bent down to form a cage around her. When Karen—Forever—tried to reach in and touch El one last time the branches stung her, like nettles. "Goodbye, my darling," she said. "You will live a good life and then I will see you again. I will wait for you. I promise."

But she knew it was a lie. As she stepped onto the ferryboat that waited in the river, as she accepted the white hand with its ruby cufflink, she knew that even if she might one day recognize an aged Eleanora she would feel nothing. How could she, for just one among so very many? As the boat slid away from the shore to take her home, she looked back one more time. She saw the cage of branches fill with light, and then it was gone. And everything was shadow.



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Rachel Pollack is the author of over 36 books of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and art, including *Unquenchable Fire*, winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award, and *Godmother Night*, winner of the World Fantasy Award. She is a world authority on the Tarot, her book *78 Degrees of Wisdom* being described countless times as “the Bible of Tarot readers.” Rachel created and drew *The Shining Tribe Tarot*, and collaborated with Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean on the creation of *The Vertigo Tarot*. Her work has been translated into 14 languages, and she has taught across the U.S. and Europe, and in China, Australia, and New Zealand. She is a senior faculty member in Goddard College’s MFA program.

The Dragonmaster's Ghost

Henry Szabranski

The stranger's back is turned to me when I enter The Cactus Tap. Lost in his whisky glass, he does not spare an old lady like me a glance. Once black hair spills across his once black clothes, draped dusty and bedraggled over his tall and angular frame. A mercenary, I guess, a Near Kingdom veteran in exile and down on his luck. The town sees a lot of the type and they invariably mean trouble—always keen to fence in its pocket of residual magic and auction it off to the highest bidder. Just the sort of newcomer Harkin wants rid of.

Motioning to the young barmaid Teja, I slide into a shadowed corner of the bar. She weaves between the tables, holding aloft a fresh pitcher of dreamwine. "What's up with the new fella?" I ask.

Teja shakes her head as she sloshes a good measure into my tumbler. "Forget him, Seren. He's busy drowning his sorrows. If he keeps drinking the way he has been, he'll drown alongside them."

I hook the half-full pitcher from her hand and set it on the table. "Sorrows need drowning."

Teja snorts. "Don't you follow him, Seren. Town needs you." She leans down by my ear. "He's been staring at me all evening. Keeps asking my name, where I come from, how long I've been here." She gives an exaggerated shudder. "Gives me the creeps, he does."

"You keep an eye on him," I say. "Lace his whisky with snake venom if he starts getting too familiar."

Teja laughs as she returns to the bar. I smile after her. Harkin's step-daughter is slim, dark-haired, a little wild. She is like a younger, carefree sister to me—much to Harkin's irritation.

I sip the dreamwine and continue to study the stranger's broad back. Glittering serpents coil along the collar and sleeves of his tattered jacket, details I hadn't noticed at first. A battlefield trophy perhaps, or stolen from one of his victims. Perhaps he was one of the old king's dragonriders, homeless and unemployed after the fall of Proximus and the death of his magic-sustained charge.

Something about him seems familiar though. Had we met before? Perhaps he has waited in my queue, looking for some spell. Or maybe we have passed on the way into or out of Pangarang. The road is busy nowadays, what with the growing interest in the Whorl and its ghosts.

I shiver.

By the time I've drained my pitcher the evening crowd has filled the Tap. Old Hoots and Madeline Crow strike up a tune. I forget about the dragonrider and surrender myself to

the sound of the violin and tambourine. Numb with dreamwine, I dance upon the sawdust-strewn boards, clapping my hands and swinging my skirts. The crowd whistle and stamp and for a while I am as thoughtless as the day I first wandered out of the desert. I almost don't notice when the stranger comes right up to me and tries to grab hold of my arm.

"You're real," he says, staring right at me with piercing green eyes.

My good mood instantly evaporates. I back away from him. "Of course I am."

"What's your name?"

"Seren Whitehair. What of it?"

His face darkens. "Liar."

I admit it. I, who am known to knock sense into brawling drunkards, who has the town urchins in mortal fear of her, the sheriff in the palm of her hand, am unsettled by the stranger's ferocity. But I'll be damned before I show it. "What do you want?"

"I said, you're a liar." He steps closer. I can feel his heat. "Are you a demon? A ghost? One of *them*? Did you steal her likeness before you tore out her soul?"

For once I am struck speechless. My heart thuds inside my chest. The others around me have stopped dancing and are looking at the stranger, but I can only focus on his green eyes.

"Well? Which are you? Demon or witch?"

"Hey, is he bothering you?"

One of Harkin's deputies steps between us with a look of concern on his face. He is new, barely more than a boy, off-duty, and I don't even know his name. The stranger does not look at him, just pushes him away.

"Demon or witch?" he demands.

The young deputy grabs the stranger's shoulder. "Hey," he says, before the stranger's fist crashes into his chin and sends him tumbling. Old Hoots' fiddle screeches to a halt.

I return to my senses. How dare this oaf knock the lad down like that?

The stranger is oblivious to the thick silence around him. "What say you? Demon or witch?"

This time I have my answer ready.

"Witch!"

I cast my well-practiced spell. The Source may have fled and the Near Kingdom may have crumbled, but—if you are skilled and determined enough to use it—there really is a little magic left.

The stranger drops. He rolls on the sawdust, clutching between his legs.

I am suddenly surrounded by people trying to check that I am unhurt. The punched deputy is already standing, rubbing his jaw, a fearsome look on his face. I almost miss it over the angry voices, but as the stranger is dragged outside by the deputy and the others, mixed in amongst his groans of pain and protest, I think I hear the sound of him laughing.



Sometimes I look out at the stunted yuccas and the orange sands rippling in the afternoon heat and I dream of the ocean. Of rolling waves the color of slate and ice as far as the eye can see. Gulls that wheel and keen. The hiss of the surf as it draws in its breath. The booming crash when it lets it out.

As far as I know I've never been near the sea. Pangarang has been my home since I stumbled lost and bewildered out of the desert all those years ago, white haired and empty minded, and Anstel took me in.

Anstel. My heart still stumbles whenever I think of him. My one love. My true love. Silent and strong and not caring about my spell-blasted mind. He took me in and looked after me, never once questioning my lack of a past. He may not have been able to read, and he knew nothing of incantations and spells, but his hands were warm and strong. The way he used the hammer and tongs and flame and water to meld and shape the metal in his smithy was a kind of magic in itself. I would spend hours on the little stool he set in a corner for me watching his muscular frame tilt and swing in the stark light of the furnace, enveloped one moment in billowing steam as he quenched a glowing horseshoe or plough blade, the next glistening orange in the flames. And when those green eyes under those thick dark brows shot me a glance, I felt a flame of sorts kindle within me. Yes, even his memory stirs it still.

After the Source itself was quenched, by whatever means and for whatever reason, we huddled together and promised each other we would survive even if Proximus fell and the Far Kingdom barbarians came to enslave us. But in the end it was a common winter fever that felled my great oak of a man. Before the magic leached from the land a simple healing spell would have saved him; but the healer stood by helpless, her incantations impotent as she reverted to honeyed unctions and herb infusions and eventually to bloodletting—all useless against the sickness that raged through his once powerful frame.

Six winters have passed since my Anstel passed away and I have taken no other man since. Sheriff Harkin knows this, I think, but he still harbours hopes. Sometimes it suits my purposes to keep a man like the sheriff on my side, and to be fair, he has never once been rough or too unkind to me. But he will never replace my Anstel. In the years since the blacksmith's death, I set about learning all there was to know about the power of the Source in hopes to eke out some effect from its last, dying gasp. Turns out I have quite some talent. Or maybe I'm just more determined than those who learned magic when its use was easy. If I had only known what I do now at the time Anstel grew ill, perhaps I could have saved him. The thought fills me with anger, so I try not to dwell on it. Mostly, I succeed.

I look out at the golden, shifting sand dunes beyond the great sandstone butte known as the Whorl, at the fiery sunsets of the wide desert sky. And they are gray to me. Gray as slate, grey as heaving iron seas.

Despite all the abilities now available to me, I know this to be true. All magic has fled from the world.



It is still dark outside when Harkin's great clunking footsteps stir me from my drowse. I roll from beneath the tangled covers and hastily tie my gown around me. The sheriff stands in the bedroom doorway.

With my head throbbing from too much dreamwine and too little sleep, I'd much rather stay abed but I bite back my protests and spread the flame from the sentinel candle to its waiting brethren. The smithy's lone bedroom fills with warm, dancing light.

Harkin ducks inside. He reeks of tobacco, beer, and sweat. He slumps onto a stool and I help tug off his dusty overcoat and boots. I am expecting him to ask about the stranger, to check that I am all right, but instead he is silent. He stretches his neck and repeatedly crushes a rag cloth he has brought with him between his dusty hands.

I knead the knotted muscle in his back. His shoulders are as stiff as two sandstone lintels. He must have been busy all night, on patrol or dealing with some problem in town. He obviously hasn't yet heard about the commotion at the Tap or he would have mentioned it, stoked full of anger. A part of me relaxes. I don't want to talk about it right now, don't want to deal with his desire to protect me or his becoming indignant on my behalf. I just need him to stick to the familiar, comfortable routine.

Often in the night or late evenings he comes round to sit and talk. To complain about the newcomers, those seeking magic in the Whorl. About his lazy deputies. He talks about his dead wife, and about Teja and her wilfulness, about whether he had been right to accept her as his own daughter. All the talk, masking a shyness at his core, shows he trusts me. I listen, or pretend to. And never let him stay.

He bows his head, twists the rag in his hands, and says, "The sandwraiths fed again tonight."

"There's no such thing as sandwraiths," I say. "Haven't you heard? All magic has gone from the world."

"Then someone should tell the wraiths. And their victims."

My fingers probe hard into his flesh. "I thought they were just a story."

He grunts, hangs his head lower. "We heard screams, Seren. Calls for help from the Whorl. So we went to investigate. Just children playing around, we thought. But we found them in the tunnels." Under my slowing fingers I feel him shudder. "They'd been sucked dry, Seren. An old man and a young girl. Like the others before. Even dead they looked terrified."

I look again at the cloth he keeps squeezing between his fingers—a rag doll, taken from the dead girl. My hand stills as Harkin wrings the doll, over and over. As if he can use it to rub every last mote of canyon dust from his hands.



The lowering sun casts long shadows across the parched earth as the stranger approaches. He walks slowly, with no sign of his earlier fury. The bruises the deputy and the others inflicted after they dragged him out of the Tap are still vivid, but not as extensive as I feared.

I did not open my stall that day and put up a sign saying I was indisposed until further notice. People had gathered, grumbled, moved on. Instead, I withdrew to the patch of ground at the rear of the old smithy and tended to the few twisted figs and flowering cacti that dare survive the arid conditions. I like to think of the patch as my garden, but the truth is most of what sets root here can manage just as well without me. One of Anstel's anvils marks his grave.

The stranger halts a few yards away. He seems pensive, almost fearful.

Straightening up, hoe in hand, I review my well-practiced defensive spells. Harkin has always told me I should employ a guard, that someone might become upset with me, want to claim their money back, or worse. As a lone woman, he said, didn't I feel vulnerable?

I am confident of my magic.

I ask, "Will I ever learn your name?"

"If you care to believe it, my name is Mevlish. The Once Mighty."

I peer closer at him. A *dragonrider*, I thought. But Mevlish the Mighty? The King's own Dragonmaster? Even I, with my mind half-blasted, have heard the stories about the High Wizard of Proximus. How he kept the free magic rebels of the Far Kingdoms in check using dark magic and dragonfire. How he fought with his mad witch-wife, Kaffryn of Admar, over custody of their daughter Farima. How, most importantly, he had failed as Protector of the Source.

"Aren't you supposed to be dead?"

His laugh is bitter. "As are you, dear Kaffryn."

My answer is automatic as my mind tries to take in his words. "My name is Seren."

He flicks his greying hair from his face. A scar from some old but deep wound gleams above his right temple. "You must excuse me for my earlier behavior. I had heard that Pangarang and the Whorl were haunted but I had not expected to see a real ghost."

His manner is charming, ingratiating even, but I feel a growing chill. Does he really believe he is the greatest wizard ever known? That I am his runaway wife? He is quite mad.

"The sheriff will be here soon." I regret the words as soon as I speak them. They make me appear frightened. Vulnerable.

He takes a step towards me, holds up his hands. "Please. Just let me explain."

"Then explain. But don't get any closer."

Hands still raised, he looks away, frowns. "I was there when the Source died, Kaffryn. I caused it." He pauses, perhaps thinking I might interrupt, voice some expression of disbelief or shock. But I say nothing. I don't know what to say. I think only of how best to disable him if I have to.

"There was a spell," he continues. "A secret spell. It cancelled all magic around the caster. I used it to breach the Wizard's Wall, to approach the Source. To extinguish it."

I can't help but listen. His voice is full of passion. If what he says is true, then he is the cause of uncountable deaths and misery—the fall of the Near Kingdom. The end of easy magic. The failure of the healer's spells.

Anstel.

I say softly, "Why?"

"I was following *you*, Kaffryn. To the Source, where you had hoped to escape me."

"My name is Seren."

He takes another step closer. "I knew it was you. As soon as I saw you. Oh, you look different. Older. Your hair. But it's you, Kaffryn. I know it's you." His face twists with sudden emotion. "I understand why you left me, you and Farima, but I've changed. Just as the world has changed."

"I don't know who you are. I'm not Kaffryn."

His scarred face darkens. "The Source was never a generator of magic, Kat, did you know that? It was an exit. A hole. All the magic in the world, perhaps beyond, rushing down like water in a funnel, concentrating around it. But the magic had to go somewhere, don't you see? Emerging elsewhere. If you and Farima escaped through the Source, you had to re-appear somewhere. Changed, damaged. But somewhere."

I take a step back. His manner has grown too intense for comfort.

"There have always been strange hotspots of magic, even when the Source was strong. Ishmer, Fangard, Iliyer, others. Pangarang, with its mysterious Whorl. All of them insignificant in comparison to the Source, but once it was gone—now they are all that's left, slowly winking out. What if the Source spread the power it sucked out of the world into many different places? What if you and Farima washed up at one or another of those exits?"

I shake my head. "I don't..."

"It's how you came to be in this Godforsaken place, Kaffryn. You and Farima escaped through the Source and you emerged out of the Whorl."

White light. Heat. Pain and thirst and confusion. Rock beneath my toes. Those were my first memories. The daubed walls of Pangarang's buildings, shimmering like a mirage on the horizon. Or perhaps solid, and me wavering like an illusion.

"And if what you say is true?" My words stumble out as I try to make sense of what he has said, of what I am feeling. "What of it? I don't remember you. I don't think I ever will. You're wasting your time, Mevlish. Or whoever you are."

I decide then that too much about him is wild. Damaged. He is a stranger to me. It will be better if it stays that way. Even if what he says is true and not some crazed imagining, we could never be reconciled. Kaffryn and her daughter must have run for a reason. For them to risk approaching the toxic strength of the Source at its peak just to escape him... No. This man was dangerous.

Slowly, darkly he says, "Do you know where Farima is? She went through the Source, just like you. And she emerged, somewhere. Some when. Just like you."

"I don't have a daughter. No children at all," I say and begin to choose which spell I will cast against him.

Mevlish steps forward. His boot crushes one of my flowerbeds. "Don't lie to me, Kat. I always know when you lie to me."

I open my mouth to cast my ward, but mistress of magic or no, I am too slow, too off balance. He beats me. Mevlish the Mighty, High Wizard of Proximus, his incantation is flawless. If the Source had still been with us, his spell would have rent the earth, caused the ground to swallow me whole. As it is, in our world almost bereft of power, it is enough.

I am cast into darkness.



Magic flows around me, through me. A warm, gentle stream. Although the ground upon which I lie is rough and hard, the swirling field fills me with a pleasurable tingling sensation, somehow familiar.

And then memory returns. And so does fear.

I open my eyes and try to sit up. A blue glow fills the otherwise dark tunnel. Mevlish squats a few yards away, weaving magic with a gentle murmur, the spell unfamiliar. My hands are tied by the remnants of a torn black shirt. My feet too. A gag stretches tight against my lips.

All these years, and I have never been so close to the Whorl as this. Never inside its twisting, field-formed passages and ravines. The sandstone rock curves, worn smooth, the grain shaped by the force of magic. Somewhere at the Whorl's heart, fading over time perhaps, but stronger here than most everywhere else, magic still emerges.

It makes no difference what curse I decide to unleash. Although I can moan and groan, with the gag in place I cannot form words to speak or cast any spell.

Mevlish stops his incantation. His eyes refocus and he looks down at me, the determined expression on his face softening. "You know, I never really enjoyed being around magic or casting spells."

His tone is garrulous, conversational. As if he is sitting across the bar from me in The Cactus Tap and we are sharing a friendly drink. Only the faint sheen of sweat on his face betrays any tension. "Oh, I was brought up to be a wizard by my father, like his father before him. I was dutiful enough in my role and responsibilities but the field always pressed on me. Always there, oppressive. But once I woke and the Source was gone—I surely missed it. Like a part of me, taken forever."

I don't think he hears or understands my garbled curses in reply. I strain against my makeshift bonds but they remain tight.

"This? Here? This is nothing." He pats the rock beside him. "A fraction of the power that used to be available even at the far edge of the Near Kingdom. But compared to what we have now...?" He hunches his shoulders, breathes in the dusty air. Shudders. "It feels different, this field. Wilder. A different type of magic entirely." He smiles at me and I feel a chill down to my core. "With the right spell perhaps I can create a new Source. One where the magic will allow us to be a family again. Re-united."

I try to kick out with my tied feet, but he edges away easily. He says, "I'm glad we met again, Kaffryn."

And then he closes his eyes and restarts his chant. Louder. More urgent. It does not take long, then, for the ghosts to emerge.

Slowly at first.

Pale dragons, breathing pale flames. Before them gathers a vast army of grotesque creatures, rising from the ground. A grey city by a grey sea, somehow familiar. A young woman standing on a high balcony. Me, or some version of me. Dark haired and beautiful. And then a lonely grey tower guarding a narrow pass, tumbled rocks and mountains behind, a ridge, and a pulsating, churning blue light beyond.

There is a small girl. Braided hair. Perhaps eight or nine years of age. Mevlish sits beside her bed, reading a child's spellbook. She climbs the narrow pass with him. She is calling beside the intense blue light. I look at her pale face and dark hair. I know who she is now. A pulse of light blinds me and when it fades, Mevlish is alone in a flattened landscape of ash and devastation. He is hunched over. He is crying.

He is howling.

At first I think I imagine it. A twisted shadow rises above him like greasy smoke. The flow of magic stronger. Darker. Polluted.

"Seren!"

Harkin's voice comes echoing from somewhere within the labyrinth of tunnels.

Nearby. My heart leaps with relief. Hope. I turn, struggling awkwardly to my knees. I try to shout, but only an animal mewl escapes the thick gag, drowned out by the growing roar of the field. My name is called again. I moan as loudly as I can, fight against my bonds. I kneel up, somehow stagger to my feet, the rock wall supporting me.

Mevlish takes no notice. He is enraptured by his visions made real. Dark energy fills him, funnels through him. His whole body glows—but he seems thinner, less substantial. His eyes are rolled back. He is blind.

Harkin barrels out of the dark tunnel. Behind him is his young deputy, the one who had tried to protect me in the Tap, his face drawn in terror. The sheriff crushes me in a brief but fierce hug before tearing off my gag. I try to cry out a warning, but it's too late. Mevlish's shadow dragon descends before he has time to react. He throws up his arm to protect me from the black flames, and we both fall, tumbling into a deep runnel beside the ledge where Mevlish stands. I hear the deputy screaming, high-pitched, but Harkin's body on top of mine blocks him from view.

We disentangle from each other and I lurch onto my knees. My ankles and hands are still bound, but with the gag loosened I am at last free to cast magic. The field here is stronger than any place or time I can remember. It swirls around and through me, its potential intoxicating. But even as I open my mouth to speak, my words stall. What spell can I possibly cast?

Whichever I choose, its effect will be devastating. I can crack the Whorl asunder, make the desert bloom, sweep Pangarang off the map.

Raise Anstel from his dusty grave.

For a moment, the temptation is so strong... to turn back time, to undo what should not be undone, to see my green-eyed love again. Our future reshaped, a daughter of our own... what bad consequence could possibly arise?

A rag doll crushed in Harkin's hands.

Mevlish's wild laughter penetrates through the roaring in my ears, and suddenly, for the first time ever, I am scared of the power, of using magic.

Scared of the magic using me.

I close my mouth—and open my eyes. I had not realized I had shut them.

The deputy lies motionless on the ledge beside Mevlish, smoke wreathing his body. Mevlish himself appears oblivious to our presence. He continues to speak at a furious pace, his mouth moving with unnatural speed, uttering gibberish as far as I can tell. He rocks

backward and forward, hands flailing, fingers stretching. They elongate, twist, follow the lines of magic. His hair whips around and dances as if alive, thousands of tiny, wispy serpents. He is... dissolving.

Harkin grabs me. A knife glitters in his hands. He slashes down, freeing my hands, then my feet. I stand, unsteady. Harkin turns, face grim, the knife raised in his hand, ready to throw it at the wizard.

"No!" I pull his arm, shout into his ear. "Help your deputy."

Harkin grimaces but he puts the knife away. We scramble back onto the ledge and grab the young man. He groans and tries to bat us away as we lift him. Together we manage to heave him upright, stagger away from the growing maelstrom, round a turn. Mevlish is no longer visible, but his strange, rapid speech and the fierce blue glow intensify.

We stumble on, fall. Pick ourselves up. Run. Above us, the rock ceiling eventually opens to reveal stars and a stark crescent moon.

Behind us, a roaring, a building pressure. A rising scream, of terror, or perhaps of joy. A pulse of blue light.

And then silence.



Madeline and Old Hoots are in full flow, the Tap raucous tonight. Teja waltzes between the tables, a grin on her face, balancing pitchers and trays of glasses with practiced ease.

Harkin spots me walk in and his sombre face lightens. I smile and nod but instead of joining him I divert to my own table. He half stands, but Teja presses a fresh-filled tumbler into her step-father's hand and whispers in his ear. He shrugs and sits down, raising the glass in wry salute before turning to watch the dancing. I see his boot tap in time to the music.

Perhaps there is some hope for him. If he is patient and wise enough.

For a while I just sit and watch, soaking in the atmosphere. Little has changed in the days I've been away. Newcomers still roll into town, seeking easy magic from the Whorl. Harkin still turns them back whenever he can.

Yet so much has changed, too.

It has been weeks since the man who claimed to be Mevlish the Mighty disappeared into the Whorl, leaving no trace, not even a withered corpse. Not even a ghost. There has been no sign of a new Source, or even the old one re-kindled. If anything, talk of ghosts has faded. There have been no deaths or reports of strange sightings since. Whatever Mevlish had hoped to accomplish, I'm pretty sure he failed.

I quietly acknowledge the gradual procession of subtle nods, meeting of glances, touches on my shoulder. This is my first visit to the *Tap* since the dragonrider's disappearance. Various folk who think I have helped them, cured their minor ailments or those of their livestock, people whose babes I have blessed or who just wanted to know tomorrow's weather (which I have never managed to predict with any accuracy, truth be known). Sometimes I have been nothing more than someone they feel they can talk to. Yet here they are, almost queuing up, wishing me well in their own little ways. It is almost too much, and I consider standing and leaving, but suddenly Teja is there, pushing people away, filling my tumbler to overflowing.

"Glad to see you back, old witch," she says, breezy as ever.

I stare at her pale face, so like my younger self, suddenly unable to speak. I have asked around. Nobody knows who her real father is. Nobody can remember her mother giving birth to her, only that she came back one day with a grown child daughter. They assume there was some scandal, the father a philandering noble or rootless desert trader who tired of his charge. Teja herself never talks about her childhood.

"We've missed you, Seren," she says.

Before she can move away I catch hold of her hand. "Did I ever tell you how pretty you are, Teja?"

"Yes. All the time."

"We should talk. You and me."

She gives me a bemused smile. "Any time. You know where I am."

Before I can say more she is away, dancing with Harkin's young deputy to the sound of Old Hoots' furious sawing. I really must find out his name.

I rub my eyes, sip my dreamwine and watch the couple dancing. How wrong I have been all along.

There is still a little magic left in the world.

If you know where to look.



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Henry Szabranski's fiction has appeared in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* and *Daily Science Fiction*, amongst other places. He studied Astronomy & Astrophysics at Newcastle upon Tyne University before graduating with a degree in Theoretical Physics. Henry lives in Buckinghamshire, UK, with his wife and two young sons.

Restart

William Reid

I wanted to break my brother's face again. My knuckles burned from my previous efforts.

Dark mascara ribbons streaked down Bridgette's cheeks. Roger's smooth features, darkened with fury, no longer bore a single scrape. The bruises he'd left on my body throbbed.

This time I had to fix things without getting hurt. More than that, I had to do it without killing Bridgette.

The activity in the lounge concealed Roger's rage and Bridgette's sobbing. Romantic and fast-tempo music thrummed, with laser ribbons etching the air above the diners and dancers. Waiters weaved among private tables filled by lovers in every stage of intimacy. All but me seemed oblivious to the lone exception I stared at, my brother and his now fiancée. My former lover.

Veins throbbed on Roger's thick neck as he screamed without sound. The low lighting edged his brow and shaved head in shadow, heightening his uncontrolled rage. Bridgette shrank as if each word crushed her further into her chair.

My fingers flew over the network grid keypad suspended in front of me. My anger seethed. Thick nicotine-stick vapor stung my eyes, further curdling my mood. I sent it scattering with a wave of my hand. The fumes scoured my throat whether they were safe second-hand or not.

The code I wrote flashed complete. I stabbed the green button in the grid to activate the program. The network node on Roger's belt blinked with an incoming call. His enraged eyes darted across the lounge as he answered. I raised the opacity of my grid to block his view. He'd spotted me before and the memory still ached. After a few moments, I dialed the opacity down and watched him through the sea of scrolling grid data that tracked my virus.

Without my interference, Bridgette would hurl her glass at him, a curl of icy water freezing his rage in place. A few seconds later he would slap her and haul her out of her chair by the arm. The memory of them struggling in the vapor haze burned indelible in my mind.

Disrupting the thread to confront him had gotten me an ever-progressing tally of damage. The little I managed in return disappeared with each restart. His assaults silenced the lounge each time. Luckily, they never tangled the threads too much for me to displace for a different approach. Hopefully a smarter one this time.

The fly, the same goddamn fly, landed on the lip of my coffee mug, jittering its legs over its bulbous eyes. It came back every time I displaced, no matter what I did to it. Little things always stayed the same, like this fly landing on my mug. I let it wander across the rim and dart away.

Roger slammed his node on the table. His voice rose enough for me to hear this time, anger without coherency. Bridgette flinched in her seat. She reached for her water glass—*no god damn it, don't backtrack on me*—but she lifted it to her lips instead of throwing it. I slid my finger off the displacement toggle with relief.

Roger threw his napkin over his plate and stood up. He stormed toward the door in such a fury that he forgot his node on the table. Her eyes followed him as he left, a conflict of fear and relief mixing across her face.

Bridgette looked beautiful, just like she had a year ago when I'd left her. Tight curves and toned muscle under a smoky black dress and rich auburn hair. She lifted a nic-stick to her lips and lit it with a twist. Smoking was new for her. The electric glow flared red and highlighted the haunted shadows under her eyes. Those were new too, but no surprise with Roger still around. I choked down a last mouthful of bitter coffee and weaved through the crowd to her table.

"Nick." Bridgette's breath caught when I sat down across from her. Her eyes flashed with anger. Tears carved furrows through her makeup, exposing the discolored skin of old bruises underneath. "What are you—"

"My mother told me the news."

Her mouth became a colorless line. White vapor streamed from her lips. "That's what got you to come back?"

"She expected me to be happy for you and Roger."

She took the nic-stick from her lips and let it dangle from the crook of her fingers. Forefinger and thumb spun her gold engagement ring by its glittering diamond, obscene in its size. "What else was she supposed to expect?"

"That I'd be the asshole's best man. She's delusional."

Bridgette dropped her hand as if realizing what she was doing. She picked up her napkin and dabbed at her eyes. "Roger will probably ask just to see if you'll show—Jesus, what happened to your face?"

"A fight. Doesn't matter. Bridge, you can't be serious. He left you in tears for a work call. You never smoked or had to cover up bruises before. He's destroying you."

Bridgette frowned. She took another pull from her nic-stick and blew it in my face. "How did you know work called him?"

I struggled against a cough. "He's a cop, I'm a grid programmer. He runs for a homicide call. I know how to fake a dispatch."

"That's very brave of you, standing up to him like that."

"Dammit, that's not the point. Why are you marrying him?"

She shrugged. "For as bad as the bad times are, the good times are just as good."

Same conversation, this time not from a restart. I picked up his scotch without thinking and drained it. "I've never seen these mythical good times, but they must be stellar."

"Of course you haven't seen them. You've been gone a year. You haven't seen anything. What gives you the right to sit down with me after walking out like you did?"

"Nice. You find a spine when he isn't around."

She ran a fingertip along the rim of her water glass, nic-stick still dangling. I tensed for a moment, expecting *her* to fling the glass at me this time.

"I could say the same thing about you," she said.

"He's not the kind of guy you go toe-to-toe with."

Her eyes fixed on my bruised face and darkened with realization. "You know, Roger was a boxer at the Academy."

"Damn it, fine. He beat the shit out of me when I confronted him before. How someone as smart as you stays with a guy like him I'll never know."

"You displacers never stop messing with things, do you?"

I winced at the unintended reproach her words held. "I am not going to let him treat you like this. You can't stay with him."

"You aren't going to let him treat me like this," she mocked. "I can take care of myself. I don't need saving."

I started to speak, then snapped my teeth shut. I remembered having this conversation with her too, a year ago. Backtracking myself.

"This isn't just about you, Bridge. I can't stand you being with him."

"So this is about you," Bridgette looked sideways at me for a moment through the swirls of vapor. "You don't get to decide to have me just because you find out I'm engaged. You shouldn't have left in the first place."

"I had to. When he found out we were having an affair—"

"You ran. He found out, and you disappeared. You never said anything or even contacted me. How can you expect to walk in and start right where we left off? You just left."

"I didn't have a choice."

"You're a displacer! All you have are choices, as many as you want. You didn't even try."

"He killed you, Bridgette."

She stopped talking. I tried to make out her expression through the blur that started to coat the world.

"God, Bridge, I would have displaced forever to get you away from him. But when I told him we were leaving together, he grabbed a kitchen knife and..." I picked up the scotch glass, empty, and set it back down. Tears stung my eyes. "He said he would do it every time you tried to leave with me. He told me to restart as far back as I could and disappear, or you'd stay dead."

Bridgette looked away. She stared blankly at the grid feeds around the bar, vapor curling from her perfect red lips. "You aren't lying."

She knew me too well, even after a year. "Why else would I stay away all this time? Why would I leave without a word? God damn it, I love you."

Her breath stumbled. A pearl of liquid welled at the corner of her eye and slid down her cheek. "All this time I thought you ran because Roger found out about us."

"I stood up to him. Look where that got me. I couldn't see a way to stay without getting you hurt."

She touched her fingers to her chest, tracing the imagined cut. The vapor trailing from the nic-stick drew a slash through the air. "He killed me just to keep me with him."

"That's what kept me away. But when I learned the bastard was marrying you, I had to stop it."

The fear that had disappeared crept back into her eyes, deepening to horror as she absorbed my words. "How can I leave him? He was willing to kill me before."

"He's not here. He's on a phantom call across town. He won't even know you've left. And I'm a displacer, Bridge. It's not as all-powerful as you think, only a few hours back at most. Sometimes only a few minutes. But I will do everything I can to protect you."

She cupped her hand again, spinning her engagement ring with intent. She was quiet for a long time.

"Can we go tonight?" she asked. Her voice was a whisper. "Can we go now?"

My heart leapt. "We need to go now, before he comes back."

One last spin and the ring slipped off her finger. She dropped it in her water glass, the heavy stone tumbling to the bottom. The nic-stick followed, its tip sputtering in the water.

A smile broke across her lips. "I've waited too long to do this," Her eyes were puffy but clear, hope swallowing her fear. "I want to be with you."

I couldn't contain myself. I rose from my chair and cupped her cheeks in my hand. She leaned in and our lips met. I tasted nicotine and tears but didn't care. The feel of her kiss, her body against mine, overwhelmed everything. God, it was thrilling to forge a completely new thread.

Something hot burst across my chest. I pulled back as a warm mist sprayed across my face.

Blood bubbled from Bridgette's lips. For a moment her eyes clung desperately to hope, to love, to life, then dimmed. She gurgled and slumped forward. Her head flopped, half-severed from her neck—an eerie echo of a year ago, almost a perfect backtrack of that horrifying, long-erased moment.

Roger slipped the nearly invisible molecular knife into his breast pocket and sat down beside Bridgette. No blood even touched him.

"Forgot my node," he said, and scooped it up from the table next to me.

I barely heard him. I stared at Bridgette lying in an expanding red stain on the tablecloth.

Roger pulled her nic-stick from the glass, shook the water away and slipped it between his lips. "Fuck happened to your face, bro?" Pale gray vapor filled the air between us.

I grasped Bridgette's limp hand, felt the lingering impression of her engagement ring.

"Learn how to fake a dispatch," Roger said. "I knew within ten blocks."

My stomach churned and I gagged. It took all my strength to keep from retching. I wanted to cradle her, to scream, to strangle my brother, but instinct held me back. Stay calm. Don't disrupt things. Don't tangle the threads.

"I thought it would never come to this after you left," Roger said. "But I knew how hung up she was on you, and the only way I could deal with a displacer—"

My voice trembled, struggling against my self-control. "God damn it, Roger." I swept my eyes over the lounge. With the throbbing music and dim lighting no one noticed Bridgette's murder. "You sick bastard."

A dark mockery of Bridgette's realization descended over his face. "I did it before. That's why you ran," He grinned. "My plan worked, then."

My eyes drifted back to Bridgette and I couldn't tear them away. "You killed her."

"No I didn't. You're going to save her."

I looked up at him. Blood and vapor burned my eyes. My pulse drummed in my ears. "That's why you're so calm," I said. "You want this to never happen."

"I see you anywhere alone," he said, jabbing the nic-stick at me. "And I kill you. Pre-empting an illegal displacement, I'll say. Mom will be heartbroken, but she'll get over it. You'll be dead and I'll still get Bridgette."

His voice was calm, morbid with the dead body lying next to him. A glassy pool crept across the table and he draped his arm over the back of the chair to avoid it.

"But not this time," I said. I struggled to get the words out.

"This time you're going to displace before someone notices her and tangles up the threads. You stay gone this time."

"Or I don't." I didn't have the strength to make it more than a murmur, Roger snorted. "The only way to end this forever is to leave her dead. Or restart again and try to kill me. We know you can't do either."

Anger crept in to my words. "You have no idea what I'm capable of."

"Better than you I do. *I* know killers. You don't have it in you. You're smart enough to know that if I don't end up dead," he nudged her limp head with his elbow, "she does."

A smile broke across his lips, and I wanted to break his face again.

He picked up his empty scotch glass and swirled it. The ice clinked. "Ma'am," he called to a waitress, catching the nearest one by the sleeve. "Refill?"

The waitress turned toward our table. Her eyes widened in horror. Her mouth opened into a scream—

RESTART.

I wanted to break my brother's face again.

Dark mascara ribbons streaked down Bridgette's cheeks, and I knew I could do nothing. The blood felt cold and sticky on my shirt. Bile burned my tongue. I let her hurl water in his face, let him slap her and drag her out of the lounge. I didn't interfere.

I reached for the cup of bitter coffee in front of me. Drying blood peppered my quaking hand. I had to get out of here before someone noticed me.

A lone fly skittered through the air to land on the rim of my cup, rubbing its legs across its bulbous multifaceted eyes.

I crushed it between my crimson-stained fingers.



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William Reid is a freelance writer, editor and stay at home father of three. When not writing, reading or editing Sci Fi and Fantasy (or changing diapers and cleaning up after toddlers), he loves cooking and playing board and video games.

Feeling All Right

Richard Zwicker

His partner was missing, and P.I. Stamens didn't know how to feel, so he went to the local branch of the Emotion Store.

"Ninety minutes of Pensiveness, please," Stamens said to Jack Condon, the proprietor. "Actually, make that three hours." Stamens's tall, standoffish calm contrasted with the squirrely Condon's jerking movements. A tag hung on his chest that read: My name is Jack Condon. Feel the difference.

"Oh, you don't want that," Condon said. "I have some prime Exhilaration, which just happens to be on sale for—"

Stamens reached over the counter and grabbed him by the collar. "Why don't you sell me what I asked for?" Ninety minutes of Pensiveness cost a fraction of Exhilaration. "Then you can take the Exhilaration to console yourself for the difference in profit."

"No need to get sore, buddy," Condon said, straightening the folds on his shirt. "I could sell you that too, by the way."

"You're a funny guy. It's probably costing you a fortune in mirth." He held out his credit disk. "Pensiveness. In bottles." Liquid was more cumbersome, but Stamens didn't like to think of himself as a pill popper.

Condon retreated to a large dispenser that nearly filled the area behind the counter. Humming a light tune, he punched in some numbers. Two blue liter bottles appeared in the dispenser's window. He handed them to Stamens. "You're only as good as you feel."

Every time Condon said that, which was every time he sold something, Stamens resisted the urge to say, "Feel *this*." Condon brought out the worst in him, with his long, stringy hair and a top-of-the-head bald spot looking as if it were pressed with a cookie cutter. What also bothered Stamens was that Condon was right. You *were* only as good as you felt. Every so often Stamens tried to do his job without augmenting his regular government-subsidized cocktail of emotions, but the difference had become like night and total darkness. Without a little help, he just groped, putting him at a disadvantage with the bad guys. His partner, Flip Dumpheys, had been missing for two days and he needed to think. He twisted the cap off his bottle, then glanced at Condon. "You don't mind if I take a hit right now, do you?"

Condon smiled. "Don't fight the feeling."

Stamens tossed back the tasteless liquid. He immediately felt yawning vistas of possibility filling his brain. "You haven't seen Nick Gorse lately, have you?"

Condon's eyes glazed with admiration. "What a guy! No, I am rarely honored with his presence."

Gorse controlled the distribution of emotions and had a well-deserved reputation for efficiency and secrecy. On his own time, Dumpheys had been investigating Gorse, convinced that the powerful drug czar used violence to ensure his monopoly. However, anything Dumpheys thought lately had to be taken with a grain of salt, as he'd been suffering from an intestinal virus that temporarily prevented him from ingesting any artificial emotions. Stamens feared his partner's un-bottled state had gotten him into trouble.

"What do you want him for? You have a problem with our product?" Condon asked.

"Not at all," Stamens said automatically, though later he wondered why the drugs had allowed him to get so ruffled.



When Stamens walked into his office, Nandy Sontines, his secretary, nearly took his head off and used it to practice kicking field goals. "Don't you ever check your goddamned cell?" she asked. Normally cool as a cucumber, her sudden change to a prickly pear alarmed him. He knew it was important to keep his phone on, but lately he'd been receiving so many solicitations from the American Heart Association, the American Lung Association—even the American Coccyx Association had been tailing him—he'd switched it off.

"You heard from Dumpheys?"

"No. I heard *of* Dumpheys though." She stood up from her desk for emphasis. Barely five feet tall, what she lacked in elevation she gained in volume. "One of Chief Inspector Rausch's detectives found him. He's in Ascutney Hospital. They don't think he's going to make it." With that, she let out a sob like a sonic boom.

Stamens closed his office and drove the two of them to the hospital. As Nandy veered from dread to hysterics, he suggested they pick up some relief.

"I don't want to feel artificial emotions right now!" she snapped. Stamens, on the other hand, wished he hadn't gulped down all of the Pensiveness.

When he saw the bruised body, Stamens thought it might be better if Flip Dumpheys didn't survive. His partner's face looked like a failed student test paper stomped on by dirty hobnail boots. The rest of his body didn't look much better—broken blood vessels gave him the appearance of a black, blue, and yellow patchwork quilt. Whoever did this had little use for the kinds of beatings that left no marks.

Nandy burst into a fresh stream of tears. Stamens realized he should be feeling more than he did, so he stepped out to the restroom and took a hit of Empathy. He soon matched his secretary in waterworks, but unfortunately he took too much. He felt sorry the nurse had to work long hours in a building full of sick people. The overhead flat screen was on and he

felt sorry for the losing contestant in a reality show about unhealthy diet called "America's Got Toxins." He also felt really bad for the elderly man in the bed next to Dumpheys who had to watch it. Trying to control himself, he leaned over Dumpheys.

"Flip..." He didn't know what to say, and that made him feel sorry for himself for having such a limited vocabulary. "Who did this? I won't rest until he rots in jail." Then he started feeling sorry for the assailant. He vowed never to take Empathy again.

Dumpheys had a faraway look on his face, that six-feet-under look. His lips fluttered, and out of them oozed the name "Anna."

"Anna, who?" Stamens asked. "A woman did this to you? C'mon, Dumpheys. There's hundreds of Annas in the city."

Dumpheys's lips fluttered again, and Stamens waited patiently. "May."

"Anna May? Is that her last name or her middle name?" As Dumpheys lost consciousness, Stamens wondered if these would be his partner's last syllables.

"Wait a minute," Nandy said, gaining some composure. "What if he wasn't saying a name at all? What if he was saying a-n-i-m-e?"

"What the hell is that?"

"Japanese animation. It used to be very popular."

He shook his head. Dumpheys was a basic, no-frills guy who didn't even like Japanese or Chinese food because he thought anyone using chopsticks was showing off.

Nandy started shaking again. "We have to figure out who did this."

"We will," Stamens said. One place to start was Gorse—what a guy—but why would that respected businessman try to murder an un-medicated man? More likely, Dumpheys lost control of himself and picked a fight with the wrong person. Feeling his own control slipping, Stamens reluctantly returned to the Emotion Store.



Just as Stamens was about to walk into the Emotion Store, he collided with an immovable object, which he mistook for the side of the building, but turned out to be Emelda Rausch, Chief of Police.

"Chief Rausch, what brings you into my neighborhood?" Stamens gasped. Rausch, as befit her authoritative manner, was a formidable-looking woman. Her large chest made Stamens think less of sex and more of a hammerhead shark.

"I'd like you to know that I have some of my best officers investigating the beating of your partner."

"Thank you," Stamens said, not sure what else to say.

"He wasn't able to say much when we tried to interview him, but there's a rumor that he suspected Nick Gorse—what a guy." Rausch placed her heavy hand on Stamens's shoulder. "Let the police department take care of this."

"You know best," Stamens said, as he watched her amble into her car, which was parked right behind his. Stamens and Dumpheys's relationship with Rausch had been tolerant at best. That she'd come out to his locality in person to tell him the police were handling things seemed more like a warning than an assurance.

As Stamens trudged into The Emotion Store for the second time that day, Condon said, "You look like somebody died. You should take a hit of Animated."

"No, I look like my partner is going to die!" Stamens said.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Condon said.

Stamens felt his anger rise again. "You're so sorry, what?"

"Huh?"

"You're so sorry that you'll give me a discount? You're so sorry that you'll donate fifty percent of your profits to the Flip Dumpheys Memorial Fund?"

"You lost me, pal, but...didn't you buy some Pensiveness earlier? Too much of that stuff will kill you. Don't buy *why* when you can get *wow*."

Stamens again found himself with his hands around Condon's collar. "I hate glibness. Would you like to know why?"

Condon nodded weakly.

"Because with glibness how and when you say something is more important than what you say. I think this cheapens thousands of years of oral communications, DON'T YOU?"

Condon wasn't getting enough oxygen to add to the thousand years. Stamens let go, wondering if he was wasting his time getting angry at someone whose sole purpose was to sell. How much better was he, a detective who solved crimes only for a paycheck? Dumpheys's imminent death was different though, and he felt the need for justice. But he had no idea if the chaos of emotions he felt was artificial or real, or if it mattered. "Give me a bottle of Righteousness."

Condon brushed himself off, coughed a few times, and seemed none the worse for wear. "Coming right up. Just do me a favor, will you? Wait until you get home to toss it down. That stuff can turn a deaf-mute into a rapper."

Stamens watched Condon press a code into the dispenser. Then suddenly he remembered "Anna May."

"What did you say when I came in?"

Condon looked up blankly. "Good afternoon?"

"No, you said I looked like death and I should take some Animated."

"Oh, right. I was joking. It's very expensive."

"I heard that stuff animates the dead."

"No, nothing does that, but it animates anything that's left." He looked grimly at Stamens. "Not for long though."

"I'll take your entire stock."

Condon's jaw dropped, then he smiled. "Detective, you're making me animated. We accept major credit disks."

Stamens paid. "What's the largest recommended dose?"

"No more than a thousand mil per hour or your head will take off like a flying saucer."



The moment Stamens got back to the hospital and saw Dumpheys's unmoving body, he knew the only way he'd get Animated into his partner was by injection. Even the doctor, who normally called a half empty cup "overflowing if you used a smaller container," gave him little hope of recovery. After the doctor left, Stamens stuck Dumpheys's arm with three thousand mils of animated. One of Dumpheys's eyebrows arched, as if to say, "Yeow-za!"

Stamens didn't have time for body language though. The side effects of animated were nausea, vomiting, and the recreation of the Suez Canal in your stomach lining. Figuring Dumpheys's days of spicy meatballs were over anyway, he injected him with another three thousand. His partner's eyelids shot up like defective window shades.

"What did you put into me?" he asked, his voice wavering like a musical saw.

"Six thousand mils of Animated. How do you feel?"

"Christ, how don't I feel? Wait a minute. You injected me with emotions? What about that flu I had?"

"It was your suggestion. Besides, these are desperate times. The doctor said you'd live a long life if we could just figure out a way to stop time. With Animated we just might squeeze a few minutes of coherence out of you before your virus reacts to the drug." He grabbed Dumpheys's hand. "Look, I'm sorry if this sounds draconian."

"I don't even know what that means. Stop wasting time."

"All right. Who beat you up?"

Dumpheys tried to relax his body, but it was as if a samba band's percussion section was building to a climax. "It doesn't matter."

"What do you mean, it doesn't matter? This is life or death. Actually, it's death or death. Look, Flip. You're my partner. We're detectives. Our lives revolve around finding out things people want to know."

"That's just it. Nobody wants to know this. We're happy. I'm so happy I could explode." Dumpheys grimaced, turning away.

"Are you in pain?" Stamens asked.

"As if someone conducted acupuncture on me with truncheons."

"Who?"

"I didn't get a good look at him, but I'd recognize his fist anywhere. I hate to say it but it all goes back to Gorse—what a guy."

There it was, this obsession with Gorse again. No one worked harder or could do a better job of distributing emotions. Life might suck and then you die, but Gorse was something you could depend on. "Are you saying Gorse beat you up?"

"Not directly. They got me before I could get near him."

"Who is *they*?"

Dumpeys's body sagged like an old couch. The Animated was wearing off, but Stamens was afraid to inject his partner with any more. "It could have been...anybody."

"Flip, these weak pronoun references are going to kill us both. I can't just arrest *anybody*."

"You might as well." Dumpeys was either getting delirious or someone had mixed in some enigmatic with the animated.

"At least tell me why you did this rogue investigation."

"Because they're cutting corners. Haven't you noticed the drugs aren't working as well as they used to? So we have to augment more often. And God help you if you complain. Someone will beat the crap out of you. And it's not only that. We've lost something. We don't have to earn our emotions anymore. They no longer warn us about anything. We've never been happier about nothing."

"What do you mean?"

"Look at yourself. You've got no family, no real devotion to your job. You don't even really care about me, unless you take your cocktail." Suddenly, his body seized up.

"That hurts me, Flip. At least, I think it does. Do you want another shot?" Stamens asked hopelessly.

Dumpeys shook his head. His mouth opened wide as a glassblower and with his last bit of strength said, "Cold turkey."

The percussion solo ended. There was no encore.



The funeral was an odd affair. Dumpeys had many admirers, all of whom paid their respects. Some were naturally grieved and allowed their feelings to show. Others less close to the fallen detective, or less emotionally connected to events in general, took some artificial grief to appear appropriate. Still others reasoned grief is a drag and compensated with less negative

emotions, ranging from detachment to glee. Later, everyone went to the home of Dumpheys's widow for the post-funeral dinner. Stamens was munching on a meat cookie when Nandy said for the twentieth time, "It was a beautiful funeral." Stamens remembered Dumpheys's bloated corpse looking as beautiful as an impacted tooth. When he emitted a soft growl, Nandy asked what was wrong.

"Dumpheys is dead."

"I know that. I made the funeral arrangements."

"And I have to make the solving-the-crime arrangements."

Her mouth dropped. "During his post-funeral dinner? Can't you show a little respect?"

"Respect for what? The food? His last words were 'cold turkey'."

"He wanted to die without another shot of Animated."

"That's what I thought at the time, but I think he was telling me to get off the emotions."

"Why would he say that? If he'd stayed on them, this never would have happened."

"You're right. He found out something while he was off them, and it got him killed. I have to retrace his footsteps. I haven't taken an emotion for three hours."

Nandy grimaced. "That's why you're acting like such a jerk."



Everyone was connected to Gorse by their emotions, but no one knew much about him. Somehow Stamens had to penetrate the inner circle. He knew only one person who'd ever seen Gorse.

"Detective Stamens," Condon said, flinching as the detective entered his store.

"You've been beating a path to my door lately."

Stamens leaned on the counter. "I thought I'd try something new. Give me a two-hour bottle of love."

Condon nodded slightly. "Ah, what the world needs now, and I've got it." He punched several buttons on his dispenser.

Stamens motioned at Condon's wall. "How old is that picture of Gorse?" It showed a profile of a smiling middle-aged man with a strong chin and bushy eyebrows.

"Oh, that came with the shop ten years ago. But he's got enough money to take care of his appearance."

"Do you happen to know where he lives?" Stamens asked.

Condon blanched. "Well, no one knows that. He's so busy though, he spends most of his time at the main factory."

Condon placed the bottle on the counter.

"Which is where?"

"I'm afraid I can't divulge that," Condon said.

"I understand," Stamens said, unscrewing the bottle cap. "You don't mind if I use this now, do you?"

"Well, to be honest I'd prefer..." Condon stopped as Stamens grabbed the proprietor's lower jaw, held it open, and poured down the contents of the love bottle. Choking, Condon slapped his customer a couple of times before his arm drooped and a dreamy smile came over his face.

"Who do you love?" Stamens asked.

"Baby, you send me."

"Good. Let's go find your boss."



Stamens drove, though it was debatable which man was the more reliable driver. In the throes of emotion withdrawal the P.I. felt like a two-hundred pound corn husk. Condon was blowing kisses to each passing motorist and every time they came to an intersection, he said, "Junction, junction, what's your function?" The love drug seemed to have wreaked havoc with Condon's sense of direction, and Stamens feared the proprietor didn't actually know the factory's location. With each mile the neighborhood seemed to deteriorate.

"Why does he hide his factory in a slum? Is he afraid people would break in?" Stamens asked.

"He could afford to have the Marines stand guard if he wanted them. Besides, for the most part, he keeps the basic cocktail inexpensive and available, so there's no reason for anyone to steal from him."

They passed a particularly burnt-out area. Guttled buildings stared solemnly at them like petrified jack-o-lanterns. The car inched over a narrow two-hundred meter bridge, the far half of which lacked any guard rails. Stamens wondered how anyone could live in this kind of poverty and why he'd never noticed it before. The answer, of course, was artificial emotions.

"Follow that truck!" Condon demanded. Stamens looked up to see an Emotion Store delivery truck crossing in front of them. He sighed and signaled for a right turn.

They followed the truck for five minutes when another delivery truck dashed in front of them on a perpendicular route. "Follow that truck!" Condon demanded. Stamens hesitated, then made an abrupt left turn, the wheels screeching. Before long, it was as if every vehicle

on the road except theirs was from the Emotion Store. His mind on fire, Stamens zigged, zagged, zipped, and zoomed. Soon the delivery trucks and the roads themselves followed suit. He was hallucinating, and if he didn't stop the car immediately, he'd soon be able to continue his last conversation with Dumpheys. Stamens tried to step on the brake, but someone else's foot was on it, or maybe it was his. He could no longer remember why it had been so important to find Gorse. He just wanted the exploding emotions in his head to stop.

Suddenly, Stamens's body lurched against the door, and everything went black.



Stamens woke in a hospital room. Most of his limbs and appendages were covered in regenerative gel, making him look like Semen Man. Nandy, Chief Rausch, and a nurse flanked his bed.

"I'm afraid I didn't get the license plate number," he said, grimacing.

"That's all right, Stamens," Rausch said. "We got yours. How do you feel?"

"Like a quality control tester for iron maidens."

"I could ask the doctor for more drugs."

"No, I need to be pure if I'm ever going to find out what happened to my partner."

"You're already full of painkillers. As soon as you're out of danger, I insist you resume your regular emotion regimen. As for your partner, we already know what happened to him—the same thing that happened to you. Once he went off his emotions, he became delusional. You crashed your car, he provoked a fight with a mob of people."

"Did you arrest them?"

"We questioned and released them."

"What did he do? Say something bad about Gorse?"

After both Rausch and Nandy commented, "What a guy," the police chief said, "I don't know exactly what he said, but I do know Dumpheys had been prescribed substitute meds to be used during his recuperation from the flu. He decided not to take them. That wasn't a wise option."

Stamens shook his head. "Am I the only one who feels there's something wacky about the brain choosing its emotions?"

"Boss," Nandy said. "You've got to go back on your emotions. You could have killed both yourself and Mr. Condon."

"Luckily for you," Rausch said, "Mr. Condon suffered only minor injuries and decided not to press charges. He, as well as anyone, understands what can happen if someone goes off their emotions. He also sent you a box of chocolates."

"Wow, that love bottle was concentrated," said Stamens.

"Let me remind you of something, Mr. Stamens," Rausch continued. "Our concern is order. When someone interferes with the dissemination of emotions, that order is threatened. We'll never get it perfect, but at least now when violent emotions can't find an outlet, we can change the prescription."

Stamens grimaced at his reflection in the window. "Does Nick Gorse exist?"

"What a guy! Of course he does," Rausch said. "But if he is to do his job effectively, he needs privacy. We make sure he gets that."

Even with his brain muddled by painkillers, Stamens sensed Rausch was lying, but what should he do? If life was about the pursuit of happiness, the Emotion Store was where to get it. Dumpheys was dead, however, and it seemed so wrong.

"I don't seem to believe in anything. Maybe I need some Reverence."

"That's one thing the Emotion Store doesn't carry," Rausch said. "The company doesn't want you worshipping false idols."

Yeah, we wouldn't want people worshipping someone besides Nick Gorse, Stamens thought. He is an idol I will take down...tomorrow.



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Richard Zwicker is an English teacher who lives with his wife in Vermont. His short stories have appeared in *Penumbra*, *Plasma Frequency Magazine*, *Perihelion Science Fiction*, and other paying markets that don't all begin with "P."

Universe In A Teacup

Seth Chambers

Once they applied the new algorithm, the senseless chatter of the Universe immediately came through as a coherent message: **CAN ANYONE HEAR ME? HELLO?**

The telemetry rattled off the message a dozen times while the assembled men uttered a collective, "Holy shit!" A return message was quickly composed and transmitted: **WE HEAR YOU.**

The incoming message ceased. Nothing else happened there in the underground bunker of the New Experimental Research & Development (NERD) headquarters. Actually, "underground bunker" is a bit of a stretch: it was actually just Bill's basement. And truth be told, they didn't research anything, and the only things they ever developed were allergies from the mold buildup. But everyone liked the acronym, and so they stretched the words to fit.

And yet, this motley collection of Firefly fans, D&D aficionados and IT geeks managed to initiate contact with an alien intelligence using nothing more than a satellite dish, a microwave transmitter, and a MacBook (Pro). The "telemetry" began as a state-of-the-art laser printer. Unfortunately, this printer was silent, which was voted as being "no fun at all." They agreed that alien transmissions should make noise, and so the high-tech printer was replaced with an ancient dot matrix machine. It was slow and clunky, but it also sounded very Eighties Sci-Fi.

Bill held his hands aloft in his trademark, "I'm about to give a lecture" gesture. Since it was Bill's basement the NERDS used, he was (grudgingly) deemed leader (or *el Jeffe*, as Bill preferred). Everyone (grudgingly) quieted to hear what *el Jeffe* had to say.

"My friends. Colleagues. Fellow scientists," he began. There were only eight people in the basement, and yet Bill peered upon a vast throng. "This is an historic occasion. On this date and time—what is it, the twenty third?—we have heard a Voice From Beyond. A Voice that has likely been traveling through the lonely vacuum of cold, empty, silent space for millions of years. By the time our greeting arrives, their world—alas!—shall likely be dust. We shall never hear from them again, nor—"

Behind them, on the work bench where all the equipment was set up, the telemetry clicked and whirred with a new message:

NICE TO HEAR BACK FROM YOU. TOOK YOU LONG ENOUGH. SURE HOPE I'M NOT BOTHERING YOU. BY THE WAY, SEND NO FURTHER TRANSMISSIONS FOR ABOUT 5 MINUTES AS I WILL BE OUT OF RANGE.

The basement erupted in excited talk. The bottle of champagne (purchased from Jewel Foods for this express purpose) was brought forth. Unfortunately, nobody could manage to

remove the cork and everyone in attendance, as it turned out, was allergic to sulfites anyway, so the bottle was cast aside.

Then Bill once again held his arms aloft and discussions (grudgingly) subsided. The door at the top of the basement stairs opened and somebody started down. All eyes flashed toward the long legs of Rebecca, Bill's wife.

"On this momentous occasion," intoned Bill. "Our next transmission must be crafted with utmost care and deliberation. I shall endeavor to represent—"

"Why you?" asked Samir, and his question echoed through the throng of assembled NERDs.

"Because," pronounced Bill, stepping upon a wooden box he kept around for such occasions. "One, this is my basement. And two, more importantly, the new algorithm, with which we have shattered the barrier between worlds, is also mine."

Rebecca, still standing on the stairs, cleared her throat. Bill's face drained of color.

"Well, sort of mine," he amended.

Everyone demanded what he meant by "sort of."

"Okay, so my lovely, talented and *understanding* wife is the one who actually came up with—"

Bill was immediately forgotten as all attention switched to Rebecca. She was coaxed downstairs and offered the last (stale) donut and what remained of the coffee. She declined both but then Samir regally presented her with the bottle of champagne. She accepted the champagne. She also accepted (grudgingly) membership into the NERD group (the first "Nerdette"). Within a nanosecond (a favorite time designation of the group) she was promoted to New Leader and Queen Bee. The basement had to go from being an "underground bunker" to a "hive," but this alteration was accomplished quickly and without argument.

Rebecca's first official act in her role as Queen Bee was to send her husband/drone out for fresh coffee and donuts. Bill lifted his arms in the old "attention please!" gesture but the magic no longer worked. He (grudgingly) buzzed off to do the Queen Bee's bidding.

The rest of the hive informed the Queen Bee of the remarkable progress they had made by utilizing her Glorious Algorithm.

"The alien entity is currently out of range," said Colin. "Most likely having traveled through a, er—"

"A coronal cluster," said Samir, in a voice of confident authority.

Again, the telemetry rattled.

OK. I'M BACK FROM THE—WHAT IS THE APPROPRIATE WORD IN YOUR LANGUAGE? BACK FROM THE CRAPPER.

"He must mean he just returned from the Crab Nebula," said Timothy.

"Communication of this sort can be very nuanced."

The telemetry rattled.

JOHN. BATHROOM. SHITHOUSE. LAVATORY. RESTROOM.

"Or not," said Timothy.

ROADSIDE FOOD GOES RIGHT THROUGH YOU. AM I RIGHT?

There was some discussion concerning their next message. Timothy suggested they inform the alien of humankind's amazing social and technological progress. Colin said they should infuse their transmission with cultural references in order to subtly demonstrate their sophistication.

"Or," said Rebecca. "We could try being good listeners and see what we can learn."

It was decided that this sort of out-of-the-box thinking was just what they needed.

They let her compose the next transmission. She typed: **SO. TELL ME ABOUT YOURSELF.**

She turned off the CAPS LOCK and BOLD settings so their alien contact could talk normally.

"Well," said their alien contact, via the dot matrix printer. "My real name is Bob, but you can just call me B'oowloh Bron Bron Zowt. I'm communicating through your MacBook (Pro) via electronic telepathy, which is why transmissions are able to transcend the speed of light barrier."

Timothy sent, "Your race is telepathic?"

"No. Just me. I hear the voices of a million species but rarely am I heard. Rarely can I establish dialog such as this. But I had to reach out and warn you."

Several moments of silence passed, then Rebecca sent: "Please go on."

"Sorry about that. I was consuming a dessert item that is surprisingly tasty. Never know what you're going to get at a roadside diner, am I right? I think you might call this 'key lime pie,' except it's composed of a petrochemical sludge."

"We have such menu items here as well. They're called 'processed foods,'" typed Rebecca. "But you said something about a warning?"

"I wish I could help you, but two guards are keeping close watch over me. You see, the telepathic voices of a million species has driven me mad and so I am a prisoner. They are transporting me from one confinement facility to another. We have stopped at a roadside diner. It is at this place where I happened to notice your Universe."

The hive erupted in an excited buzz but the Queen Bee held up one hand and everyone immediately quieted. She sent: "Please continue, Bob."

"Thank you. You are such a good listener. Believe me, that is a rare quality in any Universe. Anyway, I happened to notice your Universe at the bottom of the cup my waitress set in front of me. She was going to fill it with a hot, delicious beverage, but I placed my talons over the top to prevent this. Unfortunately, after the guards take me away from here, I will no longer be able to protect you."

Now Timothy sent a message: "You mean to tell us that our world is in danger of being destroyed by hot coffee?"

"It is not what your species would call 'coffee,'" transmitted Bob. "It has a smokier flavor and only half the caffeine. I believe it's known as Earl Grey tea. A most pleasant beverage. But yes, it will utterly destroy your Universe and all life within it. Your impending cataclysm makes my own problems pale in comparison, so I shall not bore you with them."

Arguments broke out as to how to handle the situation. Rebecca sent, "We thank you for taking time for us. I can't imagine what you are going through, and yet you stopped to give us a warning."

While debates raged through the hive, Rebecca conversed with Bob. Bob related his life story and all about how difficult it was growing up with the voices of sentient (and sometimes less-than-sentient) beings flooding his brain day and night.

"You are such a good listener," Bob said again.

"Thank you," said Rebecca.

The NERD group drew up battle plans and demands. They crafted threats and negotiations. They debated and argued and yelled. Bill returned with donuts and coffee. They filled him in on the latest developments. With the infusion of sugar and caffeine, the arguments escalated.

After nearly an hour, they were ready to send a new transmission but Rebecca said, "Oh, don't worry, everything has already been taken care of."

"Taken care of?" said Bill. "What do you mean?"

Rebecca only smiled.



In a Universe built on a vast scale but otherwise surprisingly similar to our own, a team of psychiatric interns peered into a containment cell.

"And here we have Bob," said the physician in charge. "Nicknamed B'owloh Bron Bron Zowt."

The interns clicked their mandibles together rapidly in their equivalent of polite laughter.

"Of course, out of respect for the dignity of our patients, we address him by the more formal name of Bob."

"What is he holding?" asked one intern.

"Ah, yes. One thing you will learn about the patients here is that they all cling to something. Sometimes it's a ritual, sometimes it's a possession. It comes down to security.

Bob here latched onto a ceramic cup on his way to this facility. He refused to let go of it. Eventually, his guards simply paid the diner for the cup rather than wrestle it from him. It hasn't left his talons since that day. As long as nobody tries to take away his cup, Bob is a model patient."



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Seth Chambers is an ESL teacher and author of SF, fantasy, and absurdist tales. His work has appeared in many publications, including *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Alien Skin*, *Isotropic Fiction*, and *Perihelion*.

Skipping Stones

Erin Cole

When Raine went kicking through the flower beds of the forest, Paylee knew their mother had returned from the village with a heaping basket still brimming with pungent, dried herbs and weeds. He wondered what she offered the people this time. Wartberry Fairvbell? Arrowhead Groundsel? Yellow Skullcap? She could offer them the Fountain of Youth, and they still wouldn't forgive her, wouldn't ever trust in her medicine again. Once a death, always another.

Raine's blind insistence to think things would ever change, as if the village would one day forgive them, wore Paylee down. Raine seemed to live in a world constructed of his own wants and needs, and Paylee suspected another reason for why he ushered mother to the village week after week.

"Raine, cut it out!" Paylee yelled. He picked up the flowered faces of the Wood Nymphs and tried to prop them back upright, but they drooped back down again, so he plucked them carefully from the soil and walked through the woods to the stone garden. There, the trees circled a smooth bend in the river. Their whispers echoed off granite and bark. Mother said it was the ancient ones sharing wisdom and foresight, thinly disguised in the ruffle of branches, the trickling of the river, and the moan of trunks swaying in the soft loam of the river bed. She said, one day, Paylee would hear them too. He's tried, has held a rock wheel like the one she uses to commune, a branch twisted and fastened into a fist-sized circle with rocks suspended between the lacing of twine, but so far, his ears remain deaf to their tongue.

Paylee dropped the Nymph's heads in at the river's edge. Glassy, cloud-reflected water swirled them downstream like spinning snowflakes. He wanted to spin along with them, travel to his own world far from the woods, maybe to a desert or rolling grassy plains. Any place but the cold, wet woods they lived in now.

Rocks clapped behind Paylee. He turned to find Raine holding a fistful of smoothed, flat rocks. One of them zipped from his hand across the stone garden and into the river, two, three, five skips that chased after the Wood Nymph's heads.

"What are you doing, Raine?"

Paylee hadn't meant it as a question. He already knew why Raine had come, to show off and taunt him. His 7-year-old hands lacked Raine's 17-year-old strength and dexterity, and his brother reminded him of it often.

Raine skipped another rock, this one bouncing six times before cracking against a rock on the other side of the river, dead center in a circle he'd scratched out using the sharp

tip of another rock. He grinned at Paylee, a smile too much like those of the guards at the village gate.

"Why do you keep sending mother to the village?" Paylee tossed a small stone at the river, but it only plunked with a one-drop splash six feet out. "You know they'll never take us back."

Raine picked up a large flat stone, one that fit comfortably in his palm. "To try is not to fail, Paylee. To stop trying is to fail. I do not force mother to go. The choice is hers and hers alone." His muscles flexed across his back and arms as he skipped the rock upriver, into the current. It bounced leaving behind four giant rippled rings the size of a tall fir. He swayed around to face Paylee. "A choice that you are soon going to have to make too, little brother."

Raine had never called him *little brother*. It occurred to Paylee then that he was making a point, not to state the obvious, but ever so slightly to challenge him. A glimmer sparked in Raine's eye, a flame ready to leap higher.



The next morning, mother went out to talk to the trees. She told Paylee the ancient ones said change was on the horizon. Paylee didn't need divine insight to gather that, but she also said a storm was coming, and with it, there would be irreversible outcomes.

Paylee didn't want to think about the future; it was only filled with uncertainty, and his past was more or less a vague memory of moving from mountain side to cave and mountain side again.

Today, though, in the stone garden, a nice cool breeze blew in from the North. Paylee sat silent and focused like a peregrine. He cleared his mind to the present, and deepened his breath into the now. In his hand, he held onto his own rock wheel, twine twisted and pulled taught around small rocks in a web pattern between a bent, rounded branch. When the wind blew, the rocks were supposed to vibrate, a sign of the ancients ready to commune. Paylee's didn't work so well. The rocks kept slipping loose of the twine or they sagged against it. Maybe that was the reason he hadn't heard their whispers, he thought. Either that, or mother was wrong, and he wasn't seer.

In the distance, across the river, Paylee overheard voices. He ducked around fir branches then stopped abruptly at the site of Raine with a girl dressed in village clothes, tapered, bright linens that formed to her figure. Paylee's heartbeat quickened, his fists clenched, and sweat dampened his face as he watched Raine pick her a small bouquet of flowers and tuck them into her hair.

Who was she? Paylee thought she looked like a princess, a lithe frame that moved as graceful as the Nymphs. He saw excitement beaming in Raine's smile, maybe it was happiness, but whatever it was, he'd never shared it with Paylee or their mother.

A sweep of anxiety flushed breath from Paylee's lungs as suspicion filtered into his thoughts. Raine planned to make his passage back into the village through the likes of the girl. Paylee peered at them closer and realized for the first time that Raine was almost a man. The village would take him in, no matter that he was the child of a witch and seer. He was handsome, muscular, and knew the land better than anyone. Unlike Paylee and their mother, the village needed him.

But so did they.

Tears breached Paylee's brutish fight to swallow them back, and he ran from the stone garden all the way back home.



Raine was a traitor, Paylee decided. He'd be willing to bet his flint stone that the ancient ones thought so too. Without Raine, survival would be no less than a harrowing, strenuous ordeal for him and his mother. Raine had protected them, hunted food, built and fixed their shelters, and near everything else since their exile from the village. Paylee was learning the ways, but not fast enough. He still depended on Raine daily.

Moreover, mother's frailty worsened each day. Something black grew inside of her, sucked the color from her cheeks and the fat off her bones. She couldn't do much beyond cooking and mixing medicinal treatments. Paylee knew Raine had given them everything, but they were family, and that's what families do. Maybe, in the end, it had been too much for Raine.

Paylee brooded. *That stupid girl.* Maybe she had that buttercup hair and fern-green eyes, but she couldn't fathom the consequences pressing down on them. She was selfish like the other villagers. They cared nothing about the ancient ones, cared nothing for a mother and her young children. For Raine to return to them after what they did drove a crowd of voices into Paylee's head, none of which he suspected had come from the whispering woods.

Paylee watched them from afar again and grew angrier still. He threw a rock at the river—hoping to skip it ashore somewhere in their vicinity—and ducked behind a large boulder. It didn't make it across the river, but it did skip three times and sent a spray of water their direction. At that small spark of satisfaction, he headed for home through the forest, fighting back another bout of hot emotions that had expanded from somewhere deep and up into his throat.

Halfway there, he stopped to meditate, desperate to hear the ancient ones, but still, they refused him tongue. Before entering the cabin he bit down on his lip. Mother did not need to know about the village girl, though Paylee suspected the ancients had told her already.

Inside, Paylee set the rug with two bowls and two spoons only. Mother sat down across from him and ladled broth into his bowl. At his silence, she spoke.

"You still haven't heard the ancient ones."

"Raine is spending time at the village. He's met a girl." It blurted from Paylee like scorching red lava.

Mother suspended scooping the stew as though momentarily frozen. "Raine has his own choices to make." She resumed serving.

"But he will leave us. What will we do?"

"Do not cross bridges you have not yet arrived at, Paylee." She placed the pot on the kiln and sat back down on the floor.

"He's not a chosen one, is he?" Paylee asked.

"For other things. In a sense, we are all chosen for something. It's a matter of owning our destiny, traversing our fate. You'll understand in time, my son." Curles of steam wafted up from her spoon. "Now, no more talk. Tend to your eating and remember to be thankful."



The next morning, Paylee woke to the cold breath of dawn on his shoulders. He stoked the fire, covered his mother with a blanket, and went outside. He headed to the stone garden, and after ten handfuls of rocks, he could skip them four times consecutively, almost as good as Raine. The last one hit the painted boulder across the river, a thumb's length from the bull's-eye before it split into two halves. *What Raine can do, I will do better*, he thought to himself.



At the peak of a waxing moon, the sound of skipping stones rolled through a clouded sky. The smell of charred wood soaked the air. Mother stirred with a fever that herb and weed couldn't lessen. She tossed and turned on her mat with dampness on her brow and heat at her cheeks. Her eyes fogged over with a cloudy fluid much like plant milk that crusted along her eyelashes.

She grabbed Paylee's arm as though falling. "Paylee!" she said. "Go to the stone garden. Go listen to the whispering woods. The ancient ones are calling for you. You must hurry!"

"I will not leave you, not like this," Paylee cried. He smeared tears down his cheek with his palm and took a deep breath. "I'm not Raine. You'll never be alone."

"Paylee, my son. It is I who will leave you. Go, you must hear the ancient ones." With trembling fingers, she put her rock wheel in his hand. The lacing in the middle was bound sturdy to the circular branch and the rocks still inside.

Paylee kissed her on the forehead and ran to the stone garden. A bulbous moon blinked between the swift glide of pewter-glazed clouds. Raine and his princess were long gone, probably walking the cobbled streets of the village and eating warm, spiced meat from bone, unaware of his mother's growing illness.

The sacred circle of whispering woods towered around Paylee like a dark council of revenants. He sat on his favorite boulder with his mother's wheel in his hand, focusing, listening, keen to hear the ancient ones speak to him, to tell him what to do.

He tried, but only the delicate whistle of the wind responded. He felt small, like he did in his dreams. *A little brother*. Feeble. Inadequate. Naïve. Raine knew it, and the ancient ones did too.

Paylee scooped up a handful of rocks and chucked one, two, three, as hard as he could. They skidded, plunked, and splashed into the black glass of the river.

"What do you want of me?" Paylee yelled. Warm tears spilled down his cheeks. He wiped at them in outrage.

The tree branches shook and scraped their limbs together. He stared down at the wheel of rocks, beheld the tight oscillations, but it wasn't enough, so he raised it high into the air and aimed it in the direction of the river. He would throw it in if the ancient ones didn't speak to him. He would toss it so hard, maybe his hand wouldn't let go and he would drown instead, or let the river take him to a place far, far away.

Before further thought, before his arm flexed back gaining strength for his hardest throw yet, a murmuring breeze whirled in and froze Paylee still. He heard voices... *the whispering woods*. A burst of joy gripped him and he gasped out. The rocks in the rock wheel vibrated between the twine like a plucked guitar string. At that moment, he not only heard the ancient ones, but he felt them too, the deep pull of the Divine.

"Paylee, stop! Do not fear," the voices said.

More than one voice spoke, one aching familiar. "Mother?"

Paylee looked up and around, but saw only clouds and the tarnished glow of the moon behind them. As much as he tried to force the thought out of his mind because of what it meant, he couldn't. The elation he'd had a moment ago soured into hot tears and caught in his throat like a giant knot until he screamed it out. He knew what hearing his mother speak to

him in such a manner meant, what had happened to her after he'd left. She was with the ancient ones now.

Mother was dead.

The sharp point of abandonment cut into him, his breath fitful and hoarse in his throat. The voices were still speaking, but he couldn't hear them, didn't want to. What more could they possibly say?

"You have been chosen, Paylee," she and the other voices said.

Paylee looked up at the swaying trees, tried to swallow back his sobs-keep brave.

"Now, it is you who must choose. Follow the path of your spirit, dear Paylee."

"I don't know how. I'm afraid," Paylee said. Tears ran down his face and hung at the curve of his chin. "I don't want to choose."

"You must. Trust in your heart and you will find the way."

The whispers stopped. Paylee wanted to go back home, tend to his mother's passing, and weep in the flower garden. He stepped from the stone garden and into the needle-thick canopy of the woods. An invisible, silent power steered him deeper into another section of the forest, one he hadn't been to since he could remember—the path that led to the village.

A slice of bone-white moonlight cut through the trees and landed on a slumped form in the dirt. Paylee ran over to the person and nudged the left shoulder back. His mother's face fell to the side, her eyes pinned to the night above, frozen wide in the grip of death.

Paylee jerked his hand back with a choking gasp. A warm, sap-like substance coated his fingers. A cry shot from his throat. A puddle of blood seeped across his mother's chest, a red darker than he thought possible.

"Mother! Who did this?" There was no answer.

Paylee picked up a large stone. He was going to skip it all the way to heaven. "Why!" he cried, shouting at the sky. "Why didn't you warn me?"

"Why would I do that?"

But it wasn't mother and the ancient ones. A crumble of rotted wood jolted Paylee to his feet. Raine appeared from around a trunk as stealth as a panther. His eyes shone like crimson stars, and Paylee realized then it was the reflection of blood over his palms.

"I'm sorry, Paylee. Choices were made. Mother killed Lilah."

Paylee slipped the stone into his pocket and searched the ground for the rock wheel. If there was ever a time he needed the council of the ancient ones, it was now. "How could she?" he replied. "Mother was sick."

"It's true. Mother gave me an herb to give Lilah that would take the child from her belly, but it took her too. She knew it would."

"No! Mother knows the plants better than anyone. She wouldn't do that. She respected your choices."

"Did she?" Raine edged closer to him, the flame in his eyes turned into a blaze.

"Why would she do that?"

"You know why. She was threatened by her and the villagers, scared I was going to leave you both for them."

"Weren't you?"

"You mean, aren't I?"

Something wasn't right. It stirred deep in Paylee's gut, even before he heard the ancient ones speak again, "*He hides truth.*"

Mother hadn't killed the village girl. A tremor quaked inside Paylee and bled everything in his world red. Breath knotted in the back of his throat and pulled tight against his cords. "You killed her," he rasped. "I know you did! You killed her!"

A snide grin spread into Raine's eyes. "Little Paylee, so wise, so mature. You think I'm going to live in these woods forever? Taking care of you and mother while my life slips away? Mother made the wrong choices, and we paid for them!"

"She was set up."

Raine clucked his tongue. "It doesn't matter anymore. My destiny is behind those walls, and the only way to get inside them is to bring the villagers what they want."

"Please, Raine. Don't do this."

Raine fell silent and stepped towards him. Paylee dipped his hand into his pocket and curled his fingers tight around the stone. Fear squeezed around his wriggling heart.

"The woods have spoken to me," Paylee said. "They've shown me my destiny too."

Raine lingered in his advance on him. "So, you've made your choice, little brother?"

The rock in Paylee's hand was as smooth as the best of them, and tonight it wouldn't skip across the river. Paylee pulled back and chucked the stone at Raine's temple. Bull's-eye. He crumbled and smacked the back of his head against a boulder.

"Raine? Raine!" Paylee ran over to him and shook his shoulders. His limp neck jostled his head side to side. Paylee couldn't undo what he'd done. Another hoarse sob escaped him—change choking him tight around the throat.



A rose dawn spread its light over the stone garden and bathed the sacred circle of whispering trees with the same pink as the belly of the fish that squirmed in Paylee's hand. With ease, he drew the tip of the blade beneath its gills and slit down the middle. He laid it skin-side down on a hot rock by the fire and seasoned the flesh with dried verbena.

On the horizon, Paylee knew another storm would gather, one shaped of dark horses and pointed spears. The villagers would find what they were looking for. So hoped Paylee. He owned his destiny now, and it took him down river, to a place far away.



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Erin Cole writes dark, speculative fiction, many thanks to that handy science degree. She is the author of *Grave Echoes*, *Of the Night*, *After Dusk*, *The Shadow People*, and has a novella forthcoming with *Damnation Books*. When she's not writing, she enjoys cooking 'real' food, takes in rescue animals, and is a close friend to insomnia. Visit her at www.erincolewrites.com.

Incriminating Evidence

Charity Tahmaseb

"**Y**ou won't tell anyone this."

I don't remind Magnus that I can't. Besides, his is a knee-jerk sort of question, the one he always asks at the start of a session.

"You're the only one I can talk to," he says.

I nod, doodling on a piece of paper, its edges so charred that the smoky scent reaches me. It contains a list of names that, depending on whose fingers clutch the paper, could be almost anything—a death warrant, a hit list.

But since a Sage last held it, I've taken to desecrating it with doodles—mostly hearts and flowers, and mostly adorning Magnus's name. No, I shouldn't have a crush, but then I shouldn't be dispensing advice without a license either.

"I need to fire my second," he says.

I crook an eyebrow at this. True, I am a rebel confidant, for lack of a better term, but I normally deal with Oedipus or Electra complexes, abandonment issues, and learned helplessness. (You'd be surprised how many revolutionaries aren't quite sure what to do after the coup.) But firing one's second in command? Purely an operational decision.

"He's a good friend," Magnus says.

Ah, the crux of the problem. I give a single nod, one that means: *Go ahead.*

"But I fear his loyalties may lie elsewhere." Magnus stares at me, his gaze holds both pleading and defiance. Has his second, Orlando, confessed to me? Magnus wants me to confirm. He wants me to deny. He wants something I can't give him. I can no more tell Magnus this than voice his doubts to Orlando.

"It worries me."

Now I nod. It should and greatly.

"Do you think I should consult the Sages?"

I tilt my head to one side and give a little shoulder shrug—the maximum consideration they deserve.

Magnus laughs, a big boom that fills the room and warms my heart. Still, I must swallow the bitter anxiety that floods my mouth. He is strong and this strength will be his salvation, I tell myself, not his downfall.

"Yes," he says, still laughing. "I know you've never set much store in their advice."

I have my own reasons for disregarding the Sages. That they dispense worthless advice is secondary.

"Of course..." A slyness crosses his face, the look both playful and seductive. "They led me to you."

Well, there's that.

He taps his fingers against a pillow as if counting off options. My office is rudimentary, at best. A scavenged door for a desk, propped up on crumbling cinderblock. Crates double as chairs. A fire in the hearth makes it warm enough for year-round use. But the pillow? Velvet with silky fringe in a deep emerald green. It harkens back to long ago days. Most of my clients can't help but fondle it. When they do, their fears pour from them.

"It's the betrayal," Magnus says, his fingers entwined in the fringe, which might double as strands of hair by the way he strokes it.

I stare at his hands until the heat in my face forces me to glance away.

"We expect it. Don't we? We always look for the betrayal."

I turn back to him.

"But it's never easy."

I blink rapidly, in a way that I hope conveys understanding, not flirting.

"You would caution me against haste," he says.

I give an emphatic nod.

"Rash judgments?"

Yes, those too. I can't help but smile. Are all client relationships destined to be so intimate? Or is it only that one client, the one you end up needing more than he needs you?

Magnus closes his eyes. His lashes are childlike and startling against the scarred terrain of his cheekbones. "Just saying it out loud." He exhales, the force of his breath ruffling the pillow's fringe. "You can't imagine what a relief that is."

No. I can't.

He opens one eye and peers at me. I've always envied those who can do that. I need both eyes to see the world and even then, I doubt I see it clearly—or at least not like I should. But it's this gesture that decides things—his absolute trust in me. My world is a complicated tapestry with so many threads. But tug Magnus from the weave? My whole existence would unravel.

I glance down at the list of names. The Sages may dispense worthless advice, but their sources are impeccable. I start to tear my scribbling from the rest of the page, but there's no hope for it. I've entwined myself so thoroughly with Magnus—at least in doodles. I shove the charred and adorned sheet at him before I can change my mind. Perhaps devotion can soften betrayal.

Even as his mouth turns grim, his eyes remain soft, dart toward the top of the page, then toward me.

"I know you'll never tell," he says.

I won't. I can't. Sometime on my fifth day, the Sages sliced the tongue from my mouth.

He carries the paper to the hearth and lets it drop into the flames. Evidence of betrayal—of devotion—evaporates into smoke. I join him in the walk from my office. At the

threshold, he presses a finger against my lips and kisses my forehead. I dare to yearn for more—that kiss traveling my cheek, brushing my mouth, lingering there.

But there's no hope for it. Already the warmth of his lips is a memory.

"Ah," he says. "My perfect confidant."

Yes, it's true. I am the perfect confidant.

When he leaves without a backward glance, I know this:

That's all I'll ever be.



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Charity Tahmaseb has slung corn on the cob for Green Giant and jumped out of airplanes (but not at the same time). She spent twelve years as a Girl Scout and six in the Army; that she wore a green uniform for both may not be a coincidence. These days, she writes fiction (long and short) and works as a technical writer for a software company in St. Paul.

Posthumous

James B. Willard

"**Y**ou're a good girl, Ruthie," Ma says, placing hands on my arms. She's looking at them—really looking at them—for the first time in longer than I can remember. "You've always been a good girl."

The cadenced beeping of her heart monitor rises up from the background noise of the ward, intrusive, and it seems to me that the lights are getting brighter in the room, so bright it's making my eyes water. It feels like I'm the fragile one, like she's gonna crush me into pieces while examining my scars.

She asks about them, of course.

"When'd you get these?" she whispers. She sounds concerned, but weak, and I know she's not gonna make it through the next few days.

"I don't remember, Mama. It was a long time ago," I answer, lying, but the memories are welling up in my mind after all the years. I've never been all that good at keeping them buried.

"You came back to see me, Ruthie," she says. "You've always been the best girl."

I don't go by Ruthie any more, but I don't correct her. There's old anger inside of me, even though I know there shouldn't be. It's not her fault that she's getting names and places mixed up, but I'm still feeling mad because it's not like she was ever around, not since Dad left us behind. How would she know if I was good or not, anyway? So there it is—it's been stewing deep down inside of me for almost two decades—along with all those memories of the bad winter.

Here she is, dying before my eyes, and it's taking all I've got not to walk out the door, leaving her to wither away, alone. There's too much guilt, too many years between us.

I pull my arm away from her, like I'm saying what's mine is mine and it's none of her business.

"I want you to know that I feel bad about making us leave Arbor Park, Ruthie," she says, looking at my face now.

God, she's so old, so small and worn down by life, and I can see myself in her shadow. I feel afraid of the day when I'm in her place, knowing there's not gonna be anybody at my bedside while I lie wasting away, forgotten. I know she's in bad shape too, 'cos we never talk about Arbor Park. I wonder how long she's been holding on to that.

I want to tell Ma that I feel bad about how things ended in Arbor Park, just like she does. I want to tell her why I feel that way, that I'm angry but she's not the one to blame. I want to tell her why I stopped talking to her, but I don't think she'll understand me. I don't think she'll even hear me. I close my eyes and concentrate on the droning buzz of the hospital.

I take a deep breath of the recycled, antiseptic air and I reflect on the times leading up to when we left.



There was a day before the bad winter, right around Thanksgiving. That's when everything started to shift, the beginning of one of those life-changing phases that happen to everyone, obvious in retrospect, but at the time, a struggle. I was fifteen and excited about the holidays and school break. I'd been babysitting for the neighbors, late at night, but it was a Friday so not that big of a deal. When I came home, I found Ma sitting at the kitchen table with a bottle of Dad's bourbon, a half-smoked cigarette dangling from her fingers, and this blank look in her eyes. My first thought was that Dad had been in an accident or something.

"Mama, what's the matter?" I asked, cautiously, letting my backpack drop to the floor.

It took her a minute to answer, like she didn't even know I'd come in the room. She didn't look at me; she just told me that Dad wasn't coming home again. Like part of her was gone, checked out even, and I wasn't all that sure of how to deal with that, especially since she'd said it like it wasn't even that big of a deal. So I went to my room, the one Dad added to the basement.

I closed the door, and I cried for days.

Ma never once came to check on me that first week, and by the end of it I'd cut myself a few times—just to make sure I was still alive, you know, nothing serious, nothing all that deep. I just wanted to feel something concrete, make myself feel something that I had control over, and I happened to have a sharp enough pair of scissors to serve that purpose. The scissors were a gift from Helen, the first time that I'd been to her house.

I should have stayed home that day; I should have stayed in that dark add-on room in the basement that was so much like a prison.



"I want to show you something," Helen said, opening a door to stairs that led up to an attic.

"You can't tell anyone about this place," she'd warned me.

"Of course I won't, Helen," I assured her. "Your secret's safe with me."

"Promise me. Swear on your mother's life," she demanded, blocking the doorway.

I didn't think anything of it, you know. We were kids. Kids say things like that all the time, don't they? So I promised her; I swore on my mother's life. We went up the stairs and passed through a second doorway into a room filled with scissors.

"What's with all the scissors?" I asked, looking inquisitively over the hundreds of types of scissors hanging from the rafters by strings and wires. The walls were a solid mass of sharp metal shears, layered so thick I couldn't see the plaster or boards behind them. Several light bulbs hung from the ceiling in different parts of the room, casting ominous shadows that stretched across the worn hardwood floor.

"These are for you," she said, handing me a black, medium sized pair of expensive-looking scissors. I studied them for a moment then placed them in my pocket.

"Thanks," I said. "But really, where'd you get all of these scissors?"

"This place is magic," she said, avoiding my question. She pointed to a circle drawn with chalk on the floor that I hadn't noticed. "If you close the door, stand in the circle, and wish to go anywhere in the world, this room can make it happen, as long as I'm with you."

I laughed at her. I thought she was joking.

"Your room's really cool, Helen, but don't expect me to believe that kind of kid stuff." She scowled, tilting her head down, her eyes dark.

"Why wouldn't you believe me?" she whispered.

"Because you're talking about magic. Fairy tales. It's just make-believe."

A part of me wanted it to be real. I wanted to think that such a thing were possible. There were so many places I'd never seen, so many places that I knew I'd never travel to. Ever since I was little, Ma said I'd always be a small town girl, that I'd never get away from it. There were so many places I'd heard stories about that seemed better than Arbor Park.

"Let me show you, then," Helen said, taking my hand in hers. Her touch was electric and exciting. I didn't want her to let go, so I followed behind her. She closed the door and led me into the circle.

"You have to close your eyes," she informed me, reaching for a pair of scissors that were hanging nearby, so I did.

Suddenly, I felt a sharp pain in the palm of my hand.

"You cut me!" I snatched my hand away from her, watching the bright blood well up from the slice in my palm and drip to the floor.

"Why?!" I exclaimed, stepping away from her, confused and angry.

"It's not that deep. I'm sorry. I had to do it to make this work," she explained, reaching into her pocket for a handkerchief.

Had she planned this?

"Where was it that you wanted to go?" she asked, changing the subject. Perhaps hoping to distract me from the drops of blood as they fell to the floor. "New York? Paris? Tokyo? Somewhere exotic?"

"Home," I answered, snatching the handkerchief from her hands and wrapping it around mine. Any place but the attic.

I opened the door to the stairs and part of me still hoped that Helen's magic had worked, that we'd somehow been whisked away to another land, to one of the great cities that I'd always read about in magazines, where movie stars and rich people spend their days. I wanted to feel the sunshine blasting in through the doorway, blinding and warm, to hear sounds I'd never heard before.

But outside it was still Arbor Park.

It was the same cold, overcast sky, dumping out the seemingly endless drizzle that soaked through everything I wore.

"I'm sorry, Ruthie," she apologized, reaching out for me without leaving the circle. Her lithe fingers stretched towards me, and despite the pain she'd caused, I wanted to feel them on my skin.

"It's okay, Helen. I'll talk to you later on. I need a couple of days," I said as I walked down the stairs. "I'll let myself out."



I look down at my arms, seeing the scars Ma was asking about. Scars that came later, on the week we left town, right before spring but still cold enough that I could wear long-sleeved shirts and sweaters to cover my arms. The cut in my palm and the cuts that I'd given myself had never really left any marks.

"What happened in Arbor Park's not your fault, Mama," I say to her. "It was a long time ago. I don't even think about it anymore." I lie to her again. I think about Arbor Park all the time. I think about the day that we left and how Helen cried when I told her that I could never see her again. That I never wanted to see her again. Sometimes, though, it feels like she's near, a shadow just out of sight in a dark room, watching me, or in a crowded place, standing still, studying my movements.

"Still, Ruthie," Ma says, "I know you and that little girl were good friends. I shouldn't have made you split up how I did," She hesitates a moment, licking her thin lips. I reach for the cup of water on her bed stand, but she shakes her head dismissively. Her voice is so quiet, like she's breathing out a little life with each word she whispers. "It's just that I was trying to look out for you, best as I could, and that girl was leading you down a path I knew you'd get hurt on."

I sigh, assuming that it's because Helen and I are both girls, assuming she was worried about what people in such a small town would say. You know how small towns are; rumors take hold and spread like wildfire.

Ma was right, though. Helen was a troublemaker and a bad influence, but she couldn't have known about the trouble we'd almost gotten into because we'd never been caught. Once Dad was gone and Ma wasn't around so much, after Helen apologized for what happened in the attic and I'd forgiven her, we set out against the world. Rebels. Destroyers. I followed her lead. The way I saw it was that Arbor Park owed me for taking my Dad away from me, and in turn, for taking my Ma, too. Helen was just the one who opened the doors, who helped put the ideas into motion.



All of our angst culminated on a night in late February when we found ourselves outside of the Parrish family's barn. Rumors around town were that the barn was haunted by the ghost of Old Johnny Parrish who committed suicide by hanging himself from the rafters years and years before, and we'd decided it was a good idea to investigate. When we arrived, the only thing we could see through the cracks in the walls were a couple of rusted-out cars under rotting tarps inside.

"Let's torch it," Helen said. The moonlight fell across her face, making her blonde hair appear illuminated from within. She took a lighter out of her pocket and placed it in my hand.

"I brought one for each of us," she said, producing another. Her eyes glimmered and she smiled for a moment.

I returned her smile. When I think about it, she was the only one that I ever smiled for.

When I was with her, I felt like I could be myself; I was as happy as it was possible for me to be, because all of the other things just faded away. When I was with her it didn't matter that Ma was gone all the time. It didn't matter that Dad had abandoned us. Helen cared about me. She actually listened to what I had to say, and that was enough to make me forget about all the garbage in the rest of my life.

Helen believed in living in the moment.

"Yesterday doesn't matter," she said. "Tomorrow doesn't matter. There's only now. This minute." She put her hand over my heart, touching my chest, and I wondered if she could feel my pulse increasing, if she noticed that I was holding my breath. "Let's set this relic on fire."

I shook my head, finding my voice.

"We shouldn't," I said. "We could get caught. We could get into a lot of trouble for this. Besides, there's a horse living in there." I'd just noticed the horse, standing in one of the stalls. I assumed it had been sleeping, that we had woken it with our intrusion.

Helen looked at me for a long moment, her eyes searching mine for an answer, evaluating whether I was serious or not. Whatever she saw must have convinced her to back down. I wondered if she could see that I loved her. I still wonder. Was she remembering the time in her attic, just a few months before when she'd cut me, and how I'd made her promise never to betray my trust again?

She looked inside the barn, between some of the loose boards, trying to locate the horse.

"Yeah, you're probably right." She put the lighter back into her pocket, and I did the same with mine. Maybe we should have burned that old barn down. Maybe burning the barn down and being caught would have been better for us both.

"Let's go see this horse," she suggested, and we crept into the barn.

The horse could have been white, but might have been gray. It was hard to tell in the darkness. The sporadic moonlight coming in through the holes in the roof made it seem like it had an otherworldly glow. We were standing next to this impossibly beautiful creature, and my thoughts flashed back to Helen's hair. I wondered what it would feel like if it brushed across my skin.

"We can live forever, you know," Helen said, stroking the horse's mane. It stirred a little, but didn't seem to mind that we were there.

"What are you talking about?" I asked, mesmerized by the magnificent animal in front of us. "A creature so beautiful shouldn't be locked in a barn. We should release her. She deserves to know what freedom is."

"We need the horse to stay right where it is. I've done this before," she stated, then digressed. "You know, I'm older than you think. You can live forever with me. If you want."

I was used to Helen speaking figuratively by then. She had a fantastic imagination, and there were more than a few times when I wondered if her imagination was crossing over into her reality and she didn't realize it. I'd laughed dismissively at her ideas in the attic. I chose to play along again.

"How is that possible? Did you find the fountain of youth or something?"

"Something like that. Take my hand," she insisted, reaching out for me.

I took her hand into mine, waiting. My pulse quickened. Any excuse for contact with her was a good one. Every time we touched, butterflies sprung up inside of me.

"You've never told anyone about the scissors, have you?" she asked. I shook my head.

"No, no. I never told anyone." I would never betray her.

"You have to promise me, again, that you won't tell anyone about this. These are our secrets, not theirs," she demanded. "If you tell, I'll never forgive you."

Yes, yes. I promised. The secrets are safe. Our secrets are safe. Just keep holding my hand, I thought. Just don't let go. In that moment, I didn't care what she was talking about. My feelings for her were forbidden. I wasn't supposed to want the things that I wanted from a girl, and that made me want them even more. All of our secrets are safe, I thought. Any secret you want to have, Helen.

She closed her eyes and tightened her grip. My palm was sweating, even in the cold February air. I watched as she placed her hand on the horse's chest, running her fingers across its hair.

Then, without warning, without a sound, the horse dropped to the ground. I stepped back, horrified.

"What just happened?" I asked, falling to my knees next to the horse, checking to see if it was breathing. It wasn't. "What did you do?"

She smiled at me in a strange way, and all of my desire from a moment before turned into fear and revulsion. Suddenly, I was afraid of her in a way I'd never been, in a way I'd never thought possible.

"It didn't feel any pain," she told me. "It didn't even know what happened." Still smiling, she took a step towards me, and I took another step away.

"Is it... it's dead, isn't it?" I asked. I didn't understand how it had happened, but the beautiful and peaceful creature was dead. I don't know what she had done to it, or how any human could have the power to take a life with nothing more than the brush of a hand, but the undeniable truth was on the ground before me. Beauty had fallen at my feet, as if to convey a message from some higher force—Helen was dangerous.

I had to get away.

"It's just a transfer of energy," Helen reasoned with me, seeing my horror. "I gave us a few extra years. It's a gift, and I did it for you. For us. Like I said, we can go on, forever."

I took another step back, bumping into one of the rusted-out cars. I didn't want to take my eyes off her as she continued her advance.

"This isn't right, Helen," I said. "You killed it, just like that. Can you do that to anything? To anyone? To me?" I felt a chill suddenly creeping up and out of my gut.

"This is the cycle of life. People kill animals all the time so that they can eat. So that they can live longer. I've just found a way to do that better. You'll understand as time goes on. Come over to me."

She took another step towards me and touched my shoulder. I shoved her arm away.

"This is too much," I said. "First the scissors, now this. You're scaring me," When I said that, she stopped her advance, and I knew I'd hurt her feelings, but I continued. "I don't want to be here with you. I don't think we should be friends anymore."

"You can't walk away from me. Not now. You promised me. You made a lot of promises to me, Ruth," she said in a threatening tone. "When you love someone, you don't leave them, no matter what."

I hesitated. Dad left Ma and they both left me. Did they love me? Had I done something that made their hearts change in an instant, something awful like Helen had done? Had I committed some crime I wasn't aware of, something so terrible that they had to get away from me?



I brush a few stray hairs from Ma's face. Her skin feels thin and breakable as my fingers move across it. She closes her eyes, but keeps talking.

"I know about all the things you two were up to," she says. "Things you think were pranks, but that's how it always starts. It always leads to bigger things; leads to worse things. I saw the way you looked at her. I knew you'd follow her wherever she went, and I had to step in, because she would've done the same for you, and I'm sorry for that."

How could Ma have known? While I'm angry, I'm also sad for her. I'm sad that I never told her that leaving Arbor Park is what I wanted. Instead I put all my anger, resentment, and fear for wanting that onto her. I'm sad because we've both lived without speaking to each other, each of us alone, for so many years, and because I was too cowardly to tell her the truth about what was happening, about what had happened right before we left.

I'm still too cowardly to tell her, even while she's dying two feet away.



"I'll always be with you," Helen said, pulling a gleaming pair of scissors out of her jacket pocket.

"Helen, I'm serious. You killed the horse," I pointed to the lifeless animal. "You're really scaring me, acting like this. I think we need to get you some help."

"You're all the help I need. Just don't leave me," she said, and started to cry.

I stood my ground. My feelings had changed; all the attraction and kinship I'd felt for her just hours before had somehow shifted into loathing. She had taken the life of an animal without hesitation, and I feared what she could do to me if she chose to.

"No," I insisted. "I really can't do this. I don't want to see you again. I'm going home."

I started walking away without turning my back to her. She stood still, next to the abandoned car, watching me go. I was almost halfway home when she caught up to me.

"I'll make you regret this," she hissed, coming up behind me on the street. She said it with such finality, with such venom, I couldn't reply.

Then she lashed out at me with her scissors.

I tried to block her lunges, holding up my arms, but the blades cut through my sleeves, opening gashes in my arms. I fell to the ground, screaming at her.

"Stop, please stop! Please don't do this," I begged, but she kept stabbing. The scissors tore at my skin, slicing deep into my muscles. The blades connected with bone, and she kept pushing into me. I curled into myself, crying in a way I'd never cried before. The sounds coming from my mouth were inhuman, animal. Like they were coming from somewhere far away from me. I stopped resisting her, and she finally stopped slashing at me.

"If you ever tell anyone about me, about what happened, I'll take your mother from you. I'll ruin you. I'll take anyone from you, at any time, until you change your mind about me. If I can't have you, no one will. Ever."

She said this as she stood over me, watching me bleed on the sidewalk.

And then she was gone.

I let go of my consciousness and woke some time later in the emergency room, all stitched up. The doctors asked for my information. I made up a name—Ruthie—the first of many. I did the same for the police officer who was waiting to fill out a report on the incident. I didn't want anyone to know who I was, where I'd come from, or why I was there. I didn't want someone calling my mother and making her worry about me, about what happened. The incident, the officer kept calling it without looking me in the eyes. I watched the sun rise from a bench outside of the hospital, waiting until I knew Ma would be gone before returning home. I could hide the bandages and bruises behind long sleeves.

The thing is, when Ma told me we were leaving a week later, I wasn't relieved. I was frightened. I was scared that if we left Arbor Park, Helen would show up and make good on her word. Ma didn't really give me much of a choice.

I went into my room, one last time, once the movers had taken the boxes and the bed away. On the floor where the bed was, someone had drawn a circle in chalk, just like the one that I'd seen in Helen's attic when she'd cut me that first time. I'd never let Helen come into my room, not even my house.

That wasn't the last time I found the circles. Beneath every bed I've slept in since Arbor Park, in every room of every house, apartment, or hotel, one of the circles showed up. Even if I erased them, the next day, there would be a new one. I've learned to ignore them.

I've lived in fear that what Helen said is somehow true, and so I've never told anyone about what happened, especially not Ma. I stopped talking to her, angry at myself for what

happened, worried that the only way I could protect her and save her life was to shut her out of mine completely.

Helen was right. I've never been able to get away from her.



"I won't be here much longer, Ruthie," Ma says, sighing out a long exhalation, and I shiver as the old name crosses her lips.

"Ma, I'm sorry I wasn't around more," I tell her, taking her thin hands into mine.

"It's okay, baby girl. You always were a good baby girl," she replies, and I feel so bad inside, so wrong for how I punished her. I never recognized what she'd lost: first her husband, then her daughter, and as she's dying here, she still thinks of me as a good little girl.

"I want to show you something, Ma. Something I've never shown anyone before," I say, making a decision to let her in on the secret, Helen be damned. I smile at her and note that there is already color and substance returning to her flesh. The blood inside of her is clearing away her illness and her age.

She opens her eyes and they sparkle, filling with tears. She smiles at me and I realize that I've never seen her happy before. I stroke the darkening hair away from her face, noting that the wrinkles and creases in her face are smoothing out. There's a new strength in her grip as she wraps her fingers around my weakening hand. I don't tell her that I'll never come see her again. I don't confess to all the things I've done that will allow her live a much longer life.

Maybe you can be happy in the future, Ma. Maybe you can be safe, truly safe, once I'm gone.



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James Willard has written stories used as narratives in albums by *Brokenkites* and has produced the website fictions "Origami Shadows" and "Vaporlofts". He is currently writing the comic book series "Penny Palabras."

Your Cities

Anaea Lay

I was thinking of you. It was late and the lights in the bar were set low, creating the cozy, private feeling that you always found so depressing in those sorts of places. They're my sort of place now, but there was nothing private about the mass of people pressing on me as we stared in awe at the big television screens.

"The bridges are gone, collapsed at the same moment," the reporter gasped. "There's no sign of an explosion. Authorities won't answer questions about what happened." They were showing the same footage again. And again. The Brooklyn bridge crunched at the middle as if giant hands pressed either end together then collapsing, crashing into the water below, taking who knows how many people down with it. The Holland tunnel was uprooted and submerged. New York was completely cut off from its suburbs on Long Island and in New Jersey. It had to be a bizarre natural disaster or a brilliantly executed terrorist plot or... something.

"It's like the city just shrugged," somebody whispered. He spoke to the television, but it sent shivers through everybody who heard him.

That's when I thought of you.



Chicago was next, a year later. It was one of those foggy days where the air is so thick and close that the buildings disappear inside of it. On that day the ground rumbled and the air was filled with the sounds of steel sliding over glass, of concrete creaking over rebar. The city shook with the sounds of building after building around the city prostrating itself to the Sears Tower. They bowed before it, the King of the skyscrapers, and suddenly everybody knew.

They didn't have footage of it to play over and over like they did with New York, but they had experts. Whether they knew anything or not, the experts talked. The one I remembered most sounded a little like you. "There are precedents of course. Atlantis is the obvious one, but I think the tower of Babel probably references a real event that's been garbled over time." The experts speculated about what made the cities wake up, about how the ritual obeisance could have been coordinated, about anything and everything but the one obvious question, the one you'd never answer for me: "If they're waking up, what does that mean for us?"

You're still gone, vanished with New Orleans, but I know you're out there. They're still creeping toward consciousness, so you must be.



New Orleans was the first city to wake up, but it took them years to figure that out. It was so much smaller than the others, its skyline so much less impressive. But you'd always said that buildings were the side effects of cities, that their souls didn't need skyscrapers to grow and dream and whisper their passions to you. New Orleans had an old soul, pieces of Paris and Marseilles glued together with fragments of Barcelona and bits of Africa, thrown into the world and forced to find its own place. So you chose it as the first.

The weathermen started talking about Hurricane Catherine changing course, and still you went. She grew bigger and angrier while I begged you to stay, but you couldn't be stopped. They nicknamed her Katrina II, but you laughed at me as you climbed into your car and set off.

I've tried to picture it ever since, you strolling into a city anybody with any sense had long since fled. You whistled, I'm sure you whistled. But then what? Did you crawl into the city's bed and stroke its shoulder, nibbling on its ear and whispering tidings of morning, the way you would for me? Did you wrap your arms around it and speak of love and sex and waffles, coaxing it past the foggy stages of fresh wakening and into the warmth of your voice? Did you even think of me as you made love to the city, mother, midwife and lover all in one? I picture it, but I don't want to know.

Whatever you did, it wasn't enough. Or it was too much. New Orleans woke in the middle of the worst cyclonic storm on the Atlantic since they've kept records. It trembled and shook, as if convulsed with shrieks of, "Not again!" and threw itself into the ocean, taking you and every other poor soul trapped there with it. Katrina II, Hurricane's Revenge.

The waking must be contagious. It traveled up the Gulf Stream to New York, then through the Great Lakes to Chicago. They're waking themselves and you're dead and gone, drowned in a pile of rubble. I'll never have to look at you and know you dream of sapient Metropolis even as you kiss my fingers. You're lost and gone and I'm rid of you and your mania at last.



I remember the night we first talked of cities. We wandered down State street, lightly buzzed and falling into each other's arms at the slightest provocation. You spread your arms to the sky, as if embracing it and the towers around us. "Can't you feel it breathing?" you asked me. I felt humid air and the stillness of closed shops and closing restaurants. "We could nudge it, just a little. Then there'd be something marvelous."

We kissed. I pressed my lips to yours, helpless to answer you another way. The train rumbled overhead as we parted. You sighed and I heard the street sigh with you.



Los Angeles never woke up. You said it wouldn't, that it was a stinking mass of ghettoed neighborhoods and highway united by a central strip devoted to tourists and hookers. You said there wasn't enough human soul there to keep the people from turning to plastic. You called it an abomination, a collection of suburbs with no city. San Diego, San Francisco, they creaked into life, but Los Angeles remained still.

You were right, but it's the only city with suburbs left. All the wakeful cities went to war today. They ate the half-towns surrounding them, swallowed them into the earth, trampled them underfoot, and consumed their remains. Millions of people are dead. Half of Maryland and portions of Virginia aren't there anymore. All the gray places that cannibalized the cities are gone.

I wish you'd been here to see it.



I work on a farm now. They've sprung up where the suburbs used to be. The cities are riddled with markets selling fresh produce. Visiting the markets is the newest pastime for the people living in cities.

The farmers are experimenting, making new things out of the soil. They've made a plant that tastes like chocolate grow in the Midwest. It's creamy and sweet so you can eat the fruit straight. It tastes slightly nutty as it dissolves in your mouth. A used car dealer from Troy Michigan developed it. Horticulture had always been his hobby, and it became his life after Detroit leveled his home and killed his family. He lost everything, but the cities are full of chocolate.

I don't think of you when I eat it, because I don't think of you at all anymore. I just go to the private bars with low lights out of habit. The world has changed and there's no room left for missing you.



Los Angeles is gone. San Diego and San Francisco marched against it. They say the whole coast trembled under the strain of the two cities treading steadily toward their victim. Los Angeles was still asleep and they tore it to shreds.

It's not the only one. All of the sleeping cities are under siege. Milwaukee and Chicago devoured Green Bay, leaving a pile of rubble surrounded by lakes. But you know that.

I've spent the last year working a farm in Wisconsin. Chicago turned back south and as it passed by I ran to the roof, telescope in hand. I don't know what made me think of it, but I needed to see this divided city holding itself together with nothing more than wrath and disdain for the unconscious heaps of buildings nearby. I leaned out of the window, almost nautical as I scanned the skyline. You were right; they're glorious when they're awake and moving with purpose. And there you are, perched on the spire of the Sears Tower, hair streaming in the wind and laughing with joy.

The telescope falls from my hand. I'm running, feet slapping hard against the ground as I rush to catch up with the city, to join the march. I understand now, and I need to see it, to be part of it. Wait for me, just a moment longer. I'm coming to you.



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Anaea Lay lives in Madison, Wisconsin where she sells Real Estate under a different name, writes, cooks, plays board games, spoils her cat, runs the Strange Horizons podcast, and plots to take over the world. Her work has appeared in a variety of venues including *Apex*, *Lightspeed*, *Strange Horizons*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Shock Totem*, and *Penumbra*.

Seaside Sirens, 1848

Anna Zumbro

"Let's race to the shore," William challenged.

"I'm not interested," Arthur said. He watched his twin's shoulders droop and his gait slacken, then he took off toward the water. Deceit was always his surest path to victory.

"That was a dirty trick," William protested as he caught up to his brother.

Arthur ignored him. His attention had moved on to the row of wooden carriages lining the water's edge on the ladies' beach a quarter mile away. Women in long dresses entered the bathing machines, which teams of horses then drew into the surf. The boys could hear the delighted shrieks of women exiting the carriages on the far side and splashing into the water. Arthur had seen the bathing machines every year on holiday in Kent, but now, at twelve, he took notice of them.

William nudged Arthur and pointed to the tiny figure of a bather diving under the surface head first, her bare legs waving immodestly in the sunlight.

"Didn't Miss Violet and her companion say they were going to have a bathe today?" William asked, thinking of the pretty young woman staying at their hotel.

Arthur responded with a devilish grin. "Suppose we do too, then. Suppose we swim in that direction..." William was already stripping off his trousers.

The boys waded into the blue water until the bottom dropped off and they could move freely. Keeping their heads low, they approached the sound of feminine voices with the stealth of soldiers scouting an enemy camp.

From inside the nearest carriage, a woman's lyrical voice pleaded, "Do join me in the water, Mrs. Collins. It will do you a world of good."

"That's Miss Violet!" William hissed. Arthur shushed him and pulled him next to the carriage wheels.

The door opened. The water rippled as the lone bather entered the sea.

"It's her all right," Arthur whispered. "That's her hair peeking out of the cap."

William ducked his head under, braving the irritation of saltwater on his eyes for a glimpse of Miss Violet in her short bathing dress. What he saw was far different than his fantasies. He gasped and took in a gulp of the sea as he surfaced.

"Arthur! She's a— Arthur?"

William spun around in search of his brother. He did not see the tentacle snaking around his neck until it was too late.



"How was your bathe, Miss Violet?"

"It was invigorating, Mrs. Collins, although I'm afraid those young lads from the hotel caught sight of me and I had to eat them. I felt just dreadful about it and now I've no appetite for dinner. Still, I couldn't very well have let them tell others, could I?"

"Quite so! A nasty trick, sneaking over to the ladies' beach. I should say it serves them right."



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Anna Zumbro writes short speculative and literary fiction. She has worked as a newspaper copy editor, Peace Corps volunteer, and teacher. Her work has appeared at *Plasma Frequency*, *Kazka Press*, *SpeckLit*, and other publications.

#Dragonspit

William Meikle

Dragon spit went global just after midnight on the 23rd January 2016. It wasn't intentional. Tam Duncan was playing about on Twitter when he came across a photograph of a cute cat and a Game of Thrones character. He'd had a few beers, and he posted what he was thinking.

@tamd See that #GRRM - I bet he drinks #dragonspit

The response was immediate. He had ten Twitter replies and five Direct Messages in as many seconds.

@thehoundsgirl #GRRM Please, what is #dragonspit?

Tam was feeling playful.

@tamd @thehoundsgirl #dragonspit - a pool of spit big enough to drown #GRRM in

Just minutes later, Tam's Twitterfeed exploded with abuse; his mailbox filled up with threats of castration and death and his telephone started to ring—constantly. Luckily the cyber attack didn't last long, as his PC was hacked a minute after that, a particularly nasty Trojan virus settling in for a long stay that would keep Tam offline for days.

But the damage was done. A new user appeared just as Tam went dark.

@enterthedragon @tamd was right. #GRRM needs drowning in #dragonspit

The backlash started immediately from the Twittersphere and beyond as Twitterers and fans responded to the perceived slur on their idol. But the @enterthedragon user proved ready for it.

@enterthedragon Bring it on, kids. The #dragonspit apocalypse is coming. Prepare to drown.

The newcomer proved resilient against all attacks. Both the #GRRM and #dragonspit hashtags trended worldwide, and @enterthedragon went from zero to ten thousand followers in the first hour. As if emboldened, the first picture of a pool of smoking spit with someone

drowning in it was posted at 1.00am. It was also cross-posted to Facebook, Tumblr and Pinterest.

@enterthedragon Here's a wee photie of #dragonspit for you. #GRRM

@enterthedragon's follower count stood at thirty five thousand by the time the first video went up on Youtube.

@enterthedragon Check it out/ <http://tiny.pr.1847ly>. #dragonspit

The video showed a youth staggering in the street, spitting in small neat puddles in the gutter, all perfectly orchestrated to a hard dance beat. The puddles smoked. The first copycat video arrived from a Newcastle club less than an hour later. Massed ranks stood, line-dancing style, pretending, or not as the case might be, to spit and dance at the same time.

It went round the world in a blink. By the next morning there were a hundred new videos from pubs and clubs. The general public caught on when it featured on CNN.

@enterthedragon hit a million followers on Twitter faster than anyone in the history of the site and the video shot past ten million views on Youtube showing no signs of slowing.

@enterthedragon Not long now until #dragonspit apocalypse

What with the abuse from fans of the show's celebrities who were being mocked, and new fans of the dance craze that was sweeping everything before it, *@ enterthedragon* became a worldwide celebrity, in name at least. But no one, even the most ardent of hackers, could track down the owner of the account.

@enterthedragon They seek it here, they seek it there, they seek that #dragonspit everywhere.

@enterthedragon's photographs of cats drinking smoking spit took over Facebook for a week. More videos of the dance craze turned up on Youtube and were eagerly lapped up by an ever-more obsessed population.

The real impact started to be felt soon after that.

@enterthedragon Here it comes. #dragonspit apocalypse

At first the puddles were ascribed to a practical joke. Some news sources hinted that the appearance of smoking spit at so many sites across the planet was proof that the whole *enterthedragon* phenomenon was a carefully orchestrated publicity stunt that had gone even more viral than the wildest dreams of whoever had thought it up. They cited the fact that the spit being discovered was of a singularly uniform color, being almost jet black.

Even while speculation was piled upon speculation, the dance clips on Youtube passed a hundred million views and *@enterthedragon* got his two millionth follower on Twitter.

More pools of spit were being found worldwide. No one saw how they were formed; they appeared overnight, in remote places at first, and small, but as time passed, so the puddles grew every larger and deeper, The smoke rose in a noxious fume worse than the worst pollution.

London woke one morning to find a smoking, jet-black Thames flowing past Parliament.

@enterthedragon Oh my God. It's full of #dragonspit

A video of a dam bursting in Nepal and unleashing a wave of smoking spit half a mile wide onto an unsuspecting village went viral as soon as it was posted. Later, no one was able to vouch for its authenticity, but that scarcely mattered. All of the attention pushed *@enterthedragon* to the very top of the list of Twitter and YouTube celebrities.

@enterthedragon I'm on top of the world, Ma. ROFLMAO #dragonspit

Almost everyone online was now connected to *@enterthedragon* either through a social media channel or by having been sent a link or email from someone else. And that's when it happened. The oceans and lakes of the planet turned black, the rivers ran with spit, and the rain fell—smoking, dark and bitter. The great Dragon emerged from behind his social media identity.

@enterthedragon. Heeere's Johnny! #dragonspit

@enterthedragon. I'd like to teach the world to spit. #dragonspit

The first sighting was in Paris. The city, the old tower and the new financial centers burned to crispy ash in seconds as the Dragon's shadow passed over, leaving only smoking spit behind.

@enterthedragon *Look on my works ye mighty and despair!*

@enterthedragon *Who's next?*



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William Meikle is a Scottish writer now living in Canada, with twenty novels published in the genre press and over 300 short story credits in thirteen countries. He has books available from a variety of publishers including *Dark Regions Press*, *DarkFuse* and *Dark Renaissance*, and his work has appeared in a number of professional anthologies and magazines with recent sales to *NATURE Futures*, *Penumbra* and *Buzzy Mag* among others. He lives in Newfoundland with whales, bald eagles and icebergs for company. When he's not writing he dreams of fortune and glory.

Interview with Author and Editor Cat Rambo

Cat Rambo lives, writes, and teaches by the shores of an eagle-haunted lake in the Pacific Northwest. Her 200+ fiction publications include stories in *Asimov's*, *Clarkesworld Magazine*, and *Tor.com*. Her short story, "Five Ways to Fall in Love on Planet Porcelain," from her story collection *Near + Far* (Hydra House Books), was a 2012 Nebula nominee. Her editorship of *Fantasy Magazine* earned her a World Fantasy Award nomination in 2012. For more about her, as well as links to her fiction, see <http://www.kittywumpus.net>.

Q & A

Julian: Cat, I can trace your earliest writings to the beginning of the 90's. Since then you had a prolific career as a writer and as an editor. Tell us a bit about the time before all that came to be; how did you start, what pushed you toward writing and when did you know you were ready?

Cat: It was always assumed I'd be a writer for two reasons: a) I loved, loved, loved to read and b) my grandmother wrote YA fiction. I knew I was ready when I realized if I didn't get on the ball I'd be one of those people always wistfully thinking "I could be a writer."

Give us a bit about non-writer Cat Rambo. How and where did you grow up, what were your influences and what were some of the jobs you had before going full-time writer? Since writing, have you ever considered any other career?

I grew up in South Bend, Indiana, where my dad taught at Notre Dame. If there was any one influence I'd point to, it would be the Griffon Bookstore there, where I played countless hours of D&D and other role-playing games. I worked there all through high school as well. In college, I had no idea what I wanted to do, but considered economics, computer science, and veterinary medicine. Later jobs included working as a network security expert, a technical writer, and lots and lots of teaching.

You graduated from Johns Hopkins Writing Seminar, and Clarion West. How important were these to you, how did they help you, and would you recommend beginning writers to invest their time and money in such an event?

JHU gave me a number of things, including time and space to write, as well as a chance to work with John Barth, who's been a big influence on my writing. Clarion West gave me tools for writing, and talked about the mechanics of writing in a way JHU never did. As far as their

worth to beginning writers—the best investment you can make is giving yourself that time and space to write, and there's a lot of ways you can do it. F&SF workshops, though, also often provide networking opportunities as well as an entrance into the F&SF world for the uninitiated who haven't grown up going to cons.

What would you call the defining moment in your writing career, the moment when you knew you turned pro? What story, market, or anthology had a part in that?

I got to read with Samuel R. Delany at KGB. That was a very shiny moment and one I will always, always, always treasure in my heart. I knew then I'd made the right choice when I decided to pursue writing wholeheartedly.

There aren't a lot of writer/editor combos out there, but you are one of them. How easy is it to switch the hats and how is your approach as an editor influenced by you, the writer, and vice-versa? In your career, have you had any bad or enlightening experiences with editors you'd like to mention?

It's not too hard to switch hats, but the important thing is that editing does take some writing energy. One of the things I had to think hard about is whether I was primarily a writer or primarily an editor. I chose the former, and tried to make that clear when talking about it.

Editing—as I see it—is making the story shine through and helping clear away any clutter or detritus that gets in the way of that. It's definitely a skill a writer needs to exercise at some point in their process.

As far as experiences with editors, my usual experience is that they make the story better. They catch things I wouldn't have, and even the changes I don't agree with and push back on are useful feedback to me. The only time I've had an editor damage a piece, actually, is with technical writing, when the editor didn't understand the technology.

As an editor of Fantasy Magazine, how were you defining a "perfect" story, one you would gladly accept? When you write, is the editor in you sneaking in, blocking the imagination with logic and theory?

There's so many different kinds of perfect stories, but they all do one thing: they stick with you. They come back to you long after you've read them, sometimes coaxing you to go back to reread, other times just changing the way you see something.

When I write, I turn the editor off and let the words flow. I can always make them better, but I can't do much unless I've got a lump of words to work with. There's a time and a place for the editor and first drafts aren't it. There, the editor just impedes things.

You write speculative fiction (short and long). What is your writing process? Do you have clear goals set ahead of time, or are you more of a spur of the moment kind of writer?

I usually try to write 2000 words a day. That hasn't been the case the last month, since we've been on the road as part of a six month trip, and I find myself grumpy and grouchy as a result, but will be back in the flow next week when we settle in one place for a bit.

If you were to choose one favorite novel and one favorite short story from your own works, which one would it be? Related to that, for people who haven't read your works yet—what would be the best place to start getting to know your world?

My favorite novel would be the one I'm currently shopping around, the first in a fantasy quartet, called Beasts of Tabat. As far as short stories go—I don't know. I like a lot of them. For steampunk readers, I'd point to "Clockwork Fairies." For urban fantasy, "Magnificent Pigs." For SF, "The Mermaids Singing Each to Each" or more recently, "English Muffin, Devotion on the Side."

What is your advice for young writers trying to break-through?

Persistence is pretty important. Keep your eyes open for opportunities, and grab them when you can. Research the market. And don't be a jackass. Be kind and thankful to people, because it's not incumbent on anyone but you to recognize your genius.

What's next for you? Is there anything else you'd like to add?

I'm currently trying a new experiment in self-publishing using Patreon. I'm pretty prolific normally and so I've accumulated a backlog of stories. Through Patreon, people can subscribe and get two original stories each month. (<http://www.patreon.com/catrambo>) If it's successful enough, I intend to use that to start a new speculative fiction magazine, but there's a way to go on that still.

Cat, thank you very much for participating in this interview!



Interview with Author Charity Tahmaseb

By day, Charity Tahmaseb is a writer of technical documentation, based in St. Paul, Minnesota. By night, she writes fiction, mostly young adult and children stories. Her published works include *The Geek Girl's Guide to Cheerleading*, which was a YALSA 2012 Popular Paperback pick in the Get Your Geek On category.

Q & A

Julian: Tell us a little bit about yourself. Who is Charity Tahmaseb? How/where did you grow up, any particular influences in your life? Did you live up to your high-school yearbook quote?

Charity: I grew up in southern Minnesota. I spent twelve years as a Girl Scout and six on active duty in the Army. I think these two things explain a lot about me. As for the yearbook quote, my school didn't do that, so I have nothing to live up to (or regret).

I know your regular job involves technical writing. How did you get into that and how did you make the leap to fiction?

For part of my time in the Army, I worked as an intelligence analyst, which involves combining pieces of information so they make sense to someone else. The same is essentially true for technical writing, although the end result is (with any luck) installed software.

As for making the leap into fiction, it was simply a matter of realizing that I could write down the running narratives I had going in my head and that other people might want to read them. It took me a long time to figure this out.

Did you take part in any workshops, critique groups, or otherwise writing communities, and if so, how did that process help your writing career?

I did, and still do on occasion, although nowadays I tend toward more self-study. The best workshops/classes are the ones that get you writing and get you trying something new.

What do you consider to be the defining moment in your writing career, the moment when you knew this is what you will do for the rest of your life? What story, market, or anthology had a part in that?

After *The Geek Girl's Guide to Cheerleading* was published, I was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease. For a while after, I wasn't sure I would be able to write, and things got dark. It's really hard to write with major brain fog.

In 2012, I returned to writing short stories again (a form I've always loved). Then I started submitting those stories. The first pro-paying market I sold to was the first volume of *Unidentified Funny Objects*, and the story was *The Secret Life of Sleeping Beauty*. In 2013, I joined Write 1/Sub 1 and really got my writing mojo back.

I sometimes feel as though I've had to retrain myself to write again. I'm grateful to the Write 1/Sub 1 community for providing a way back into the writing life.

You have published quite a number of short stories, some of them in difficult markets. What was your experience of working with editors?

I enjoy seeing how someone else perceives what I've written, and the editors I've worked with have been great at conveying how something did—or didn't—work, but also why. I use that "why" when I revise.

You write speculative fiction, mostly young adult and children stories. What drives you to the genre and have you tried writing anything else?

Until I started Write 1/Sub 1 last year, I never realized how many speculative fiction stories I had stored up in my mind. I've always read in the genre, so I'm not sure why I was so surprised to start writing in it.

I think what draws me to both speculative and young adult fiction is the sense of discovery. Everything is new, or at least, viewed through new eyes.

In this E-World, how do you see the day to day life of a writer, outside of writing? Do you use social networking and do you feel it is helpful for your writer's platform?

I like social networks for their social aspects and tend not to fret about my writer platform (which I'm sure is fairly obvious). I've always used the rule that when it comes to marketing and/or social networks, do what you enjoy and don't worry about the rest.

For people who haven't read your works yet, what would it be a good place to start? What is the favorite piece you wrote so far?

For young adult contemporary reads, either *The Geek Girl's Guide to Cheerleading* or just released this past June, *The Fine Art of Keeping Quiet*. As far as speculative fiction goes, I think one of my favorite pieces is the (very) short *Straying from the Path* in the March 2014

issue of Flash Fiction Online. I'm also partial to *Ghost in the Coffee Machine*, which appeared in *Coffee: 14 Caffeinated Tales of the Fantastic* from UFO Publishing.

I am almost always trying to put this question in any interview, because I believe advice from writers to writers is very important. What is your advice for writers?

Brace for the collective groan—I highly recommend writing on a regular basis. I won't say every day, because I don't always reach that goal. But what has made a tremendous difference in both my life and writing life is weaving in the writing.

I think when writers hear "write every day," they imagine they must carve out a four-hour block of time—no one has a four-hour block of time. What is beyond helpful is grabbing twenty minutes. This is doable, and once you start doing it, the power of the approach really sinks in.

What's next for you? Is there anything else you'd like to add?

I spent last year writing a lot of short stories, many of them speculative fiction stories. I'd like to try my hand at longer pieces, with more complicated world building.

Charity, thank you very much for sharing your thoughts with us. I personally wish you good luck in your career and I hope we can read a lot more amazing stories from you soon.



Interview with Author William Meikle

William Meikle is a Scottish writer, now living in Canada, with twenty novels published in the genre press and over 300 short story credits in fifteen countries. He is the author of the ongoing Midnight Eye series and his current best seller is *The Invasion*, a sci/fi alien invasion tale with mass carnage, plucky survivors, and last minute rescues.

Q & A

Julian: Tell us a few words about yourself—how did you grow up, any particular influences in your life, any strange (or overly normal) jobs you had before writing?

William: I grew up in a decaying industrial town in the West of Scotland south of Glasgow—it was a steelworking town, but when the works closed, unemployment became the main order of the day and the town stagnated. Books and a guitar were my armor against growing despair. I escaped by going to University in Glasgow, where I got a biological sciences degree, worked for a year cataloging a museum's plant fossil collection, another year in an apple orchard researching fungal diseases on fruit, then fell into a career in IT that lasted 25 years.

My influences would have to be the reading I did in the genre as a teenager in the early-seventies, before Stephen King and James Herbert came along. I graduated from Superman and Batman comics to books and I was a voracious reader of anything I could get my hands on; Alistair MacLean, Michael Moorcock, Nigel Tranter and Louis D'Amour all figured large. Pickings were thin for horror apart from the Pan Books of Horror and Dennis Wheatley, which I read with great relish. Then I found Lovecraft and things were never quite the same.

Mix that with TV watching of Thunderbirds, Doctor Who, the Man From Uncle, Lost in Space and the Time Tunnel, then later exposure on the BBC to the Universal monsters and Hammer vampires and you can see where it all came from. Oh, and Quatermass. Always Quatermass.

I also have a deep love of old places, in particular menhirs and stone circles, and I've spent quite a lot of time travelling the UK and Europe just to visit archaeological remains.

How did you start writing? Was there a sudden epiphany or a slow process? What pushed you to writing and when did you know you were ready?

When the steelworks shut and employment got worse, I *could* have started writing about that, but why bother? All I had to do was walk outside and I'd get it slapped in my face. That horror was all too real. But I had an itch that needed scratching.

So I took up my pen and wrote. At first it was song lyrics, designed (mostly unsuccessfully) to get me closer to girls. I tried my hand at a few short stories but had no confidence in them and hid them away. And that was that for many years.

It wasn't until I was in my 30s that it really took hold.

Back in the very early '90s I had an idea for a story... I hadn't written much of anything since the mid-70s at school, but this idea wouldn't leave me alone. I had an image in my mind of an old man watching a young woman's ghost. That image grew into a story, that story grew into other stories, and before I knew it I had an obsession in charge of my life.

So it all started with a little ghost story, "Dancers"; one that ended up winning a prize in a national ghost story competition, getting turned into a short movie, getting read on several radio stations, getting published in Greek, Spanish, Italian and Hebrew, and getting reprinted in *The Weekly News* in Scotland.

Since then I've sold over 300 short stories, including appearances in the likes of *Nature* and *Daily Science Fiction* among many others, and I've had 20 novels published in the horror and fantasy genre presses, with more coming over the next few years.

Did you take part in any workshops, critique groups, or otherwise writing communities, and if so, how did that process help your writing career?

Nope—I haven't had any writing training whatsoever beyond English classes at school. I'm not much of a joiner and I hate how most groups turn quickly to cliques and power-struggles. I'm happier working away on my own.

What would you call the defining moment in your writing career, the moment when you knew you turned pro? What story, market, or anthology had a part in that?

It was in 2005. I managed to place a story, *Total Mental Quality*, in a big name Scottish science fiction anthology, *Nova Scotia*. I went along to the launch and got to stand next to multiple award winning writers like Charlie Stross, Hal Duncan and Ken MacLeod. That single moment was an epiphany, and taught me that I was capable of pushing a career higher than the small press in which I'd become established and rather stagnant. I've become a convert since then to the idea of aiming for the highest markets you can. There are more misses now, but the hits are so much more satisfying.

You have an impressive amount of short stories published, and a lot of them in pro-markets. This means that you submit a lot and deal with many editors along the way. Without naming names, unless you want to, do you find working with editors difficult, helpful, annoying, etc? Any bad, or enlightening, experiences you'd like to mention?

I've been mostly lucky with editors and publications. The problems mostly arise when editors bite off more than they can chew. Grand promises are made that can't be kept and the whole thing either folds with money being owed to everyone concerned, or the product is put out too fast and looks cheap and shoddy. The best editors play their cards close to their chest, never make promises they can't deliver on, and quietly go about their business putting out a quality product. They're the ones to seek out and develop relationships with.

You write speculative fiction (short and long), mostly fantasy, science fiction, and horror. Have you attempted to write other genres as well? What draws you to SF/F?

Counts quickly... I've written Horror, Fantasy, Science Fiction, Crime, Western and Thriller. Plus the subgenres, like ghost stories, occult detectives, creature features, sword and sorcery etc. But I don't really think of them as being different. It's all adventure fiction for boys who've grown up, but stayed boys. Like me.

Tarzan is the second novel I remember reading. (The first was Treasure Island, so I was already well on the way to the land of adventure even then.) I quickly read everything of Burroughs I could find. Then I devoured Wells, Dumas, Verne and Haggard. I moved on to Conan Doyle before I was twelve, and Professor Challenger's adventures in spiritualism led me, almost directly, to Dennis Wheatley, Algernon Blackwood, and then on to Lovecraft. Then Stephen King came along.

There's a separate but related thread of a deep love of detective novels running parallel to this, as Conan Doyle also gave me Holmes, then I moved on to Christie, Chandler, Hammett, Ross MacDonald and Ed McBain, reading everything by them I could find.

Mix all that lot together, add a hefty slug of heroic fantasy from Howard, Leiber and Moorcock, a sprinkle of fast moving Scottish thrillers from John Buchan and Alistair MacLean, and a final pinch of piratical swashbuckling. Leave to marinate for fifty years and what do you get?

A psyche with a deep love of the weird in its most basic forms, and the urge to beat up monsters. And in my case, it comes out in writing that's almost all pulp. Big beasties, swordplay, sorcery, ghosts, guns, aliens, werewolves, vampires, eldritch things from beyond and slime. Lots of slime.

I think you have to have grown up with pulp to *get* it. A lot of writers have been told that pulp equals bad plotting and that you have to have deep psychological insight in your work for it to be valid. They've also been told that pulp equals bad writing, and they believe it. Whereas I remember the joy I got from early Moorcock, from Mickey Spillane and further back, A E Merritt and H Rider Haggard. I'd love to have a chance to write a Tarzan, John Carter, Allan Quartermain, Mike Hammer or Conan novel, whereas a lot of writers I know would sniff and turn their noses up at the very thought of it.

I write to escape. I haven't managed it yet, but I'm working on it.

You are active in social media, on Facebook, especially. How important is social networking to the modern writer and what do you get out of it?

It's important to me, as I live in a remote corner of Eastern Newfoundland, so the opportunities to interact one to one with people in the business are limited. Social media lets me talk to editors, publishers and other writers without leaving my desk. I can't remember life without it—actually, I can—it involved scores of brown envelopes, expensive printer ribbon, reams of paper and a huge postage bill. Thankfully those days are long gone.

If you were to choose one favorite novel and one favorite short story from your own works, which one would it be? Related to that, for people who haven't read your works yet—what would be the best place to start getting to know your world?

Probably my favorite book, (available now in Limited edition hardcover, paperback and ebook) is *The Creeping Kelp*. It's a synthesis of many of the points of this interview. It's a cautionary tale of what man is doing to the environment. A WW2 experiment resurfaces; a Shoggoth fragment meets some bits of jellyfish and some seaweed and together they decide they like plastic. They like it so much that they start to seek it out, and grow, and spread... and build.

It's a homage to several things. There's more than a touch of Lovecraft obviously, given that I've appropriated the Shoggoths, but there's also a lot of John Whyndham in there. I wanted to do a big-scale, Britain-in-peril novel for a while. The title came to me one day and I knew immediately that there was a story to be told there. There's also a bit of Quatermass in there too—the old "British scientists screw up" genre has been with me for a long time and it's also something else I've always wanted to do. Here it is. It's available now from Dark Regions Press and in all the usual online places.

As for short stories—*Abominable* is my homage to Boy's own adventure stories, set during Mallory's ascent of Everest, and is about the beastie that beat him to it. It was a lot of fun, and

I think encapsulates a lot of what I'm about as a writer. It's available as a stand alone ebook from all the usual places.

As a writer who went through the process and succeeded, what is your advice for young writers, trying to break-through?

Firstly, develop a thick skin. Rejection is part and parcel of a writer's life, and the sooner you learn to deal with it and move on, the less frustrated you will be. Other than that, write, write, then write some more. It's like getting an engine turning over. Once it warms up, it just keeps on running.

What's next for you? Is there anything else you'd like to add?

I've got several works in the pipeline. I've just signed a new 3 book deal with DarkFuse that will mean I have 7 novels and 4 novellas in total out from them by 2018. I've also signed a contract for 3 more weird Sherlock Holmes novellas from Dark Renaissance, and I have several other story collections lined up in the UK small presses.

Busy, busy, busy. Just the way I like it.

As for what I do when I'm not writing... I've been playing guitar badly since 1973 and I use it as my relaxation when not writing. I also spend a fair bit of time outdoors rambling with my wife in the wilds of Newfoundland. And I love beer. I love movies and watch at least one a day. I also spend far too much time online reading about Fortean subjects. I'm a sucker for stories of alien grays, bigfoot, lake monsters and all manner of weird shit.

Thanks for having me on.

And thank you, William, for being here. Good luck with your projects!



Interview with Award Winning Editor Lynne M. Thomas

Lynne M. Thomas is a librarian and award-winning editor based in DeKalb, Illinois whose latest project, *Uncanny Magazine*, was recently funded on Kickstarter. She was the Editor-in-Chief of the Hugo Award-nominated *Apex Magazine*, taking over as editor with issue 30 in 2011 and concluding her term with issue 55 in 2013. Lynne has also co-edited with Tara O'Shea the Hugo Award-winning book *Chicks Dig Time Lords* and follow-ups *Whedonistas* (with Deborah Stanish) and Hugo Award-nominated book *Chicks Dig Comics* (with Sigrid Ellis). She won a second and third Hugo Award for her participation in the SF Squeecast podcast, and was on the Hugo Award for Best Fancast ballot for a third time with Verity!, an all-female hosted Doctor Who podcast. She serves as the Curator of Rare Books and Special Collections at Northern Illinois University, where she has been building a collection of papers of science fiction and fantasy authors since 2004. In her free time, Lynne spins fire (<http://bit.ly/ltfire>). That video was too cool to be left out, despite Lynne's comment: "I don't spin fire! That was the VERY FIRST TIME I did it. The experienced fire-spinner at *Uncanny* is our Managing Editor, Michi Trota."

Q & A

Julian: Lovers of science fiction and fantasy enjoyed your work at *Apex Magazine* and the books you've co-edited. But before we get into that, can you give us a glimpse into your life before all that? How and where did you grow up, and what was the driving force that steered you toward your career?

Lynne: *laughs* You're assuming that there was a driving force to steer me toward my career, and this job in particular. I grew up in Worcester, MA, in a working class household, where I attended public schools and was a cheerleader in addition to working in fast food, then retail, then as a switchboard operator. I was a theater kid, attending a specific day camp for that during most of my summer vacations. I also took dance lessons on and off. I also spent a goodly amount of time hanging out in both my school and local public libraries under the benevolent eyes of several excellent librarians.

My formal training as an editor came through my undergraduate and graduate degrees. I majored in Comparative Literature & French Literature (BA) at Smith, Library and Information Science (MS) at the University of Illinois, and English and American Literature (MA) at Northern Illinois University, where I work as Curator of Rare Books and Special Collections.

The academic side of my undergraduate training was focused on reading, writing, and thinking about what makes literature work in two languages. At the same time, I was a student worker in the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith, which taught me to think about books not just as holders of stories, but as artifacts. I have distinct memories of reading *Five Hundred Years of Printing* and *An Introduction to Bibliography for Literary Students* as a sophomore at Smith College, for fun, on my lunch breaks while working there.

When I graduated from Smith, my degrees and experience had set me up for two very specific types of jobs—rare books librarian or editor. I'm both pleased and a little shocked that I have now achieved both.

After college I worked as a library assistant at the Library Company of Philadelphia. My first professional library gig was as a cataloger at Yale University. The position at NIU opened up just as I was becoming more personally geeky, and it matched up really well.

I came quite late to the SF/F genre. While I've been an avid reader all my life, I pretty much only read canonical literature, YA, romance, and mysteries. I didn't read SF/F regularly until I landed the job at NIU in 2004 and found myself in charge of a massive SF/F collection. My SF/F To-Be-Read pile will be epic for the rest of my life, but on the flip side, I'll never run out of things to read!

I married into geekdom, too. I had never been to a convention or consumed much SF/F media until I met Michael (he's the lifer geek in the family) back in 1998-1999. He converted me.

Michael is a huge *Doctor Who* fan. He introduced me to the series, and the rest as they say, is history...

In your years at *Apex*, I am certain you've seen every type of story possible. What do you expect from a good short story and what is the recipe for a bad short story? Can you name one or a few of your favorite short stories (or authors), if any?

I expect good stories to be well written, with all of the parts of the story contributing to the overall effect. So, for instance, the descriptions should feed into the themes/ideas of the story, the themes/ideas and the plot should go together. The characters should be fascinating (although not necessarily likeable), and make choices that work within the thematic, plot, and descriptive frame you've constructed. To me, short stories fall apart when the different elements work against each other, or when I ask the question, "So, what?" and don't have a satisfactory answer. The stories that work the best for me are the ones that make me care about the people in them.

It's hard to choose my favorite writers, because there are so many! But the ones that are probably most indicative of my "editorial style" in terms of works that make me likely to say, "Yes, this!" include Maureen McHugh, Ken Liu, Kelly Link, E. Lily Yu, Rachel Swirsky, Christopher Barzak, Sam J. Miller, Sarah Monette, Elizabeth Bear, Mary Robinette Kowal, Catherynne M. Valente, Maria Dahvana Headley, Kat Howard, Charlie Jane Anders, Genevieve Valentine, Sofia Samatar, Alaya Dawn Johnson, Aliette de Bodard, Henry Lien, and so many others. This is not an exhaustive list by any means, but it's a start.

You've recently started *Uncanny Magazine*, a new publication of science fiction and fantasy. I am very glad to see this project fully funded on Kickstarter; I think the more high-quality short-fiction markets out there, the better for both readers and writers. Tell us a bit about this project: how did it come to be, what are the short term and long term goals, and, as a related question, why SF/fantasy?

Well, after Michael and I stepped down from *Apex* (he was the Managing Editor) due to our daughter's major surgery, we found we missed editing. (We edited *Glitter & Mayhem* together last year, along with John Klima, as a Kickstarted anthology.) Once our daughter recovered, we looked a way to get back into the SF/F field, which we both enjoy so much. Thus *Uncanny* was born.

We want to publish SF/F stories that make us feel. The aesthetic we're going for is that of a pulp magazine that changed and evolved with the times into a 21st century online magazine. Our long term and short term goals are pretty much the same: find and publish the kinds of stories that make us punch the air when we read them, and haunt us afterwards. Our number one goal is to make the magazine sustainable after the first year so that we can keep working!

Both at *Apex* and now at *Uncanny*, you've worked with a talented group of people. How important is your editorial team in general? I assume that you find it easy working in teams, given the various projects you've co-edited. As a person who works best alone, I am wondering: how do you do it?

I'm a huge fan of working collaboratively. Part of this is my professional training: EVERYTHING in libraries is done by committee, so that's something I do every day. The give-and-take that is a collaborative, creative process actually improves my work, adding perspectives I might not have thought of, or filling in details or areas of knowledge I would never have gotten to alone. Every project I've worked on collaboratively has turned out better as a result. The key is to make sure that your team is full of people who are just as passionate about the project as you are, and that we check in routinely to make sure we're all still going in the same direction.

For example, our *Uncanny* podcasting team, Steven Schapansky and Erika Ensign, are both expert podcasters. While I can make a basic podcast recording that sounds okay, they have a skill set (editing, recording, production) that I do not, which they are very happy to leverage for our content. Our podcasts sound awesome because they care deeply about that. This makes our content shine, which Michael and I care deeply about. Everyone wins.

The other major advantage to a collaboration like this is that a team allows us to occasionally delegate or step back when we need to, which is particularly important for us given that our daughter is medically fragile. We depend greatly on the work of our phenomenal Managing Editor Michi Trota. So long as we've all communicated well, and stay in contact, the project can keep moving forward without us being there at the times when we need to prioritize our daughter. A bad day or two does not mean the project grinding to a halt.

The key to any and all teamwork is communication, communication, and more communication. We send a LOT of emails.

You are also involved in several Podcast projects (SF Squeecast & Verity!). Tells us a few words about these projects and how do they correlate to your other work?

My major lesson in life these days is: be careful about what you say on Twitter. Both the SF Squeecast and Verity! came out of Twitter conversations that began with, "Wouldn't it be great if this kind of podcast existed," and ended with, "Okay, so when can we get together to record?" The SF Squeecast is an attempt to put more positivity out in the SF/F landscape. We went with a model of, "This is awesome. Here's why I think it's awesome. You should check it out." Then we spent a lot of time trying to make each other laugh.

Verity! Is a podcast that is basically made up of the conversations that my friends in *Doctor Who* fandom and I have been having in the convention bar for years, moved to podcast format. Fans love to debate, and we're no different. We rarely agree about individual episodes or stories, but we always love each other and *Doctor Who*. The rest is just trying to make each other laugh, really.

So, the major podcasting lesson for me is: there is nothing better than hanging out with friends and trying to make them laugh.

Your list of Hugo nominations and awards is getting longer, and I can only hope it continues to grow. What do these awards mean to you? Was winning ever a goal for you, and if so, what is your next goal?

The Hugo Awards have been hugely validating for my work, and I'm deeply grateful to be recognized by this community. It's humbling. My goal is to just keep doing the best work that I can in the hopes that people will continue to enjoy it.

As an editor of short-fiction you must face tough choices all the time. I am thinking about things such as rejecting a story that is 98% good, just because spending that extra 2% fixing the story might not be something you could afford. Or, perhaps your style is just the opposite? What was this process like at *Apex* and how are you setting it up at *Uncanny*?

We absolutely face tough choices. Part of this is a function of sheer numbers. We have roughly 800 submissions per month. Out of that, we're only going to buy 3 or so, maximum. So, really, we have the option to hold out for stories that are nearly "fully cooked." Given that every market has its own aesthetic, what makes a story "fully cooked" and "the kind of story that gets bought" varies from editor to editor and market to market. There isn't really a magic formula to creating an *Apex* story or an *Uncanny* story or a *Lightspeed* story or a *Clarkesworld* story.

Particularly at the beginning of my tenure at *Apex*, when I was new to fiction editing, I tended to prefer fully cooked stories. It took me a while to develop the language of developmental editing: to give feedback to writers to explain what I thought needed improvement or changing. Over time, that changed. Michael and I began working with writers when we found a story that we fell in love with, and fit what we're looking for quite well, but it didn't quite work for one reason or another. In those cases, we made suggestions for what would make the story work for US. The author has the option to rewrite for us in the hopes that we say "YES THIS" and buy it, or they can send it on to a different market.

That's rare, though. We have great submissions editors who do a first pass on our unsolicited submissions, but Michael and I are still reading 50-100 submissions per month, between solicited work and unsolicited work that comes up to us. Editing is a second job for both of us. I have my librarian day job, and Michael caregives our medically fragile daughter, so our time that we can work on this is restricted.

Do you have any editor heroes? Can you name anyone in particular that that had a major influence on your style and approach to editing? And while we're at it: what do you love most about editing?

I've often joked that I'd like to be Ann VanderMeer when I grow up. Ann's run on *Weird Tales* is probably closest to my personal taste. As with many other editors, I learned on the job. My first non-academic editing was for Lars Pearson at Mad Norwegian Press. I learned a

ton from those books. Cat Valente and Jason Sizemore gave me my start at *Apex*, and I'm grateful for what I've learned from that opportunity. Michael and I learned even more working with John Klima on *Glitter & Mayhem*. For the nuts-and-bolts parts of running the business end of owning and managing a magazine, we are particularly indebted to John Joseph Adams and Neil Clarke, who have been absolutely invaluable and hugely supportive in helping us get *Uncanny* set up properly.

What I love most about editing is the opportunity to read something, decide it's awesome, and then be able to share that awesomeness with the world.

You run the Rare Books and Special Collections at Northern Illinois University. What does this entail and what does it accomplish exactly?

My day job is never the same thing twice! Like many librarians, I spend a fair amount of time in meetings and dealing with administrative work. Beyond that, I interpret our collections for classes and individual readers, as well as through exhibitions. I build our collections, too, working with donors making gifts, and with a modest budget to acquire other materials. Our collections are fundamentally quite geeky: popular cultural materials, including children's literature, dime novels, comics, pulp magazines, science fiction books, and the literary papers of about 70 science fiction and fantasy authors, as well as the organizational archive of SFWA itself, which is currently being assembled. It's wonderful stuff!

Those are the basics of the job, but I also have an administrative role (I supervise several other units at this point), and I'm involved in statewide and national projects to help solve one of the major issues in our field, that of digital preservation. Taking care of paper is relatively easy: if we control its environment, we can leave it on a shelf for decades and it won't degrade all that quickly. Electronic documents, though, (which, if you think about it, are the original artifacts for most of us these days), degrade or become obsolete quite quickly if we aren't taking care of them directly. When your collecting timeline is "posterity" or "at least 100 years," that's a big problem. About 10 years ago, when I said to an SF/F author "I'd like NIU to be the home of your literary papers" and got handed a flash drive, it became *my* problem.

I always like to get a few words of advice from editors for the writers. So, what is your advice for young writers seeking to have their stories accepted in magazines such as *Apex* or *Uncanny*?

Read more widely, both inside and outside of genre, and write more. Tell the stories that you want to read, that you think need to be told, to the best of your ability. Find critique groups who will tell you the truth about your work, learn from it, and keep telling new, better,

different stories. That takes lots of practice, and figuring out what the best versions of the stories *you* want to tell look like. We often talk about the "million words of crap" metric, and while it varies from writer to writer, writing is both an art and a craft. The more you work on the craft part, the more you can internalize the structures, the syntaxes, the choices that need to be made to tell the version of the story that is yours. The art comes from internalizing the craft, and using those skills to produce something that is unique to *you*, that may tell us more about *us*.

There is no secret handshake.

The path to getting published is to write a story that makes that particular editor punch the air when they've finished reading it. Which stories will make the editor punch the air will vary quite a bit from editor to editor, and market to market. SF/F is not monolithic: the universe is a vast and diverse place, and the stories that we tell each other should reflect that.

Dear Lynne, thank you very much for answering these questions and for taking the time to share your thoughts. We wish you good luck with your new magazine and all other projects. At FSM we believe that a normal progression after fire spinning is walking on hot coals. I'm just saying...



Artist Spotlight: Kuldar Leement

Kuldar Leement is a concept artist, illustrator, and graphic designer from Tartu, Estonia. He has won several awards and honors for his works, and his art has been recently featured as the cover of *Clarke's World Magazine*, Issue #98. For our issue #4 we went with a piece by Kuldar called "Resistance." Today we are talking to Kuldar, getting to know a bit more about him and his art.

Julian: Tell us a little bit about yourself: where did you grow up and how did your early life influence your future as an artist?

Kuldar: I am actually a country boy, but after art school I stayed in Tartu, the second largest city in Estonia. A lot of people told me that I should go study in art school, but I decided to learn construction first, and after that I went into the army. After army I finally decided to see what art school can offer me. There isn't much to tell—I have always loved to make futuristic works and art school gave me the extra push. It's here where I've discovered digital art. I went on to study graphic design for the next 4 years.

What are your favorite design tools and how did you get to learn them?

I use a graphic tablet (Wacom Intuos5 M) and Photoshop. I also use Illustrator, Mandebulb, and other great programs. I like to use different tools because they help me give a more unique look to my works. I was introduced to the Adobe software in art school, and I learned it there. Later I really became a master in it and I even taught it in the same school. I learned all the other programs through self-study—there are a lot of tutorials out there and it's really easy to learn when you know what your main goal is.

Are there any other artists out there that you admire and whose work has helped shape your work?

Indeed! I like a lot of artists and their works. To showcase the sources of my inspiration, I've created a Tumblr page where you can see all of that: <http://a-million-little-fibers.tumblr.com>.

Where do you find inspiration?

Movies and games are great inspiration resources for me and I just love science fiction.

How would you break down your workflow in steps?

Basically—bigger shapes first and details later. Light is very important for me so I'm constantly working with it throughout the entire process. Sometimes I just make some start sketch to see if the idea is good or not. Mostly doodles :)

Your work is very fantasy-driven. What drives you to that subject?

I don't really know—life can be quite boring if I can say so—dark winters and bad weather makes you really want to see something else and it's really nice to watch new works come to life. Also I like to be a source of inspiration to others—many works of art have driven scientists and engineers further—so it's cool to be a part of that.

If there was one piece of advice you could give other beginning artists, what would that be?

Do a lot of work with yourself and respect copyrights! Best way to start is art school, but there are many tutorials out there as well. If you want to succeed, you simply need to practice a lot.

We've selected one of your pieces for the cover of our magazine. Tell us a few words about how that piece came to be.

This is my first work for Cosmosys' art collective exhibit "Resistance". I used some of my Terragen renders for rocks and tried to make a cave-looking environment where people are trying to stay alive because the planet is in its final days.

Where can we find you on the web?

Homepage: <http://kuldarleement.eu>

DeviantArt: <http://kuldarleement.deviantart.com>

DrawCrowd: <http://drawcrowd.com/kuldarle>

Kuldar, thank you very much for being a part of our magazine. Good luck to you and we hope to see more of your works on our covers!



Book Review: Half a King (Joe Abercrombie)

Jeremy Szal

Half a King

by Joe Abercrombie

Del Rey (July 15, 2014)

When we first heard that Mr. Abercrombie was penning a young-adult novel, the kingdom grinded to a halt. The commonfolk were in an uproar. "Off to the torture chamber with him!" they cried, "Do whatever it takes to make him write a proper fantasy novel!"

An overreaction? Perhaps. Despite its success, young-adult fiction is a term that raises some crooked eyebrows among the hardcore fantasy and science-fiction readers, automatically likening the term to the avalanche of soppy vampire novels and raunchy love-triangle stories that plague the shelves. Sadly, it's true that fantastic works such as Michael Grant's *Gone* (2008) and Sarah J. Mass' *Throne of Glass* (2012) are lost under the rubble. But this is Joe Abercrombie we're talking about here, and no amount of genre branding is going to stop him doing what he does best; writing blood-soaked, morally ambiguous fantasy in a dark world full of revenge, adventure and a never-ending onslaught of danger.

And *Half A King* is just that.

Prince Yarvi has suddenly become King Yarvi, once he learns of the deaths of both his brother and father. Thrown into a world of mockery, betrayal and people as cold as the land they live on, a cruel twist of fate finds him betrayed and sold into slavery, doomed to live and die on his knees. But we all know that an Abercrombie character isn't going to buckle so easily. And so begins his quest to escape and make his way back home to reclaim his rightful throne, the throne he never actually desired.

The book doesn't *feel* like an Abercrombie story. The cynical humor that once dominated the pages is hard pressed to find. *Half A King* seems to go for the less subtle approach, using phrases that are almost lyrical in structure. Oddly enough, as someone whose books deliberately subvert fantasy tropes, *Half A King* plays out a lot more like a traditional novel. Idioms such as "the cold has killed many a man" and "I have kneeled long enough" are frequently seen on the page. This is a dangerous ledge Abercrombie walks on, for a lesser writer would topple into cringe-worthy clichés and wooden dialogue. But not Abercrombie. Much like his blood-brother George R. R. Martin, these phrases never feel out of place; nor

do they seem poorly fitted by the character who speaks them. This high-risk, high-reward prose works brilliantly, and is used only when it needs to be. There are still traces of dark humor, but it's far less frequent.

Unlike his previous books, Abercrombie has snatched away all the bloodstained shoes that we could don, gaining the ability to see through the eyes of multiple characters. All the fat is trimmed, leaving our crippled hero Yarvi as the one and only point of view character. Abercrombie is more than capable of juggling half a dozen characters, but it's nice to see him tighten his focus to a single protagonist. Doing so comes at a hefty cost, leaving *Half A King* at a bite-sized morsel of 80,000 words. This *is* a YA book after all. For the fantasy readers who are accustomed to their novels exceeding a quarter of a million words, this may sound unacceptable. But if you do feel that way, I'm happy to say that it felt exactly the right length, finishing exactly where it needed to finish. I definitely wanted more, but quality over quantity is a rare commodity in fantasy these days, and I was glad for the opportunity to read meat that wasn't lavishly drowned in gravy.

But not a word of the 80,000 that Abercrombie has packed in is gone to waste. Bloodshed, witty dialogue, betrayal and hair-raising adventure is stuffed into every single page. In his other novels, there are always a moment or two for a respite. Not here. There's never a single moment to stop and catch your breath. Danger is around every corner and behind every hill. Abercrombie is a master of maintaining a sense of urgency throughout the novel; a sense of dread that holds you in an iron-like grip and doesn't let go.

To all those wringing your blood-spattered hands, worrying that *Half A King* is low on grim, gritty violence; worry no longer! Although it is definitely toned down a notch from *The First Law*, there is plenty of ultra violence to go around. Fingers are severed, throats are slit and bones are crushed. This isn't particularly new to the genre, but it's definitely a cut above the average YA novel. So while the violence is lesser than that of, say *Last Arguments of Kings* (2008), the horrors of war and a city under siege is never glazed over, but nor is it ever glorified.

As per usual, all this comes with a dose of moral ambiguity. Characters are difficult to categorize as good or bad, especially when later events cast them in a new light. And while we all know who we're rooting for, Yarvi gets his fair share of blood and grime on his hands too, and no deed *ever* goes unpunished. This quote sums it up rather nicely: "*If life has taught me one thing, it's that there are no villains. Only people, doing their best.*"

While *The First Law* primary took place in a very Renaissance-esque Kingdom, the *Shattered Seas* has a far more Viking aesthetic to it. If anything, the *Shattered Seas* has a far harsher landscape, packed with frozen glaciers, snow-capped mountain, icy seas and the bitter wind.

It feels like the polar opposite of his previous novels in almost every regard. From the heavy emphasis on gods and religion to the political climate and the land's unique history, no traces of his other work has managed to trickle into this new world. It's been conjured up completely from scratch. It's a blank canvas that Abercrombie has started working with, and it's definitely for the best. How often have recurring author-favorite tropes been spotted popping up out of nowhere across their body of work? Far too many. But you won't find them here.

Half A King may not be Abercrombie's best (that crown goes to *The Blade Itself* (2006)), but it's his most significant one. As mentioned at the outset, the YA genre has become a groan-inducing term, inspiring nightmarish visions of rows and rows of cookie-cutter books, stuffed with sickly sweet teenage vampires in all their milk-and-watery prose. Readers don't imagine it to be a wealth of fantastic literature, one that *appeals* to younger readers, but is not exclusively devoted to them. With *Half A King*, Abercrombie has done a damn fine job of eroding the barrier between adult and young-adult fantasy, something that more authors would do well to attempt. It's been a gamble, but it's one that's worked out magnificently for all parties. I can't remember the last time I've had this much fun with a YA novel, and I'm anxiously waiting for the next installment in the *Shattered Seas* trilogy.

With the likes of Abercrombie on the throne, it's a fine few next years, my friends.



© by Jeremy Szal

Movie Review: Interstellar (Christopher Nolan)

Mark Leeper

CAPSULE: With the depth and complexity of a science fiction novel, Christopher Nolan brings *Interstellar* to the screen, based on an original screenplay he wrote with his brother Jonathan. As the last-ditch effort of our dying civilization, a mission is sent through a wormhole to another galaxy in an effort to find an Earth-like planet to be a new home for humanity. No previous science fiction film has ever had the scope and span that this film has. It is surprising it all fits into a very tight 167 minutes. Rating: +3 (-4 to +4) or 9/10.

Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* is quite possibly the most complex science fiction film with the most ideas of any SF film ever. It starts with a family suffering in what at first appears to be the great 1930s Dust Bowl and spans its way to planets in other galaxies with references to higher dimensions and other universes, not to mention examinations of not one but two father-daughter relationships with in each case father and daughter literally, as well as figuratively, light-years apart.

But that is getting ahead of myself. As the film opens we think we are seeing a documentary about the great 1930s Dust Bowl. We quickly find out that in this near future world, the dust storms have returned to the Great Plains. Blights and haboobs have killed off nearly all major crops. Only corn still survives and its time seems to be limited. Most people are worried, but still make a priority drinking alcohol made from—what else?—corn. The world is counting down to its demise. Cooper (played by Matthew McConaughey) is a corn farmer who was once a very good test pilot for NASA. He is contacted by NASA who wants him back for a mission that might save humanity. One end of a wormhole has appears to have formed near Saturn. There are twelve explorers who were sent out a decade earlier to study earthlike planets near the other end of the wormhole. But the information they found never made it back to Earth.

Now a mission is being mounted to travel through the wormhole and at the far end to collect what information they can to decide if any of the planets can be a haven for humankind. On the mission will be Amelia Brand (Anne Hathaway), the daughter of a former colleague of Cooper's. Her father is planning the expedition, called the Lazarus Mission. In the course of the film we go from cornfields to wormholes, to black holes, to the surfaces of two alien planets along with spacecraft and robots, all of which are important to the plot. It is a complex scenario and one that will tax viewers to just follow what is happening. And all of

this nearly takes back seat to a story that is mostly about strained family relations. The viewer should expect that with everything else going on there is a good deal of tearful apologies. It is an unimaginable feat of story telling to juggle so many elements and keep them all in the air at once.

In a film with this many ideas packed together, some have got to be a little on the funky side. It takes our astronauts two years just to get to Saturn and the wormhole, yet at the other end of the wormhole there are no less than twelve superficially habitable-seeming planets all within striking distance, like Starbucks near a subway stop. TARS, their robot (voiced by actor Bill Irwin), is a very new and a very original-looking design for a robot. TARS steals every scene he/she/it is in by being so interesting. Back in the 1940s film robots looked boxy, but not nearly as boxy as TARS. On the corny side is that suggestion that love has some special trans-dimensional implications. And speaking of corn, it is a crop very susceptible to droughts. It is unlikely that corn could grow in a region suffering from dust bowl conditions.

Besides Matthew McConaughey and Anne Hathaway the film features Jessica Chastain, Michael Caine, Ellen Burstyn, Casey Affleck, John Lithgow, and more.

Not everything is so wonderful about this film. My major complaint with the film is that the sound editing is a mess. With the complexity and techi-ness of the talk it is important to hear every word. The sound is, however, muddy and indistinct, and at times the music and sound effects tracks overpower the dialogue track. Also, occasionally the actors just don't project their voices. I look forward to getting the film on disk so I can turn on subtitling. After 2001: A Space Odyssey set the standard for scenes of hyper-light travel and Contact had its own sequence, the wormhole travel depiction us just a bit uninspired, though the depiction of the black hole is fairly accurate.

INTERSTELLAR is more than just a science fiction story for the screen, it is a novel aimed at adults with a novel's complexity. This is probably the most audacious science fiction film anyone has ever made or even tried to make. I rate it a +3 on the -4 to +4 scale or 9/10.



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Film Credits: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0816692/combined>

What others are saying: http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/interstellar_2014/

Originally appeared on: <http://leepers.us/interste.htm>

Game: "The Edge" by Awaken Realms

A*waken Realms* is a professional painting studio, focused on creating and painting miniature sculptures. The company is based in Poland, and in 2015 they are planning to launch a new game called *The Edge*, using their unique, high-detail miniatures and a newly developed gameplay. Today we are talking with Marcin, one of the founders of *Awaken Realms* and the mind behind *The Edge*.

Dear Marcin, let's talk a little bit about Awaken Realms, the gaming industry in general, and *The Edge* in particular.

Awaken Realms

Who are the people behind Awaken Realms? Give us a short bio and a little detail on how you got where you are today.

Hi! My name is Marcin Świerkot, one of the founders of *Awaken Realms* and creator of *The Edge*. *Awaken Realms* was founded by me and Adrian (also known as Medows). We had been friends for quite a long time, and one day we decided we'd like to follow our passion and attempt to bring our vision to life. We both have degrees in business and I have spent 4 years of working in a corporate environment. So, when we started our company, we aimed at being a fully professional studio and bring some of the high standards you can normally see in large companies.

How did Awaken Realms come to be? How did the founders get together, and is this something you'd like to do for the rest of your life?

Well, it was kind of a leap of faith for both of us. I had a pretty nice corporate career, and Adrian was painting on his own, already getting vast recognition. But yeah, you know that feeling when you wake up in the morning, look in the mirror for a few days in a row and you feel that what you're doing at work just does not feel like what you should be doing? I think that's exactly what happened to me during my time at my previous job. I've always wanted to create something of my own, and Adrian shares the same values. I think of myself as very lucky from that perspective, as I strongly believe that one of the best things in life is being able to do what you love and create things out of passion. This is pretty much what we are doing right now. Is this something we will do for the rest of our lives? It's really hard to say, but for now we are definitely feeling like we are in the right place at the right time.

Give us a few words about the *Awaken Realms* team in general (outside of the founders). What kind of talent are you harvesting and what is the type of art you are tackling and why? Do you see yourself branching out in other types of art as well?

With *Awaken Realms* our goal was to take miniature painting to the next level. This is very a "young" discipline comparing to more traditional art, though I deeply believe it can be more impressive than other forms of art. It makes sense: you have 3D objects giving you a lot more freedom and more possibilities, which enables you to provide people with a whole new experience. Our team is full of people who enjoy art at all levels. Some of them are miniature wargaming players, others are just purely artists. But I think we have a great chemistry together. You know, when you put bunch of creative people in one room it does not always work out well, but I really love the way it has turned out for us.

As for the other branches of art, well, doing *The Edge* is this kind of project. We are trying many new things, experimenting, working with concept art, miniature design, story and even some music and video composition (just shhh, it is a little secret for now ;)). We also love the idea of bringing dioramas to a wider audience. I think there is great potential in it.

What are the short-term and long-term goals for *Awaken Realms*?

Short term: become the biggest and best miniature painting company and successfully launch *The Edge* miniature game. Long term: create a complete miniature wargaming experience with *The Edge*, bring it to the next level, and become the biggest painting studio worldwide.

Gaming

What is your general overview on the gaming industry today, then specifically wargames in the way that it relates to your work?

When it comes to the wargaming industry, I feel like a lot of exciting things are happening. Right now the biggest company out there, who practically created the miniature wargaming market from scratch, Games Workshop, started to have some serious competitors. I believe that this is a good sign, since competition always brings more effort to provide better products, and you can slowly see the changes in direction.

Looking strictly at miniatures: 3D print is a very exciting technology that begs to be exploited. Right now we can get detail levels of 0,016mm on the miniature, which is pretty amazing. I think this can change some standards in the industry.

Overall, looking at the gaming industry as a whole, I like to think that tabletop and board games are here to stay and will continue to be developed. At some point you realize that

sometimes sitting around a table with your friends and playing some games face to face is a better option than playing another video game, even if you do it in a network.

What are some of your favorite games and how did they influence your work?

Well, I used to be a total video game addict in my early life. I've always enjoyed games that could immerse you into their world, strong characters and interesting plots that keep you thinking long after you've finished the game. There was a huge influence from the Warhammer 40 000, obviously. I love the whole universe behind it and the diversity of races. As I said earlier, Games Workshop practically created the market for miniature wargaming from scratch, putting tons of effort into their products. People often look at these miniatures and wonder what is all this fuss about. But hardcore hobbyists see or imagine the amazing stories behind those miniatures, and that is what makes them special.

I think there is one very important thing to mention: I used to play a lot of *Magic The Gathering*, the card game, and I can say that its creators are masters when it comes to introducing interesting mechanics into the game. I'd like want to get a little of that awesome complexity and Aha! moments into *The Edge*. They've also done an amazing job in creating all those worlds, designs, and stories behind them.

The Edge

What is The Edge? Give us an overview.

The Edge is our game project. We want to first introduce it in the form of a short skirmish game, and later develop it into a full tabletop wargame. What we want to do is to provide the highest quality miniatures and connect them with gameplay that will be a combination of the best in war, board, and card games. We also are developing a whole story behind this world, basically creating our own universe from scratch.

How did you get the idea, what was the inspiration?

There are actually a lot of different sources of inspiration. Every faction is based on a different set of aesthetics. Being from Poland and other Slavic countries, we tend to love post-apocalyptic and epic settings. We are generally fans of those kinds of harsh environments.

I personally always loved the idea behind steampunk, but I feel like it's never treated seriously. So we wanted to connect somehow the steampunk idea with the post-apocalyptic feel to create the world of *The Edge*: grim and dark, but also beautiful in some strange way.

Give us a feel of the gameplay, some general guidelines, length of play, difficulty, etc.

We are working on the rule set so I am not yet fully sure of the end result, but there are few things I know I want to get an emphasis on.

First of all, the rule we want to implement is "easy to learn, hard to master." What we want to do is create very simple overall rules, and add complexity and difficulty to the game with cards and special abilities.

Our idea is to do have a crystal-based mana pool—you will be able to collect crystals on the battlefield and they will increase your "mana pool," resetting each turn. With this mana you will be able to cast special abilities to units, as well as cards that can drastically change the flow of the game. With this strategy for gameplay, we want to make the situation on the battlefield more interesting than just "kill your enemy" or go here and there.

Will you build any extensibility into the game? Do you see a future in add-ons?

Yes! What we want to do with *The Edge* is to create a full universe and a gaming system. I realize that most of the projects that are being featured on Kickstarter right now are mostly created to be done, shipped and forgot. We want a totally different thing—we are not focusing on the short term profits, but rather on a long term universe and system.

Therefore to answer your question—yes, I would love to see a lot of additions to *The Edge* universe in a lot of forms—game extensions, story books, comics perhaps. We shall see what the future brings.

What makes this game different and unique?

First of all, we have an enormous focus on the miniatures' details, which already creates a different and unique experience. We know how to do that—we are painters and we have spent tons of time with models from other companies.

Another thing is the gameplay idea. We want to make this game very dynamic and dramatic, through the power of special cards and abilities. I think adding collecting crystals on the board will make for a very interesting feel of a wargame and a card game packed into one.

Last thing I would like to mention is *The Edge's* aesthetic and universe—I think we are making something unique out there, because every miniature, every piece that we do is in itself unique.

The marketing materials show some really cool figurines, but do you see a future in taking this game online as well? Is that also a market you are after?

It's definitely too soon to make any serious comments about that. Right now we need to be 100% certain we can provide the best skirmish game before we will move on to any other ideas.

Any projections about availability dates and locations?

We are aiming to launch our Kickstarter by March 2015 with an almost complete product, ready to ship within 6 months.

As said before, we want this beginning to be a trailer, allowing us to learn how people would react to *The Edge*.

Contact

Where can we find you online?

Right now the best place to follow our work is our Facebook fanpage at:

www.facebook.com/intotheedge

We are posting there a lot of work in progress and we really appreciate all the feedback. We believe this is the best way to create things. We are surrounded by a great community and not once they have proved to be really helpful critics of our work. So be sure to follow us and speak your mind!

Website will be soon up at www.intotheedge.com (right now in the making)

Our products will be available for online in March of 2015.



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In this section we recognize our supporters. They are those who helped us during our Kickstarter campaign, or those who donated funds directly on our site. **We thank you!**

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