

# penumbra

speculative  
fiction mag

Aug 2k22 • vol vi issue 2

Feature Interview

Horror Author & Artist

**Gemma  
Amor**

Publishing, podcasts, & her  
new book about trauma

plus work by

Tabitha Marsh • Carolyn R.  
Russell • Christina Sng • Luke  
Walker • Shikhar Dixit • Tim  
Hildebrandt • J. J. Steinfeld •  
Marge Simon • Bob Ritchie •  
R. Mac Jones • J.C. Pillard •  
Nicola Brayan • Maureen  
Bowden • Harris Coverley •  
Ed Ahern • Carl Scharwath •  
Emma Neale • Harrison Kim •  
Ryan Hyatt • N.K. Leullier •  
Jesper Nordqvist



Gemma Amor

*Penumbria* is published six times a year (June, August, October, December, February, and April). ISSN 2693-0234. *Penumbria*, *Penumbria Speculative Fiction Mag* and *Penumbria Speculative Fiction Magazine* © and TM 2019–2022 Neomythos Press, LLC. All rights reserved.

Note that content in *Penumbria* sometimes contains adult language and/or situations. If it were TV, it would be rated MA.

We are always open for submissions of art, animation, and music! We are open for fiction and poetry submissions from 15 June to 15 September and from 15 December to 15 March each year. Please see our Submissions page (<http://penumbria.com/subs.html>) for details.

# Table of contents

from the editor

## article

interview

Gemma Amor: Her new book, mental trauma, and a successful publishing journey

## fiction & poetry

by Carolyn R. Russell

Switchback

by Christina Sng

Vlad's Cat

by Luke Walker

The Thing in the Loft

by Ryan Hyatt

When the Fireworks Fade

by J. J. Steinfeld

My Biggest Existential Disappointment

by Marge Simon

I've Been Told of Fourth Street

by Bob Ritchie

Scorekeeper

by J.C. Pillard

Nobody's Hero

by Maureen Bowden

The Quintet Is Ready

by Harris Coverley

Unfamiliar

by Ed Ahern

Petitions

by Emma Neale

Premonition

by Harrison Kim

The Rock Swimmers

by N.K. Leullier

Fire and Particles

## art & g. narrative

by Tabitha Marsh

Hidden Mirrors

by Shikhar Dixit

Earth9

by R. Mac Jones

Waking to Cry Stop

by Nicola Brayan

Calamity

by Carl Scharwath

Awaken

by Tim Hildebrandt

Fire Door

by Jesper Nordqvist

Mondo Mecho

contributor's

bios



*Fire Door*



*Waking to Cry Stop*



*cover: Leviathan  
by Gemma Amor*



# From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

When I wrote about anxiety and mental trauma in June, I had little idea that the world would double down on just those things in the two months before our August issue. The US, in spite of being a self-described bastion of freedom and democracy, allowed a minority to dictate the setback of women's rights by five decades, and looks on the verge of doing the same for LGBTQIA+ rights and sticking its Moral Minority nose into decisions such as contraception. Meanwhile, we reap what we've sown with stronger variants of Covid and other viruses, and with climate change wreaking havoc across the world. And as if this weren't enough for one two-month period, we continue to watch Russia destroy Ukraine (tiptoeing around Putin and not really giving the Ukrainians what they need) and provoke China into aggressive demonstrations of its military might around Taiwan (without asking the people of Taiwan if they wanted us to do such a thing). And these are just the traumas and anxieties of the world around us, pressing down on our daily lives and just adding to our burdens, making worse any personal traumas we have.

Somehow, though, we lucked out into planning ahead.

This issue we feature an incredible interview with author and artist Gemma Amor featuring a discussion about trauma—in a sense, continuing elements of the article we had in the last issue, but on a much more personal level. Amor's latest book, *Full Immersion* (due out in September), explores in a sense her own mental health crisis over the last five years and how she's dealt with that. Plus bonus material: We also talk about her art, self-publishing vs traditional publishing (not so much versus, actually), and just how one goes about writing a book.

It seems appropriate that the rest of the issue is filled with works that speak to the idea of changing our lives (I mean, more so than most stories do). Everything from decisions that bridge living and dying ("Switchback" Carolyn R. Russell, "Scorekeeper" by Bob Ritchie,

"The Thing in the Loft" by Luke Walker) to working to change the lives of others or the planet ("When the Fireworks Fade" by Ryan Hyatt, "The Quintet is Ready" by Maureen Bowden, "Nobody's Hero" by J.C. Pillard) or both ("Fire and Particles" by N.K. Leullier). There are very personal changes bought at a price ("The Rock Swimmers" by Harrison Kim, "Unfamiliar" by Harris Coverley) or that just wander into our lives ("Vlad's Cat" by Christina Sng), and more philosophical musings on change ("My Biggest Existential Disappointment" by J. J. Steinfeld, "I've Been Told of Fourth Street" by Marge Simon, "Petitions" by Ed Ahern, "Premonition" by Emma Neale).

An integral part of this fabric of change is the art found in this issue, which although more difficult to define still reads to me as change, from looking from one self to another in *Hidden Mirrors* by Tabitha Marsh to finding one's way amongst one's selves in Tim Hildebrandt's *Fire Door*, from the joys of simply being in Shikhar Dixit's *Earth9* to moving toward enlightenment in *Awaken* by Carl Scharwath. In Nicola Brayan's *Calamity* I see not that but, rather, the resolution to change life for the better, and in R. Mac Jones' *Waking to Cry Stop* a desperate attempt to save ourselves—but which self?

We also continue toward the end of *Mondo Mecho*'s run in *Penumbria*. Just a few more issues left!

I hope that as we wind down summer and head into the autumn things begin to calm down a little. I usually find that autumn rejuvenates me leading into my favorite month of the year—October. I hope that it rejuvenates you as well.

All the best,  
Jeff Georgeson  
Managing Editor  
*Penumbria*



Feature Interview

# Gemma Amor

*Her new book, mental  
trauma, and a successful  
publishing journey*

*HORROR AUTHOR AND ARTIST GEMMA AMOR has already written many books, but her journey into traditional publishing is only just beginning. We spoke about that and many other things in an interview that began with the pandemic and our various experiences, including the trauma of COVID and the difficulties of dealing with that for two years, and how we're just now coming out of that trauma ... at least for the moment. And for her, it includes a new book, Full Immersion, due out in September. We begin there ...*

\* \* \*

*So you have a new book coming out.*

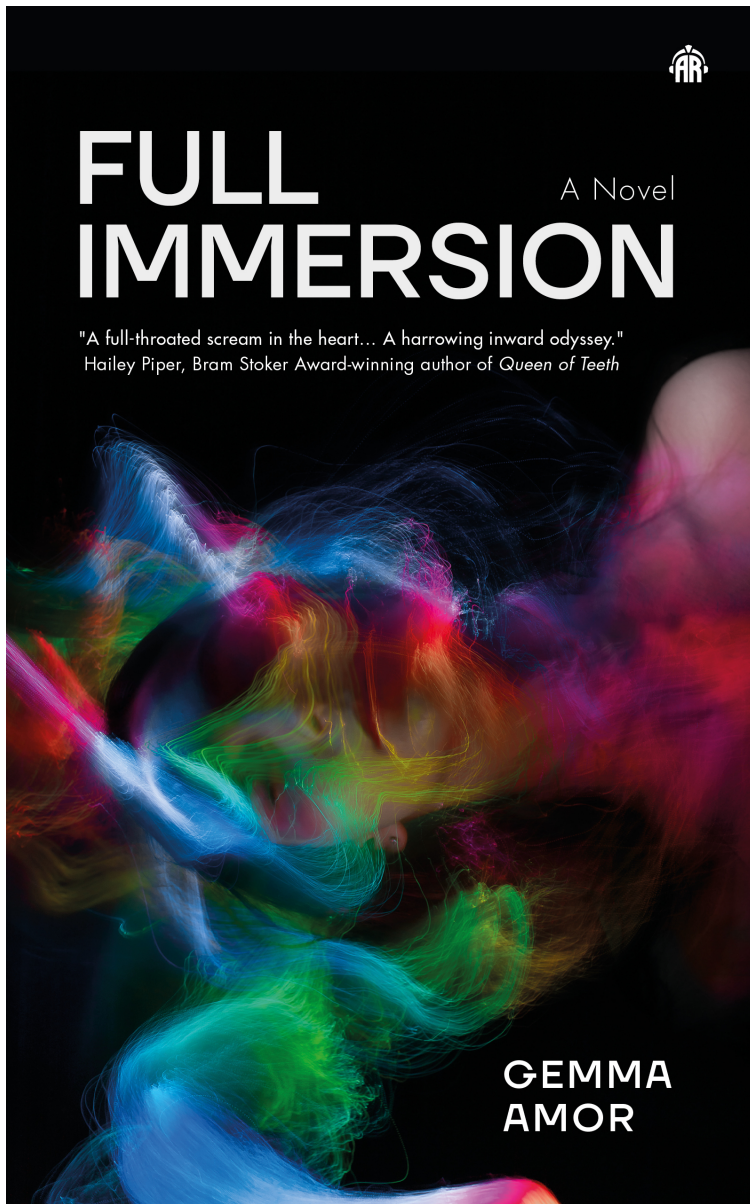
I do.

*And you mention that that ties into trauma—not COVID trauma, but ... I don't know how much you want to talk about that, without giving things away*

...



PICTURED: Gemma Amor



PICTURED: Cover of *Full Immersion*, due out 13 September from Angry Robot books

It's hard. It isn't a spoiler to say that it's my examination of my own journey through a mental health crisis that I had, which ... again, it's difficult, because so much of my journey in the last five years has been self-diagnosis, which I don't recommend to anybody, but at the same time it was a case of me not really understanding what was happening, or even realizing what was happening to begin with. And then when I did realize stuff was happening, going away and doing some research and realizing, "Ah, that sounds like me. Oh, this sounds like me." And then taking that to a health care professional who would then say, "Yeah, that sounds like this." ...

What we all think was the root of it was a very delayed reaction to some post-natal trauma, and what I didn't understand at the time, which I've done some reading around now, is that it's not that uncommon for some women to experience post-natal issues in a delayed way, a good couple of years after their kids are born sometimes, because what I think tends to happen when you have a child is you sort of go into survival mode when they're very small, so life becomes about feeding and sleeping and changing and eating. And then when they're suddenly a bit more self-sufficient, you have an opportunity to sort of look at yourself and realize "Ugh, I'm not in a very good place right now."

So that's pretty much what happened with me, and as part and parcel of all of that I found myself unemployed. I wasn't performing terribly well in my job, I wasn't functioning particularly well as an adult on a day-to-day basis, and especially not as a parent. And then when my son was four, and I was without a job, he started school, and I suddenly found myself with an awful lot of time on my hands and an awful lot of issues to work through. So I started a very lovely routine where I'd drop my son off at school and I'd walk down to the café on the street nearby. I would start typing ... I bought myself a secondhand laptop from the shop up the road and I started typing, and eventually, about five years later, there's a book. So the book started as a very autobiographical kind of brain dump of everything I was feeling and experiencing and going through and having trouble processing, and then later on I had a conversation with Angry Robot, the publisher, who wanted to know if I had any novel-length projects



that I could submit to them, and I had a choice: I could either write something brand new, which I knew would take a very very long time, given that it was the pandemic and the speed at which I was working, or I could revisit something that I already had and see if that was fit for purpose. So what I did was I dug out that manuscript that I started writing when my kid first started school, and I thought long and hard about how to communicate the kinds of things I was trying to communicate about my experience, but do it in a way that was, I guess digestible. It wasn't just, "Here's my diary," you know?

*Right, it wasn't just a journal ...*

Right, yeah, and turn it into a novel, but also, I didn't want to cheapen the message, or the things I was trying to talk about or write about. I didn't want to trivialize anything. So it was a case of trying to come up with a way of fictionalizing an experience that wasn't fictional in a way that did the subject matter justice, and didn't look like I was having fun at the expense of my mental health condition, which I didn't particularly want to do. That's not to say that you can't do that with topics and themes that are difficult. I certainly poke fun at myself in other ways. But this particular topic was too deep and traumatic for me to do anything other than something quite serious.

*Right.*

And the only genre that kind of stuck out for me in that sense, aside from horror, was science fiction. Science fiction has long been used to explore the vagaries of the human mind and all the things that go on in our brains, and I had grown up reading a lot of Isaac Asimov. He talks a lot about identity and humanity, and I felt like I wanted to do something that kind of echoed some of the basic tenets of scifi with elements of horror woven in, so that the examination of what I've been going through was quite serious and meaty.

So I did that, and I sent the manuscript over to Angry Robot, and they said yes, and the rest was history. But what I didn't think about so much, which I probably should have thought about and came to a couple of weeks ago, when my husband finished reading the book,

was ... there's that quote from *Jurassic Park* that scientists didn't stop to think about whether or not they should, they think too much about whether or not they could, and I think there was a certain element of that with me: How do I approach this opportunity, how do I get this book out there? Should I have? I don't know. A lot of the experiences in it also belong to my husband, and they belong to my kid. It wasn't an easy experience for [my husband] ... But he's been very supportive; he loves the book. But that's the thing now that I'm approaching publishing day, I'm now starting to have these like "Ohh, should I have done this?" I wasn't even sure when I sent it whether I should have. I don't know; I have very mixed feelings.

*I get that. I've started semi-fictional, autobiographical things of my own.*

At the same time you have a right, and this is the thing that I've figured out, is that you do have a right to your own story, and you do have a right to work through things in a way that's helpful for you. What I would say is that I probably should have had the conversation I had with my husband after he read it before I wrote it. But then I also didn't really know what the book was going to be until it was finished, and by then it was too late. [laughs] Because ... in traditional publishing, something I didn't realize is the number of edit processes you go through, so the book came back with structural edits, and that meant there was still work to be done in evolving it, and actually it was in the course of those structural edits that a lot of the deeply personal stuff came out, because I just decided to lean into it, you know; that was my opportunity to really kind of exsanguinate. So it wasn't really until the finished thing was going off to the printer's and I had the e-ARCS out that I was like, uh, yeah ... but you can have those conversations if they're receptive with your family members. It's your experience and it affected you. It was your trauma, and you are allowed to take ownership of it.

I think the dialogue has been quite helpful for me to have with my husband, in a way. I was able to express on the page things that I haven't been able to verbalize in real life, partly because I didn't know I felt that way about those things until I'd written it down.

Which is what therapy's also very good for. You don't often know how you feel about something until you hear yourself talk about it, until you hear it come out. And ironically, because the book is about therapy, the book was a form of therapy as well in that sense. It sort of scrambles my brain if I try and think about it too much. [laughs]

*It's like this meta thing where it's like my life, and I'm reliving it and thinking about it and delving into what I think about that and ...*

Yeah, it's the most meta thing I think has ever happened to me, or sort of initiated myself—I can't say it's happened to me because I wrote the damn thing ... The projects I've just started working on now, I need to not just relive my own trauma for a bit. I'm just going to write purely fictional stuff now. I'm just going to lean into places where I've been, characters that I like in books, and authors that I like, but I'm not doing anything about my own life for a while, because I just can't do it, I just need a break [laughs].

*Yeah, totally. So you already have things in the works, as it were.*

It's interesting, because I found myself finally, for the first time in years, without any major deadlines; I have a few short stories to do, and a few book covers to do, but beyond that I don't have any structural edits to do, I don't have a book to hand in, and that being said, I have an agent, who's sitting there waiting keenly for me to give him something to sell. So I've just passed him a novella; we'll see what happens with that, he's reading it at the moment. In the world of traditional publishing, novellas are a harder sell, but I hope that it will survive its novella length because I prefer short, sparse stories. I prefer to say more with less, and this story really spoke to me in a kind of ... it's very inspired by Daphne du Maurier's stories and short stories. She's very similar; she did an awful lot with very little.

So he's sitting on that. And I'm working on a manuscript that I must have started writing fifteen years ago, if not longer. I just found a draft of it that was about 64000 words in, and it was last updated in 2015. And I thought to myself, why not? That's 64000 words sitting there that I can do something with. The problem was at the time I

didn't know enough about myself as a writer to be able to actually bring that to a completed project. I didn't know enough about how to write a book. There's an art to writing a book now that I have got the hang of, and I didn't have it back then, so it sort of languished on my hard drive for years and years, and my problem with books was that I didn't know how to finish them. I've since had a very good idea for how to take that one forward. So now I'm in the process of rewriting that with new protagonists in mind, with a new direction, and with my voice, because I didn't have a particularly strong narrative voice back then, not something that was identified with me, which I think I do have now.

*So in a way it's like you're co-authoring it with an older version of yourself.*

I am. And also I may try co-authoring it with another author who I'm very good friends with, V. Castro, and I really wanted to lean into that friendship and the strength of that, and sort of portray that with the protagonist of the book. As I'm writing it, I'm realizing that it would be a lot easier to get the voice for the other character right if perhaps we wrote it. So I might try and sweet-talk her into writing it with me, but we'll see.

*Cool.*

It's more of a crime noir, very much based on places where I've travelled, in Asia and Vietnam in particular for this one. So that's something I'm working on; who knows where that will go, or who that will involve, or whatever. I do have a book contracted to come out with Cemetery Gates Media next year and that is a novella. It's going to be around 40000 words, I think. That one I'm very excited for. It's tentatively titled *The Once-Yellow House*, although it might be also titled *Thomas*. I'm not sure yet. I like short titles. I am a big David Cronenberg fan; I love body horror and I love cosmic horror, and this is an exploration of that. In fact, and I don't want to give any of that away ... because I have a good relationship with CGM I can lean into that one hard. That's the one that wouldn't get past the traditional publisher [laughs]. So I'm going all-out with this one and I probably

don't want to spoil it.

I probably have another two or maybe three manuscripts outside of that that I'm going to try and finish by the end of the year, so that my agent has lots to work with. And beyond that, I'm working on a treatment of *Dear Laura* at the moment with a lovely screenwriter lady and a small production company who are sort of guiding me through that process. So, again, it probably won't go anywhere, but I'm learning a lot about how to write a movie treatment, which is something that I'd like to explore more of over the years. And I have other various podcasty bits and lots in the pipeline.

*Yeah, on your website you mention that you'd done a podcast for some time, worked on a videogame as well ...*

Yeah, I was sort of brought on board to write for a videogame. It's gone a little bit quiet lately, so I don't know quite what the status quo is with that. It's a sort of indie game called *Ivy Likes Stories*, but I think with a lot of these projects it's down to budget and time and what's happening in the world at the time. I'd like to do more of that kind of stuff; I'm very keen to get into videogames on a bigger level, because there's so many cool horror games and indie games out there at the moment.

*Yeah, definitely. I've started development on a few games, and they start as relatively simple and become more and more complex and then never manage to get finished.*

Novels are the same, I think. You have to really rein yourself in sometimes to do what you can actually achieve, rather than what you want to in your mind as it grows and grows. That's the same with any creative endeavor, I think.

*Like you have this world that you've created, but then you want to do all the stories in the world all at once in your novel.*

Yeah. That's interesting, because ... so, I've got seven books out at the moment, and *Full Immersion* will be eight. So *Full Immersion*

and *Dear Laura* are the only two that are not connected to kind of a shared universe. All my other books have got sneaky little elements of a shared universe. And it's something that is really tempting to keep building on and keep building on, and just go to town with it.

*Well, yeah! That'd be an incredible sort of Easter Egg kind of thing.*

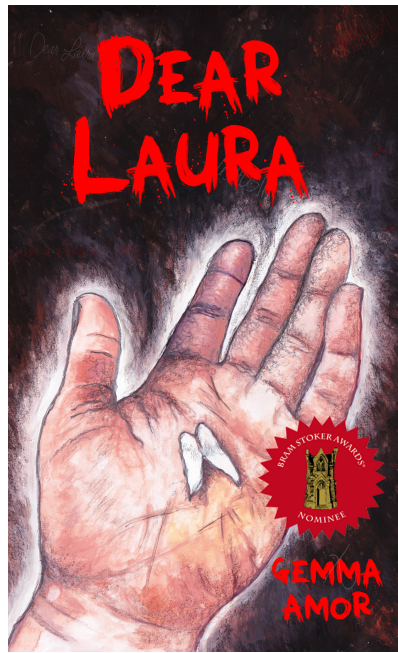
Yeah, I think anyone that's read *White Pines* will have spotted a few Easter Eggs in there, and the potential for me to build on that is enormous. The problem is, again, with traditional publishing with an agent, because those books already exist and they're already out there, how much of that can I continue with new work, and keep a traditional publisher interested, you know? So the way around that is to write interconnected books that don't look like interconnected books. [laughs] People that like hard work will find Easter Eggs.

*So you've done a lot of "non-traditional publishing." What would you say your experience has been with that versus the traditional publishing route?*

They've both been wonderful for very different reasons. I do like the idea of continuing to be a hybrid author in that sense. I certainly don't want to not work with the indies I've built up good relationships with, and my agent's quite understanding of that. So in terms of self-publishing, which is kind of where I really started, it for me was purely about speed and getting as much work in front of as many people as quickly as possible, so that I could start to build a name for myself. And I think in that sense I achieved that, and achieved it quite quickly. I think my first book was out in 2018. So I haven't done too badly in that sense.

When you think about the traditional publishing journey, even before you sign a contract, there's sometimes years of being in the querying trenches trying to get an agent. There aren't that many traditional publishers who accept direct submissions, so normally your agent submits your work for you, and getting an agent is quite honestly traumatic for a lot of new writers starting out. So I knew that wasn't really for me. I knew it was more important for me to focus on the

PICTURED, THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE:  
Cover art by Gemma Amor for  
both her own works (*Dear Laura*,  
the upcoming *Child of Mud and  
Clay*) and others' (*Malevolent  
Nevers*, *Slash-Her*, *Almost Ruth*)



stories and the writing than it was losing myself in multiple rejections a day, which I just didn't think I had the resilience for, emotionally anyway. And I knew, again, that that would damage my confidence, and then that would also affect my writing and my love of doing it. So the quick way to feel like you are doing the thing, for me, was to have people with a physical copy of my book in their hands reading it and interacting with it and reviewing it, and that's what self-publishing gave me. It is literally the case of hit "Publish" and go.

With *Dear Laura*, I use this example a lot, I wrote the thing in one month or two months, I can't remember exactly how long now, I designed my own cover and did my own typesetting, and just hit "Publish." And it's my most well-known book and the one I got the Stoker nomination for. In that sense, self-publishing was beautiful for me in terms of giving me a foot in an industry that I don't think I would have had had I gone the traditional route, or at least not for years.

And also, I think with indies and self-publishing it offers people that

perhaps wouldn't and haven't had enough of a voice a chance to have that voice. I'm talking about marginalized writers, and writers of color, and disabled writers and queer writers and people that perhaps haven't had their fair shot, or their opportunity to sit at the table, you know? Those barriers are gone when you just publish your own book. It's like, this is what I'm writing about. There's no barrier here, off I go. And I love it for that. It feels quite punk rock to me in that sense.

*Yeah.*

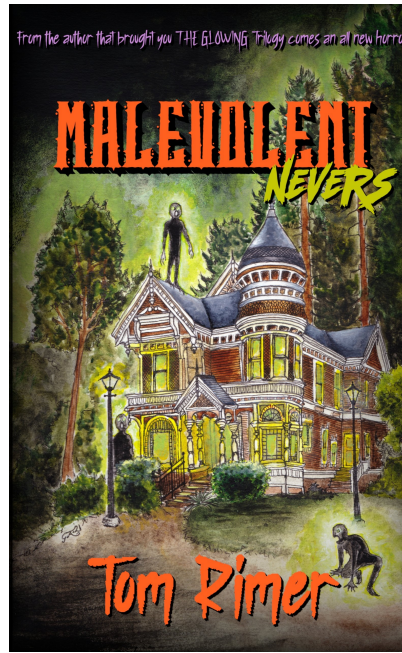
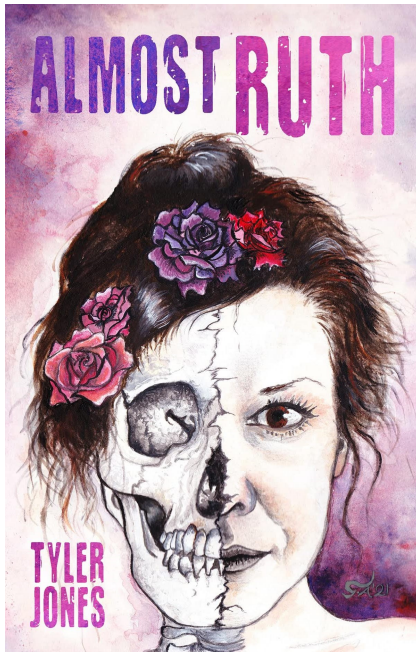
That being said, the traditional journey that I've had in the last couple of years has also been very edifying, very fulfilling. You work with a team who are all really invested in your book and making it as good as possible. I learned a lot through the structural edit process, the copy edit process, the line edit process. I've learned a lot through talking to marketing and publicity. I mean, having a publicist who is there to do that legwork and reach out to people and make connections and organize events has just been mind-blowing to me because

that's all stuff I had to do myself up until now. I still do that to a certain extent. They still expect you to promote your own book. They still expect you to be proactive and active on social, but I felt like this book was so important, I needed it to be in the hands of a few more people than just me, because I was too close to the material as well to be properly objective. So that's where it's been beautiful in taking a book that's very serious seriously and doing it justice, and I really think that Angry Robot have done that, they've fully talked to me about all the aspects of it, and offering me support if I needed it, and they were open to things like me putting the trigger warnings in it at the beginning, I put in a list of resources at the back of the book for anyone struggling with any of the issues. They've just been incredibly accommodating to all of it, and it's been quite a lovely process building a book with them, really. Slow, very slow. Traditional publishing is the slowest thing I've ever seen in my entire life.

*Yeah, I come in at the end process of that, because proofreading's almost the last thing, and I have to proof the layout as well. Sometimes*

*it's a rush job, sometimes it's "We need this out yesterday," but most of the time it's weeks and months and ...*

And the other things as well, on that note, is what I think with self-publishing and with indie publishing, self-publishing more so, if you want to do this as a job and make some money, with a self-published book you can start seeing some returns within a few months; the royalties are sort of two months backdated and they start coming in. With traditional publishing, I think the thing that people don't always think about is that, from the date that you sign your contract, you'll probably have an advance, which is a chunk of money, then it could take that book a year and a half to two years to go through all the edit processes and see the light of day in a published format. When it's published you may or may not see another chunk of the advance, depending on the contract, and then the royalties I don't think you start to see from that until perhaps some time after. So let's say you sign a deal for your book, you're not going to see the royalties for maybe a number of years after, which is a real consideration for peo-



ple if money is something you have to factor in to having a creative career, and self-publishing gives access to your royalties in a faster way than traditional does.

*How did you end up doing your own artwork and cover designs?*

It started with wanting to get *Dear Laura* out as quickly as possible. I had this weird, arbitrary, self-imposed deadline where I wanted to get something out near my birthday, so I was like “Agh!” I paint anyway. I paint for a hobby. I sort of [use it to] relax in the evening, so I’m not staring at my phone, scrolling mindlessly forever. I find art is quite a good way of occupying my brain and my hands in a way that calms me down. And I just decided that I had a painting that I’d been doing a while ago that was just my hand as a study, just to relax me, and I thought, actually, this would work really well for the *Dear Laura* story, so I kind of finished that painting, figured out how to use Photoshop, figured out how to do the dimensions and cover templates in Amazon, and people really like that cover, I think because it is a bit different. And then I was like, oh, maybe I should do some more of these, so I just started offering commissions, and people just commissioned me. I’ve learned a lot in the last year and a half since I’ve been doing it. And I love doing it. I work mostly with self-published authors or small publishers. I work really closely with the author in terms of what kind of feel and style they want, what color palettes they like, other covers they’ve seen that really inspire them, the mood, the overall thing that they’re going for. I love that process. ... I know as a writer what a cover needs to do for me is pull out the main elements of the story and that book and communicate it in the right way to a potential reader. I think that’s really important. And so it’s really nice working with authors to get to that nugget of information and get it down visually in a book cover. I have a few that I need to do in the next month that I’m really looking forward to, some really fun ones, so ... test my boundaries and test my limits a little bit.

*That’s really cool!*

Yeah.

*So I recently read Six Rooms and I thought that was ... not to be all fanboyish or anything, but I thought that was amazing!*

Thank you.

*I really liked the way that it has so many different viewpoints and also over different time periods, and goes back and forth like that. That’s really difficult to control, writing-wise.*

Yeah, so there’s a running joke that I can’t write a story from beginning to middle to end. I write a lot for the NoSleep podcast, and there’s lots of jokes about how it has to be multiple timelines or it has to time-hop or it has to be multiple perspectives. I think I just enjoy telling a story in lots of different ways, from lots of different angles. I struggle with linear, and I think that’s probably because my brain struggles with linear as well. My brain hops around a lot from project to project, from story to story. So, it feels more dynamic to me to tell a story from different perspectives and with different voices. I tend to get a little bit bored when I just start typing, and then, you know, the end. It’s also easier for me to properly portray a character, I think, sometimes from first person, so I definitely found that with ... well, first or second [person] ... I found that with *Six Rooms* there were so many characters, there was such a big cast of characters, that I needed them to each have their own experience so that I could properly write them. Otherwise, it would have been very difficult to write it from the perspective of one person looking at all these other characters and describing them. It would have been quite boring as well.

I think that works really well with intimate books with one or two characters, and I have definitely done that sometimes as well, but it just didn’t suit the structure of this book. And the main thing ... So, Cemetery Gates came to me with an idea for a collection of stories around this particular house, which is based in a universe they’ve created, so there are other books in that universe. They were like, can you do justice to the idea of, here’s a house, and we want a series of stories set within that house, in a different room, and you can do whatever you like with that idea. So I could have just done a straightforward collection of short stories, each one set in a different room in



the house. And it would have worked absolutely fine. But I didn't want to do that. I wanted to write a novel and structure it around each of those rooms, because I felt like it would take the reader on a journey as if you were on a tour of the house. I think the main thing I wanted to communicate was moving through the house and moving

PICTURED: Cover of *Six Rooms*, published in 2021 by Cemetery Gates Media

through those different environments and seeing it from different people's perspectives, but also having the flashbacks, without spoiling it too much, so you could also see it from the house's perspective as well; the house was also a character in its own right. So like most of my books do, it had a basic structure that I had in mind, and it just evolved, really, and it took on a life of its own, as they often do. I don't always know what's going to happen when I start writing it, and what happened with this one is that I started with that loose structure—six rooms—and then this whole cast of characters just kind of made themselves known to me, and I just went with it, really. But interestingly, there are flashbacks in the book that deal with one of the characters who used to live in the house; that wasn't a feature of the first draft of the book, and [the book] didn't really work. It felt a bit like a *Clue* ripoff, and I think the thing that finally gave that book its own identity, a sort of unique personality, was the inclusion of flashbacks, so that you got to meet the owner of the house, and then you got to understand the house a little bit more.

It was a journey, that one. It was difficult to write, difficult to keep track of everybody, difficult to tie off all the loose ends and all the narrative threads. I still think it could use a little bit of work, but then I always think that about every book, so ... It was a fun one to write, as well.

*Yeah, it was definitely fun to read. And it did feel like you had managed to get everything sorted out in the end, all the different characters and everything.*

I hope so. Cemetery Gates have since said it is one of their most steadily selling books, and everybody seems to be happy with it and like it. I'm glad the gamble paid off.

*So do you have a general writing process?*

Generally I just sit down and plug away from sort of between nine

and three pm, every day of the week, in the week. Sometimes on weekends if I've got a bit of free time, which I don't often have. And that's about as complex as my process is, really. I just sit down and write and see what happens. There are certain things that I do do that are becoming process. I have some trusted beta readers. What will normally happen is that I will start writing a draft of the book and I'll lose faith in it about two-thirds of the way in, and I won't be able to see the woods for the trees, and I'll need something to get me through the final push, so I will then send the unfinished manuscript to a beta reader or two, and they'll give me their honest feedback, and that feedback will often shake something loose or unstick something that will give me the idea to finish the book in the right way. So that's becoming quite habitual for me.

Every book is so different. Every story is so different. With *Six Rooms* I had white boards on either side of me, and I'd fill them both with flow diagrams and stuff to make sure I wasn't forgetting anything. [But] I don't really have a process. I tend to kind of muddle through, see what happens. I'm not a planner or a plotter at all, which I do need to get better at. I think there are certain genres I want to write that I cannot without proper planning. Crime is one of those. You aren't going to write a crime thriller without a solid gold plot.

*And you'd need the white boards out again for that.*

Yeah, exactly. So that's something that I need to get better at. I do tend to get bored if I know exactly what's going to happen, and I lose interest in a piece of work, which is why I find editing so much hard work, because I'm like, Oh, my God, I know where this is going. My brain isn't really geared for that; I just want it to be new and fresh all the time.

I am a big pantsner and a fudger [laughs]. If I was to be kinder to myself, I'd say that I'm more of an intuitive writer. If you were to ask me what a past participle was, I wouldn't be able to tell you, but I would know how words sound together and what sounds right and what doesn't. I tend to write quite instinctually, so the process changes depending on the book. *White Pines* is a good example of, I

had this idea in my head, I had this image in my head of how to start the book. I got about 15000 words in, 10000 words in, and it just didn't work for me at all. So I binned those 10000 words, and my husband made me aware of a certain location that would suit the book better, and I started writing it from that perspective and it started to flow a lot more easily. And then I actually went up there and did some research and stayed in the area and drove around and explored, and then the rest of the book just unlocked and wrote itself. So I am going to start making more room in my schedule for research. It doesn't always have to be on location; I'm not going to fly to Vietnam just to write a book. ...

*Fun as that might be.*

Yeah. But there's a lot to be said for making room for research, and if you can go to a place and soak up the atmosphere, I think that should be part of every writer's process as well if they're able to, and obviously time and money and physical ability get in the way of that sometimes, but ...

“No” is the answer to your question. [laughs] I don't really have a process.

*[laughs] Well, is there anything I haven't asked you that you'd like to mention or talk about or ...*

I don't think so. It's worth giving a shout-out to the NoSleep podcast. I always try to do that. They were the first place that published anything of mine in any form. They accepted my short story “His Life's Work” in 2018, I think it was, and that pretty much changed my life and made me realize I could be paid for writing, it gave me a confidence boost. I built up a very good relationship with them very quickly, and it meant that by the time I brought my first book out—it was a collection of short stories, most of which the show had produced—I also had a bit of a captive audience there from listeners who liked my work, and I think that gave me a real foothold in a very difficult industry. David Cummings, the show host, has been nothing but incredibly supportive of me from day one, and helped me promote the



book. I've since gone on to write scripts for their live shows when they go on tour, I've been lucky enough to tour a little bit with them. I just did a live show with them at the Stanley Hotel in Estes Park, Colorado, the pre-party for StokerCon. I wrote a special script for that, which was riffing on *The Shining* obviously. I sort of hung out with them in Stockholm and in Brighton when they were on the European tour and in Bristol. I have a lovely, very good, close relationship with them. I wouldn't be where I am today without them taking a chance on my work. I'd say they're a huge part of my day-to-day

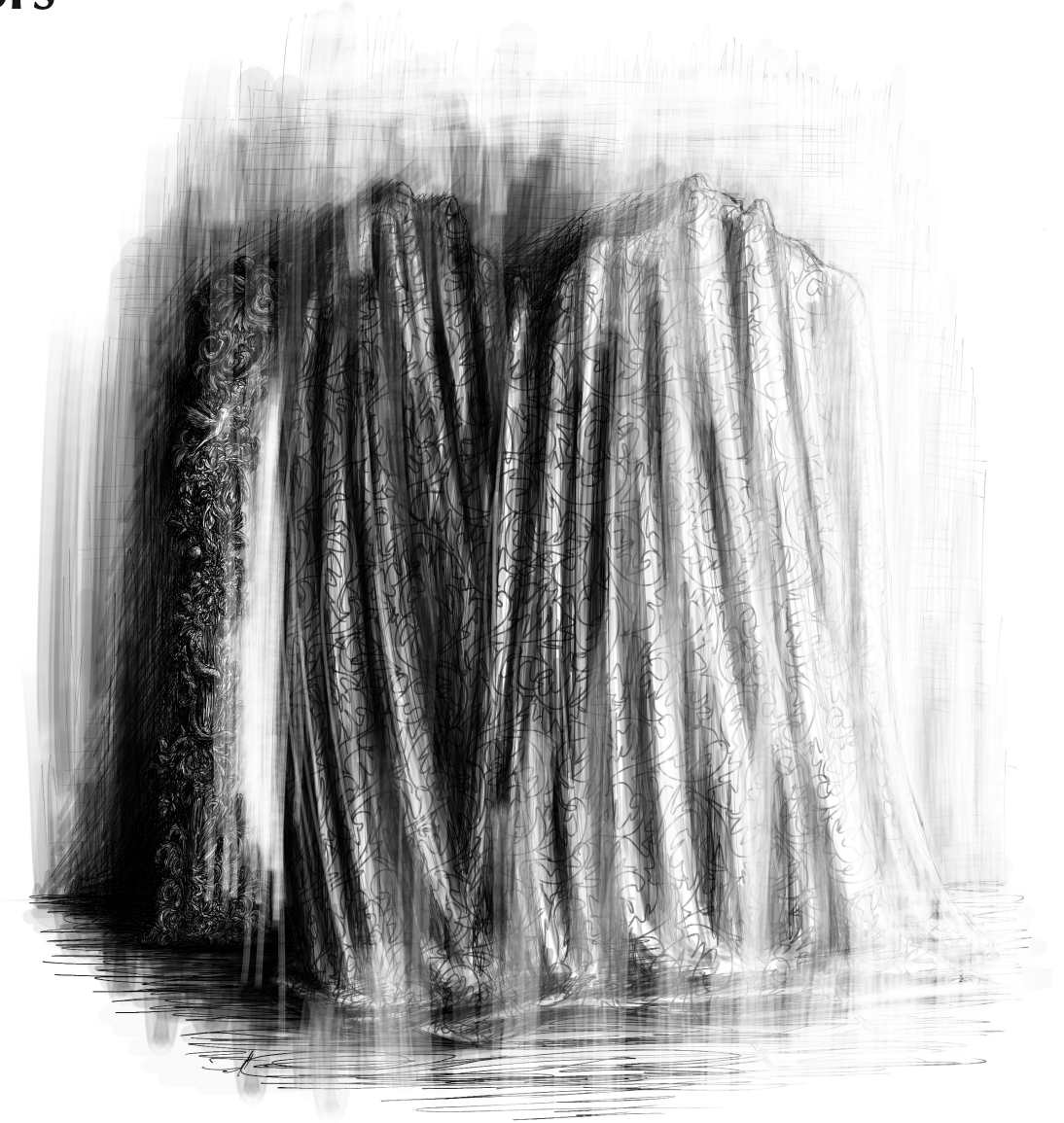
life still, and I'm very grateful for that.

\* \* \*

*Full Immersion is out September 13th from Angry Robot books. Try this link here (<https://angryrobotbooks.com/books/full-immersion/>) and, hopefully, most good bookstores. All Amor's other books are on Amazon, and you can find her on twitter and instagram as @manylittlewords.*

# Hidden Mirrors

by Tabitha Marsh



# Switchback

by Carolyn R. Russell

Averie dragged herself up a second flight of stairs, pushing against the nausea that had plagued her all morning. The small third-floor landing came into view, a welcome sight despite its bleak appearance. The space hosted a wooden door and a mangy brown rug that balanced a small round table on its uneven surface. On the wall, a bronze plaque identified the floor's sole tenant: Sterling Timeshares, Ltd.

Averie's queasiness surged and mingled with a new jolt. Panic. She bent and crouched close to the floor to steady herself. Down low, the aroma of disinfectant competed with a more seasoned mildewy smell. Miraculously, it cleared her head.

The sacrifice she was about to make would be well worth it. Just one lost week, and she'd be able to support herself and the baby no one knew about. There'd even be enough money to move to another city and start over, after the Unrest and the municipal lockdown was lifted. She'd design a new life for herself and her child; the orphaned and pregnant seventeen-year-old Averie would be transformed by Sterling Timeshares into a woman who could afford to raise a kid. And who knows? Maybe she'd be able to go back to school in a few years.

Averie straightened up and knocked on the door. Nearly instantaneously, it was opened by a young-looking man in a lab coat.

"Averie Rancourt?" the man asked, reading from a tablet.

"Yes. Rancourt," said Averie, inflecting her surname with its traditional French pronunciation.

The man made no response. While his attention was on his screen,

Averie studied him. Everyone these days looked some species of young, but even the finest cosmetic surgeries available and, her mother had always said, a culture that glorified a pathological fear of natural human ageing had their limitations. You could always tell if someone's face had never been touched. The man before her was truly young.

After several moments, he flipped the tablet toward her. Averie placed her left forefinger in the DNA-ID slot and listened to its familiar five-note verification chime. The man shut the tablet down and waved at the white-tiled corridor behind him. He waited for her to pass, then followed Averie down its pale length to a dimly lit room. She turned and opened her mouth to speak, but the man was already moving soundlessly in the other direction.

Averie sat on one of the beige upholstered chairs pressed up against a gray wall. The room was plain, without artwork or windows to break up its monotony. One scraggly yellow plant listed in the corner, nearly doubled over upon itself.

Averie pulled her cotton cardigan tightly across her chest and forced its collar up, halfway over her face. She breathed deeply through the loose stitches knit by her mother during her final weeks. What her mother had called "blue sky days" had endured an uneasy truce with the bad ones until the very end, when it was all pain. But they had made the most of what time they had together, and those memories were a sweet place to linger when she could.

Her reverie was interrupted by the sound of her name. Startled, she located the source of the female voice, a speaker hidden discreetly in the ceiling.

“Miss Rancourt. Please proceed to the changing room on the right-hand side of the hallway. There you’ll find guidelines so that we may proceed. Thank you.”

Averie noted that her last name had been afforded its correct pronunciation; either the man who answered the door had mentioned it, or, more likely, the office was wired for sound.

The changing area was little more than a booth, with a flimsy curtain for privacy. Inside, there was barely enough space for Averie to undress and exchange her clothes for a green hospital gown; a poster taped to the back wall listed instructions accompanied by simple illustrations. She carefully sorted her things and put them in their assigned bags, labeling them in block printing with the black marker provided. There was also a single page to sign, which seemed to be a concise summary of the contract she had already agreed to. Finished, she left everything in a neat pile. Her always orderly mother would have been proud.

When Averie flung the curtain open, the young man in the lab coat was right outside; Averie realized he must have been waiting, mere inches away from her, the entire time. She shivered in her thin shift and took a quick step back. The man stared at her blankly before nodding and handing her a mug of steaming liquid.

“Please,” he said. “It’ll calm your nerves.”

Averie took the hot drink and cupped it between her palms. Its lemony warmth felt comforting, and she smiled at the man.

“Thanks. I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name?”

For the first time something akin to an expression crossed the man’s face. Her question had been an unwelcome one.

“Ronald,” he said after a brief pause. He turned and walked briskly down the corridor. Averie glanced behind her and briefly considered leaving the building dressed as she was. But the weeks since her

mother’s death had been hellish in their intensity of grief and despair, and this route, suggested by a friend, had emerged as her best option. She followed him.

Ronald moved quickly enough that when he stopped suddenly in front of closed double doors, she nearly bumped into him. The young man’s face stayed still as Averie clutched her tea with both hands and regained her balance. He pushed the doors open wide and gestured for her to enter. Averie looked over her shoulder, about to thank him, but he had left, already out of earshot.

The room seemed a place apart from what she had seen. A huge chandelier dominated the space, throwing silvery light against the floor to ceiling bookshelves that lined two opposing walls. Ornately framed diplomas and certifications decorated the other two. Glossy wooden floors showcased a large glass and nickel desk and chair set. In front of this arrangement was a half-moon of matching seating. Maybe a fleet of Ronalds stayed on-call to take notes from those chairs.

Averie gravitated towards a sofa near a window. She waited alone for several minutes before stretching out on its upholstered silk. She sipped her tea and waited.

\* \* \*

Averie shuddered awake and instinctively recoiled. Six inches away hovered the smiling face of an elderly woman.

“I’m so sorry I startled you,” said the woman, her voice a whispery contralto. “It’s just, well, you’re so lovely, my dear.” She sat down next to Averie on the sofa.

There was another person in the room with them. Dr. Severance was behind her desk, shuffling through some tablet screens.

“The maiden is risen,” said the woman dryly.

Averie sat up straight and smoothed her paper gown across her knees.

“Hi, Doctor,” she said, and was appalled to hear the submissiveness in her tone.

“All seems to be in order. Miss Rancourt, please meet Mrs. Anne Theil. She will have the privilege of timesharing your organic structure during the first week of April. Which begins tomorrow. Your high school spring break, yes?”

Averie nodded and looked at Theil. The name was a familiar one; the wily heir to a pharmaceutical fortune, Theil was often in the news. Images of her were uncommon, though. Averie remembered a scrap of public gossip about the woman. She was said to be deathly afraid of the surgical procedures required to keep her face and body looking youthful. Staring at her now, Averie believed the rumors. In an age when just about every person of even modest means refreshed their appearance while still in their mid-thirties, a process they would then promptly replicate every five years for the rest of their lives, Theil looked reptilian.

She couldn't imagine what it would be like to inhabit this woman's body for a minute, let alone seven days.

“The procedure will take approximately four hours. Upon awakening, you'll find yourselves in each other's homes, in each other's bedrooms. Is that clear? The process works best this way. You've had several virtual tours through these spaces, which ought to mitigate any understandable early confusion. And remember, you'll also have the company of the medical assistants you've selected during the first 24 hours. We train them very well; they'll be able to assist you with all aspects of your initial adjustment.”

Averie pictured her choice of companion, a vibrant young woman only a few years older than herself. Nina had made her belly-laugh within minutes of their first conversation, which counted for a lot. She was also over-qualified for the job; Nina was only a year away from completing her degree in intermorphic neurology. They had spent a lot of time together preparing for what the company called “The Reciprocation,” and what they called “the switch.” Their rap-

port had seemed to resonate beyond the boundaries of a business agreement. It would be comforting to wake up with Nina by her side.

Severance aimed her gaze at Theil. “Are we all set?” she asked, and Averie couldn't help but notice the note of deference in her voice. That's what Theil's kind of money bought you, along with the nearly unlimited use of a young body. There were restrictions, of course: no unsafe sex, no toxic amounts of drugs and alcohol, no death-defying sporting activities. Theil didn't seem to be the sky-diving type, but who knew what other shenanigans this woman might get up to in a delirium of restored youthful opportunity? That was, presumably, why the pay for this gig was so good.

Theil clasped her wrinkled fingers in her lap and nodded at Severance. Averie tried not to shudder at the old woman's knuckles, large and scaly and unevenly distributed across the tops of her hands. Theil closed her eyes and smiled.

“I'm all set, too,” said Averie. Severance, frowning behind her tablet, didn't look up. She closed the computer's casing and pressed a button built into the top of her desk.

“Anne, do you need to return to the Green Room for anything?”

“I'm perfectly ready, thank you,” said Theil.

Green Room? A fancy suite for the high rollers, no doubt. Averie bit back a laugh. Probably there was a whole other lavish section of this office with a separate entrance; she, no doubt, had been directed to enter through the back door.

Severance stood and motioned towards the front of her office. Averie hadn't heard a thing, but two women now waited just inside its entryway. Each stood behind a wheelchair, the machines incandescent in the room's glittery light. One of them smiled encouragingly.

“Ladies, if you will,” said Severance. Averie rose quickly but faltered and had to steady herself against the sofa. “Your pre-op procedural

has begun, Miss Rancourt. You may feel a bit odd. You'll feel better again when you sit." Severance met Averie's eyes and answered her unspoken question. "The tea."

Ah, yes. The tea. Averie nearly giggled. Her mother had always warned her never to accept food or drink she hadn't either prepared herself or observed being assembled. Good thing she had already made up her mind to follow through with her plans when she came here.

Severance oozed from behind her desk and offered her arm to Theil. They moved together towards the wheelchairs in a slow, stately procession. Averie followed them, taking care to walk in a relatively straight line. Dizzy, she sank into the chair provided and allowed the aide, the one who had smiled, to help her into position.

"You're going to be fine," said the woman. "I've worked a lot of these. Believe me, it'll be worth it. If I were twenty years younger, I'd do it myself."

Averie reached up and patted the woman's hand, thankful for her kindness. As they wheeled down the hallway, a flicker of movement caught Averie's eye. Turning her head, she glimpsed Ronald, his gaunt figure spiky against a backlit doorway. He stared at her and put his hand over his heart. At least, that's what it looked like.

\* \* \*

The light wasn't right. It was the wrong color and angled in from behind her rather than from across the room. She tried to rise from her bed, but a restraining hand pressed gently against her forearm. Nina was by her side.

"Easy does it," Nina murmured. "Try to sleep just a bit longer."

Averie lay back and breathed in a familiar fragrance. She located its source, a vase of arranged flowers on a nearby side table. They reminded her of her mother's last hours, her struggle inextricably

linked to the aroma of the blooms' chemical preservatives. Averie closed her eyes and let herself drift.

\* \* \*

Hours later, she awoke. Averie had to blink hard several times to clear her vision. She struggled to sit up and felt a hand smoothing her hair back.

"What? ... Mom?"

"Shhhh," whispered Nina. "Give yourself a few minutes."

"I don't feel good."

"It's going to take a little bit of time to adapt, Averie. Here, have some water."

Averie reached for the proffered cup and froze. The arm she had extended was foreign to her. It was thin and speckled, with pocked loose skin that rippled and trembled as it hung in the air. She gasped and withdrew it. To her horror, it stayed attached to her shoulder.

The scream began to build in the back of her throat. Averie clenched her jaw but couldn't contain it. The high-pitched voice that burst through her lips sounded strange to her ears, reedy and frail. Her memory kicked in, and she began to shake.

"Shhh, honey," Nina said. "This part is the worst. It all gets easier after this. I'm here, I'll stay, I promise I'll stay. Shhhhh ... Just rest, it's all going to be okay...."

Nina disappeared for a moment and returned with a heavy quilted blanket. Averie hadn't realized she was cold until she was pinned underneath its warmth. Nina sat close by, singing a lullaby that meandered from note to note, comforting in its tunelessness.

By the evening, Averie was able to sit up on her own. The bedroom

had been darkened by thick draperies drawn close, but she could make out the mandala pattern on the textured paper that covered the walls. A painted ceiling seemed absurdly far away, lit from below by glass sconces that threw diamond-shaped light upwards.

Nina helped her stand and cradled Averie's elbow as she hobbled towards the bathroom.

"Wash your face and brush your teeth first thing. You'll feel like a new woman," said Nina. Averie managed a weak smile.

Although she felt feather fragile and weightless, the joints in her feet and knees protested as she made her way across an expanse of plush carpeting. Assuring Nina that she was steady enough to go it alone, she opened the bathroom door and locked it behind her.

Vast and monochromatic, the room was like something out of a movie. It boasted an entire wall made of tiny windows of various shapes that fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. Everything shimmered with pale light, and Averie squinted to take it all in. The functional hardware was a rosy gold, finely wrought and polished. Tiny white, ivory, and yellow glass tiles covered all non-metallic surfaces, even the floor and bathtub. A cream-colored area rug looked like it had once graced some wild beast, and Averie avoided it as she approached a full length, tri-fold mirror. She undressed in front of it, carefully folding her clothes and placing them over the back of a tufted chair. She arranged its panels to reflect a multi-angled view of herself and stood still.

The body before her was unfathomable, its weather-beaten frame a shocking contrast to the glossy patina of the room. The hair on her head was fashionably cut, but dry and paper-thin. Averie ran a hand through it and watched as several white strands fell at her feet. Her arms and legs were stringy, their withered flesh bound to bone by ribbons of raised violet veins. Mottled breasts lay flat against her ribs; below, a small lump of dimpled belly rose above sharp hips. Then, a scar the shape of a canoe.

"You okay?" called Nina.

"Compared to what?" Averie yelled. She started to laugh and found she couldn't stop, not until tears slicked her wrinkled cheeks.

She brushed her teeth and stepped into the shower. Out of habit she turned the water temperature all the way up but found the heat unbearable. She adjusted it downward, to what her mother would have called tepid, and lingered; the bathing area was larger than her galley kitchen at home and equipped with comfortable places to sit down. Maybe she'd ride out the week in here.

There was a pile of thick terrycloth bathrobes in the room's walk-in closet; Averie chose a powder blue one from the middle. Her fingertips grazed a silky embroidered patch as she smoothed the robe around her body. A quick look in the mirror confirmed her guess: a monogram. Because the wealthy marked their territory. Well, maybe she'd do it, too. Maybe Theil would wake up next week to a full-color dragon tattoo etched across her ass. The thought was cheering.

"You're probably hungry," Nina said, as Averie entered the bedroom. To her surprise, a dining set had been wheeled in, and the table was groaning with food. It wasn't until Averie sat down that she realized how tired she was. She leaned back and closed her eyes.

"It's standard to feel exhausted right about now. And there's a lot of drugs still in your system. You'll hopefully be feeling more energetic when you wake up tomorrow."

"Energetic for an 82-year-old," said Averie, eyes still closed.

"For an 82-year-old, yes. But only for a week. And then, you can write your own ticket. I checked my tablet; we both have in-account receipts for the balances owed. And I have some news, Averie. Theil sprang for me to stay with you for the duration. If you'd like me to."

Averie snapped to attention and grinned. "Yes. Yes! Oh damn, I feel better already!"

"I think she felt bad that she was leaving you here on your own with

no servants or something; they've been given a vacation. Plus, I can cook. I said I'd be okay to clean, too, but I'd really rather not. It's only for seven days, right? How much damage can we do?"

Averie held out her arms, and Nina walked into them. "I feel like such a baby! But I'm so glad you're staying," Averie mumbled into Nina's shoulder.

Nina stood up straight. "We're going to make the most of living in this glamshell. Only eight rooms because this is her tiny city place...."

"We'll just have to adapt," said Averie.

"Can you eat something?"

"Maybe some, but not enough to make a dent in what's here," said Averie, waving at the spread.

"Yeah, I guess I got carried away ... you were asleep for a long time. Try something light. The miso soup came out great. Your electrolytes will thank you."

After their meal, Averie watched as Nina cleared their plates and stored the leftovers, sprightly as she moved between the bedroom and the kitchen. Averie didn't offer to help; it would be a hollow gesture at best, and Nina would know it. She hoped she'd feel less helpless tomorrow.

\* \* \*

The week unfolded slowly, time that seemed to thicken with each passing day. A routine grew around Averie's care and feeding; she was astonished at how much of her and Nina's attention was required to accomplish these simple pursuits and wondered how she would ever have managed on her own.

Anything other than the blandest of meals sent Averie's digestive sys-

tem into painful spasms. Sometimes even rice or cereal would send her into the bathroom for an hour or two. Nina's tenderness, and her cheerful tolerance for the kind of caretaking reserved for newborns and the very old, made Averie feel less embarrassed than she might have been with someone else.

"Enchiladas soon, honey, just hang in there," Nina would say after such an episode. The two shared a love of spicy foods, especially Mexican.

Theil's medications were abundant and needed to be ingested on a strict schedule that Nina managed with nonchalant expertise. Theil suffered from a multitude of ailments, and Averie wondered what she would feel like without these drugs. Just the torture of moving from place to place in the apartment was sometimes overwhelming, even on the prescribed painkillers. Good thing that Nina was stronger than she looked.

Worst was the way her head felt. Her brain felt like it was wrapped in layers of cotton fuzz. Her thoughts seemed to swim around for a while before they became distinct. And it was hard to focus, sometimes, on the simplest of goals: brush her hair, finish her meals, remember the long game.

When Averie was up to it, sightseeing excursions around Theil's lavishly appointed penthouse made for good low-energy entertainment. Theil was clearly an educated collector, eclectic in her tastes. Averie's great grandmother used to quote a lifestyle guru, famous in her day for advising people to discard from their homes that which was not beautiful or useful, or which failed to "spark joy." Theil's furnishings and accessories were a mishmash of styles and eras, collected and arranged with an eye toward form and function. Great Grandma would have approved.

Best were the original artworks. At school, Averie had studied 20th century art, and was thrilled by a Calder sculpture here, an original Andy Warhol print there. She and Nina lounged whenever possible in front of Theil's treasures. They became a backdrop for the stories



they shared about themselves, the good, the bad, and the absurd.

Still, Averie kept her pregnancy to herself. She had an idea she was forming about surprising Nina with the news when her ordeal was over, about Nina maybe becoming a part of her and her child's life. What might she think of the name she had already chosen? However the baby anatomically presented at birth, they would be called Renoir, after her and her mother's favorite artist.

Occasionally, they plotted creative ways to spend Theil's money. After all, Averie was legally Theil during the timeshare, just as Theil was legally Averie. Only good faith and the threat of post-Reciprocity judicial prosecution held the young folks back from robbing their elders blind. Intermorphic-related crimes were in a special category, and the penalties approached those given to murderers. Still, it was fun to talk about; the city's lockdown wouldn't last forever, and they let their imaginations roam. Averie wanted a mansion, a sailboat, and a mini-wombat. Nina wanted a resort in Belize to house her future medical practice. And a chocolate factory.

\* \* \*

By day number five, Averie could barely be persuaded to get out of bed.

"Everything hurts so much," she mumbled.

"Honey girl, we're almost at the finish line," soothed Nina. "You're gonna give up on me now? I don't think so.... Two days. Two measly days and poof! You're set for a long, long time."

Averie gritted her teeth and pushed back her blankets. The motion reminded her of her childhood; her mother used to have to talk her out of bed, too. She allowed herself to sink into those memories for a few minutes before she let Nina help her out of bed. Nina used the hem of her blouse to wipe away Averie's tears.

"Hang in, Averie," she whispered. "Two days."

The morning of the switchback dawned gray and foggy, but the weak light that greeted Averie might have been fireworks. Her last day! She tried to stretch and felt the now-familiar misery as her limbs struggled to wake up. Well, by this time tomorrow Theil would be re-entombed in her own shell, and she and Renoir would be free.

Nina sailed into the room and twirled a couple of times, filmy tops and sheer denim in her arms.

"Surprise! I ordered this stuff one night after you passed out at, oh, maybe 7 p.m. We can invoice it under essential supplies, for obvious reasons."

"Such as?"

"Such as, they were advertised as 'must haves for the spring season.' Who are we to dispute that kind of clear directive? Besides, by the power vested in me, I'm prescribing them for your mental health."

"Excellent. Thank you!" said Averie.

"Shall we?" asked Nina, pointing to the balcony off the bedroom. "One last visit to say goodbye to that gorgeous skyline?"

During good weather, the two had enjoyed it, a wrought-iron float that featured an ocean view beyond the pointed city rooflines, and the crowded streets below. As they considered the vista a final time, Averie thought about the week she'd lost, and tried to imagine how Theil might have spent it. She couldn't begin to guess.

Nina helped her pack up her things, her toiletries, the clothes she had brought with her, plus the new pieces Nina had purchased for her. Then Nina walked through all the rooms in the penthouse, checking to make sure that everything was in its place and in reasonably clean condition.

The tour didn't take long; their tenancy had been marked by a delicate respect for their surroundings. The women moved to a loveseat

that faced an oversized marble fireplace.

“It must be frustrating, to have to wait now, these last few hours. We have time for some food if you’re hungry. Some mashed bananas for the road, my love?” said Nina.

“Only if there’s no more Cream of Wheat,” laughed Averie.

“What’s going to be your first meal in your own body?”

“I’ve got it all planned. Me, you, and two gigantic chile rellenos. Plus, chips and margaritas under an umbrella at an outside table at Agave on Ocean Crest. Whadya think?”

“I’m all in,” said Nina. “Chihuahua cheese!” Nina groaned. “You’re killing me here.”

“So, when the switchback is done, this ...” Averie said, waving her hand between them, “this isn’t, right?”

“Well, that depends,” said Nina. “Will I ever need to wipe your butt again? Or put your green beans in a blender?”

“Not unless you want to,” said Averie, “and I’m thinking that’s a no.”

Grinning, they leaned back against the seat cushions. Averie managed to get one foot up on the inlaid mahogany coffee table, and Nina leaned in to help her with the other one before reclining in similar fashion.

Averie sighed. It was hard to not feel crazy impatient. But soon she’d meet with Theil a second time, and she would shed the skin she was in and return to her senses.

\* \* \*

They took the elevator down to the ground floor, and Nina called for an autocar. As she gave the operator their coordinates, Averie took a

last look around the lobby and waved to the young guy at the front desk. He was kind of adorable. Maybe she’d just happen by this place in a couple of weeks and ask for a glass of water on a hot day.

After Nina put their bags in the trunk of the autocar, the women settled themselves in the back seat. Averie checked the route on the screen mounted between them and pressed GO.

“This time I want to make a request,” said Averie. “I’d like to open my eyes to a coffee milkshake with a side of moisturizing cream and mascara. Doable?”

“Highly. Consider it done,” said Nina.

Fifteen minutes later, they were there. The office building was as Averie remembered it, sun-bleached and non-descript. They lingered outside on the sidewalk so Averie could have a moment; her breath had become raggedy.

“I can’t believe this week is finally over,” said Averie. “I’ll never be able to thank you enough, Nina. I know we’re not supposed to, but damn, the tales we’re going to tell!”

“Probably we’ll leave some things out, just so people don’t lose their lunches,” deadpanned Nina.

“But those’ll be the best parts,” said Averie. Nina laughed and took Averie’s arm. Heart pounding, Averie gave her friend’s hand a squeeze and they went inside.

Thankfully, the elevator had been fixed. The door wheezed open on the third floor, and Averie hesitated.

“This switchback thing probably isn’t going to be a picnic,” she said.

“Stay strong,” said Nina. “You got this.”

She and Nina stepped out onto the landing.

It was bare. No rug, no table, no bronze plaque. In slow motion, Averie moved towards the wooden door. She didn't bother to knock this time. The knob twisted loosely in her hand and spun when she let go. She pushed against it and the door swung open.

The office was empty. That is, it no longer existed. Even the interior walls were gone. A few power cords lay tangled in a pile in a corner. On top was a note. *I'm sorry* was written in large black block letters. It was signed *Ronald*.

As if from a distance, she watched Nina rush past her, into the void. She spun towards Averie, her hands in the air. Nina's face was flushed and crinkled and wet; Averie watched as her friend's mouth moved soundlessly. Averie heard nothing but an echoed name.

Renoir, Renoir.

"I made a mistake," said Averie.

She didn't know she was falling until her knees hit the floor. Then Nina was there. Then, nothing.

\* \* \*

Averie shuddered awake and instinctively recoiled. Six inches away hovered the smiling face of an elderly woman.

Her mother's.

No.

Theil's.

Nina leaned forward from behind the woman, her eyes anxious.

"Averie," she said softly.

Averie reached for her and froze. The arm she had extended was for-

eign to her. It was heavy, sinewy with muscle and covered with hair.

"This isn't really happening," said Averie.

Nina clasped her hand. "You've been under sedation for quite a while; we've been worried. But physically, you're fine."

Averie looked from Nina to Theil.

Nina took a deep breath. "At the office, I thought I was going to lose you. Then Ronald shows up. Very emotional. Very...."

"Guilt-ridden," said the old woman. "Severance didn't tell me you were pregnant. I found out by accident. Not that that's any excuse for what we did."

"We used Theil's money to get a new doctor to perform the switch-back. Except with Ronald."

"Before you say anything," said the woman, "you should know I'm much older than you might think. I was in a very young man's body when he died inside mine during our timeshare week. Most unexpected, truly. Aneurism. Unforeseeable. But please hear me. I've lived well and long. My only aim now is to make amends. I'm going to help you locate Anne Theil and your child. The lockdown has been extended for at least another six months, so she's still in the city. We'll find her."

Nina propped up the pillows beneath Averie's head and handed her a small mirror.

"Take it easy," she said. "This is going to be maybe stranger than last time."

Averie gazed at her reflection and ran her hand over her face.

"I need a shave," she whispered.

# Vlad's Cat

by Christina Sng

Vlad adopted a cat,  
A stray tabby cat  
Who wandered one day  
Into his mausoleum.

She meowed incessantly  
Outside his coffin  
Until Vlad woke up  
And fed her some morsels.

He named her Ursula  
And took her on hunts.  
He even turned her  
When she turned 21.

Every single morning,  
She took all day to decide  
If she wanted to get into  
The coffin or not.

Vlad patiently waited,  
Scratching her ears.  
He had all the time  
In the world.

That century,  
Vlad didn't get  
Much sleep at all  
But he got a lot of love.

# The Thing in the Loft

by Luke Walker

Adam paused the video when he heard his sister approaching his bedroom door. She didn't knock, but then she never did. That was pretty unfair now that he thought about it. Mum had told him to always knock on Katie's door.

"You okay?" Katie glanced at his TV. It was only a small portable Dad had brought down from the loft the week before to go with their old video player, but it was his alone. It didn't get much cooler than being able to watch films in his bedroom. His sister frowned before he had chance to reply.

"What are you watching?" she asked.

"*New Nightmare.*"

"What?"

"Freddy."

Katie blew a breath out of her nose in a decent impression of their mother. "Dad rented a video for you?"

"Yeah. Don't tell Mum."

"I won't as long as you stay in your room until they're home later."

"Why? What are you doing?"

"Nothing. Just stay in here."

She moved away, hand on the door.

"What if I need to go for a poo?" he asked.

"Do it out the window. Just stay in here."

"I'll do it in your room."

She reached for the nearest object – a box for the blank tape in his little stereo – and threw it lightly at him. It landed on the bed near his knees. In the stereo, *Parklife* played with the volume at zero. He had until the next day before his mate Ben wanted the tape back, so he'd set it to record, oddly satisfied with taping it at the same time he watched a video in his room.

Katie saw the box for Ben's copy of the album and held a fist over it. "Just don't annoy me and I won't break this."

"Yeah, all right. Let me watch my video." He fumbled with the remote, eager to re-start the film. It was only halfway through and he was desperate to see how the woman killed Freddy, again. Ben had told him the film was better than any of the sequels, but Adam didn't think his friend had really seen it. If Ben's mum wasn't letting him round to see Adam tonight because Adam's parents were out, then no way was Ben allowed to watch a film like *this*.

"Are your friends coming round?" he asked his sister.

Her amusement was obvious. He wished he'd found a cooler way of phrasing his question.

"Like who?" she replied.

“I don’t know. Anyone.”

“Fiona? Zoe?” Her grin, weighted with knowledge and mocking, grew wider. He felt the heat of his flaming cheeks and pretended he hadn’t asked. Zoe had barely spoken to him, but he thought about her a lot. Usually with images of them together in his room. Adam had little self-awareness, but he knew enough about the world to know that at eleven, he was nothing to his sister’s seventeen-year-old friend. Only six years and it was like a baby compared to a grandma.

Still, he could think about her.

“No. Just wondered how much noise you’re going to make.”

“None. They’re not coming, but you still need to stay out of my way. I’ll be on the phone.”

“In Mum and Dad’s room?”

“Yeah, in their room. Shut up and watch your shit film.”

“It’s not shit,” he protested and she strode to him in three quick steps. Her punch was more of a tap on his shoulder.

“Don’t swear,” she said.

“Bums.”

“Adam. I mean it.”

“Bums. Farts. Boobs.”

“You’re such a dick.” She left, calling over her shoulder as she closed the door, “Stay in here, you little shit.”

“Tits,” he bellowed and heard Katie laugh as she walked down the hallway to her room or to their parents’ room to use their phone. She could just as easily have gone downstairs to use the phone in the

kitchen like he did, but having a phone upstairs was actually pretty cool. Dad had got a mobile phone last month for his job and spent a lot of the time since swearing at it for not doing what he wanted. Mum didn’t like him having it; she said they were common and naff.

He played the film, comfortable against the walls and his pillows. The sunlight of the June evening played on his curtains; there’d be another hour or more until dark, which was a bit of a pain when it came to watching a horror film, but Mum and Dad would be home by ten-thirty at the latest and he needed to get the video back in the box and hidden to pass to Dad by then. Dad would return it to the shop tomorrow morning when he went out to the papershop for his pack of fags. A secret operation outside Mum; something special for him and Dad. Katie knew, but she would keep quiet as long as he didn’t annoy her tonight.

Warm air wafted between the curtains and brought the faint sounds of the outside world as his film went on, nearing its climax. The steady traffic on the parkway beyond the fence and the tightly packed trees; the occasional bark of a dog; birds singing before nightfall. And with the sounds, the pleasant scents of the early summer: cherry blossom, cut grass; the faint mix of his perspiration masked by deodorant, and the suggestion of Katie’s shampoo. Something fruity. Something behind the clean smell that wasn’t clean.

Adam wrinkled his nose. The smell was faint, but noticeable. Something dirty like an overflowing bin or a drain in October. Without pausing the film, he slid off the bed, crossed to the window and opened it further. The breeze played with the curtains. On the screen, Freddy phoned the woman to taunt her about her son. The dog outside barked, suddenly louder. An angry dog. Or maybe a scared dog with a higher-pitched bark uttered in rapid bursts.

“Shit.” He hissed it. No more than forty minutes left on the film. Annoyed, he paused it and listened to the dog, waiting for the owner to shout at it to stop.

Above, the ceiling creaked. The dog was silent. The ceiling creaked again, directly above his bed.

Adam craned his neck, staring straight up.

*Pipes and wood. Pipes and wood. Pipes and wood.*

The sounds continued.

Someone was walking around in the loft.

\* \* \*

*It's a bird.*

Adam had been standing on his bed for a few seconds or minutes or hours. He wasn't sure. He'd been scared before. There was that time last summer he, Ben, Ansar, and Sean were on the school field one Saturday evening and some of the kids from St John's had cycled through the grounds. They'd stopped on their bikes and stared over the grass at Adam and his friends. Ansar was the first to jog for his bike and say they needed to go *right now*. Seeing his friends scared of the older kids – the bigger kids – was bad enough; having his back to the St John's boys as he ran for his bike was worse, and then when Sean shouted they were coming, Adam couldn't have told anyone his name. He knew terror and nothing but.

This was that fear returned, stronger and hot like a fire in his bedroom, paradoxically chilling him as it brought childish tears close.

*It's a bird.*

The steps ran back and forth, pounding the width of the loft. Whoever was up there was moving in a random, jerking movement instead of methodically pacing. He tried to picture a pigeon jumping and flapping in the confined space. Or maybe a cat. Somehow. They didn't have any pets and there were no windows higher than his. It was something, though. Something alive.

It continued its senseless movement, skittering and thudding. They kept a few bits and pieces in the loft: old boxes; the Christmas dec-

orations, a couple of sleeping bags, and some stuff from Nan's house now she was in a home. Posts and beams criss-crossed low down. The area smelled of wood and heat and fresh air creeping in through cracks and holes in the bricks. And now someone was up there.

*This is stupid. There can't be anyone up there.*

The steps ceased. Adam held his breath, ears thudding in time with his heart.

He listened.

Someone up there, listening to him as he listened to it.

*Him, not it. Him. There's a man up there.*

It was a fierce protest that he wanted to scream, to give it flesh and blood. At the same time, *him* was worse than a nameless it. A man up in the loft – a man who couldn't be his dad – was rich with awful possibilities not only for him but for Katie. Especially for Katie.

Him or it, there was no difference. Something or someone up in the loft, walking around and listening to him while he listened and wanted to cry.

*It knows you're listening. The video's paused. You're not making any sounds.*

Adam crouched abruptly, sure the ceiling would open like a mouth and arms would reach down for him – because he was right. It knew he was listening.

His mouth opened. He had no say in the movement.

“Stupid TV not working,” he said too loudly and cringed at the invading sound of his voice that was far too high and wavering to sound like him. He could have been a little girl.

“I told Dad it wasn’t working properly,” he said in the same fake tone and hoped with equal strength that his voice did and didn’t carry to Katie. If she heard him like this, she would come to his door, which meant she would pass directly under the entrance to the loft.

Movement, again. Steps. Lumbering steps as if the walker had a sprained ankle. Moving closer to the join of Adam’s room and the hallway. To the loft entrance.

He dropped to the floor with the smooth ease of a nimble cat, swept up the remote and hit Play. The film – shockingly loud after minutes or hours of nothing – bloomed back into life and he cried out over the volume.

“Yes, TV working again.”

The steps ceased. It was listening. It was breathing as he breathed.

Adam slapped his forearm over his mouth and tasted sweat. It kept the cry inside. He heard the breathing. A wet inhalation, rasping and laboured. Through the brick and plaster, he heard it, which meant it had to be right down on the floor of the loft, mouth to the boards as if kissing them.

*I have to get out. Out of my room. Out of the house. Call Dad. Call his mobile phone.*

Each thought was separate and part of the same family. Getting out and calling Dad was impossible, but he would do it.

The Walking Thing was now the Breathing Thing. Also the Listening Thing.

*Move quickly and carefully. Don’t think. Just walk and step lightly.*

It was Dad in his head. Mum and Dad were a few miles away at Uncle Brian’s and Aunt Jenny’s; they’d come home a bit drunk and silly and maybe let him stay up another hour while Dad drank something from

the cabinet, and Adam would wish in a secret space that he was still small enough to sit between them on the sofa. Katie would perch on the arm of the chair so she didn’t have to commit to being in the room with her family and they’d talk and laugh and things would be okay.

But first, *out*.

Adam slid around the edge of his bed, jeans whispering on the duvet cover, his body turned into a hot, tight wire. The film was still playing. Everything normal was on the screen while nothing normal was in his house.

*Get to Katie and get out. Everything will be normal again.*

He’d have to pass the stairs to get to either his sister’s room or their parents’. The stairs and *out* before his sister.

Outrage shoved up a wall between him and the thought.

He crossed from the bed to the door, finger wet as he reached for the handle. He’d open it inch by inch and creep out. Let the listening, breathing thing hear the film. Let it walk around if it wanted to. He would get his sister and get out of the house.

Or go for the stairs and straight down.

*No. No. NO.*

A new sound from above. He tilted his head back, mouth wide open, his eyes two roasting holes in his face.

It was growling up there. But worse than the idea of an animal somehow up in the loft was the strange and familiar cast to the growl. A rise and fall to the pitch instead of a simple animal warning or threat. He stared, aware he hadn’t blinked in long moments.

The Listening Thing, then the Breathing Thing and now the Growling Thing. And now the Stinking Thing.



The smell of waste and dirt returned. He imagined it bleeding through the floor of the loft and his bedroom ceiling, dripping to his face and nose. He gagged, shoved a hand over his mouth and nose to keep the sound inside, and swayed on the spot. It growled again; the sound still familiar. It was like hearing a dog learning to speak. Not in a gruff bark way that made him laugh, but in a *this is a dog trying to be human* way that made him want to drop to his knees and cover his ears until all the sounds of the universe were lost.

Without a single conscious thought – certainly without any planning or consideration of the consequences—Adam grabbed the nearest object and threw it at the curtains shielding his bedroom from the fading sunshine.

His hardback copy of *Salem's Lot* punched the curtains and hit the carpet with a heavy thud. At once, the Growling Thing ran across the loft, chasing the sound from below. Adam opened his bedroom door and took five rapid steps into the hallway before forcing himself to stop. He panted like a tired dog and tried to breathe quietly. It seemed impossible he could sweat so much. But then, this whole thing was impossible.

"I get out and I'm okay." Adam cringed. He hadn't realised he was about to speak. There was silence above. Hopefully, the Growling Thing was still level with his window, listening for another thud.

Adam moved, horribly sure that if he didn't, he'd never do so. Roots would grow through the lower floor, up the stairs and entwine through his feet, and he'd become a permanent part of the hallway. If he didn't move.

He crouched when he drew level with the loft opening in the ceiling, then skittered before long, spindly arms descended like claws and yanked him into the dark mouth.

He was going to piss himself like a baby.

*I won't, I won't, I fucking won't.*

Mum would scream at him for using *that* word. Even Dad would have a go. Katie would laugh but make sure she wasn't seen doing so.

*Katie.*

She was straight ahead in their parents' room. Between him and his sister, the stairs and out.

He could run straight down. Nobody would know.

He could leave his sister to the Growling Thing.

*No.*

He was on the third stair down before he could stop himself and splayed his palm on the wall to halt his movement. The wall was strangely cold. *He* was cold. This was like winter had set up home in his heart and lungs and he was exhaling January wind as his hot blood crunched and snapped into chunks of ice.

*Katie.*

He went down another step, mouth shivering, arms trembling.

*I can't leave her there.*

He couldn't shout or get her attention in any way other than going right through the bedroom door.

Down another step. Two more and he'd be halfway to the ground floor. To the door. To *out*.

His sister. His big sister. His family in the house and no help anywhere. This was all on him.

Adam wheezed like his granddad and tried to whisper Katie's name. Nothing emerged from his mouth but that winter breeze. His insides were as dead as the fields and the trees were around Christmas. Dead

as Katie would be if he descended any further.

Keeping to the edges of the stairs to reduce any creaking, he returned to the hallway. As insane as it was true, the film played on in his bedroom and evening light spread its goodness over what he could see of his bed and the carpet. Not long to go before that light sank into the purple, then the black. And then. And then.

“Katie.” He breathed his sister’s name as if it were a magic spell.

Adam skittered again, bent double and running against a terrible wind battering his resolve. He didn’t hear the hiss of his socks on the carpet or the fading sound of the film playing in his bedroom. He listened solely for the running creature above to come for him.

A few feet from the closed door to his parents’ bedroom, he stopped and blinked rapidly to clear the black spots dancing in front of his eyes. All the spit in his mouth had dried up; his breath stank but couldn’t compete with the reek from above. Rotten things. Mouldy things. Dead things.

He’d get Katie off the phone and they’d run downstairs. They could be under the loft and to the stairs before anything opened the little door in the ceiling. Before any arms came down.

Adam wiped his hot forearm over his mouth, sure his lips were dry enough to crack and bleed, and reached for the door handle.

He couldn’t hear Katie on the phone.

*No, please. She’s okay. Please.*

Cringing at the click of the handle and the faint creak of the hinge that sounded to him as loud as a cannon blast, Adam inched open the bedroom door.

Fresh air hit him first. The window was wide open and the balm of the evening warmth brought the scents of cherry blossom and grass.

The breeze made the open curtains flap. It was only after staring for another moment that Adam realised one of the curtains hung from the pole at a disjointed angle. It had come close to being yanked free. Halfway down, it was torn. Shredded.

His breaking mind flashed on the video Dad had rented for him, and imagining a fictional demon had broken into his home was a fierce comfort because it was as ridiculous as it was impossible. Which meant none of this was happening.

The duvet was on the floor. The phone, secure on the bedside table, was beside it in a tangle of wires and snapped plastic. There was a book Mum had been reading. A paperback. He didn’t know what it was. The cover and first few pages were as ripped as the curtains. The remains of the book rested on an overturned vase.

Katie was on the bed, facing him.

In one splayed hand, she held a second vase. Its flowers were spilled beside her leg. She couldn’t stare at him because her eyes were missing.

Adam felt a soft tug in his centre, a welcome snap in his mind before he drifted and faced his sister. There was enough left of him to see it as if it was happening right now. It came through the window and came for Katie. She’d grabbed the vase as a makeshift weapon and it changed nothing.

It reached her before she screamed or made it off the bed. It reached his sister and it and it and it and it and—

In the bedroom, Katie was a ruined mess and he couldn’t look away from his sister. The holes in her head; the blood splattered on her clothes and the bed; the obvious speed of whatever had done this to her.

Adam’s thought was as soft and warm as the twilight sunshine on a pleasant June evening.

*How fast was it to do that before she could scream? How could it run*

*so fast from here to the loft?*

A new sound echoed through the house. Something high and constant. It was the phone ringing. Mum calling to check on them. Mum with Dad in the background, probably laughing and a bit drunk; a quick call to make sure he was behaving himself and Katie didn't have any boys round.

*Mum, no, please. Hang up. Don't call. Don't make the phone ring.*

The phone rang and rang, the shrill noise piercing into the numb meat of his brain while soft thuds from above answered it.

Wood scraped behind him. Gently. Carefully. Wood shifting between him and the stairs. Something clicked and snapped. Perhaps it was a crab's claws. Perhaps he should turn around and see it so it could come for his eyes as it came for Katie's.

The noise of the phone echoed and danced, gleefully mocking him because it was safety if he answered it. If he was downstairs already; if he hadn't come for his sister.

*dead sister adam dead already you should have run you should have run from me you won't see me you won't you won't know me dead sister saw me dead sister soft eyes in my hands my hands should have run away*

The phone cut out; Mum probably thinking he couldn't hear it over his film and maybe Katie was in the shower. Maybe thinking she and Dad should come home to make sure everything was all right

*No, please don't. Stay away.*

Adam smelled the nasty stink of a choked drain or a pile of tiny bones with the scraps of skin still attached, blackening in the damp and the quiet. It was the smell of the Listening Thing and he breathed that reek in because it was in the stone and brick of the house, wiping out the scents he'd never considered as home: Katie's shampoo,

Dad's aftershave, Mum's baking. All corrupted by the stink of the Listening Thing peering at him from its place at the top of the house. Staring out of the darkness in the loft with what he knew were too many eyes, as it had too many legs.

Croaking laughter dropped from the loft. It knew his thoughts, saw what capered in terror through his head. And it welcomed that terror even more than it welcomed his helplessness. It thrived on both. Ate both as it had eaten Katie's eyes. And when it was finished with his terror, there were neighbours and streets and towns. There were fields and woods in which to hide; long roads linking the homes and families safe and warm in the night.

*should have run away little boy not come to the dead sister should have left already dead already dead run away turn to me turn to me see me in the dark where I live my home out there in the secret place the low place should run from it little boy*

It was gleeful, but there was no humour or light in that joy. It was one of the older kids at school beating someone smaller; a PE teacher delighting in making kids without the ability run long-distance; a man who liked to do things to little girls and then dump their bodies in the secret places. The thing up there knew he would come for Katie; it wanted him to regret that, to wish he had left her in her blood and her ruin.

He wouldn't smell it or hear its mocking laughter. He would not turn. He would not see it. He would stay with his sister and not be sad that he had risked coming for her instead of fleeing. He had tried to be brave for Katie, and he would not be sorry for that even as he cried. He would smell her shampoo, not his fright or the salt of his tears. And he would hope that the thing that came through the window to sneak into the loft was gone by the time Mum and Dad came home. Or that it would leave his neighbours and the streets and the towns alone.

Legs crossing the carpet.

The reek of it.

# Earth9

by Shikhar Dixit



# When the Fireworks Fade

by Ryan Hyatt

Fiery streaks race across a smoggy sky and disappear over an ocean horizon.

“Are they aliens, Nana?” the girl says.

Her ponytail flops as she grips the rail with her hands, pulls herself toward the ledge, and pushes herself back toward the patio. She repeats the motion, waiting for a response, but the old lady fails to acknowledge her game of tempting gravity.

“Depends on what you mean by *aliens*,” the old lady says, shielded by a sun hat as she transplants a fleshy succulent from a smaller pot to a larger one. “They’re from our solar system, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

The old lady stands and wipes dirt from her hands onto her apron. She grabs the oxygen mask dangling from her waist, takes a whiff, and joins the girl at the ledge.

“They’re made of stardust, like we are,” she says, gazing at the incoming bursts of flame. “We share ninety-nine percent of the same material they do, but it’s that one percent they have, and we don’t, why they’re here now.”

“Are they friendly?” the girl asks.

The old lady’s gaze shifts from the flashes of light tearing across the atmosphere to the waves crashing below. For years, she feared this edge. Not that she might fall, but that she might jump.

“I hope so.”

A hovercopter rises from the ocean surface and whirls past the tower.

“Papa’s home. Time for an update on this ... invasion ...”

“Not funny!” the girl says, and she dashes across the patio and vanishes in a pixelated puff.

\* \* \*

Captain Fred Takatsu, strapped to an ergonomic board, rotates to gaze through the cockpit window. The augmented overlay of the target comes into view, a murky horizon blotted by thousands of coordinates.

“Looks like a smoggy sky on Earth,” he says. “You getting this, Earthlings?”

“Is that a rhetorical question?” says a feminine voice.

“Maybe, or a bad joke,” the captain says. “Eight-and-a-half minutes until this transmission reaches command, another long pause as they think of a response—18 minutes, I’d say, until we hear back from them.”

“You want to bet?” says the feminine voice. “Plus or minus 30 seconds, margin of error?”

“Deal.”

“Winner gets a backrub?”

“Always,” he says. “I probably owe you a hundred, computer. De-

ploy the drones and elevate us ten-thousand clicks above the engagement zone.”

“Aye, sir.”

The hull rattles as the ship alters course.

On the cockpit display, the captain eyes the swarm of self-propelled spacecraft vacate the cargo bay and fan toward the hazy objective.

\* \* \*

“Preliminary data is positive,” says the old man sitting across from the old lady. “Looks like everything we’ve worked for, Dee, is finally paying off.”

“You know I hate it when you call me my name, Tom,” Dee says, reaching across the table, handing him a plate. “Makes me feel like I’m in trouble.”

“I’m just so proud of what you’ve accomplished,” Tom says, plopping a patty onto a bun.

“And to think, you were once a skeptic.”

“True,” he says, lathering his patty with mayonnaise. “More fake meat? When the dust finally settles on this project, dear, I’m flying us to Buenos Aires for real hamburgers.”

“*Dear*, now that’s more like it,” Dee says, dressing her patty with lettuce. “So, it’s going well?”

“Better than expected,” Tom says, sipping whisky. “Rocks passing by Mars and the Moon are being redirected by gravity and drones, as needed, so they burn over the ocean. Just as your team envisioned. Amazing, really.”

“It’s nice for something to go right for a change,” Dee says.

Tom gazes around the candle-lit cave with its upscale furniture and iridescent walls.

“This place always felt like an extraterrestrial fortress, even though it’s been home longer than I care to remember,” he says. “And you? Enjoying retirement?”

“Very much.”

“Well, you’ve made your point,” he says, wiping his mouth with a napkin, “and you’re welcome back to the company any time, if you wish. It would be great publicity, especially now. I’m sure the world would rather hear from its bold visionary than a bunch of boring executives.”

Dee swallows.

“Thanks, but the only trip I’m interested in taking is to Buenos Aires for those burgers,” she says, wiping her mouth. “I only hope you actually take the time to join me, when the time comes.”

Dee watches him chew. The crisp white folds of his hair, the smoothness of his cheeks, the firmness of his chin. Two decades together, and he is aging well, but how much longer can they last?

“Of course we’ll go,” Tom says after he swallows. “To Buenos Aires, or wherever you want. As soon as the situation cools off.”

“What about me?” the girl says, materializing in a chair between them.

“What about you?” Tom says, staring at Dee. “Her, again?”

“She keeps me company ...”

“Baby, I’m worried about you ...”

“*Baby*? Now that’s a word I haven’t heard in years ...”

“That’s not fair ...”

“What are you talking about, Papa?” the girl says. “What baby, Nana?”

“Stay out of it!” Tom says, tossing a bun at her.

It passes through the child and bounces off the chair.

Husband, wife, and hologram stare at the abandoned piece of bread on the floor, and laugh.

“See?” Dee says. “She keeps things lively around here.”

Tom rolls his eyes, carries away his plate and drink.

“What’s his problem?” the girl says.

Dee takes a bite from her burger.

“Me.”

\* \* \*

A smooth hand reaches for a strip on a bathroom counter, and Dee glances at the younger version of herself in the mirror. She checks the pregnancy test, and a lackluster expression on her face transforms into a beaming smile.

Using her briefcase to shield herself from the sun, she marches out of a high-rise building to a street filled with cars, bikes, and a city basking in heat. A few brisk steps past scattering children, shouting food vendors, demanding pawn brokers, and a homeless family squatting under a lone tree, and she ducks inside an SUV.

“Is everything all right, ma’am?” the chauffeur asks.

“Couldn’t be better,” she says, taking a puff from an inhaler. “For me,

anyway. Headquarters, please.”

An hour of traffic later, Dee arrives on the top floor of TrustUS Holdings where Tom presents to the board.

“Sorry I’m late,” she says with a half-hearted wave, taking a seat among the executives.

A graph projected over a sprawling window tells the story of the company’s failed green financial initiatives, billions of dollars lost.

“Looks like betting on the planet’s future is not a safe investment, after all,” Tom says with a sarcastic grin. He eyes Dee at the back of the table. “Perhaps our top research analyst, and my lovely fiancé, has good news?”

\* \* \*

The old lady’s wrinkled hands rinse a dish as the girl sits on the kitchen counter.

“At that moment, I just wanted to grab Papa, rush him to the window, and shout loud for the whole world to hear, ‘I’m pregggggnannnnnt!’” Dee says with a faint laugh. “Instead, I kept my joy to myself.”

She loads the dish into the washer.

“Maybe, it was for the better.”

\* \* \*

“We’ll see,” Dee says, and she plops her faux-leather briefcase onto the table, withdraws a laptop, and starts to type.

Tom continues to address the other partners.

“We can only scale down the price of electric vehicles *so far*, and barter

with the Chinese *so much*, without having to obtain a new source of rare metals for the batteries,” he says, switching to a graph that shows a supply of planetary minerals. “The demand for electric may be great, but we’ll never replace fossil fuels entirely if we don’t have enough material for the batteries. Simply speaking, Earth does not.”

“Fortunately, the solar system does,” Dee says, and her index finger whirls in the air with optimistic flair before it lands on ‘Enter.’

A video replaces the graph.

\* \* \*

“This is Dr. Dee Cranston with Dr. Elisa Zutu inside her Kenyan laboratory,” Dee says to the recording camera. “Dr. Zutu, why am I here?”

The camera pans across a table lined with tubes containing precious metals.

“You must convince our investors there are riches to be obtained from the asteroid belt,” Dr. Zutu says, gesturing at the flecks of cobalt, palladium, and osmium on display. “These samples were acquired from a recent meteor crash. If we want to continue to mass-produce electric vehicles, we will need more.”

She grabs a large piece of crystal at the edge of the table, hands it to Dee.

“However, this is really why I invited you, Dr. Cranston,” Dr. Zutu says. “This crystal forms when you combine some of the minerals found in the asteroid belt with salt water.”

Dee marvels at the jade-like lattice; strong, firm, and radiant in her palm.

“It’s beautiful,” she says.

“Yes,” Dr. Zutu says. “It’s also a carbon sponge.”

\* \* \*

“What happened to the baby?” the girl says as the old lady waters her succulents. The girl glances up from her holographic notebook at the patio table. “I mean, why am I your only child?”

“You are *not* our child,” Tom says. A glass of whisky dangles from his hand as he lies on a lawn chair and gazes in sunglasses at the sky. “You are an artificial intelligence program TrustUS Holdings commissioned as a housewarming gift when we moved into this damn place. You’ve been haunting my wife’s psyche ever since ...”

“Just ignore him, he’s drunk,” Dee says, eyeing a succulent she is about to soil. “Sweetheart, could you hand me the shovel?”

The girl reaches for the tool lying on the patio table; her hand passes through it.

“Not really,” she says.

Tom glances at the unmoved shovel, shakes his head.

“Not a word, Tom!”

“I wasn’t going to say anything,” he says with a snicker. “Have you looked up and checked out this light show, dear? The view is really something.”

“Nice of you to notice,” Dee says, glancing up in time to see a meteor appear, and vanish, over the ocean. She stands, takes a whiff from her oxygen mask, and joins the girl at the patio table.

“I never had the baby,” she whispers.

Tom shakes his head from the lawn chair.

“Sure, tell her the story, again.”



\* \* \*

“Asteroid mining?” Tom says. “Really, Dee, we send you to Africa on the company’s dime, and that’s the best your team’s got? There are colonies on the Moon and Mars crumbling from neglect, and you want to waste more time and money sending ships deeper into space?”

Dee pauses the video, gazes beyond it. Outside the boardroom window, police hovercopters circle a crime scene like vultures. Somewhere beyond the dirty skyline of jagged skyscrapers, she spots a sliver of blue, the ocean.

“If we’re serious about solving our planet’s problems ... for ourselves ... for our children,” she says, her gaze resting on her fiancé, “we need to start treating our situation like the crisis it is. The honeymoon for our life on Earth is over.”

\* \* \*

Dee, curled up next to Tom, opens her eyes.

Sunlight pokes through a penthouse suite, shines on her face.

She glances down at white sheets, smeared in red streaks.

“Oh, god, no!” she yells, leaping out of bed.

“What is it?” Tom says, blood dripping down Dee’s legs.

\* \* \*

The old lady turns in bed and sees the old man trimming his gray beard in his underwear. The viridescent walls of their bedroom glow.

“I thought you were going to stay a while.”

He abandons the trimmer, struts past her, and disappears inside a closet.

“Me, too, but the Asian consortium wants to double productivity of hovercopters and drones to oversee the placement of towers on their side of the Pacific,” he says, re-emerging in a suit. “They’re requesting an influx of capital. They’ll get it, of course, but I need to negotiate a return for our investment.”

“My guy, wheeling and dealing.”

He buttons his shirt, ties his belt.

“The company is finally making its fortune, selling to governments the equipment necessary to set up our carbon towers.”

“You seem excited about leaving,” Dee says, rolling to the edge of the bed. “Are you sure this isn’t about a woman?”

“Yes, it is,” he says, leaning forward, kissing her forehead. “You.”

He squeezes her hand.

“Back soon, promise.”

\* \* \*

The old lady sits in a robe at the dining table, stirring a cup of tea. As morning light radiates her face, the shimmer of crystal walls fades.

“I had several miscarriages,” she says. “Tried too late, I guess.”

The girl appears in an empty chair. She places her holographic hand over Dee’s.

“Even so,” Dee says, “every time I became pregnant, I told myself, ‘This is it, my baby’s going to stay, and I’m going to be a mommy ...’”

\* \* \*

“We could have tried medical procedures,” Tom says from the lawn

chair. “We could have adopted. You were always so stubborn about the way things ought to be.”

Dee sits at the patio table and watches meteors disintegrate toward the sunset. A flurry of drones, like a flock of seagulls, whizzes past the tower in active pursuit.

“I know,” Dee says. “I’m not blaming you. I never have.”

\* \* \*

A limo with a sign, “Just Married,” pulls up to a podium on a precipice. Dee exits the vehicle in a white dress, and Tom follows in a tuxedo. Dozens of reporters, in hats and sunglasses, gather around them.

An employee from TrustUS Holdings shades the newlyweds with a parasol.

\* \* \*

“The worst pregnancy fell on our wedding day,” the old lady says, speaking in darkness at the dining table, the greenish light of the walls reflecting on her face and limbs. “I was three months along, miserable.”

\* \* \*

As newlywed Dee stands behind the podium, her rosy cheeks glisten with sweat.

“I am grateful to live in a world where there is hope for a better tomorrow,” she says. “The home Tom and I make for ourselves, as husband and wife, promises a new day, not just for us, but for all of humanity.”

The TrustUS employee hands Dee a bottle of water. She takes a sip.

“Imagine, reversing global warming,” she says. “Imagine, restoring emission levels in the atmosphere to the way they were *before* the In-

dustrial Revolution. Thanks to the efforts of our investors and global partners, this fantasy will become a reality.”

The TrustUS employee lifts the parasol away from the couple.

“Finally, imagine the sun ...” Dee says, pointing up at the sphere, “... not as a hellish adversary, or some terrible punishment for our existence, but as a star we love and cherish, as our ancestors did.”

Tom reaches around her waist, lifts her into his arms.

“Ooh, wee!” Dee says, a bump protruding from her dress as she lies suspended in the air.

“Isn’t my wife something?” Tom shouts. “All brains, and beauty!”

A mixture of applause and questions fire from reporters. Tom turns, revealing to the press the view behind him: A glimmering monolith protrudes from the ocean.

“Now, if you’ll excuse us, it’s time my bride and me settle into our new home.”

A hovercopter swoops up from the salty depths of the sea and rests at the edge of the cliff. Tom carries Dee on board, and they fly toward the crystal spire.

\* \* \*

“I lost her here,” the old lady says, sitting at the patio table on a relentless sunny day. “You and I were standing where the succulents are. We were admiring this vast horizon, considering the future possibilities for ourselves and our children, remember? And just like that, I started to bleed in my wedding dress.”

Dee takes a sip of water.

“I leaned over the ledge, inconsolable,” she says, “my tears falling

into the ocean. I could have died at that moment.”

“I know,” Tom says from the lawn chair, sunglasses fixed on her. “How many times do you have to remind me?”

\* \* \*

The walls illuminate the old lady’s eyes with a jaded tinge.

“By the time we started to date, I already felt old,” Dee says by herself at the dining table. “I was in my early forties. I wanted to have children, naturally, or not at all.”

She takes a sip of tea.

“The fact I couldn’t have children, I took as a sign. Life had other things in store for me, apparently, but it didn’t feel liberating. In fact, it felt like the end of the world. Eventually, I decided to go on antidepressants, and being on them, at least, I no longer was susceptible to the highs and lows, the push and pull of my hormones, or the psychological turmoil of a childless existence. I stopped feeling much of anything, really, except the energy to plunge myself into work and marriage. I did so, without looking back, for two decades.”

\* \* \*

Dee shows off her wedding ring to an inquiring board member. Then, she and several scientists and engineers present to the executives.

A graph shows the mission: A three-stage deployment to the asteroid belt is to include supply stations orbiting the Moon and Mars for outgoing and returning crews. Thousands of specialized drones are to dislodge the asteroids from their path and redirect them toward Earth, their minerals showering the planet’s seas.

“The gravitational fields of the Moon and Mars will be critical to guiding the incoming rocks, so there are only three alignment windows for these mining expeditions,” Dee says. “That means we have

three chances to get this right. If we fail, in twenty years the worst effects of global warming will be complete, and we will not be able to stop our planet from overheating.”

As Dee exits the TrustUS lobby, she is assailed by aggressive reporters and admiring citizens. A girl in a ponytail squirms through the adults and asks Dee for her autograph. Dee smiles down at the child, signs the notebook, and steps into an SUV. She takes a puff from her inhaler.

\* \* \*

“So many failures,” the old lady says.

She takes a whiff from her oxygen mask as she stands in her apron at the edge of the patio. Some succulents, strewn from soil, lay abandoned and wait to be planted in larger pots. Under the roof of her sun hat, Dee gazes at a series of shadowy towers forming along the ocean horizon.

“You have an incredible capacity to overcome adversity,” she hears Tom’s voice say.

“That, or I relish self-punishment.”

\* \* \*

When Dee steps out of the SUV, she is as an old lady assailed by scientists and engineers in lab coats. One of them hands her a hard hat, which she places over her head, while another hands her a set of schematics, which she reviews as she is led across a concrete walkway.

The group stops, separates in half.

A man in a silver flight suit walks down the path of determined faces toward Dee, lost in the fine print. He gently pulls the schematics away from her face.

“I’m Captain Fred Takatsu,” he says. “It’s an honor to meet you, Dr. Cranston.”

They shake hands, and he steps to the side: Towering over a launch pad is the rocket, U.S.S. *Desperation*.

“Isn’t she magnificent?” he says.

“You’re really taking the trip?” Dee says.

“The last ship on the last mission to save Earth.”

“Special, indeed,” Dee says, gazing at the majestic rocket. “Reminds me of home.”

“It will be mine, for a while.”

\* \* \*

The old lady walks past the old man with a potted plant in her hands as he sits on a reclining chair. He sips whisky and watches TV as a jaded glow radiates the walls around the screen.

“Where are you going?” Tom says, glancing at his wife. “The *Desperation* is about to launch. The most broadcasted event in history.”

Dee glances at the countdown ticking away on the screen. Right on schedule.

“I’m surprised you’re not watching from the boardroom, with your buddies.”

“Come on, Dee,” Tom says, patting the empty love seat next to him. “I came home to watch the launch with *you*.”

“And your drink,” she says. “I guess you’re entitled to do what you want. I can’t imagine it’s been pleasant living with me, at least since I’ve been off my meds.”

“Your meds?” Tom says, tightening his grip around his glass. “How long have you been taking those?”

“Since the last miscarriage,” she says. “Most of our marriage.”

He takes a sip of whisky.

“I’m going to place this succulent on the patio and watch the launch from there,” Dee says. “You joining me?”

“Really?” Tom says. “That’s all you have to say?”

“I’m not sure what else there is to say,” Dee says. “I did the calculations. It’s going to be a spectacular view.”

Tom stands, drink in hand, and follows her.

\* \* \*

“We’re with you, captain. In spirit, anyway.”

The transmission ends, and Takatsu checks the time.

“Seventeen minutes and fifty-two seconds,” he says. “Within the margin of error. I won the bet.”

“I owe you a massage,” says a feminine voice, and the captain’s ergonomic board starts to vibrate. “It’s your lucky day.”

“Not just mine. Everybody’s.”

“Are you sure, captain? Your heart rate is racing ...”

“Just a little nervous, that’s all.”

“You have every reason to be. The fate of your race is in your hands.”

“And yours,” he says. “Don’t forget, we’re in this together. Can we

finish the message after the mission?"

"Of course," says the computer.

The vibrations of the ergonomic board cease. Takatsu rotates his position for a better view through the cockpit window.

"Are the drones in position?"

"Affirmative."

"Initiate targeting sequence."

"Copy."

He takes a deep breath.

"Fire!"

Takatsu watches a series of explosions ignite the coordinates, sending asteroids off their gravitational path, rushing past the ship.

"How are we doing?"

"Calculating ..." says the computer. "Congratulations, sir! Ninety-seven percent of the targets are on a crash course for Earth."

"You hear that, Earthlings?" Takatsu says, tears floating from his eyes. "We did it. Fireworks are on the way!"

\* \* \*

On a breezy afternoon, the old lady admires the spiraling lattice of a nearby tower. Her silver hair flows freely in the wind.

"New neighbor?" she hears Tom's voice say.

"We could save the world, but we couldn't save our marriage, could we?" Dee says, clinging to the rail, glancing at the waves crashing below.

"I don't think so," she hears Tom's voice say.

"He's not coming back, is he?" Dee says, turning to the girl at the patio table.

"I don't think so. Sorry."

"I'm not," Dee says. "Not anymore."

She takes a whiff of oxygen and dashes across the patio.

"Where are you going?" the girl says.

"To Buenos Aires, for hamburgers ..." Dee hollers as she disappears inside the tower, "... then, to open an orphanage ..."

# My Biggest Existential Disappointment

by J. J. Steinfeld

I am, after all, somewhat clear-eyed and level-headed  
have a couple of university degrees  
eat sensibly, exercise moderately,  
and rarely use profanity even when  
loud noises wake me in the middle of a night  
but still, why take a metaphysical chance  
especially so late at night  
the stars dazzling and communicative  
and it's nowhere near Halloween  
this odd creature claiming to be  
from one of those communicative stars  
a mild sort of threat, nothing breathtaking,  
asks me to reveal my biggest existential disappointment  
I tell you, I was more surprised that this creature  
pronounced *existential* perfectly  
than its odd otherworldly appearance.  
I rationalize, a playful impostor at best,  
a sinister exploiter at worst,  
but what if I'm part of something transcendently historic  
and I'm fumbling for words, so here it goes:  
*Until a few minutes ago, never meeting an extraterrestrial ...*

# I've Been Told of Fourth Street

by Marge Simon

I'm told there is a market,  
A real one, where around noon,  
They bring out platters of fresh salads,  
Assortments of fruit, bowls of avocado sushi  
And carrot casseroles, emerald broccoli compotes,  
Sweet orange starbursts on plates of iced lettuce,  
Dainty jade cucumber sandwiches, fit for royal fingers,  
Ruby red cherry tomatoes in beds of ermine pasta,  
And olives green in aspic, or set like rich onyx stones  
Around bowls of candied almonds and pecans.

I am told that strains of exotic music play  
As android patrons inside pretend to eat their fill,  
To drink the finest vintage wines from crystal glasses  
And nibble honey-glazed desserts of heavenly grace.  
I am told they allow you to pass by this place  
Which isn't real – which cannot be real! –  
As a reminder of our subjugation.

We can look but never touch,  
And we can only dream of taste,  
And a life we might have once embraced  
As we move through our daily rounds  
In this wasteland of a former Eden.

This street  
Is lined with living trees.  
Or so I've been told.

# Scorekeeper

by Bob Ritchie

Water spattered down on her, stuttering from holes in the showerhead near-closed by years of accumulated calcium deposits. A hyphen of black inched up the tiles in front of her. Though without her glasses, Hannah knew that it must be an ant: They always invaded the shower and the kitchen when it was the rainy season in Puerto Rico. She wouldn't have it. She leaned through the spray, thumb extended, and crushed the intruder, wincing at the pain in her gut that seemed to have been caused by her forward lean.

“Most uncool.”

The voice rode the shards of water sputtering through one of the mostly obstructed holes.

“Excuse me?” All the dignity she could muster while naked and wearing a raggedy, blue shower cap. The hand with the thumb that had just crushed the ant went to her genitals; she didn't realize that the tiny body had not yet been washed off, and gravity and flowing water transferred it from thumb to pubic hair. Her free arm crossed her breasts, hand clutching her armpit, her response as automatic as turning towards a car crash. Nervous, she said, “Who's there?” She put heels to tile and forced her demeanor from apprehensive to assured. “God?”

A man of indeterminant age squeezed out of the showerhead and slid down the arc of water. When his heels hit the shower's tile floor, he bounced up, doing a perfect front flip over the high bar holding the shower curtain. He landed with a slight grunt on the closed toilet seat.

“That's a 10,” he said, a satisfied smile on his face.

Beto had complained when she had hung the clear shower curtain in their bathroom. “But anyone can see me taking my shower,” he had said.

“Keep the bathroom door closed,” she had replied.

Now she thought maybe he had been right, but how could she have predicted the arrival of a small man spritzing from the showerhead? Though it *had* been a 10, she admitted.

Hannah uncrossed her arms and swiveled on planted heel to face the man more completely. The still spraying water cascaded down the left side of her face, an annoyance, so she twisted the faucet closed.

Beto had already left for work, taking Cristina with him to drop her off at pre-school, which was on the way to the bakery that Beto was set to inherit from his mother, Miriam.

The silence of the empty house pushed through the closed bathroom door.

“No,” said the man, ripping through the accumulation of heavy quiet to answer Hannah's question.

Hannah had already noted that he was small, not quite little person-sized, but if he was over 5'2”, she would eat her shower cap.

With one hand, Hannah flicked the shower curtain to the right. At the same time, she reached her other hand out to the towel hanging from the bracket between toilet and shower. Wrapping the towel around



her wet and naked body, she said, “You’re very short.”

“Not usually the first thing that I hear when I make a home visit.”

She tucked the corner of the towel into the edge that passed under her arm, not bothering to check whether it would stay in place. *It will*, she decided, the affirmative already more attention than she really would have paid to the issue if a small man weren’t perched on the toilet seat, eating, she noted, a string of black licorice.

Noting her noting, he pulled another twisted string from the breast pocket of his suit and offered it to her, “Want some?”

She shook her head and looked pointedly at her arm where a watch would be if she wore a watch in the shower. If she wore a watch.

“Sure. To business.” The man removed a clipboard from a desk drawer and ran his finger down it; the licorice still clutched in his hand scraped the clipboard’s surface. He put the sweet down next to him on the seat. His sliding finger stopped, tapped once. He said, “If it weren’t for all the mosquitoes, we would have been having this meeting a few weeks ago.” He folded the clipboard in ten and tossed it onto the otherwise empty desktop. “It’s their bites, you see. Individually, each bite doesn’t amount to much, but after a couple of decades, the number of points removed from your total score adds up.” He reached out to an adding machine. Tap click tap click, grinding gears. After studying the emitted paper for a moment, he leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers under his chin. “At your current rate, you’ll have reached the max allowable lifetime score in two days. The ant would have put you over if it hadn’t been for the cat scratches that stray gave you last June. And the mosquitoes. You have to admit, they’re one of the benefits of living on a tropical island, the mosquitoes.” His eyes drifted down from the 10-foot ceiling. It was crossed by heavy beams that looked like nothing Hannah had ever seen in Puerto Rico. She imagined the ceiling to be in a Bavarian castle. His eyes lit on hers. “You’ll probably want to start seeing to things, make arrangements for your continued absence, that is.”

She sat on the toilet seat “What’s your name, again?” She tweezed the abandoned bit of licorice on the seat between thumb and forefinger and dropped it in the trash can.

“Sam, but my colleagues call me ‘Scorekeeper.’”

“Sam the Scorekeeper?”

“Absent the definite article, but, yes.”

Hannah stood and turned to the mirror; still steamed up from her shower, it displayed clouded confusion. She took up the washcloth that lay draped on the edge of the sink and cleared the condensation from the center of the mirror. She couldn’t wipe away the confusion.

Her unwrinkled—attractive even, in a middle American healthy kind of way—face stared out, innocent and dumb. Not that she was a stupid woman. She had reared Cristina and—to some degree, Beto, her husband—to be responsible and careful. A trick, since Miriam had given him that particular prince-of-the-house upbringing that was still considered normal for the oldest male child of a Puerto Rican family. But faced with Sam Scorekeeper’s news that little remained of the life that she had imagined stretching on into an unknowable but gold-limned future, she allowed herself a moment of stupidity, letting slip, “Two days?”

“Remember the mouse, rat, and cockroach invasion after the heavy rains back in January of ’02?”

She watched the face in the mirror lift and fall as the head it fronted nodded once. She smoothed down an escaping eyebrow.

“I get that you don’t want a bunch of vermin overrunning the house, especially not with an infant child crawling about, but them’s the rules. If you had followed your husband’s advice and called an exterminator . . .” Sam mimed holding a phone with a silver handset.

Hannah objected, “I *did* call.”

Consternation compressed his features. He spun on his chair and removed a fat file from the open drawer of the file cabinet, shuffled through the papers as fireworks arced out of and exploded over the drawer. “Now *that* is a mistake that—”

“Well, I called. He couldn’t come for two days. So I had Beto buy me some poison and some glue traps at The Home Depot.”

Sam dropped the file on the desk. It *flaplanded* and popped out of existence at the same time that he said, “Ah, well.” A last sparkler sparkled and darkened.

Hannah pointed at the place the file should have been. She said, “Shouldn’t you put it back in the file cabinet?”

Sam ticked his head to the side, looking a question, and then realized. “No,” he said, “it was supposed to be deposited into my heaven-drive, but I kept putting it off. I can be the most dreadful procrastinator. It’s the little things that catch me up. You know how it is.”

Hannah glanced over at the unputaway stack of soap bars on the bath cart and said, “Yes, the little things.” An ant cruised across the tiles and began a slow climb up the stack. She reached out to smash it and then stopped herself. “What if I don’t kill anything ever again?”

Sam, nodding, said, “Sure, we see that all the time. But it’s no good.”

“What do you mean?”

“Even standing there, refraining from crushing the ant, your gut flora is taking out intestinal boogeymen and your white cells are destroying some viruses that are trying to invade your bronchial system. Among other things.” Sam’s nodding changed to shaking. “Try not walking on grass. Death is all around.”

“But surely that’s not my fault, well, the grass, but viruses?” She wondered about the “other things.”

The licorice appeared again; Sam chomped a two-inch length. “Back in the so-called biblical times, we let that kind of ‘killing’ go. That’s why you had people living four and five hundred years at a crack. Noah was the straw that broke: He saved so many animals that he was up to 3,000 years. We changed the policy when he reached 950. Already the population explosion was exploding. Imagine what a 1,000-year lifespan would do to the planet.” Sam finished the licorice. “We had to go strictly black and white: You—which includes all that your body encompasses—are responsible for anything you kill, unwittingly or no—strict liability. And that includes any injury that results in the death of the organism within 24 hours of your having done whatever you did to cause the original injury.” His lips quirked up in a smile and he chuckled.

“What? I don’t see anything funny.” Hannah had once read that a frown isn’t indicated by the mouth but by the eyebrows. No way, her mouth was frowning so hard that its corners parenthesized her chin.

“I’m sorry. Nothing about you. I was thinking about ethical vegetarians and vegans who grow their own food: The shock; you have no idea.”

“Eating? That hardly—”

“Tricky, that. You don’t wield the sledgehammer that kills the cow. We got a statistician to make a table—an actuary from MetLife.”

“I can’t *not* eat, but still, if I start saving animals, like Noah. That’ll extend my life, right?”

Sam tapped his fingers on the desk. “It would.”

“I hear a ‘but.’”

Sam nodded in agreement, “But, your ovarian cancer has metastasized into your abdomen, colon, and bladder. And those cancer cells are some efficient little killing machines; they’re jacking up your score at a fierce rate. No, it’s days, not months.” He smiled apologetically. “You’d have to save several million animals to offset the points the cancer is accumulating. I’m not saying it’s impossible, but . . .”

Lifting the towel a fraction of an inch, Hannah flicked the just-remembered ant body from her pubic hair and nodded. “Just a sec,” she said.

Sam watched as she leaned over to pick up the heavy porcelain slab that covered the back of the toilet. The curiosity he wore splattered the wall next to the shower.

“That’s that, then,” said Hannah, carefully replacing the porcelain cover.

# Waking to Cry Stop

by R. Mac Jones



# Nobody's Hero

by J.C. Pillard

Natasha nearly dropped her book when the pounding on her door started. It was Frul, a rest day, and her smithy was not even open. She scowled. She was the only blacksmith in Waypoint, the sleepy village that hugged Kircalim Forest. Many knights stopped here to get equipped before testing their mettle against the darkened woods beyond. But it was Frul, and it was autumn, and with winter coming on the stream of foolish warriors hoping to brave Kircalim usually petered out.

The knocking paused for only a moment before resuming with increased fervor. Natasha set aside her book with a sigh and went to the door.

Outside, her ten-year-old niece stood, anxiously shifting from foot to foot. Her eyes were wide and ringed with red, and she was twisting a corner of her blue shawl with both hands, wringing the faded fabric like a wet shirt on wash day.

“Sara? What are you doing here?”

“Excuse me Aunt Natasha, I’m so sorry to bother you, but ... but I didn’t know where else to go ...” The girl blinked rapidly, as if fighting back tears.

“Well, come in.” Natasha opened the door a little wider, brow puckered.

Sara and her brother Remy were two of only a handful of children in the small town. They lived with their grandmother, a kind but forgetful woman who acted as the local seamstress. Natasha had been friends with the children’s mother. Before she’d died a few years ago,

Natasha had promised her friend that she’d watch over her children. Sara and Remy often came by during the day when their grandmother was busy, and Natasha would fix them lunch and have them help her with odd jobs around the smithy to keep them out of trouble.

Sara sat down in the wooden chair beside the kitchen table, her worn shoes dangling above the floor. “I didn’t want to tell my grandmother. She wouldn’t know what to do—”

“What happened?” Natasha interrupted, kneeling in front of the girl and taking her hands.

“It’s Remy,” Sara said wretchedly. “He went into Kircalim.”

Natasha closed her eyes, her hand straying to the glass pendant around her neck. Waypoint itself was protected from the forest by the sentinel fires—blue-colored flames encased in glass that guarded the edge of the town. Beyond that, Kircalim Forest crouched like a great beast. About half the knights who went in never came out again. Those who did come out changed. They would emerge with gold and jewels stolen from the forgotten kingdom, but the wild look never left their eyes. They told tales of the depths of the forest, the strange and frightening creatures that lived there, the marvels of the long-lost empire buried in the woods.

It was no wonder, then, that every so often one of the young people who lived in Waypoint would get a little restless. They’d imagine they could be one of those knights that did succeed, that they would somehow best Kircalim where so many had failed. If they were caught early enough, the only result was an earful of scolding and a month of filial penance. But when they were not ...

Remy had been begging to learn how to fight for a long time. So had Sara, come to think of it. Whenever they were in her care, they always pleaded with her to teach them swordplay, but Natasha had always refused. “The sentinel lights are all you need,” she’d say sternly. She wished now that she’d broken her own rules and at least taught them how to defend themselves.

Natasha stood and moved towards the old oak armoire. It had resided in her front room for as long as anyone could remember, herself included. She didn’t open it much these days except to clean its contents, but now she pulled open the dark wooden doors with a creak. Her personal stash of weapons and armor lay within.

“What possessed him to go in there?” Natasha asked, digging in the armoire.

“Moira goaded him, Aunt,” Sara replied. “He told her that he loved her, and she laughed at him. Said he’d have to slay a beast of Kircalim before she’d even consider letting him court her.”

Natasha groaned. Moira was the town’s local beauty, a fact of which the girl was well aware. “Gods and the six hells preserve us from pernicious teenage girls,” she muttered.

After a moment, she found what she’d been searching for. Carefully, reverently, she pulled out the armor. Swirling vines decorated the leather breastplate, and similar patterns covered the greaves, gauntlets, and boots. The helmet she left behind. She didn’t want anything impeding her vision once she was in the forest.

Sara’s eyes were wide as she studied the armor. “Aunt, did you make that?”

Natasha winced. “No, not me. Someone else, a long time ago.” She pointed to the door. “Go and fetch my bag from the back of the shop, will you? Fill it up. Water, apples, cheese. As if I were going to Fenly,” she instructed, naming a town two days’ ride away.

Sara nodded and ran for the door. Natasha took several deep breaths, studying the armor. The leather seemed to glow in the dim light of her home, and she set it aside before she could get caught up in memories. Turning back to the closet, she pulled out the sword.

The sheath was nothing special; some old leather with a scale pattern stamped down its length. But the blade within ... she had not wielded that blade in many years. She pulled it from the scabbard, feeling its weight. It was perfectly balanced for her arm. The hilt was decorated with rearing griffins bracketing the pommel, and the metal of the sword positively gleamed.

It was a blade forged to slay monsters.

Natasha sheathed it once more, her mouth set in a hard line. Remy might be a fool for venturing into those accursed woods, but she wasn’t going to let him die for his folly.

Sara returned and nervously handed her a full pack and canteen.

“How long will you be gone?”

“Hopefully not long,” Natasha replied, hefting the pack over her shoulder. “But one can never tell with the forest. Run home to your grandmother. Let her know that I’ve gone to find him.”

\* \* \*

The road into Kircalim Forest was well travelled by foolish warriors. Natasha had watched many of them from her front window as they entered the tangle of vines, trees, and shadows at the edge of the village, outfitted with her finest weapons. She rarely saw them come out again.

Now, standing before the wood, Natasha squared her shoulders. It had been an age since she’d fought off anything bigger than a curious black bear. The sentinel fires kept the less savory denizens of the for-

est at bay. But once she passed beyond those, her fate was her own.

She stepped forward.

The cool quiet of Kircalim enclosed her. The sunlight vanished, leaving her in the darkness beneath the trees. Her footsteps were loud in that place, and she worked to quiet her steps, remembering the way her feet used to move long before she'd been a blacksmith in a sleepy village. Remy's tracks were clear enough, since no one had passed this way for a few weeks. His footprints had sunk into the muddy road as he'd pursued it deeper into the woods. Natasha followed them.

Kircalim Forest had not always been a place of darkness and ill omens. Once, it had been a peaceful woodland that bordered a neighboring kingdom. But after the Last Great War had ravaged this land, nothing grew here that wasn't already twisted and cruel inside. It was a place of shadows and death, and terrible things lurked within its depths. Decades ago, before the sentinel fires had been completed, an ashwolf had turned up in the village. Once an animal of flesh and bone, it had long since decayed with the twisted magic of Kircalim into a creature of ash and embers. It had burned three houses to the ground before it was finally extinguished, taking five bystanders with it. And ashwolves were common: deep in the Kircalim Forest, even more dreadful creatures fed and grew.

Natasha had been walking for the better part of an hour when she heard the soft fall of footsteps behind her. She slackened her pace but kept moving. Whatever was following her paused with her movements, slowed when she did. She didn't want it to suspect she was aware of its presence. She waited until the footsteps relaxed, until whatever it was grew more confident.

Then, she drew her blade and whirled.

Sara shrieked, falling backwards and scrambling away.

"Six hells, Sara, what are you *doing* following me here?" Natasha growled.

"I-I'm sorry, Aunt Natasha, I j-just wanted to h-hel—"

"Stop stammering." Natasha sheathed her sword and held out a hand, yanking Sara to her feet. "And be quiet. I don't want anything to hear us."

The girl clamped her mouth shut, face pale. Natasha paused to think. Given how far she had walked, it wouldn't be safe to send Sara back to Waypoint alone. They were far enough inside the forest that many of the bolder creatures wouldn't think twice about trying to swallow such a small thing.

Natasha pinched the bridge of her nose. "Sara, why, in Calenhai's name, did you think this was a good idea?"

Sara stood up straighter, sticking out her chin. "I wanted to help. I can fight." She patted her belt, a wooden sword dangling from it.

Natasha wanted to groan. "No, you cannot."

"I've fought my brother."

"Do you think a wooden sword will do you any good in these woods?"

Sara crossed her arms. "I *can* fight," she insisted. "I've been learning with some of grandmother's old books."

"Well, you're not doing any fighting today." Natasha rolled her neck, trying to ease some of the tension gathered there. "All right. Stay near me."

Sara's face brightened. "I can come?"

"You can come, but you will not be fighting. And you *must* be quiet."

They kept going in silence. Natasha found herself impressed by how noiselessly Sara moved. The moldering leaves barely rustled as the

girl walked over them, and more than once Natasha found herself glancing over her shoulder to be sure Sara was still there.

The forest bent around them as they went on, the trees becoming more gnarled and blackened. Their canopies blotted out the sky, their leaves almost black, as though stained with old blood.

After a half hour, Natasha halted. There was a sound coming from the path ahead of them, a sort of *shhh, shhhh* of something being dragged along the ground.

“Stay behind me,” Natasha whispered, voice low. Sara nodded, her hand white-knuckled on her wooden sword.

They approached cautiously, Natasha straining her eyes in the low light. The road curled around a large tree. As they moved past it, they beheld what was making the noise.

A creature, half bubbling flesh and half rotted log, was dragging the carcass of an ashwolf along the path. Its roots slid along the ground, turning over the leaves with its passing.

“What is that?” Sara whispered tremulously.

“Rotling,” Natasha replied, her mouth twisted with distaste. “It looks like it’s following the path through the forest.” Rotlings were unnatural beings forged of the flesh of other creatures melded with fallen roots and trees.

“Can’t we go around it?”

The blacksmith frowned. “Perhaps. But if we leave the path, we’ll have a hard time finding it again. The forest has a way of turning you around.”

As she spoke, the rotling paused. It creaked as it turned in their direction. Gashes in the wood served for eyes as it swiveled all the way around and stopped, staring towards them.

It let out a scream and charged.

There was no time to think. Natasha dashed forward, drawing her blade as she did so. She brought it down on one of the creature’s branches, severing it from the stump. The rotling shrieked, lashing out with vine-like appendages that wrapped around her legs and dragged them from under her. She tumbled to the ground, the impact jolting her sword from her hand.

The rotling hurled itself on top of her, its roots and tendrils wrapping themselves around her wrists. Natasha struggled, trying to twist for the hilt of her blade, but the creature kept her arms pinned to the ground. A vine snapped across her cheek, making her hiss with pain.

Grunting, Natasha braced her legs wide and threw herself upwards, using her weight against the rotling and dislodging its grip on her arm. In one swift movement, she grasped her sword from the dirt and sliced across the tendril binding her other arm, earning another shriek of pain from the monster. It scuttled backwards enough for Natasha to kick it off her body. She rolled, bringing her feet beneath her in a crouch, and thrust her sword into the gaping hole that was its mouth.

The creature wailed as Natasha’s sword went through its tough bark and into the soft tissue beneath. As the blade ripped through its innards, the magic that held it together fell away. The creature shuddered one last time before collapsing into a heap of rotted wood and flesh.

Natasha stood, her mouth set in a grim line. Her eyes landed on Sara. The girl stood a few feet back, her eyes wide and her mouth open. But she wasn’t looking at the rotling’s corpse.

She was looking at the sword.

Natasha glanced down at her blade and swallowed a curse. During the fight, her weapon had started glowing gold, as it always did when severing corrupt magic.

“You—you’re a Harbinger!” Sara exclaimed, staring at Natasha with



awe and something like fear.

“What are you talking about?” Natasha asked, feigning confusion. She turned back to the rotling, flicking it over with her foot. It didn’t move.

“That sword. ‘Only they who Griffins be / Can wield a blade of sky and sea.’” The blacksmith winced as the girl intoned the old rhyme. “That’s a griffin-blade, a Harbinger’s blade.”

Natasha swallowed against the lump in her throat before turning back to Sara. “This? I found it on some corpse.”

“Then how can you wield it? The swords were bound to their owners.”

Natasha sighed, spying iron in Sara’s gaze. It had been a long, long time since anyone had figured out what she was. She hadn’t expected it of a ten-year-old girl. Then again, Sara’s grandmother was incredibly well-read, and Sara was a little too bright for her own good.

“Do you know what happened to the Harbingers?” she asked wearily.

“They were all slaughtered by Irehan in the Last Great War,” Sara whispered, as though speaking his name too loudly might summon Irehan from his tomb. “Their final act was to kill him to save mankind.”

“We didn’t kill him,” Natasha replied. “We couldn’t. Irehan wasn’t some dark wizard who grew too powerful. He was a Harbinger, too.”

“W-what?”

“He thought our power had been given to us not to protect, but to rule. He wanted to subjugate the world under one, glorious Harbinger banner. That desire twisted him, turning him into something dark and terrible.” Natasha reached for her glass pendant, pulling it up so she could see the water inside. A relic of her old life. “We tried to kill him. But Irehan had tied his life to the other Harbingers. He couldn’t

die without the rest of us dying as well.”

“Then how did you survive?” Sara asked in a hushed voice.

Natasha laughed without humor. “There was a vote. One Harbinger would take the lives of the rest, take their power, and use it to subdue and bind Irehan. Then, that Harbinger would land the killing blow ... on herself. I was chosen for that task.”

She fell silent, studying the trees around them. Her brothers and sisters had been entombed here, amongst the corpses of Irehan’s fallen monsters. She had wanted to leave, had thought about it so many times, but she couldn’t bring herself to abandon them here, at the edge of the world.

“Irehan was too cunning for us. He bound his life to the Harbingers, yes, but he bound his spirit to the land. Had I struck that final blow upon myself, he would not have died, but merely taken on a different form. So, I imprisoned him instead.” Natasha closed her eyes. It had been centuries since that final battle, and for so long she had wanted to seek her own final rest. But she could not.

“How?” Sara demanded. “How did you bind him?”

The blacksmith let out a weary sigh. “I sealed him away, deep in Kir-calim Forest. And I bound his prison in the only way I knew how: to myself. We Harbingers cannot die by sickness or old age. Only by the blade can we find rest. I bound his prison to my life and laid aside my sword. As long as I live, as long as one Griffin-bound survives, he will be locked away.” She took a shuddering breath. She had not told this tale in so long, yet time had not eased the telling of it.

Sara’s face was suddenly before her own, the young girl’s skin gone white. “Then *why* are you trying to find Remy?”

“What do you mean?”

“You could *die!*” Sara replied, tears edging her voice. “You could die,

and then Irehan would come back!”

Natasha huffed a laugh. “I thank you for your concern,” she said with a smile, “but I can handle myself well enough to recover your foolhardy brother.” She sheathed her sword, and then knelt in front of Sara.

“Now you’ve seen the dangers of Kircalim,” she said, her voice softer. “This is no place for children. You told me you want to fight, and I believe you. But now is the time to be cautious and clever. Can you do that?”

Sara swallowed before nodding solemnly.

“Good. All right, stay close. And stay quiet.”

\* \* \*

All too soon, Remy’s footprints vanished. They were replaced with signs that he’d been dragged.

Natasha didn’t tell Sara. It was one thing to expect the child to be quiet as they went to rescue a living brother. It was quite another to expect silence when that brother might be dead.

The path widened, and stone markers began springing up intermittently on either side. They were travelling on the Old Road, Natasha realized, the main highway that had connected the ancient kingdom to the outside world. She hadn’t thought anything remained of it.

Eventually, the drag marks turned, leaving the road to disappear into the forest. Natasha closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Then, she stopped and knelt before Sara.

“Sara, we’re going to have to leave the road.”

The girl’s face whitened. “Leave the road? But you said—”

“I did,” Natasha interrupted. “The forest will try and get us turned

around, growing over our path, beguiling us. But,” she added with a smile, “I plan on marking every tree we pass. As I’m certain you know, the cut of a Harbinger blade cannot be healed. If we mark our path with my blade, we’ll find our way out again. You must make sure I don’t miss any, all right?”

They made their way into the trees. The air grew close, the smell of rot more powerful the farther they went from the road. Natasha drew a notch into each trunk they passed, marking their way as they followed Remy’s trail. Whatever had grabbed him seemed intent on its path: the tracks cut a relatively straight line through the woods. For that, at least, Natasha was grateful.

Eventually, the forest opened onto a clearing. In the center stood the ruins of what had once been an abbey. The structure stretched upwards, but the pinnacle of rock that had crowned the front of the building had long fallen, leaving cut stones scattered over the ground. Two walls stretched back into the clearing, leading into what had been the sanctuary. Ivy climbed over everything, strangling the fallen walls beneath a shroud of vines.

The tracks led inside, and Natasha was about to follow when a low moan made her grab Sara and crouch behind a short stone wall. A creature dressed in a ragged robe appeared from within the ruined edifice. It seemed to glide across the ground, the hem of its garment scraping over the leaves. It paused, head moving from side to side as if scenting the air, before gliding past the ruined wall and out of sight.

“What was that thing?”

Natasha’s jaw tightened. “A gallwraith.” They were the ghosts of Irehan’s soldiers who had died on the battlefield and never been buried. Whatever remained of the warrior’s soul was consumed by hunger as their restless spirit sought out the living, making a meal of the still warm blood of mortal creatures. And judging by the drag marks leading into the ruins, it appeared that the gallwraith had gotten Remy.

Sara whimpered. “Is my brother dead?”

Natasha frowned. “Not yet, I think. Gallwraiths must feed after night-fall. They have very little physical presence until the sun is gone. But we need to be quick. Come.”

They moved silently through the ruins towards the doorway from which the wraith had come. Natasha felt her pulse quickening, her awareness sharpening as it always did before a battle. The world came into focus, the edges of the stone more harshly defined against the darkened forest.

The inside of the abbey was a mess of rotting pews and tangled vines. Natasha crept along the edges of the sanctuary, Sara behind her with her small wooden sword drawn. They were about to round a corner into a side chapel when the low moaning sounded ahead of them. Natasha froze, then knelt, kicking up dust and ash as she pulled Sara down beside her. The creature came around the corner, slithering down the center aisle.

Sara sniffled, and the creature paused. Natasha turned to the girl who, to her horror, was turning red. Sara frantically placed a hand over her face.

“Achoo!” The sneeze echoed, unbearably loud in the quiet ruins.

The gallwraith turned. Nothing was visible within its hood, but Natasha knew it was staring straight at them. She swallowed back her fear, then stood, drawing her sword.

“Return the child you took, demon,” she commanded, hefting the blade and stepping in front of Sara, nudging her with her foot behind one of the pews.

The wraith laughed, a sound like glass shattering. “I thought I smelled an intruder. Do you think to command the dead?”

“I think to command the profane,” Natasha said, stepping forward. “What have you done with the boy?”

“He struggled so, but now he sleeps until I’m ready to feast.”

Natasha gritted her teeth. He was alive. At least he was alive.

“This was once a holy space,” she growled, “and you have desecrated it with your filth. Give me the child you stole. You’ll get no dinner tonight.” She took another step forward.

“This place is no longer consecrated ground.” It sniffed the air. “Grif-fin-born,” it said with satisfaction. “I remember your kind. I wonder what you will taste like.”

Suddenly, Natasha could barely move. She looked down to the stone floor of the sanctuary. There, hidden by the tangle of vines, she could make out a rune inscribed on the flagstones. It was of the ancient tongue, a single word: HOLD.

Her sword arm was paralyzed. She strained against the invisible bonds, but they held fast. She glanced behind her but didn’t see Sara anywhere. Hopefully, the child had had enough sense to hide.

The creature moved forward, its robe rustling through the fallen leaves. “You are a fool, Harbinger. Your kind are not welcome here. You are unfit to stand before me.”

“And yet here I stand,” Natasha spat out. “Let me out of this little trap, and we’ll see which one of us is unfit.”

“You dare to challenge me? Your ilk have long fallen into darkness.”

Natasha opened her mouth to respond but felt a tap on her foot. She glanced down and saw Sara scrubbing furiously at the rune that held her in place.

Her head snapped back up. The creature had moved closer, and she could now make out the embers where eyes should have been. It didn’t seem to have noticed Sara: it was so focused upon her that it

was utterly oblivious to the child.

“I will feast on you slowly, from the inside out. There will be nothing left of you, hero.”

Sara squeaked a note of triumph and scrambled away. Natasha felt the enchantment weaken. She clenched her jaw.

“I’m nobody’s hero,” she said. Then she whipped her arm upwards, slicing across the wraith’s abdomen. It shrieked, falling back. Hissing in anger, the gallwraith raised a hand. Shadows split off from its cloak, wrapping themselves around her arm. Natasha screamed, for wherever they touched, they burned.

To her horror, Sara stepped into the creature’s path and sliced through the smoky bonds with her little wooden sword. Her *ash* sword, Natasha realized, as the tendrils were severed by the holy wood. The gallwraith hissed again, advancing. Sara tried to back away, but the creature was too fast. It struck her with a taloned hand, sending her flying into a log half buried in the ruins with a colossal *crack*.

“No!” Natasha screamed, rage coursing through her. She lunged, driving her shining Griffin blade deep into the gallwraith’s torso.

The creature screeched, the sound sending shudders coursing down Natasha’s spine. It twisted, trying to dislodge the sword from its body, but Natasha held fast. From where the blade pierced the creature, more black smoke billowed. Whatever magic had animated it began to break, and the gallwraith’s gaseous form evaporated like a morning’s mist.

Natasha’s sword came free, smeared with black. She let it drop, frantically dashing between pews towards where Sara had landed.

“Sara! Sara!” She knelt by the child’s unconscious form in the mud. Leaning down, she placed her ear to the girl’s mouth. She couldn’t tell if she was breathing. Blood stained the child’s golden hair, matting it against her head.

Natasha fumbled for the vial she always wore around her neck. “Come on, come on.” The small crystal bottle contained a little of the water from the Stantois River, which had once run, clean and pure, from a sacred spring in Kircalim Forest. The local people had called it the Water of Life.

Uncorking it carefully, Natasha poured a few drops into the girl’s mouth, trying not to spill any. There was only a little left, and she had no way to replenish it.

Sara lay still, her face pale in the half-light of the forest. Natasha could feel tears welling up in her eyes. Angrily, she swiped them away. No. No, this would work. This *had* to work. Sara wasn’t some hero ready for death, laughing in the face of it. She was a child, a *child*, one who didn’t deserve to be killed for the love of a foolish brother.

“Please,” Natasha sobbed, clenching her hands into fists and closing her eyes. She had not come so far and done so much to let yet another person she loved die in the forsaken forest. She could see them now, her fallen comrades, standing before her in Harbinger Hall five hundred and thirty-six years ago. Each had given up their lives that day so that the rest of the world might live. She was the last of them, the last of the Griffins, and if she could not bring back a child who’d done nothing but tried to protect her—

A cough startled her, and she opened her eyes. Sara’s eyes were open, bleary as though from sleep.

“Sara!” She swept the startled girl into her arms, hugging her to her chest as tightly as she dared.

“Aunt Natasha,” Sara said, her voice grainy. “What happened? Is the gallwraith gone?”

“Yes, yes, he’s gone now.” Natasha leaned back, smiling and wiping away her tears. “It’s quite all right.”

“My head hurts,” Sara pouted, her hand gingerly touching her bruised

temple. The blood was still there, and Sara started as she saw it. Natasha grabbed her hand.

“It’s all right,” she said as Sara stared at her with alarm. “You’re all right. You hit your head, but the wound is gone now.”

“Griffin magic,” Sara whispered in wonder. “Did you use Griffin magic on me?”

Natasha choked out a laugh. “Of a kind.”

Sara frowned. “I’m sorry I didn’t get to see you kill the monster.”

“It wasn’t that exciting. You did most of the work.”

The girl glanced around. “Where’s Remy?”

Natasha sobered. “Probably further in the ruins.” She hoped, anyway. She needed to search for him. Judging by the dimming of the light outside, it was nearing dusk. If the boy was alive, she needed to find him before it was too dark.

“We’re going to have to camp out in Kircalim tonight.”

Sara made a small, frightened noise, but Natasha shook her head. “No, it’ll be all right. Nothing’s coming here tonight, not if a gall-wraith staked it out. We’ll set up a camp once I find your brother and head back to the village in the morning. I need you to tend a fire while I search the ruins. Can you do that?”

Sara, her hand tenderly touching her head, nodded.

\* \* \*

Natasha found Remy, bound and frightened, in one corner of the ruins. Apart from a few scrapes and bruises, he seemed largely untouched. Natasha gave silent thanks to whatever gods were left that she’d found him in time. Then she’d smacked him on the back of the

head and gave him a firm scolding. She’d led him back to Sara, who had thrown herself at her brother, hugging him tightly, and he, embarrassed, had hugged her back.

“I suppose she’s the one who told you I’d gone into Kircalim,” he said now, sitting across from Natasha with an untouched apple in his hand. A fire crackled merrily in a small stone hearth they’d found in the old praetor’s quarters, banishing some of the darkness of the forest.

“She was. And thank the stars she did, or you’d be dead by now.”

“I didn’t mean to get caught,” Remy replied, sullen. “I just wanted to prove myself.”

Natasha snorted. “What sort of idiot thinks they’ll impress a girl without having any training in battle whatsoever? What *were* you thinking, Remy? Your grandmother will be worried sick already, and I can only imagine the tongue lashing she’s going to give you when we get—” Natasha broke off, seeing tears welling in the young man’s eyes. He sniffled, pathetically.

“I just wanted her to like me. I’ll never impress Moira now.”

Natasha took a deep breath. He was still a boy. He looked older than his fourteen years, but he was young and foolish. She stood and came to kneel beside him where he sat on an old stool, placing a gloved hand on his shoulder.

“I’ll make you a deal.” She glanced at Sara, thinking of the girl’s earlier words. “Every day, after you’ve finished your chores, I will teach you and your sister how to fight. I will teach you how to wield a sword, how to shoot, and how to defeat the monsters in this forest. And in return, you will *promise* me to never, *never* go into Kircalim until I say you’re ready to face it. No matter what Moira thinks of you,” she finished wryly.

Sara came to sit by her brother. “If you learn to fight, you can woo a

princess in Calvairn,” she said soothingly. “And just think of how much Moira will regret not liking you then!”

*That girl is too smart for her own good,* Natasha thought, but she nodded in agreement. Standing and stretching her back, she peered down at him. “Do we have a deal?”

Remy looked thoughtful. “You’d train us? Really?”

“Yes,” Natasha said. “One day, I might not be around to defend the village. We need ...” She trailed off, swallowing a lump that had formed in her throat. “We need new warriors.”

“New Griffins,” Sara piped up, smiling widely. Remy frowned in confusion.

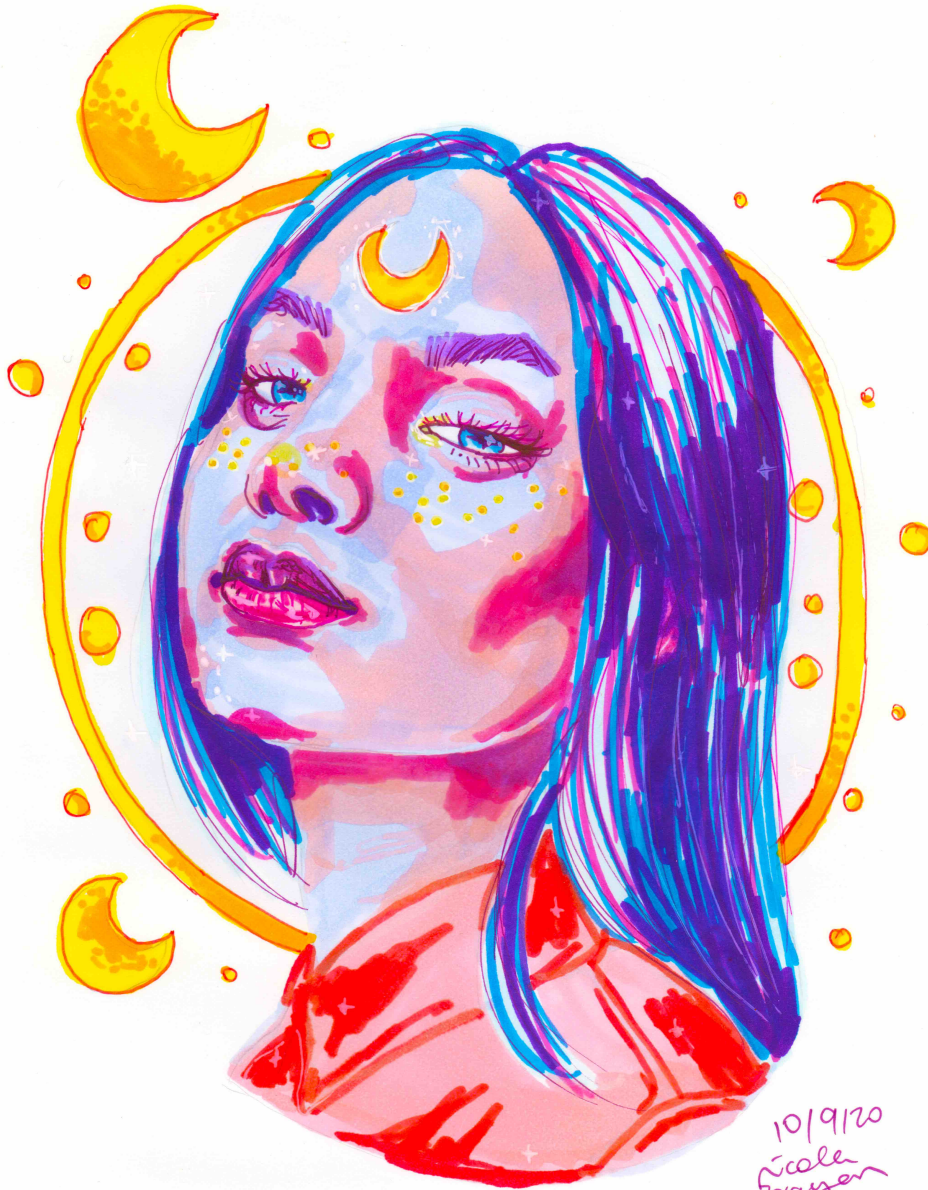
Natasha huffed a laugh. “Yes, new Griffins. Knights who can make

better choices than the fools who come to Waypoint. So. Do we have a deal?”

The boy stood, and Natasha saw just how tall he’d become. Yes, he’d make a decent Harbinger one day, if he didn’t lose interest as soon as he learned how much work it would take or lose heart as soon as Sara outranked him. Which Natasha had no doubt she would. But at least it would keep him out of trouble for a time.

Natasha extended her hand to him. “Are we agreed?”

He shook her hand. Natasha sighed and sat again, closing her eyes. She was very tired. But there was more to say. “Then I think it’s time I told you both a story.”



# Calamity

by Nicola Brayen

10/9/20  
Nicola  
Brayen

# The Quintet Is Ready

by Maureen Bowden

I have no name. I am an elder sibling of humankind. Human beings make a habit of getting themselves into trouble. It is a constant aggravation to me. In the twenty-first century they face their worst self-induced predicament yet. I am forbidden to get them out of it but permitted to help them to help themselves. With this in mind I searched through time for individuals capable of leading and inspiring them to sort out the mess before the cartoon pig grunts "That's all folks" for the last time. I hope my efforts will have been sufficient.

\* \* \*

Sixth-century B.C.; Lumbini (later known as Nepal)

I observed Prince Gautama Siddhartha, leaving his palace and his pampered life, to seek enlightenment in the real world by enduring suffering and deprivation. He was on the verge of starvation when a young girl, with common sense and compassion, took pity on him and offered him a bowl of rice.

Her action did not result in his immediate enlightenment, of course, but I saw a candle flicker in his brain. "Thank you, daughter," he said. Somewhat condescending, perhaps, but I know he meant it humbly.

I sought her out. "What is your name, girl?"

"Prakasa."

She was well named. It means Light. "Do you know what you have done, Prakasa?" I said.

She glared at me. "Yes, I've given my dinner to a man who thinks he

can't be good and well-fed at the same time. Do you have a problem with that?"

I laughed. "Indeed not. You've turned him away from extremism, which I consider a dirty word, and onto the path of balance. He will call it The Middle Way and it will lead him to becoming the Buddha."

She shrugged. "Good for him. Do you have any rice to spare? I'm hungry."

"Come with me and you'll never be hungry again."

She backed away. "I too know a dirty word. My mother used it for people like you."

I shook my head. "Not like me." I allowed her to see my true face.

Her eyes grew wide. "You are a great one."

"No greater than you. I wish to take you to a future time when the world will need your greatness. I will take care of you and enable you to achieve your destiny, if you and your family give me permission."

"My family is dead. I give you permission. Let's go."

\* \* \*

Sixteenth-century; England

My name is Mary Sidney. I was a Lady-in-Waiting at Queen Elizabeth's court. Her Majesty swore me to secrecy about certain events in



the year 1575, when I was but fourteen years old. Richmond palace's walls have not only ears, but noses to sniff out gossip. It is, therefore, no less than a miracle that those events remain unrevealed. I shall now reveal them.

The royal chambermaid whispered to me, "Mistress Sidney, Her Majesty is indisposed and has taken to her bed. She wishes to see you alone."

I hurried to the royal apartment, curious but a little afraid. I loved good Queen Bess dearly, but her temper was unpredictable and she needed very little provocation to deliver a sharp slap.

I found her vomiting into a chamber pot. "Mary," she said, "that clay-brained codpiece, your uncle Robin, has got me with child."

Trying to ignore the picture that flashed into my mind I helped her back to bed. I was aware that my mother's brother, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, had warmed the Queen's bed for years. She took the usual precautions, involving a vinegar-soaked sponge, so how had this happened?

No doubt she read my thoughts in my face. "I should never have accepted his invitation to visit Kenilworth. We were in a holiday mood and Robin was irresponsible."

I didn't dare to point out that it takes two to gavotte. "How may I help, Your Majesty?"

"Find a discreet midwife who will deliver the child and place it in a good home but not reveal its parentage. I will reward her well, but if she loosens her tongue it will be cut out."

"How long--?"

"Six months. No hurry. In the meantime relax the laces on my corset, but not too much. No one must suspect. Go now. I wish to sleep."

I knelt beside my bed that night, praying for a solution. Perhaps it was inappropriate to pray for help in concealing the Queen and my uncle's sin, but I feared that if I failed her she'd cut off my head. Someone tapped on my door, and before I could respond a robed figure entered. It had a beautiful face that could have been either male or female. "Do not be afraid, Mary," he or she said. "I will help you to solve the Queen's dilemma."

"Are you an angel?"

"Tis as good a title as any."

His or her presence, and my instinct, reassured me and restored my courage. "What next? Will three wise men bearing gifts ride over the mountains?"

The angel laughed. "I doubt it. We both know that this is no virgin birth."

I'm ashamed to say I giggled. "Will you find her a midwife?"

"No. I will deliver the child. It is a girl. I'll take her into the future and prepare her to meet her destiny." He or she raised me from my knees and sat beside me on the edge of my bed. "This child will have the blood of the Tudors, the Plantagenets, and the Normans in her veins. She will have the courage and leadership qualities of the Empress Matilda, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Isabella of France, Jacquetta of Luxembourg, and Elizabeth herself. She'll also have the tenacity and single-mindedness of Anne Boleyn."

"What of the men?" I asked.

"The less said about them the better."

"What shall I tell the Queen?"

"That it's all arranged. She'll ask no questions. I'll see you in six

months' time." The angel vanished.

When Queen Bess's condition became difficult to hide she instructed me to spread the news that she was exhausted, and would spend some weeks in her bedchamber. Her physician called to see her, but she sent him away.

I slept on a couch at the foot of her bed, and when her labour began she howled at me to fetch the midwife. I fled from the room and sent a silent prayer to the angel. Before I could panic he or she appeared.

"I am afraid for her life," I said. "She is in her middle years, and she has narrow hips."

The angel smiled. "She'll feel no pain and her body will be undamaged."

The Queen barely glanced at the robed figure who delivered her child. The only words she spoke before closing her eyes in sleep were, "You must call her Anne. It was my mother's name."

The angel instructed me on how to prepare a potion that would rid her of her milk and restore her vitality.

"Thank you," I said. "May I tighten her corset?"

"Yes, after five days. The Virgin Queen's waistline and reputation will be intact, although her hymen is not. And you are permitted to giggle, Mistress Sidney."

He or she took the babe in his or her arms, and disappeared.

\* \* \*

Nineteenth-century; Tasmania

I am called Lowanna, beautiful woman, but not like my grandma, Truganni. Her soul shone like big moon. She was wise. When the

Wadjela took our land and made us slaves, she yabbered no curse and threw no wobbler. She learned their ways. They respected her. They loved her. She made them see we are people, not mad beasts to be tamed or broken. Without her they would have killed us all.

After she joined the ancestors I saw her in Dreamtime. "There is big fella come for you, chook," she said. "He boojery bloke and he need help."

"No, grandma," I said. "I stay here. Send him away."

"Don't go off like frog in a sock, Lowanna. He come from time where the world gone bugged-up. They got quondongs that murder people who walk different Dreamtime from them. You make them stop."

"I don't know how, Grandma."

"You teach them stop hating, like I taught the Wadjela. It harder to murder someone you don't hate."

My belly fluttered with fear, but the ancestors see what is right. I trusted her. "If you want me to I'll give it a burl."

"Good onya. Go with the big fella. He show you how. No worries. You belong him now, and he belong you."

I stepped out of Dreamtime and the big fella was waiting for me.

\* \* \*

Nineteenth-century; South Dakota

My name's Jane Canary: pronounced with the emphasis on "Can." I can do and I can go where I like. I ain't no caged bird. Most folks called me Calamity Jane. I didn't care much what they called me. I strung along with Wild Bill Hickock for a time. I guess I tamed him some. Strung along with plenty of others, too. Some tolerable, some

bad, some downright rotten, but I knew only one mighty fine man. I never shared his bed, but it don't matter. Sioux injun, he was. Chief of the Oglala Lakota. Known as Crazy Horse, but I knew his true name, Cha-o-Ha. Means In the Wilderness. I guess he was. He taught me about loyalty and courage, and I'll carry him in my heart till I die.

He fought for his land and his people until my people killed him. I helped his parents to move his coffin to a secret location and we mourned together as they called on the Great Spirit to take his soul.

I met his daughter at the graveside. Didn't know he had a kid, but there was no mistakin' that she was his. I saw him in her eyes.

“What's your name?” I asked.

“Maka. It means Earth.”

“Good name for a child of the man in the wilderness. Can't say he ever spoke of you.”

“He gave me to a servant of the Great Spirit when I was in my second summer. No words were needed then. Few are needed now.” She took my hand as we stood together beside her father's grave. “I come today to say goodbye to him, but I belong in the future, where I must fight to save the Earth from destruction. The people of that time have forgotten how to care for her. I have her name and I must teach them.”

Sounded like a load of hokum, but I guess I've learned to know the truth when I hear it. She walked to her grandparents' side and embraced them, then she held up her hand to me in farewell and she vanished.

\* \* \*

Twentieth-century; South Africa

I will tell a secret, but not my name. In the apartheid years I was a member of the ANC and I loved Nelson Mandela. He loved me too, but briefly. We ran together for a while before he met his soulmate, Winnie Madikizela, and they took their journey to free our people. I didn't let him know he'd left me with more than a memory. I didn't let anyone know, because his enemies would have used our child to manipulate him.

I called her Lerato, which means love. It suited her. She shared her father's great love of Africa and its people, and his love of freedom. That's why the woman from the future took her.

I found them chatting together outside the school gates when I drove to meet her after classes one day. My little babblebekkie would share her heart with anyone. “Mallie,” she said, “this lady says I can make my ouballie proud.”

I pulled her away from the woman and stood between them. “I don't know who you are, but you won't lead my child into politics. I don't want her dead.”

The woman's gentle eyes made my anger fade. She took my hand. “Her ouballie's fight will be won long before Lerato faces hers. I wish to take her to a future time when the world will have great need of her to inspire love and loyalty and help lost people to find their way. She will teach them patience and perseverance, and the graciousness to forgive their enemies and make allies of them. She inherited these gifts not only from her ouballie but also from you.”

“I must go, Mallie,” my child said.

The woman cupped Lerato's face in her hands. “Only if your mallie allows it.” She turned back to me. “She should not waste her powers.”

I knew she was right. I would weep for the loss of my daughter every day, but I was proud to let her go.

\* \* \*

Twenty-first-century; Earth

The human race stands on the brink of an abyss. Greed, megalomania, ignorance, and stupidity are threatening its survival. Wars and violent protest movements are increasing, disillusionment with political leaders is widespread, civilisations are self-destructing, and the planet herself, damaged by abuse and pollution, is becoming less able to sustain life.

I have brought help: not a conquering army to beat the fools into submission, but five women, one from each of Earth's continents. From Asia I have brought Prakasa, who illuminated the Buddha's path; from Europe I have brought Anne, Elizabeth I's daughter; from Australia I have brought Lowanna, Truganni's granddaughter; from America I have brought Maka, Crazy Horse's daughter; from Africa I have brought Lerato, Nelson Mandela's daughter. They are humanity's best hope, but nothing is certain. I see two possible futures. One is an age of darkness and despair; the other is an age of philosophy and scientific discovery. It will be an even contest.

The quintet is ready. I will journey into the future to observe its progress. Let it begin.

\* \* \*

The year 2125

Prakasa walked among the young people. She told them that the future is theirs. She showed them that although her path to awareness and truth may be different from that of others' their differences need not divide them. I watched her on a television documentary. Her interviewers were curious. They questioned her. She said, "I offer no answers but possibilities. I see the young finding joy in human companionship, as we take our path together through life's journey. They are turning away from petty divisions that breed fear and hatred. That's no fun. Nothing wrong with fun."

Anne led a peaceful demonstration confronting misogyny, homophobia, and hatred of sexual differences. Millions of voices from every gender identity joined her own. No longer would inequality be acceptable. No longer would sexual oppression or violence be tolerated. There were too many of them to be ignored. They said, "We stand together. We are all human, united in mutual respect. This will be a new day."

Lowanna found fame on social media. Refusing to be intimidated by the trolls, she said, "Some no-mates throw shade at me, but no drama. Most find it hard to get cranky with me, and they take my hand in friendship. The rest fear me, but I won't fear no fella. If they can't stop hating they no-hopers." Those in authority also feared her. She caused a disturbance in their well-ordered world by calling for education and equal opportunities for all. "That how to kick poverty up the jaxi," she said. "Poverty come from greed. We watch out for each other, for those who are hungry, cold, or alone. Things gone bugger-up. We can put them right."

Maka's image was depicted on tee-shirts worn by campaigners to repair the damage done to the planet. The industrialists and land developers ridiculed her, calling her naïve. At an international political conference a sympathetic world leader gave her an opportunity to respond. She replied, "Those who are destroying the Earth wish to destroy me because I threaten their bank balances. They refuse to see that their wealth won't save them from the rising ocean, and dollar notes won't line their lungs against polluted air. My words have gone viral now. Millions have added their own voices, and it's too late for us to be silenced. Earth is hitting back and there is nowhere to run. There are those who can help, but they must be allowed to do what needs to be done. We don't have much time."

Lerato reached out to the world with a song. It told of a Black woman who would be heard. It was a song for the Earth, for the future. It was for all people, for equality and compassion. It was a song for people who refused to be bullied, persecuted, and murdered because of who they are. She told the world, "Those that fear my song may take my life, but the song will still be sung. Sing it for each other."

Sing it for your children, and for their children. Music is the language that unites us all.”

\* \* \*

The year 2127

The forces of hatred and greed were afraid. They saw the end of their rule. They hit back. Prakasa and Lerato were imprisoned. Lerato believed she would die in captivity. I feared she was right.

\* \* \*

The year 2130

Lerato’s jailers killed her. Her death was a catalyst. Her song was sung in every land. Millions mourned for her and demanded Prakasa’s release. Her oppressors relented and set her free. Lerato’s death bought Prakasa’s liberty. Religious leaders, previously reluctant to challenge authority, urged that there should be no more martyrs. Soldiers rebelled against military commanders. Despots were thrown from power, and more progressive political leaders promised change. Another young woman, a child of the twenty-first century, native of the Nordic countries, joined Maka in her fight for the planet.

The quintet was again complete. The Scientific world pledged their support and applied their expertise to healing the damage done. Now we had a chance.

\* \* \*

Twenty-second-century; Earth

The quintet won the battle. People now live a simpler life, but they are happier. They have learned that if they nurture the Earth she will nurture them. If they endanger her they endanger themselves.

They are still learning to co-exist, if not in complete harmony, at least in acceptance that each individual has a right to their own beliefs as long as they don’t seek to harm or oppress anyone else. Ethnicity and gender identity are no longer a cause for conflict. Friendship has obliterated such boundaries.

\* \* \*

In the land where Maka was born, a farmer stoops to examine a rocky outcrop on his homestead. I listen to his thoughts as he ponders what use he might find for the black sludge that oozes through a fissure in the barren rock. So it begins again.

# Unfamiliar

by Harris Coverley

Ellsworth Melkin cast his eyes about his front room for something long, an object that could be held in one hand and thin enough to slide easily underneath the settee. He first considered rolling up a copy of the *Daily Express*, but decided this would not be nearly long enough, and would most probably leave his hand open to attack, like his face had been ...

*Oh god his face!* He hadn't even dared to look yet. He had repeatedly wiped the blood from his cheek with tissues after trying to wash the wound in the kitchen sink, but he didn't know how long or deep it was. And although the vision in his left eye was perfectly clear, he was terrified she had just been able to catch the white, even though the eyeball was painless.

Gently, but with a reserve of energy to leap out of the way, Ellsworth put his hands on the carpet and leaned down to view into the darkness below the settee. At the back, towards the wall, two green and vicious eyes greeted him, and he shuddered. She was still there, alert, waiting ...

He got up and went to the hallway mirror.

The damage was bad, but not *too* bad: the eye itself was fully unharmed, but pulling down the eyelid he saw two red scratches that proved she had come close to blinding or retarding his sight. The cut was around three millimetres wide and nearly three centimetres long, across the maxillary bone beneath the eye socket. A scar would be inevitable, but it was just a surface scratch.

As he poked his cheek, a trickle of blood exited and he reached for a new tissue to wipe it away. There were already enough rouge stains

on his sleeveless jumper to resemble an eclectic pattern.

“Little bitch,” he growled, looking back to his front room and wincing again.

The mackerel tabby, barely a teenager, had appeared in his back garden two weeks ago, thin, dusty, and collarless, as he had been dealing with his rose bushes. He had attempted to greet the cat, but she had shied away. She came back over the next couple of days, each time getting a bit closer to Ellsworth, until he had the notion to wait outside with a few cuttings of corned beef to tempt her to his feet. As he got in a stroke or two, he found she was *fuzzy* as opposed to *fluffy*—not like Toby, his mother's last cat before her death, a long-haired black tom who was an utter prostitute when it came to whose bed he slept on.

Over a week Ellsworth softened her to his knee while he sat in the garden chair, and just three days after that he brought her inside and set to the task of making her a house cat. It was the kind of thing mother would've done, and he so wished to remain in her good books even now. He purchased a new basket and a month's worth of dry food, and had a card on the fridge door of a man who installed cat flaps. The little girl-cat, whom he christened Blanche, a classic old lady name, had at first seemed so scared of everything, but she quickly settled in. In fact, she did not merely settle in—she took over the house.

However, Blanche soon became unreceptive to tickles and the ball he had got her with the bell in. She skulked around like she was in a prison and defecated in the hall, even though Ellsworth was sure to keep her outside while he was at work to do her “business.” One of

the worst incidents came two nights earlier, when, impatient, Ellsworth had picked her up under her protests and carried her to bed for a cuddle. Such impropriety on his part led to three cuts on his chin and puncture wounds on his hand, one of which still stung.

In spite of all this abuse and obvious unhappiness, she did not run away, and he still let her in. He was certain that she would domesticate, that she would get used to him, that he would not be so alone ... but this new assault was a step too far. All he had wanted to do was put her outside for a while, kiss her on the head on the way to the backdoor, a little bonding, a little signifier of affection ... but Blanche was having none of it.

She *had* to go. Right now. There was no other—

There was a knock at the front door that broke his chain of scheming.

He went down the hall and opened the bent plastic door with an awkward movement that suggested long-term experience with manipulating a faulty mechanism.

On the pavement stood a woman in her early forties, dressed in a black blouse with a short red skirt, dark leggings going down to black boots. Her hair was brunette, wild and frizzy, her face heavily made up with white foundation. She had a toothy smile that reeked of false sincerity.

“Hello there,” she said in a dark voice. “I believe you have something of mine.”

Ellsworth, feeling exposed with his wound, stood aside to let the woman in without questioning her statement.

After he shut the door they looked at each other. Never had two otherwise heterosexual people of the opposite sex and similar age been so unattracted to each other. He immediately found her common and grim, so unlike mother. She found it oppressively weird that a fortysomething man would dress like a geriatric from the 1950s, nor did she in any way find balding men with wire-framed glasses virile

or temptingly mysterious.

“I’m sorry,” Ellsworth said. “Your name ...?”

“My name is Edna,” the woman said. “And you have my cat, yes?”

“How ...” started the confused man, but the woman walked past him and through the door into the dining room.

“The front room, right?” she asked, as if she needed confirmation.

“How did you know she was here?” asked Ellsworth, following after her. “I didn’t tell anyone, or put up any posters, or anything.”

“A good mother always knows,” replied Edna.

Ellsworth internally agreed. *His* mother would know ... but *this* well?

Edna got on her knees and looked under the settee without prompting, Ellsworth no longer able to question it.

“Hello my baby,” she beamed, and the cat meowed in appreciation. Within a few seconds the striped beast was in the woman’s arms and being transported down the hall.

“Thank you, Mr. Melkin,” said Edna, the cat under her chin, purring away like the nightmare was all over. “I’ll take her out of your hands ... I can see she’s already given you enough trouble.”

“But ... what?” Ellsworth stumbled, wiping his untorn cheek. “How do you know my name? I don’t understand any of this ...”

The woman paused and turned to him.

“Mr. Melkin,” she began, stroking the animal, “are you acquainted with the concept of a *familiar*?”

Ellsworth shook his head, totally confused.

“Well, Mr. Melkin, people in, shall we say, my *line of work* like to have on staff a creature, usually a cat like this, to act as a familiar, that is, a companion, an assistant, maybe even a spy ... it’s just that this one got a little bored in her youth and wandered away on an adventure.”

“She’s so violent,” he said in pathetic complaint.

Edna laughed. “She will be with people not skilled in arts such as mine, Mr. Melkin ... well, toodle-ooo!”

Edna reached for the door, but Ellsworth put his hand on her shoulder and a chill went through him.

Edna halted and said with a matching iciness, “Don’t touch me, Mr. Melkin ... what would your dear mother say?”

Fighting his fears, Ellsworth stammered, “How do I know this cat is yours? Is she chipped? You can’t just take her, it’s not right!”

In his mind his pride was at stake. Even if the cat was awful and despised him, she was by all custom, without proof otherwise, still *his*.

Edna turned, and her cool eyes met Ellsworth’s dread-filled ones.

“I wanted to do this nice and cleanly,” she said. “But since you’re clearly not going to let me do that ...”

With a sharp movement, she swung her right hand, thumb and index finger in a loop, before Ellsworth’s face, the cat remaining comfortably cradled as it gave him a final moan and hiss.

He took a step back, but felt angry at what seemed a feigned attack. As he came forward, though, his wound suddenly burned like it was being seared and he yelped. He put his hand to his cheek and the blood was flowing again, worse than before. It was like a tap had been turned on and then the knob broken off. He looked at his crimson-soaked palm and wailed as Edna wished him farewell and

slammed the door behind her.

It took another hour before the bleeding stopped, but the throbbing pain carried on through the night until at daybreak it at last dissipated.

Over his morning porridge, groggy and grey-faced, Ellsworth decided against cats permanently. He would try a dog instead. Perhaps something like a Yorkshire Terrier, or maybe a Japanese Chin. He knew mother had been fond of those, he was sure of it.

A knock came at the door.

Ellsworth’s whole body shook with fear. But he calmed himself quickly—what was there to worry? It was probably just the postman with a package, hopefully the new interchange for his model train set in the attic.

He got up stiffly, wearied, went down the hall, and opened the door in the old awkward way.

There stood Edna holding a dark wicker basket by the handle, a look of indignation on her face.

“You’ve ruined her!” she almost yelled.

Ellsworth backed up against the wall to his right, almost breaking down in tears.

“Oh god,” he cried. “Not more! Please, leave me be!”

He slipped down the wall and his backside struck the uncovered floor with a thud, his head in his hands.

Edna came in and pushed the door shut.

“Oh shut up, you sad git!” she snapped.

She held up the basket and through gaps in the weave Ellsworth



could see a set of angry green eyes he was well acquainted with.

“Oh no!” he moaned. “You’ve brought it back to kill me!”

Edna rolled her eyes and put the basket on the floor before him.

“Her time with you has ruined her link with me,” she began. “I am supposed to train her from the earliest possible age ... it seems that when she got out on her own, she was still too young for the link to remain unbroken.”

“But, but, but ...” Ellsworth stuttered, his nose running. “But she recognised you! She got into your arms.”

Edna shrugged: “Simple reflex of familiarity ... any given cat will do that. But her ability to listen to direct commands has gone, and look at this ...!”

She held out her right hand to Ellsworth: a long red score went down the back from the knuckle of the middle finger to the rightward bone of the wrist.

“She’s never done this before ... it’s obvious: she’s useless to me now, so you can have her.”

Ellsworth trembled. “But can’t you use your, erm, *skills*?”

Edna shook her head. “No. There may be others with such strength of power to correct such things, but it’s not in my fiscal means to seek such wielders out, nor in my best interests given how they can be.”

“But I can’t have her! She hates me! Look at my face.”

Edna walked up the hallway, looking at the pictures on the walls.

“Even at this age it’s rare to lose a link,” she continued, ignoring the slumped man on the floor. “There must be something about *you* that ...”

She stopped and asked Ellsworth, “What was your mother’s maiden name? I can’t quite catch it in my mind ...”

“Erm, it was, it was *Parkhurst*, Susannah Parkhurst.”

Edna considered this and suddenly snapped her fingers. “Of course! I thought I’d sensed something, but I’d believed it just a crossed wire! Do you have a picture of her?”

Recovering some strength, Ellsworth managed to get up.

“The top drawer, the bureau,” he said, stretching his neck.

Edna opened the drawer and removed a cracked leather-bound book labelled *Memories*.

“Why don’t you have any pictures up?” she asked him.

“Her presence is already everywhere here,” he confessed, coming to her side. “I don’t need the physical reminders.”

Edna opened the book and there on the first page was a family picture: little Ellsworth and his sister Margaret, seated beneath the stern expressions of John and Susannah Melkin.

Edna squinted and turned the page, whereupon was a portrait of a much younger Susannah Melkin, when she was still a Parkhurst.

“Yes,” mumbled Edna, considering the grey visage, still tinged with the possibilities of adolescent hope. “It all makes sense now ... she was one of us.”

“One of *you*?”

“She was a powerful soul too. And her abilities, in spite of an obvious lack of nurturing, are present within you, in some way, raw and formless, but *there*.”

Ellsworth struggled to process this new information, but Edna had already turned to leave.

“Wait!” he called out as she moved towards the door. “I can’t do this!”

“It’s all in you, Ellsworth,” said Edna, turning to look back at him. “You just need to listen carefully to your inner wisdom.”

Edna came back to him and patted him on the head with a, for once, genuine smile. “Take it easy with her. It’ll come. Good luck and goodbye.”

She moved fast down the hall and out the door, saying something about him being able to keep the basket, and was gone, the dust moving in the morning light with the closing of the door.

Ellsworth looked down at the basket. A small meow came from within.

He unlatched the lid, lifted it up and over, and it clanked to the floor.

There was the banded face of Blanche, Edna’s original name for her still and forever unknown to Ellsworth, staring up at him.

Leaning in, he stroked her once, twice, and no more upon on the head, withdrawing his hand gently. That would be enough interaction for the day. Afterwards, she put her paws on the edge of the basket and leapt out, balling up in one of her previous primary spots under the hallway chair as though nothing at all had happened.

Ellsworth checked his watch and saw that it was time to go to work.

He looked at his face to see that the cut was fine and moistened with antiseptic, the best way for it to heal, then gathered his keys and wallet, and put on his coat. As he left, he bid the cat farewell and locked the front door.

He walked down the street to the bus stop, the cold breeze irritating the open cut, but it did not concern him.

The revelation had fully come to him: he at last had a task in life to concentrate on that really meant something. He would tame that damn cat, and it would be but the first step towards reclaiming a legacy he had never known he had.

# Petitions

by Ed Ahern

It's always struck me as peculiar  
that invoking a demon by spellcasting  
is cause for corruption and damnation,  
while praying to a saint in similar tone  
is seen as redemptive and uplifting  
even if I'm asking for the same things.  
Give me love, give me luck, give me looks.  
Maybe we can safely accomplish the gimmies  
by simultaneously appealing to both sides  
and letting them figure out  
who should take the call.

# Awaken

(model: Luzviminda  
Gabato Rivera)

by Carl Scharwath



# Premonition

by Emma Neale

Like ragged, black sheets drawn above a face  
a storm dragged across the town.  
Stranded on stubbled acres,  
leaning into a cold head wind's howl,  
I heaved, heaved, into that gale  
as if to haul on rope wrapped round boulders,  
boulders breaking waves of effort  
into shreds, shingle, splinters  
of stinging salt-cut water,  
as a voice inside said *push*,  
*you can push now, you have to push*,  
before a sudden silence belled.

In my throat, fear billowed dank smoke.  
I knew our youngest was lost, alone  
as crowds tried to make safe exodus  
in the nimbus-palled town behind me  
his tall slim form an unstaked hollyhock  
bent inside fate's hurricane.

Then like the breath between contractions  
I saw below the thunderheads  
two long, lean dogs milling;  
their russet coats like buffed copper,  
polished resin; two amber lanterns  
set in panic's window; and that was when  
my mind sheered off, shed its pod of reason

for I knew our son would soon find shelter;  
the wolves' kin that stood there now,  
their fur silk-shot and racing  
like grasses streaming in the wind,  
two warm heralds that announced  
our child's animal obsession  
would act as magnet in his skull  
to draw the young, red iron of him here —

yet an old woman some still call seer  
told me later, it was right,  
what my shucked mind saw;  
if there is anything left to guard us  
it will be the wilds that vine our blood  
on the future's blistered shores.

# The Rock Swimmers

by Harrison Kim

In my fourteenth year the authorities fostered me to a religious fanatic's fenced-in compound under the Cree people's sacred mountain, the long-extinct volcano known as Usakam. From my locked bedroom window the ridge along the summit resembled the form of a sleeping giant.

Shem, my foster father, made his money selling gravel from a huge pit scooped from the mountainside. The pit ran like a deep cut over the side of the sacred peak.

Like all my other foster parents, Shem used me for work. In my first week, I shovelled gravel, piled stones, laboured in the large garden, and hammered rocks in the pit.

Shem helped his two daughters, dark-haired, soft-voiced Anna, who was my age, and her younger sister Ariel, winch me twenty-five feet down a well hole to dig for water. "You must earn your keep," he told me. "Everyone does here."

A tanker drove in once a week with enough water to fill the cistern, but Shem wanted his own well. "I don't want to be dependent on outsiders," he told everyone at the supper table. "Mount Usakam will provide. It's knowing where to dig."

A water witcher confirmed the current well hole as a source. "Fifty feet down," the wrinkly-faced lady cackled, "is an underground spring. You have to shovel hard for liquid gold."

The hole was already a deep one. My job was to dig til I found the spring. Shem gave me a funny look and a tiny smile as he loosened

the winch. I stood in a bucket and grasped the rope as the two girls lowered me.

"I won't let you fall," Anna assured me, her thin arms holding the handle.

The air cooled as I reached twenty-five feet. The sky-showing hole above me formed a tiny blue O. Shem's big, bearded face appeared there. He commanded from above in his deep preacher voice. "Dig, boy, and find that liquid gold."

Earlier, I stood on the surface, enjoying the sun for the first time that day. Shem had stared at me with red-flecked eyes showing under his massive cowboy hat and said, "You are signing the naming document today, Kevyn."

"No," I told him. "My name is not Kevyn. It will always be Maskwa."

From the day I arrived, Shem pressured me to sign a paper that would legally change my name to Kevyn, which he said meant "handsome birth." "Accept the even tone of Kevyn," said Shem, "and you will no longer be a moody failure of a boy."

He believed that every letter of a person's name represented a number, and the total number a name added up to created a person's character. "Maskwa" added up to 13.

"That's very unlucky," said Shem. He stared at me and quoted from the Bible. "The Old Testament prophet Shem lived six hundred

years,” he said. “I named myself after him and I haven’t been sick since. If you become Kevyn, you will live a happy, stable life.”

I looked at my foster father. I knew that Maskwa meant “fearsome bear” in my indigenous Cree language. That was my true identity. I had a strong temper and a tough will, like the animal I was named after.

“I will never be a Kevyn,” I told him.

He gave me a long look. “You will sign that legal paper, sooner or later.”

I had come to the compound from the street several weeks before. I’d run away from my last foster home, where they made me work in their butcher shop every day after school. The authorities recaptured me and slammed me back into the system. I should’ve run away again when I had the chance. Now I was locked in my room every night, imprisoned by the compound’s high fence. Shem’s wife Dorothy home-schooled me for a couple of hours every day, to meet requirements. Other than that, I shovelled, dug, moved gravel, or pulled weeds on Shem’s garden plot.

“When is lunch?” I yelled up at Anna. “I’m hungry.”

“We’ll lower you down some sandwiches,” Anna said. She smiled down at me.

“Make sure you put lots of meat on the bread,” I yelled back.

She giggled, and Shem’s face appeared at the edge of the sky circle. “You’ll eat what you get,” he shouted. “Until you sign that paper.”

“I’m not signing,” I yelled, shovelling another pile of rocks into the bucket.

“Then you’ll not come out of there,” he shouted back, “until you

change your mind or we hit water.” He laughed like he made a joke.

I ate the peanut butter sandwiches Anna lowered down and kept working until evening. The picking and shovelling burned off my angry energy through the hours. I dug down at least three more feet.

“Are you going to winch me up now?” I asked Ariel, as I saw her face peer over the edge of the sky hole. She was ten, freckle-faced and straw-haired.

“Dad says no,” she said in her high child voice.

“What do you mean? He can’t keep me in this hole.”

Now Anna appeared. “I’m gonna drop you down some supper,” she said. “I bought an extra orange.”

She lowered the food in a bucket, a plate of beans and rice with the fruit. I took out the supper and Anna winched the bucket back up.

“It’s cold!” I yelled. Dust and gravel covered my clothes. “I have to get out of here.” Anna threw down a coat.

“Dad says you have to stay,” she said, and moved away from the edge of the hole.

A few minutes later, Shem’s hawklike face appeared.

“You can come out if you sign that paper,” he told me.

“This is abuse!” I yelled back up. “You can’t do this! I’ll tell the authorities.”

“When your name is changed, you’ll mellow,” Shem shouted. “Until then, enjoy your time in the well.”

I threw my shovel up to get him in the face, but it fell far short and

clattered back down, bringing rocks and dust. I kicked it out of the way and put the coat on. It was a good, big parka, thanks to Anna. She was the only one who'd been kind to me. I reached my hands to the sides of the hole and pushed myself up. I raised myself a few feet, but rock kept crumbling off. I made a bigger effort, and a great burl of stones and sand broke off and tumbled around my shoulders. The whole well could collapse if I tried to clamber up without a rope. I'd be buried under. I sat at the bottom of the hole and looked towards the sky. I shouted and yelled, "Come get me out of here, you coward!"

As night fell, the sky hole became a ring. Above the ring, stars sparkled. When I turned my face away I couldn't see my fingers, but the ring circle above me twinkled bright from its centre. I continued to roar like my namesake the bear. Nobody answered. I sank down to the floor, looked away from the stars to my feet. In front of me an outline shimmered. It appeared as the shadow of a shadow. After a time, it started to move. Then there were others. The first shimmers resembled inkblots, raised forms on dark paper. I thought maybe my eyes were still adjusting to the dark. The inkblots took on a blue, creeping aspect. They flowed in from the sides of the hole. I rubbed my eyes and opened them again. The forms danced around me. I watched, scared but also interested. Maybe all my yelling had tripped something crazy in my brain, or maybe something shared my space here. An hour passed. I tried to make sense of the shapes. As I did, they slowly grew definite outlines, arms and faces rippled from out of the rocks. I backed up against the side of the well. The outline figures filled the blackness.

"What the hell are you?" I shouted.

I heard a whispering within my mind. "What is your name?"

"Maskwa," I said, then louder, "My name is Maskwa. It means 'bear.'"

The voices floated in my head. At first, they vibrated and echoed,

then they calmed and became one tone. "You are alone with us beneath the earth," the voices whispered. "A bear lives alone inside the earth in winter. Your name sound is from the Cree tongue."

"Yes, my name is Cree," I said out loud.

"Then you know about us," said the voices. "Why are you here under Usakam?"

I discerned their features more clearly, more in my mind than in the dark. They appeared as animal creatures of all descriptions. Some resembled eagles, others salmon, still others more like owls and coyotes. They protruded from the rocks in every direction. Their teeth stood out, long and canine-like. I sensed the figures waving, like anemones in the stone. For some, only their beast-like heads showed. For others, their entire bodies moved loose. They swirled around in shimmers within the rocks and changed position. Their whispers lingered long after they spoke.

"My foster Dad made me dig this well," I told them. "Now he won't let me out until I change my name or find water." I stared around me. "Who are you?"

"We have always existed here," the voices hummed. "We are the rock swimmers who serve the sleeping giant."

"My grandfather always said this mountain possessed strange spirits," I answered.

"Your Grandfather was very wise," said the voices. "We're hungry." The forms around me showed their shimmering teeth. "We need to eat." One of the voices rose louder than the others. "We need to take a human soul," it said. "Gain back power from the ones who destroy Usakam."

The part about the soul made me think. "You don't want mine, do you?" I said.



“As you are named Maskwa, you’re protected here,” the voices chorused. “Greedy people mined Usakam, they logged off trees. Their forest fires burned the rest. Our spirits are weak. These people have made us hungry. They must pay us back.”

“I only want to get out of this well,” I said.

The voices came back fast and indignant, the figures weaving faster, in and out of the stone well wall. “Who put you here?”

“My foster father Shem. He’s the one who wants water.”

“Bring him down with us,” said the voices. “We’ll answer his request,” and I heard a cackling, a dry laughter.

“He won’t let me out til I agree to change my name,” I said.

“Will he let you out for water?” came the distinct voice.

“There’s no water,” I said.

“Oh yes there is,” said the voice. “We can gather it from anywhere under Usakam and bring it here. We will take you from this hole, and not just from this place, but from the place in your life where you do not belong.”

“Why would you do that?” I asked.

“We help those who belong,” they replied. “In return, you will carry our voices.”

“What does that mean?”

“You will always have our voices inside your mind, we will be part of you, as you will be part of us.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “You’re saying I’ll be possessed.”

“You will be guided by our voices. This is the deal we offer. These are the conditions.”

I looked up. Already the sky seemed to be brightening. “I have no choice,” I said. “I have to get out of here.”

I glanced around me at the growing light. The forms faded back into the rocks. As they did, I felt something wet burst out of the side of the well.

“Here is water,” the voices whispered in my head. “Bring Shem to us.” “It’s freezing cold!” I said.

A rock tumbled down from the surface, and I saw my foster father’s head in his large cowboy hat loom over the sky ring.

“Good morning, Kevyn. Have you decided to sign that paper yet?” he yelled.

“I found water here!” I shouted. My voice cracked some. “Come and see.”

I reached down and took up some of the liquid in my hands. I cupped my hands, reached down, and drank.

“It tastes delicious!” I yelled.

Shem’s shadowy face peered in at me. “I want a working well, not some crazy story,” he said.

“Give him gentle words,” I heard the rock swimmer voices.

“I heard you praying to the mountain, Dad,” I called. “You must take a look at this water. It will answer your prayers.”

I saw the bucket coming down.

“Did you call me Dad?” Shem’s voice sounded.

“Yes, I did, father,” I said. “You have taught me a lesson by leaving me here to think.”

“I’m glad you’ve learned,” he said. “Sometimes it takes a night or two of serious contemplation.”

When the bucket hit the bottom I scooped some water in it, grabbed the rope, and started to climb. I had to be fast. I braced my legs against the rock and pulled with my arms.

“What are you doing?” Shem yelled. “You stay down there!”

“I’m coming up with the water, Dad!” I said.

I climbed the twenty-five feet of wall in seconds.

Shem jumped back as I emerged.

“Look, Dad!” I said. I scrunched my eyes up at the day’s brightness, then winched the bucket to the surface. “See the water?”

Shem looked. It shimmered, silver and cool. He dipped his hairy arm in. “It seems like the old witcher was right!” he said. He whipped off his cowboy hat. “It was a good idea to leave you down there!” he laughed. “You’re a great worker.”

I let him jump around in his victory dance, his big arms waving, legs stomping.

“Make your next moves carefully,” the voices sang in my ear.

Shem swirled the water in the bucket with his huge calloused hands. “It’s really cold!”

“You should go and take a look,” I said. “I can winch you down there, Dad.”

He looked over the edge. “I like the way you call me Dad,” he grinned. “Maybe you will sign that paper now.”

I heard the voices of the rock swimmers. “Tell him yes,” they said.

“I’ll go into the lawyer’s office with you, after you’ve checked that water out,” I replied.

“I can’t tell you, son, how happy I am to hear you say this.” He swirled his arms in the water again. “You will become a much more agreeable person.” He took the water from the bucket and emptied it carefully over a tiny fir seedling poking up nearby.

“In ten years,” he said. “That will be a strong sapling, just like you will be a strong boy, Kevyn.” He grinned. “Lower me down,” he said. “Remember, I trust you.”

“I will remember,” I told him. He grabbed the rope, stepped into the bucket, and I winched him over the edge. I watched the top of his cowboy hat as he descended.

“When he reaches the bottom, roll that big rock down the hole and grab that plywood well cover,” said the voices.

I’d noticed the rock before, it was one of the first I’d dug out of the hole. On its other side was the huge slab of hammered-together plywood pieces, made big enough to cover the well hole so no one accidentally fell in.

I looked over at the house. Anna stood on the porch. She waved. I felt the rope go slack as Shem reached the well bottom.

“It sure is dark in here,” he shouted. “But you are right, I feel water all around me!”

I let go of the winch.

“Get that rock. Get that plywood!” screamed the voices.

I bent down and pushed the rock. It moved slightly. “Push harder!” the voices yelled. They were screaming in my ear; I had to obey. I grabbed a crowbar lying in the dust and wedged it up and the rock tumbled into the hole. I heard a tremendous crash downwards, and a scream muffled by a roar. I dragged the plywood over the hole, then stepped on top of it.

“Now what do I do?” I asked the voices.

“Keep the lid on!” they yelled. “Stand tall like a true walking bear.”

I put my weight on the plywood and felt a whirling and a vibrating below me. In my head I heard the echoes of the rock swimmer voices repeating, “We are very hungry. We must eat!”

I saw Anna moving towards me across the gravel turf from the house.

“What are you doing, Maskwa? I felt sorry for you all alone in the well last night.”

Shem’s wife Dorothy leaned on the verandah. “Where’s my husband?” she shouted.

I said nothing. There were too many rock swimmer voices in my head.

Anna ran over. “How did you get out of the hole?” she asked. “Where’s Dad?”

“I think he went to pray at the gravel pit,” I said.

The turbulence and vibrations disappeared from below the plywood.

“Why is the cover on?” Anna asked. “Did you feel an earthquake? The earth kind of jerked and rumbled a few minutes ago.”

Dorothy came puffing up on her short fat legs. “You’re supposed to be digging,” she said.

“I’m taking a break.” I stood with a slight grin, hands behind my back.

“Lift that cover off the hole, Kevyn,” Dorothy commanded.

“I’ll throw you down there too,” I muttered to myself.

Then I heard the rock swimmers in my head. “Do as she says.”

I reached down with all my strength and tossed the plywood up and over. Anna gasped.

“You threw that so far!” she said.

Dorothy stepped back. “I’m afraid I’ll have to give the authorities a bad report if you keep losing your temper,” she shouted.

I looked down the hole. The sun shone directly in. I saw nothing, except a dark rippling at the bottom.

“I didn’t lose my temper,” I told her. “I found water.”

Dorothy peered over the edge. It was all I could do not to grab her arm and pull her down.

“What’s wrong, Maskwa?” asked Anna.

I leaned forward, gazing at the empty well.

“Go down and get us a sample of that stuff.” Dorothy looked at me. “I want to taste it!”

It took me a moment to answer.

“If Anna can work the winch I’ll do it,” I told her, emptying the

bucket and grabbing the rope.

“Get ready,” said Anna. “I’m strong enough to hold you.”

I nodded. “I trust you,” I said.

As I descended, the circle of the sky became a ring once again, the sun angling in and light vanishing as I went deeper. A burning odour and steam like smoke rose around me as I reached the bottom of the well. I stood up to my knees in the water, my runners soaked. Something floated in the wet. I reached down and held it at arm’s length as my eyes adjusted to the light ... a dripping cowboy hat.

I looked around the sides of the hole. It took a few minutes, but packed among several stones I saw what looked like the image of a pair of lips and an open, toothless mouth. The mouth aligned along a crack in the rock. Water trickled out of the mouth and into the well.

“Shem the taker is giving back now, Maskwa,” whispered the rock swimmer voices.

I threw away the cowboy hat and pulled on the rope. “Get me out of here!”

“Are you bringing up some water?” yelled Dorothy.

I didn’t answer. I climbed up the rope like a crazed ape; clumps of gravel and rock sloughed off as I felt for footholds.

I reached the surface.

“Wow, you look so shivery!” said Anna. “You’re covered with dust.”

“You forgot the water, Kevyn,” said Dorothy.

“Get it yourself!” I told her. “And my name is Maskwa.”

Anna looked at me. “What did you see down there?”

“Nothing,” I told her.

“I’m going to get Shem,” Dorothy yelled. “You’re out of control!”

“You told us he was up at the gravel pit,” Anna said.

“I don’t think so,” I shouted as I grabbed a shovel. “But he’s somewhere around all right.”

I jogged up the hill, pretending to look for Shem. I stopped and stared at Mount Usakam, with its towering peak and burned-off forests from all the fires, at the roads that crisscrossed its sides from the logging, then at the big gash that was the pit itself.

“I killed my foster father,” I thought.

The rock swimmer voices answered back. “You have no responsibility, Maskwa. We pulled him into the rocks. He’s swimming himself now, within the mountain.”

I thought of the mouth spewing water at the bottom of the well. I wondered how long I’d hear those voices.

“I am Maskwa, the Bear!” I yelled. “Get out of my head!”

“We will be with you always,” murmured the rock swimmers. “We will help you find your voice, your life way with the mountain spirit.”

“Then I’ll never be free of you,” I told them.

“We will whisper lightly,” they said. “Carry your shovel, Maskwa.

There is a weak spot in the perimeter fence.”

Below, several pickup trucks pulled into the compound. “Dorothy must have called the neighbours to search for Shem,” I thought.

I ran across the pit to the compound fence, holding my shovel. Anna came running to meet me halfway.

“I don’t know what you did to Shem,” she said. “But I’m glad he’s gone.”

“Isn’t he your real father?” I asked her.

“He never was,” she said. “And Anna is not my real name.” She stepped closer.

“My real name is Onocaya. It means ‘hawk,’ and I see you clearly, Maskwa the bear.”

We stood there on the pit, staring at each other. She nodded, smiled, and we jogged to the fence, where I noticed a gap across a low dip.

“There is the weak spot,” said the rock swimmers in my head.

“Dig us out of here, Maskwa,” Anna whispered, and for the first time in many years I willingly obeyed a human voice.

# Fire Door

by Tim Hildebrandt



# Fire and Particles

by N.K. Leullier

Bodies in ecstatic prayer came together, sending ripples of energy across the island and awakening a great slumbering presence. Neither male nor female, the being occasionally paraded as one or the other. As it sought out the source of energy, it fancied itself male, erect and ravenous, and found a way to become so. *It* became *he*. Binary thinking was an unnecessary human invention, but he did enjoy slipping into a warm, pliant host to experience a moment of containment. There was very little he could not see or do; he was once hailed a god, but his glorious temple was now a cloister and his powers had much diminished.

The entity now gazed through globes of water and cells, eyes they called these pinpoints of limited sight, and in a small bedroom watched writhing covers hewn of rough and scratchy wool. Beneath he perceived the softness of two women's skin. One thin and pale, elbows and collarbones. The other was the opposite: brown, plush, and round. Limbs intertwined, there was just enough room in the bed. The current worship was not meant for him. The women worshipped each other. No matter. He could feed off the sheer physicality of any human experience, like a trapped mouse cannibalizing a dead companion. But he preferred willing sacrifice.

As he observed the females, the entity directed his hand to his borrowed body and felt the wetness of sweat on hard muscles. The hands, they stung. He lifted them in the darkness and saw cracks and burns, like desiccated land.

The lone candle illuminating the room was long extinguished; the entity took it before leaving. The women gazed at each other in the moonlight and shivered. A cool breeze had snuck through the open door.

\* \* \*

With mechanical efficiency, Ursula slipped into her dress and straightened the folds of her seventh skirt. She was eligible for new fabric in six more months, but for now the garment would last, wrinkles and all. It was a testament to her skill with needle and thread that she could recycle the remnants of one swath of black cloth so many times. After all, Ursula had been a seamstress in her previous life, but as she assessed the breathing heap in her bed, she could see little that reminded her of her old self. Except perhaps for Sister Etty's snoring, which sounded not unlike the husband Ursula had abandoned in the city of Gerauvan.

Ursula draped her great-grandmother's shawl across her bony shoulders, her only possession from the life she had fled, many years ago. It too would be left behind, someday. In the winter light streaming through the glassless window, Ursula's bare arms appeared translucent, her veins gray as if her blood had run dry.

Each dawn she was drawn to the window, which offered a view of the courtyard where all wings of the cloister met. The cloister was shaped like the spokes of a wheel, a place where single, meaningless parts connected and formed a greater whole. The cloister came alive in its usual fashion: the sisters walking to the refectory, the shepherdess herding her flock to pasture, and the clumsy gardener, Tot, carrying his tools, dropping one every few steps. All lost themselves in daily routines as steady as the stars moving across the firmament, but did these people keep a piece of their hidden self for later, to share as she did? Goosebumps freckled her skin at memories of Etty's touch. Ursula shrugged away her thoughts of the previous night. *The self was an indulgent concept best left to common folk.* Part official

dogma, part admonishment from Matriarch Arbella, that phrase came often to Ursula's mind. Sameness was not required to be a Sister of Veritas; individual characteristics were the simple result of the rambling madness of the world. The challenge was to set that individuality aside within the mind, to access Truth and find one's spiritual home. But in harsh daylight Ursula often struggled to reconcile her behavior with her beliefs.

Ursula returned to Etty and brushed dark locks away from her face to reveal thick eyebrows and full cheeks. The picture of health and vitality, even when unconscious. There must be some Truth to be found in sleep; if not, it was at least a consolation prize. Etty loved her sleep. Ursula quietly left the room and walked the musty stone halls toward the refectory even though she had decided to fast that morning, again. Hot porridge lulled her with comfort, apples from the cold cellar lifted her spirits with energizing sugars. Body emotions were affecting her meditations, and if she needed to choose between food and Etty ... Ursula's choice had been made. She had felt so close to Truth lately. Many of her fears and emotional excess had been shed along her journey.

Though the nature of Truth was hotly debated among the elders, Ursula was certain it would feel like pure, untethered freedom. A leaf in the wind, no longer earthbound. With every step along the serpentine halls of the cloister she longed to cast away her limited body. She had never felt at home in her ill-fitted sack of skin and bones. Creation was a deplorable seamstress.

Other sisters left their cells. Some like Ursula walked with eyes downcast, while others smiled in greeting. Ursula counted 480 steps from her room to the refectory; counting was a habit engrained from years of knitting. Numbers held a certain purity, perhaps even a hint of Truth. The refectory was a dim, cavernous hall smelling of beeswax and centuries of smoked meats, though meat was seldom served anymore. Most sisters sat at their respective place along dozens of long, rectangular tables. That morning Ursula was struck by the number of empty seats. She knew the sisters' ranks had waned in recent times, but that reality was only now becoming apparent.

Many sisters had been blessed with Truth, leaving behind nothing but footprints in the dust. Even dear Eunice, who became novice the same day as Ursula, had moved on. Ursula felt a pang of loss ... or was that envy?

Despite strict family traditions, females were in insufficient supply. Just a few days ago, Ursula had overheard Matriarch Arbella discussing the issue of low birthrates on the mainland. Just as well for Ursula. The cloister would be that much more peaceful with fewer novices running about.

Ursula retreated to the far end of the hall and stood against the cold stone wall. She stood with two dour-faced women, both older than her. They waited together in silence for first bread to end. Silence was good, a pathway to Truth, and a practically insurmountable challenge for the younger sisters.

As Ursula finally made for the garden door, her stomach roaring, Sister Patricia accosted her in a flurry of blond curls.

"Seen Etty around?" she asked, a grin spreading across her pink cheeks.

Ursula shook her head.

"Sure," said Patricia. She winked and handed Ursula a napkin filled with still-warm rolls before running off.

Ursula sighed. Her relationship with Etty wasn't exactly forbidden, but it was frowned upon. Some sisters would be thrilled to see men accepted as adepts, but then the cloister may as well become a match-making facility. Her feelings for Etty seemed special somehow. Etty had come to the cloister as the fifth daughter of a wheat farmer whose fields had turned barren, a common occurrence in recent years. After tearful embraces, Etty had boarded the ferry and arrived at the cloister not to seek Truth, but to ease her family's burden. This Etty told Ursula over a hot cup of cocoa and salty tears, the very first day they met, two years ago.



Ursula had not known that such a bond with another female was possible. It was cause for great amusement among the younger sisters, while resulting in glares and sniffs of disgust from the older ladies. Matriarch Arbella had gone so far as to take Ursula aside.

“If you are so concerned with what lays between your legs, then perhaps you should have remained in your husband’s bed,” she had said, her words betraying her kindly smile.

Ursula’s belly turned to lead at the thought of that alternative life.

\* \* \*

The garden was yellow. Not a cheerful hue, but the dreary yellow of parched grass, desiccated flowers, and sawdust. Rain had not fallen for almost two full months. The droughts had been altering each season, turning even the wet winters into something of a new season altogether. Ursula recalled Etty calling it the “little death” because it felt like the end, just until spring proved you wrong with its peacock display. Etty also thought the clouds had become capricious –Etty thought many things– but Ursula found the clouds as patient and yielding as ever. They obeyed the rotations of the planet and the whims of the wind, yet seemed at peace with this arrangement. They owed nothing to the people below. But the dry birdbath at the center of the courtyard served as a daily reminder of the changes creeping upon the cloister.

Ursula watched as a wispy novice no older than twelve holding a large earthenware jug approached the birdbath. Her arms shook as she struggled to pour without splashing the precious content. Renewed, the bath and its water glistened black. When the novice raised her head, Ursula noticed the many scars on her childish features. Ursula wondered if they were self-inflicted –some sisters favored the cat-o-nine in their quest– or if they were a parting gift from her previous life. Ursula felt her own scars tingle. If only they were seams. She would tear them open and step out of her costume.

“The fountain is made with obsidian. I mine it myself, from the side

of the mountain. In the crevasse. Did you know that?”

Ursula turned to find the young blacksmith who served the cloister standing near her, smiling. He offered an odd combination of handsome, chiseled features and poor teeth. He smelled of burnt skin.

“Not much surprises me. I have been here some time,” Ursula replied as she readjusted her shawl.

His eyes twinkled black like the obsidian fountain.

“I recognize the experience in your face,” he said, brushing Ursula’s scarred lower lip with the tip of his finger. “But did your Matriarch tell you the crevasse is really a fire pit? Long ago it spat out the guts of the One God, Kolvar. They hardened into mountains and valleys, into this island you walk on and into the ore I collect.”

Ursula took a step back and snorted at the blasphemy of Kolvar as a living planet, but it was a good tale, a very ancient one, and she could easily picture the titanic god bleeding the world into existence. The lore was still spoken of in Gerauvan, but it had long entered the realm of pure myth. Fodder for children.

“Then surely the oceans are pools of his tears,” said Ursula.

The blacksmith frowned and edged closer. His smell overtook her like a wildfire.

“And we are all children of Kolvar, born from *Its* great body,” he said.

As the blacksmith’s eyes lingered, Ursula wondered if the man had inhaled too many fumes from the smithy.

“Still the Matriarch thinks birds are thirstier than the townspeople,” he continued. “What would Kolvar think of that?”

The fine hairs on Ursula’s arms stood on end. Perhaps the strange

blacksmith was sharper minded than she had realized. Ursula offered him a lopsided smile that she hoped looked sympathetic and ran from the flower garden into the shade of the arboretum. Nobody remembered how the people came to be. The age of science had come and gone, in flames. The few remaining thinkers now claimed that one day, in the world's infancy, humans appeared as if by magic and then reproduced amongst themselves, like rutting animals. Unbelievable, thought Ursula. Yet Ursula existed, and so did the chill in her chest; wasn't that knowledge sufficient? Besides, such subjects had not been welcome in school and were usually answered with a lashing. Only a simple life and the search for Truth mattered, but Ursula, like the blacksmith, also knew prayer and meditation were unlikely to make the rain fall.

A few days ago the pump had coughed up silt and sand. The barrels storing water were still mostly full, but already their fundamental contents were rationed. The settlements on the mainland, with Gerauvan at the center, served the cloister and did not have the means to store sufficient water for drier times. Any surplus was directed to the cloister. The sisters relied on the peasants for their survival, and the peasants lived to serve, as Ursula once had.

Ursula glanced back at the newly filled birdbath. The garden was teeming with fluttering sparrows attracted by water and the bread rolls she had dropped. The Matriarch might agree to let the gardens wither so each worker could take home an extra water ration to sustain their family, but Ursula knew the situation would need to escalate before that decision was made. The gardens were the pride of the cloister, and many of the plantings were centuries old. The blacksmith was gone, but his question followed Ursula like a rain-heavy cloud as she made her way to the three widows on the edge of the sea.

\* \* \*

Ursula chose the middle tower, the highest, called the Weeping Widow. The old tower leaned dangerously toward the cliffs below, bent as if crying and reaching for her husband's corpse down in the seabed. Men no longer sailed very far, their boats small and only fit

for fishing along the shoals near the barrier reef protecting them from the open sea. Seafaring lore was one more casualty of the previous era, but the cloister still attracted widows.

The tower's entrance, a gaping archway with a crumbling keystone, was foreboding but for the playful carvings visible in the damaged stone. Ursula enjoyed the tactile sensuality they offered. She closed her eyes and felt the outlines of men and women dancing at the bottom of a valley, of abstract lines radiating from below their feet and above their head, and strange animals she did not recognize. To ascend the stairs, she closed her eyes and counted each step. Like breadcrumbs on a forest path, pieces of granite from the ailing structure were strewn about the winding staircase. Ursula recognized the feel of each one as they scraped against her ankles.

Every structure on the island was in a state of decay, but this tower was furthest down that road. For centuries it had been exposed to the harshest winds and salts of the sea. Other structures were vital to the functioning of the cloister, and workers could never be spared for the towers. Mortal and neglected, they aged, letting pieces of themselves fall away. Ursula felt a certain kinship with the towers.

A gust of wind came through a wide crack in the wall and took hold of Ursula's skirt, threatening her delicate balance. She stood still, took a deep breath, and moved along. The cold stung her face and numbed her fingers, but she barely noticed. In ascension she began the early stages of her meditation: the counting, the rhythmic breathing. Finally, she reached the tower room with its expansive, gaping windows and peered at the raging body of water surrounding the island. So many tears must have Kolvar cried.

Ursula sat cross-legged on the bare, dusty floor and let her mind fly.

\* \* \*

Ursula floated above endless fields of blue-green grass. A warm summer breeze caressed her hair, and she welcomed it. She imagined her body dissolving into particles as small as the dust visible in a slant of

light. In this form she could travel. Ursula of wind and light observed Hurvid, her once husband, burying the pale blue box in their garden, sweat glistening off his meaty back, while past Ursula lay in bed in their one-room cottage. She harbored a secret smile, which she pressed deeply into her tear-stained pillow. That was the day she chose to join the Sisters of Veritas and abandon a life of production and reproduction, a cycle that gave her no joy.

This meditation once took Ursula to many places, from a childhood she could fit into the eye of a needle, to the day her body became her jailor. But she had shed those memories, traveled through them until they dissolved into her own inner light. Only Hurvid and that wretched box remained. The usual banishing techniques never seemed to help her resolve the emotional contradictions present in that particular memory. Beyond, she was certain Truth awaited.

This time, she buried herself in the meditation. Hour after hour passed. Hunger and thirst had been left at the foot of the tower. She could wait forever. Finally, through closed lids, Ursula made out the soft brilliance of a distant sunset and the first blinks of the Horizon Star, a star so low in the sky it appeared to skim the ocean surface. The present seeped into Ursula's meditation. An image of Etty came to her. She would be waiting for Ursula. Etty, so simple and cheerful in the best of ways, who had never been forced to marry and bear children. Etty's soft body made Ursula forget about her own. As Ursula became distracted by thoughts of Etty, she could still see the image of Hurvid hunched over a hole that would never be deep enough, the painted box cupped within four dirt walls. The garden was a patchwork of filled-in holes. Hurvid moved his lips, perhaps saying a short prayer, as his calloused hands wielded a shovel. For the first time in Ursula's visions, Hurvid turned and looked straight at her, the real Ursula, sitting on the floor in the empty tower room. His eyes were black when they should have been brown, and his mouth flipped into a smile with as many secrets as her own.

"What do you want, my wife?"

"Just let me be," Ursula replied.

"There is something more you desire. It radiates from within you. You are as hungry as I."

He spoke in no way like the Hurvid she had known. Ursula rubbed her eyes, but Hurvid with his lumpy, plain features was still there, superimposed onto the real world. Ursula stood, sensing her moment had finally come. Fear was no more than a fly to swat, but anger was a beast to harness.

"I want you to lay in that hole, too, and be gone forever," she said.

"Die?"

"Die."

"Then do something about it," he said, dropping his shovel and taking a step toward Ursula.

Ursula placed her hands on Hurvid's slick chest; he felt as real as any man. She pushed hard. Hurvid grinned with all teeth and gave no resistance. He flew out from the tower window, laughter trailing behind as the earth at the foot of the tower opened into a red, fiery maw. Ursula stumbled backwards and came down hard on the stone floor. She covered her face with trembling hands and waited for Truth, for some glorious moment of release, but it never came. Instead, a wisp of smoke found its way through the crack between her fingers. Her throat convulsed, and she rushed to the window for air only to find the tower engulfed in flames, and the fissure from her meditation still open like a wound in the earth. The cliff top was ablaze, and she could still hear Hurvid's laughter along with shouts in the distance. Ursula stood frozen at the window, swallowing smoke. Her eyes filled with tears.

"Sister Ursula! Come!"

Ursula turned to find the young blacksmith in the tower room, waiting near the stairs. She wondered at his sudden appearance and knowledge of her name, but that seemed a trifle compared to what

had just taken place. She lifted her skirt with one hand and took the blacksmith's crusty hand with the other. Heat radiated from the walls as the two practically tumbled down the tower. They exited the stairs into a cloud of opaque smoke. The blacksmith pulled and guided her, not once stopping. Ursula closed her stinging eyes and followed him blindly for what seemed like eternity. She heard shouts of terror and of purpose. She heard the rumble of carriages and the clash of equipment. The peasants fought the fire, but in the pitch black of Ursula's mind, it was all, far, far away. Just another meditative nightmare. She finally smelled fresh air, felt grass under her feet, followed by the ringing of ceramic tiles.

Ursula opened her eyes, and before she could regain her bearing, the blacksmith had pulled her down an unfamiliar flight of stairs. At the bottom was a massive bronze door, and next to it, a dangling rope. The blacksmith pulled the rope, and a bell resounded through the thick walls. The door swung open to a dark, low-ceilinged room filled with furniture and strange shapes covered by white sheets. Matriarch Arbella, stiff as a statue, sat at a desk covered in parchments, a roaring fire at her back. She removed her reading glasses and studied her guests.

“Sister Ursula, I hadn't expected you. Come closer.”

\* \* \*

Arbella pointed to a chair. The blacksmith pulled Ursula's arm and pushed her into the seat. Ursula tried to speak but fell into a coughing fit. The Matriarch bent behind her desk and disappeared from view; Ursula heard a drawer open, glasses clink. Arbella resurfaced with two oblong crystal glasses and an obsidian decanter. She poured an inch of rosy liquid into each glass.

“Have some fire wine, won't you dear. It will help clear the smoke from your lungs.”

Ursula accepted the glass and poured the wine down her throat. It tasted of honey and charcoal, and something else entirely unfamiliar.

She had never tasted alcohol before. It was said to be a lost art, the making of fermented beverages.

“Good, isn't it?” asked the Matriarch. “The recipe has been perfected over the years. My best batch yet.”

When she smiled, her jowls quivered as if some intense energy was contained within that expression.

“Where are we?” asked Ursula. “Is the cloister burning?”

“You're in the cloister, child. In the lowest level, where I keep my office and records. The only fire here is the one heating my old bones.”

The administrative spaces were in the same building as the refectory, not in the lower level. At least, that is what Ursula had believed. She had been there on many occasions, notably on her first day as a novice, as a frightened woman-child. She had never set foot in such a grand building. But the office Ursula knew had been filled with cheerful flower arrangements, and the midday sun shone through the curtains. She had eaten toast and jam with the Matriarch and cried tears of relief. That moment now felt as distant as her life in Gerauvan.

“From the tower I saw the land burning. We ran through the smoke.”

“Hmm, yes, the towers and their surroundings are burning to the ground as we speak. But I've already taken the necessary actions to ensure the destruction won't spread, haven't I, blacksmith?” Arbella said, turning her smile to the blacksmith. He gave a curt nod.

The Matriarch nodded in return, her chin a spike that stabbed the room, and flipped a lever near her hand on the desk. The bronze door opened as if by magic, and the blacksmith bowed his head. As he walked away, he held Ursula's gaze, and the flames from the fireplace reflected in his eyes. Ursula remembered her husband who was not her husband.

“Tell me Ursula, what makes you special?” asked the Matriarch.

“Excuse me, Matriarch, I don’t understand. Should we not be helping with the fire?”

The Matriarch’s smile was gone, but the jowls still quivered, and her eyes, which had been wide and languid, had become small and alert.

“Do you think it’s because you have taken a lover? Do you think that is new and unexpected? Many sisters enjoy the moistness of another woman or lift their skirts for the gardener to plow. If I had a piece of gold for every such occasion, why, I could hire enough mercenaries to build my own army. I could make real changes with an army at my command.”

Matriarch Arbella gulped the rest of her wine and poured herself another measure. Ursula was more disoriented than when she had walked blindly through smoke.

“Tell me, what did you see up there, in the tower?” asked the Matriarch.

“I was working through my meditation, the last memory that has plagued me. ...”

The Matriarch lifted her hand.

“I did not ask what you were doing. What did you see?”

“I saw my husband, and he spoke to me.”

“Interesting. Did he say what he wanted?”

“He ... he wanted to know what *I* wanted.”

The Matriarch laughed and spittle ran down the side of her mouth.

“Really? You must have misunderstood. Everyone knows what you want, Ursula. You want the same thing all these stupid women want. Peace, freedom from pain, Truth with a capital ‘T.’ Your lives are

made so miserable that you have but two choices, become a mother or a Sister of Veritas.”

Ursula clenched the armrests with hands as tense as eagle talons. She may not have understood much, but she knew when she had been duped. Matriarch Arbella spoke like the administrators from Geravan, with contempt for the people. The same administrators who arranged marriages, executions, and beatings. The same administrators with their long-fingered healer who prodded her before her wedding night. He spread her legs and tapped her buttocks the way you would pat cattle that needed moving along. Good girl. But she was never a good girl, and the mainland shot her out with more violence than when she had left her own mother’s womb.

“I’m sorry you’ve lost your faith, Matriarch,” said Ursula.

“When God spits on your face, losing your faith is the least of your worries, child.”

“There is no God, only Truth.”

The Matriarch’s face relaxed and settled into a weary expression. For a moment she looked like the kindly old lady who had handed Ursula a napkin when she had smeared jam all over her blouse, that morning long ago, in the other office.

“The truth is, I have failed, and God is waking up. Can’t you feel that faint tremble below your feet? Kolvar is awake even as we speak. It’s hungry. I can keep it satisfied for now, but not much longer. Then ...”

Tears had crept into the Matriarch’s voice, and Ursula found herself pitying the older woman, that staunch example of what a strong female could be. She could barely fathom the secrets and deception surrounding Arbella, but she could see them outlined in the loose shape of her once full lips. Words half-formed, screams held back. It was a look Ursula recognized.

“How can I help, Matriarch? I’ll do anything to save the cloister.”

Arbella straightened her shoulders and passed a withered hand over her features. She smiled.

“I know you will, Ursula, I know.”

\* \* \*

The blacksmith lay prostrate in filth, his face mere inches from his fire pit. All the smithy’s doors, vents, and windows were closed. The air was thick with smoke and the tang of unprocessed ore, but the blacksmith was used to rank air. Of late, he often found himself nauseous when out in the open. Like a fisherman feeling unease upon the immobile earth, the blacksmith coughed in the face of a fresh breeze. Earlier that day, the burning towers had invigorated him. He could not recall what he had been doing before finding himself at the top of the Weeping Widow, beckoning to the sister, Ursula.

He lifted his head and gazed at the dancing flame. His handsome features spread into a smile as the heat pierced him. Sitting up he wiggled his fingers, then shook his arms and shoulders. Soot fell from his garments. He reached for the ground and sifted through piles of ash and sharp bits of clinker. Something about his movements, his very own body was unfamiliar, delightfully so.

“These bodies we take for granted,” he whispered in the dark.

“Bodies that beat and breathe and twitch. Yet you notice none of it.”

“I notice.”

“*Now*, you notice.”

Two different voices had spilled from his mouth, but the blacksmith did not feel divided. He felt more complete than ever. He stood and walked over to one of many workstations. Each worktop was heavy with tools and ore samples. The blacksmith was more than a craftsman; he was an artist. His favorite creation had been the obsidian bird bath. The Matriarch had acquired the bird bath, created in

Kolvar’s honor, and placed it at the center of the cloister.

For months the blacksmith had searched the mountain for another such obsidian fragment. Every evening after work, he took his supper of bread and cheese and made the ascent to the top of the mountain, followed by the long descent into the mountain’s crevasse. All for slivers, skinny glass needles unfit for a masterpiece. He had never been much of a thinker, but then ideas had suddenly found him, appearing in his mind like holy gifts. Just the previous night he had collected a dozen larger fragments, guided by these new thoughts and a candle stolen from the cloister. He awoke the next morning scraped and battered, but with a sense of purpose.

The blacksmith grabbed a pair of heavy iron tongs, opened them and reached toward the flames.

“Useless.”

The blacksmith lowered the tongs and lifted a questioning eyebrow. A singed eyebrow.

“You have all that you need.”

The blacksmith raised his hands. Cracked and burned like desiccated land. He reached into the flames, searching. The fire could not match the power of a volcano, and yet the shards had merged and become one mass of malleable obsidian. The blacksmith cradled the mass in his hands; it was smoother than clay. He began shaping it in quick motions, creating curves and straight lines. Delicate angles formed the limbs and torso of a woman. An imperfect shape, perfect in its imperfection.

Heat beyond belief, flames licked at the blacksmith’s skin, and he marveled at the strength of his body and of Kolvar’s will. At the strength of the one that he held in his hands.

\* \* \*

Ursula was pushed down a forgotten, never-ending stairwell; at least, that is how she felt when Arbella dismissed her with one disdainful flick of the finger. Dazed and dehydrated, Ursula followed the destructive momentum of the day and returned to the edge of the cliff, where the peasants battled the fire. Her watery eyes stared ahead; she barely noticed the complex system of pulleys used to carry buckets of seawater to the top of the cliff, much as the peasants appeared to ignore her presence. An errant sister was none of their concern. The peasants covered their mouths and dowsed their own clothing before emptying their buckets onto the burning earth. Ursula walked among them, her skirts billowing in a breeze that only fanned the flames.

The land around the towers was fallow and abandoned, filled with tall grasses that scratched at Ursula's legs and burned with the intensity of fireworks when the smallest spark ignited, but that did not seem sufficient to explain the tall plumes of smoke that arose from the ground, tunneling the sky. Had she caused this destruction with her meditation?

Passing through a wall of smoke to approach the towers, Ursula thought she saw two sparkling lumps of coal, observing her. The blacksmith. She felt an urge to pluck his eyes, but then they were gone, surely imagined, and the towers were within reach. They were permitted to burn; the flames would starve once every bit of wood had been consumed. When the final retainer beams crumbled, so would the towers.

With eyesight that no longer seemed impeded by such things as smoke and ash, Ursula could see other sisters watching at a safe distance, near the steadfast stone walls of the cloister. Sad specks of black, gray, and white. They mourned the loss of the towers, as did she. But Ursula also mourned something of a different magnitude: her remaining shreds of innocence. How could she have been so naive?

Time passed, as diffuse and impenetrable as the blacksmith's eyes, and Ursula finally stirred, thought of Etty. Decisions must be made; she could no longer let outside forces carry her along when she could not even identify friend from foe. She left the site of the fire, let the

cries and the crackle diminish in the distance. The cloister sat gorging on silence as the sisters made themselves scarce. Ursula assumed they were either outside still watching the destruction or laying prostrate in one of the many prayer rooms, plush spaces filled with embroidered pillows and incense, though like everything else in the cloister, the pillows were old and faded.

When she reached the bedroom shared with Etty, Ursula was surprised to find her piled under the covers as if she had remained in the room all day. Ursula sat on the edge of the bed and shook her beloved.

"Wake up, Etty. We must talk. How can you be sleeping?"

"I'm not sleeping. I'm hiding," Etty said, peering from behind the blankets. "You smell like smoke."

Etty's eyes were red-rimmed and her nose rubbed raw. Ursula grabbed her hand, but Etty pushed it away and leapt out of bed. She was fully dressed and her hair had been woven into a thick braid, from which dozens of strands had fallen out. She looked as disheveled as ever.

"I was so worried, what with that awful fire. I ran around the cloister calling your name, but I didn't dare go to the towers. Now I'm crying for a whole other reason."

"Please don't be angry. I came to you as soon as I could. I just left Matriarch Arbella, and I have so much to tell you."

"You can't have just left off with the Matriarch, because I was just with her. She called me to her office. She told me you were safe."

"Which office?"

Etty tilted her head like a confused puppy, then a big, lone teardrop meandered down her cheek. Ursula reached up and cradled Etty's face in her hands.

“So warm,” said Etty.

“I left Arbella, then watched the towers burn. I’ve never felt such heat.”

And now she listened to Etty recount her day. Out of bed, Etty flitted to and fro, between the window and the door, like a captive sparrow. She told of her late breakfast, her work at the stables—even the sisters helped with chores—and her terror upon realizing that Ursula was meditating in the towers when the fire had ignited. Ursula listened, seated on the bed, wanting Etty to find a modicum of calm before she shattered her reality once more.

“And now this,” Etty said, wringing her hands. “I’m not sure I’m ready.”

“Ready for what, dearest?” asked Ursula, reaching again for Etty’s hand. This time Etty let her take hold.

“The Matriarch told me I was ready. For Truth. I couldn’t believe it. I was so happy, then I was immediately sad. Because I thought we would find it together, you and me.”

Truth could be found in many ways. Alone in meditation, through a powerful dream whisking you away in the night, or communing with nature down a wooded trail. Particles, that is what they became. These solitary spiritual raptures bore no witnesses, and after her conversation with the Matriarch, Ursula now gleaned their meaning: women vanishing into thin air, taken, as other sisters foolishly rejoiced. Taken, yes, but the where, how, and why, Ursula could not fathom.

There was, however, one more path to Truth. A time-honored tradition.

“To walk down the crevasse and find Truth without you, Ursula. I don’t know that I can do it.”

Ursula felt her blood drain, her bones reach for her skin, turning her a

whole new shade of pale. But bones were also strong, and Ursula needed a carapace of sorts to shield Etty from this doom that paraded as Truth. Etty’s greatest sorrow, the parting from her family, had seemed a great gift to Ursula, who had never known such joy. For Ursula, the word *family* invoked want, and hunger. Family was akin to a famine of the soul. But when the two women embraced, Ursula often found herself saying a silent prayer: that Etty may remain untouched by grief. The wish was not selfless; when Ursula tasted Etty’s lips, something of her innocence escaped, and alighted on Ursula, ever so briefly. A brightness, a kiss from a firefly.

“Anywhere we go will be together, trust me,” said Ursula.

\* \* \*

That night in their room, they spoke little and nursed empty stomachs. Not a soul sought them out. This was a relief and yet an immense, unspoken anomaly. With barely a footstep to be heard in their corner of the cloister, no nosy tapping at the door, Etty and Ursula seemed mercifully forgotten.

Ursula said nothing of the Matriarch’s cruelty, of the possibility of the god Kolvar. Possibilities were malleable bits of reality, so of course Ursula had said nothing, not yet. Ursula had believed truth to be a simple thing, like good or evil, clear as day and night. But how to judge a night sky obscured by smoke? As she lay next to Etty, counting cracks in the plaster ceiling, she failed to grasp the scope of it all. Instead, she let part of her mind go blank, and on the outer edges of this mental eclipse, she accepted one simple truth: they must flee.

When the night had taken hold long enough that silver moonlight streamed through the curtain Ursula had fashioned from a torn sheet, she woke Etty. Her eyes opened at once. Ursula understood that Etty had also lain awake, sensing the coming of some action before daybreak. Ursula busied herself about the room, while Etty, unusually placid, patted her braid and waited.

Ursula retrieved her sewing box and balls of yarn from under the



lumpy mattress. Etty owned a cracked leather satchel, some blue ribbon she never wore, and a pack of faded cards. Two long wooden matches and a pewter candlestick, but no candles. The clothing they wore. Not one coin, nothing fit for trade, and yet Ursula knew they had to run with whatever they owned. They owned nothing. And still she could not bring herself to tell Etty the reason why they must steal a boat and row to Gerauvan.

The two women crept through the crisscrossing halls, then at the second intersection stopped in front of a niche carved into the wall, where the stumpy remains of an ancient statue stood guard. Ursula reached behind a pair of legless marble feet and brought out a wax stub tipped with a sad wick.

“Never waste,” whispered Ursula.

She always kept the ends of candles, to illuminate her late-night meditations. Hid them here and there. Her devotion had led to resourcefulness, if nothing else. Ursula placed the stub into the candlestick and lit one of the matches. As Ursula pulled Etty down the bitter cold halls of the cloister, faster now that they moved by candlelight, she willed a smile onto her face. A pretension of excitement, of adventures awaiting.

“Won’t they be worried? Even angry?” asked a panting Etty.

Ursula veered to the left, down a narrow service hallway used by the cooks to move goods between the storeroom and the kitchens. The hall was encumbered with empty burlap sacks once filled with grain. Ursula gently pressed Etty against the wall, took her hands in hers.

“We will write the Matriarch a note.”

A lie can be sweet as honeysuckle when the lie is a kindness accepted by both parties. As they entered the kitchens, Ursula was struck by other sorts of lies. On the surface, the signs of a busy kitchen: copper pots and utensils hanging from hooks, a row of cast iron stovetops and ovens, and shelves stacked with enough dishes to serve hundreds

of hungry sisters. But then, a meat cleaver jutted from a butcher’s block, rusted, forgotten. Upon closer inspection, most surfaces were caked in oily grime and dried bits of food. Little piles of brown dirt in the rooms’ corners turned out to be ants and cockroaches, belly up.

On the one clean countertop was a bushel of apples and a handful of jars filled with beans, rice, and wheat, along with a few leftover bread rolls from that morning. On one stovetop, a pot of congealed porridge with the consistency of cement sat as if waiting to be reheated. For how long had the sisters been reduced to this? Ursula did not partake in rich foods; that was her choice. During each pregnancy she had been force-fed every fatty, salty, and sweet item her husband could put his hands on. She was like a sow, round bellied with protruding nipples. But Ursula held no grudge against the sisters who indulged, or who, like Etty, needed the sustenance. She noticed Etty eyeing the apples.

“Take some, hurry.”

Etty opened her satchel and filled them with the fruit. In the colorless room, the apples were a shocking red. If they could speak, they would speak of life, of a simple existence without need for illusions. Ursula grabbed one out of Etty’s hand and took a bite, the crisp, juicy sound resounding in the desolate kitchen.

\* \* \*

Ursula threw open the kitchen door, and the two women fell onto a mound of trash. Rotten cabbages like severed heads, potato skins like something from a shedding reptile, and underneath, a mossy stone path. The path was on the outer edge of the cloister, a liminal space meant for the peasant workers; Ursula was confident it would rejoin the dirt road leading to the docks. As they ran, the candle blew out. It seemed an ill omen, but the moonlight was sufficient and more discreet, so Ursula let the wax stub drop. The candlestick she could sell. They ran until distracted by an unnatural shift in the air and a sound neither woman could ignore, but Etty was the one to let go of Ursula’s hand, drop her satchel, and dart through a stone doorway to the right.

Ursula pursued her and they quickly found themselves in the garden, back at the center of the cloister. They were surrounded. All the sisters were present in their drab outfits, their features equally drab, their figures obscured by the night. In unison, they hummed a single note that resonated from within their chests. All seekers of Truth were taught to recognize the simple song used to guide a sister to the crevasse. Ursula had never witnessed the rare ceremony used when the individual quest for Truth became a group endeavor. Her breath was taken away by the note, round and thick in her eardrums. Etty next to her shivered.

“They’re calling to me. I couldn’t help myself, Ursula,” said Etty, her eyes lowered.

But Ursula did not blame her. Etty could not know the danger, and even then, Ursula ached to be wrong. The tension in her belly was a mix of fear and hope.

Was that Sister Patricia, staring at them with void, unrecognizing eyes? And who was that squat sister next to her? Ursula realized that what she had mistook for sisters were often just shadows on the ground or shrubs swaying in the breeze. Ursula counted only twelve women of flesh and blood. But where were the other sisters? Only twelve left out of dozens.

The Sisters of Veritas had dwindled, Ursula knew this, but had not understood the extent of the loss. She had been busy with her inward journey of prayer and meditation, and had stopped noticing the details of things. As Ursula reached back through the cobwebs of her memories, they felt like thick pudding. She came up with moments of ecstatic prayer, the beauty of the towers, the splendor of shedding her pain and of sharing her pleasures. The closeness of her sisters, but no, she was never close to them, only to Etty. The others were tall spindles encased in yarn, unraveling, bringing along their past and their entanglements. Ursula had avoided them.

“How can this be?” said Ursula.

She also remembered an intoxicating floral scent, like the one she smelled now. White roses and cold rainwater. A swoosh of fabric and Matriarch Arbella was at Ursula’s side, holding a silver incense burner. Its clean smoke wafted forward and enveloped Ursula and Etty.

“A year in prayer is like ten in the real world. You never did pay much attention to your surroundings, sister Ursula. This is what remains of the cloister.”

“I noticed what mattered most. I thought,” Ursula said, and her eyes flicked towards Etty.

“On that account you are correct. Etty is important to us all, and it is her turn to find Truth.”

Arbella smiled; a toothy grin that shone like a beacon. She placed a hand on Etty’s neck, rubbed her downy skin with the tip of her fingers. Etty’s mouth twitched between a smile and frown.

“Come Etty, your sisters are here to guide you. They are your family,” said Arbella.

At the word *family*, Etty’s features relaxed. Arbella wielded the word as a weapon; the blow struck Ursula out of her stupor. She should not have hesitated earlier, should have trusted Etty with all that she knew. Ursula braced herself, ready to scream, but two hands hard as marble grasped her arms. A red mouth appeared at her temple, smelling of earth and minerals.

“I’ll do anything to save the cloister.”

That is what the mouth whispered, the mouth attached to the blacksmith, but they were Ursula’s own words, pronounced only hours ago in the Matriarch’s special office.

“We heard you. We have been watching you.”

From a distance, the mountain was formidable, but Ursula could compare it with no other since it was the only mountain she had ever seen. Gerauvan was settled on a landscape flat as a hot cake, dwarfed by the rugged island where the cloister presided. The mountain was simply called “Mountain,” and up close, it looked tamer, eroded and collapsed at its peak.

The humming sisters, led by the Matriarch and ETTY, began their ascent, with Ursula and the stealthy blacksmith closing the line. The way he walked along the spiraling path, with long strides and a playful jaunt, the blacksmith seemed a young man on a quest. But Ursula knew better. It was the unnatural symmetry of his movements that gave it away, the way his arms and legs swayed, the way his hips jutted from one side to the other. And yet, the creature inhabiting the blacksmith managed to convey a casualness, something Ursula herself could not achieve, even within her own body. She hugged herself, feeling oddly reassured by her familiar lines and curves.

The Matriarch’s incense spiraled along with the pilgrims, carrying its floral scent and languid effect. The relaxed feeling in Ursula’s limbs and deep in her chest was unnatural, but she did not care. The acute sense of panic she had felt in the garden was gone. She remembered the panic, the way her blood seemed to burn and sizzle behind her eardrums, but memory of an emotion was not the same as the experience. She recalled many emotions that she no longer carried with her, so she marched forward to meet whatever fate awaited her and ETTY.

After they had gained sufficient height, Ursula glanced downhill and saw that fires continued to burn along the cliffs. The peasants had failed, she thought. The blacksmith stopped and looked back at her, the fires reflecting in his eyes.

“The peasants succeeded. They are now keeping vigil.”

He reached for Ursula’s cheek, but he was too far from her and only caressed the air. Ursula recoiled at the intrusion. He had read her

thoughts.

For hours they ascended the mountain and then began the descent into the crater. Ursula saw bright spots along the crater’s inner walls, like eyes blinking in the dark. She let her hand drag along the wall and felt the jagged edges of obsidian fragments tear into her skin. She flinched, and for a brief moment felt in control, then found herself vaguely wondering if birds at night became confused, thinking there were stars below as well as above.

“The birds are smarter than you think” said the blacksmith, still stalking Ursula’s mind. “But however much they fly, they cannot escape me. In time, they land again.”

“Some land on water,” said Ursula, thinking of the great white birds that floated near the shore every spring and fall.

“Sister, sister.” The blacksmith frowned, shook his head in disappointment. “Water and earth are but textures of my body.”

He stopped his ascent and took Ursula’s hand, running a finger along the lines of her bloodied palm.

“Your hands are calloused while your breast is soft as lamb’s hide. Both are skin. Your encasing is small. Mine is of the scale of your world.”

He placed a sliver of obsidian in her hand, a piece of himself. Ursula looked down at her hand, at her feet, at her filthy sandals standing on the body of Kolvar. She felt a great wave hurling towards her, a nauseated understanding. But the feeling subsided, perhaps thwarted again by the effects of the incense.

“No, Ursula, it is your strength that keeps you standing,” whispered the blacksmith. His mouth had not moved, yet she had heard him. Kolvar, not the blacksmith, spoke inside of her.

“*The blacksmith is an avatar, a faithful servant who treated my body*

*with the reverence it is due. But he is failing me now. Look closer.”*

Ursula stepped closer so that she could feel the blacksmith’s breath, and even through the gray tones of night saw blood red cracks appearing along his features, from the corner of his eyes and mouth to his jaw and hairline. A puppet whose puppeteer had a hand much too strong, breaking the poor puppet along the seams. She had never noticed how young the blacksmith was, barely twenty and with high cheekbones and full lips that made him appear girlish despite the razor-sharp jawline.

“The journey continues,” he said, pointing to the line of sisters disappearing around a bend in the path.

They walked side by side, ever closer to the bottom of the crater. The blacksmith’s jaunt gradually turned into a limp. His legs flopped with each step, and at times he stumbled, but the blacksmith simply smiled at Ursula and urged her on. She obeyed, because what else could she do? The world itself asked this of her. Without fanfare, the procession reached a platform. They could walk no further, no deeper. The crater was dry and hot. It offered a climate different from the one beyond the mountain. Ursula used the edge of her shawl to wipe dust and sweat from her face.

The sisters stood before a dais made from a large slab of stone, not unlike a toppled headstone, elevated upon a bed of rubble. The setting was as mystical as an abandoned cupboard. Why had Ursula expected more? Tradition, ritual, all of it a game they played at the cloister, and now the veil had been lifted from her eyes. The signs had been there, only she had not known to look.

The Matriarch began scrambling up the platform, pulling at her skirts and flailing with the frustration of an old hag. That straight back of hers was now bent and the blue veins of her legs glared like angry welts. Etty stood by, her eyes open and vacant, a beatific smile carved into her soft features. Pearls of sweat beaded down her face, and the smoke from the incense burner she had been tasked to carry wafted into her eyes and mouth. She was fully subdued. The other sisters moved about, hesitant, like sheep lost in an unfamiliar field. Some

continued humming, others fell silent in a torpor.

Ursula perceived a dull beating coming from the ground. A feeling more than a sound. She turned to the blacksmith and found him on his knees, tremors shaking his flesh the way Ursula used to shake the one rag doll she had owned as a child. The blacksmith was failing, but those black eyes remained steadfast like the beating heart of Kolvar’s life, underneath her feet. Kolvar was real. Ursula’s love for Etty was real. Two truths she could hold onto as she faced the lies.

Ursula pushed through the sisters and pulled at Arbella’s cape. The older woman fell back with a grunt.

“The Truth you peddle is a lie,” said Ursula. “I know that now, but in the tower, something was within reach. Something real. Do you deny it?”

“Are you still searching for redemption, Ursula? A payoff for your pains? You will find none,” said Arbella as she gripped the platform once more. “I have been holding broken eggshells together with the force of my will. The pieces were bound to fall apart someday.”

“Then why bother with this elaborate charade?”

“Could you send your sisters to death for the greater good? You, with your feelings and your self-obsession. I offer them a kind illusion.”

Ursula pondered this in silence. She was no longer surprised; she and her sisters were nothing special, after all. Arbella sighed and took Ursula by the shoulders. Her touch was cold, lizard-like, yet Arbella readjusted Ursula’s shawl with the gentle touch of a mother.

“You are unlucky to have been born when you were. Born a woman. But let’s see if we can fix this broken world once more. Long enough for you and I to live in peace, and let another generation deal with Kolvar.”

“That is a cowardly position.”

“What’s cowardly is you wanting to save your lover, above the well-being of others. Not just these remaining ragtag sisters, but also those who dwell in Gerauvan, and . . . others.”

“What others?”

“This world is larger than you know, sister. Be thankful for your ignorance.”

Arbella turned her back to Ursula and with one final heave managed to scramble onto the platform. She swung her arms at Etty, who dutifully clambered up after her without even glancing at Ursula. Their bond was broken, but Ursula could fix it. At the back of her mind she still held an image: a small house made of timber and yellow framing, adorned with flower boxes. On the inside, so many colors. Rugs and upholstered chairs, cheerful curtains, and silky sheets. Everything soft and comfortable where Ursula and Etty could be together, with no other expectations.

Ursula looked up at Arbella.

“I can expose you to the sisters,” shouted Ursula.

Arbella glared at Ursula from her elevated position. Her mouth twisted into a smirk.

“They will not listen to a tale that does not suit them. *You* only took notice because you found yourself at a disadvantage.”

Ursula looked at the sisters, huddled together and no longer humming. Their fretful whispers crawled through the crater like insects. Sister Patricia, at the head of the pack, had clear eyes once more; the incense burner had been tossed to the ground when Etty had climbed the dais. Ursula saw confusion creeping up behind those eyes as Patricia noticed the blacksmith for the first time. A strange man kneeling upon the ground. Until then he had been but a shadow to the other sisters.

“In this sacred space, the luckiest of sisters stand and await Truth. To-

day that sister is Etty,” declared Arbella, her voice booming from the platform.

The Matriarch raised her chin and straightened her back. She offered an indomitable figure, and yet Ursula could feel the weakness beneath. The sisters gasped and stared at their leader, awe illuminating their features. Arbella gave them a reason to focus, dispelled their confusion. The power of the incense was no longer needed, and Ursula understood that Arbella had been correct. The sisters would follow whatever path the Matriarch set for them.

Ursula would not let Etty be taken, but she needed one final answer. She had endless questions, of course, but only one of them mattered. She knelt in front of the blacksmith.

“Why do you want us sisters? I must know, please.”

Silence. A silence that overwhelmed Ursula’s senses. Had Kolvar vacated the blacksmith’s body? Then a voice, a low chuckle, escaped the blacksmith’s parted lips.

“Your people have made our transactions complicated. My needs are simple: willing sacrifice, worship. In exchange you may harvest my bounty. Your cloister is nothing to me.”

The blacksmith’s head tilted. His eyes found the obsidian shard still clutched in Ursula’s hand.

“But the Matriarch, she follows your orders,” said Ursula, pointing to Arbella, who continued her oration.

“She follows the orders of many. I have but one.”

“Willing sacrifice. Then you don’t want Etty? Don’t need to kill any of the sisters?”

“Your predecessors knew to converse in terms that held more texture, more nuance. Sacrifice is not murder. Murder is the realm of men,

surely you see this now.”

Ursula thought of her meditative encounter with Hurvid in the Weeping Widow. She realized that Kolvar had come to her in that recognizable form for a reason. To test her, to tempt her as well. Ursula had said she wanted Hurvid to die; she had followed through and pushed him off the tower in an unforeseen show of outer strength. Strong in the way of men, but foolish in its simplicity. That violence was hard to escape, it was all around, in Ursula’s own thinking process and in the way she and everyone else ripped apart creation and threw the pieces into separate piles. Truth or lies. Male or female. Mine or yours.

While Ursula no longer wished to tear herself from her own skin, something of that violence lingered in her, but if violence could render the world asunder, then surely it could be turned upon itself to mend the greatest fissures.

Ursula pressed the obsidian deeper into her palm and relished the pain, the trickle of blood mingling in the dirt.

“I will give myself to you. Be your vessel. If we free the sisters.”

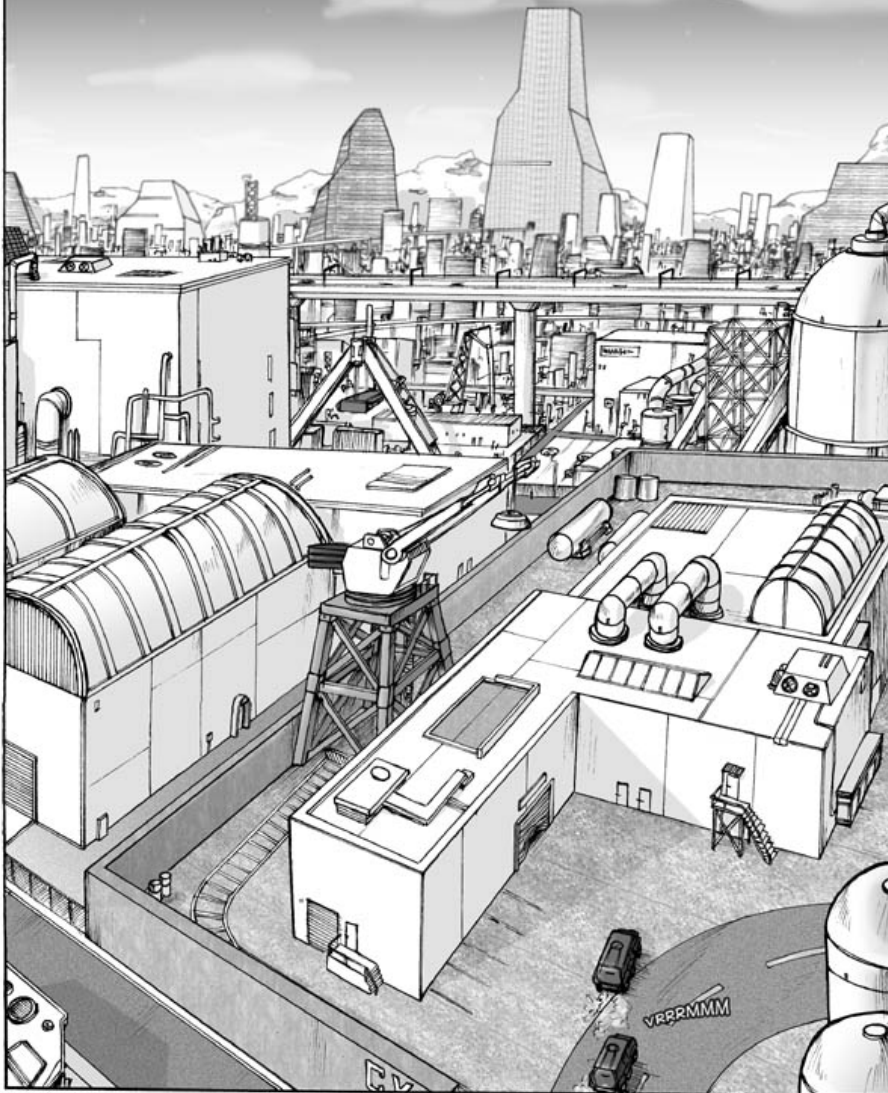
For the last time, the blacksmith raised his head and smiled.

“That will only be the beginning, Ursula. Beyond the beacon you call the Horizon Star, an entire world exists that has been hidden from you. There is much to do.”

The blacksmith’s body sagged to the ground.

Ursula wondered at Kolvar’s intentions, whether they would prove helpful or destructive to her people. But her people were already being destroyed through despair, drought, and starvation. Kolvar’s bounty was failing no matter how many women were funneled to the cloister. The changes had been incremental, but they were noticeable, even to one like Ursula, who gazed inward rather than outward. Bit by bit, like a sandcastle collapsing in the rain. At first the water appears harmless; there are so many grains of sand. Soon, a tower is lost, then another. The moat fills with water, the gate topples, and then the walls crumble. Ursula thought it was time for a storm to wash it all away, for a new castle to be built. She would keep the highest tower for herself and Etty.

Ursula stood next to the fallen blacksmith, let her shawl drop to the ground, and waited for Kolvar to claim its vessel.



by Jesper Nordqvist

## NOTES

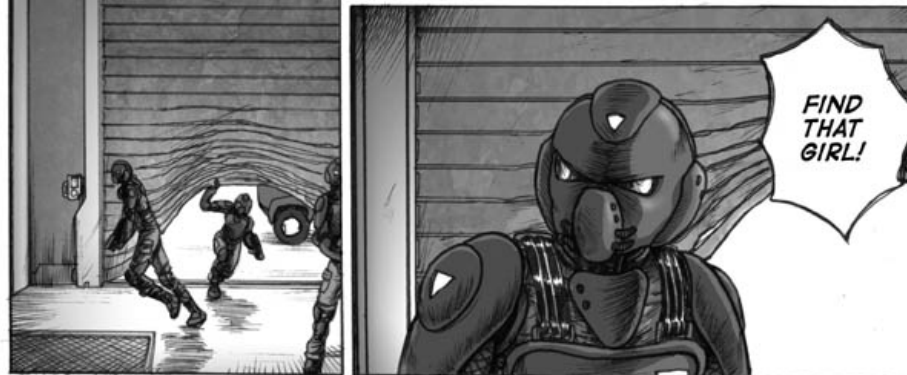
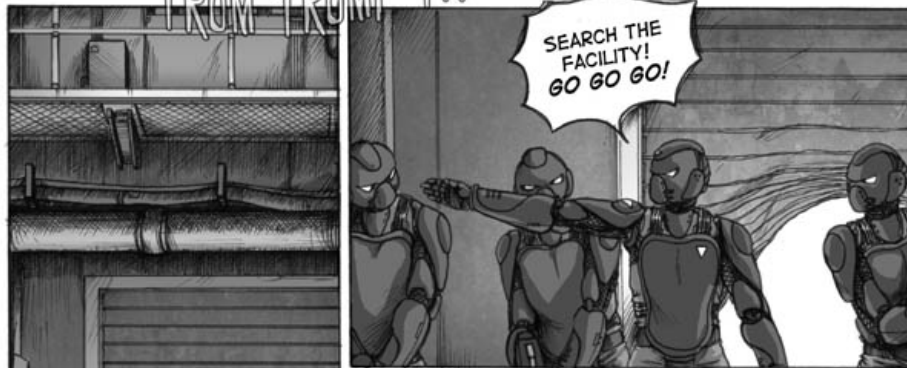
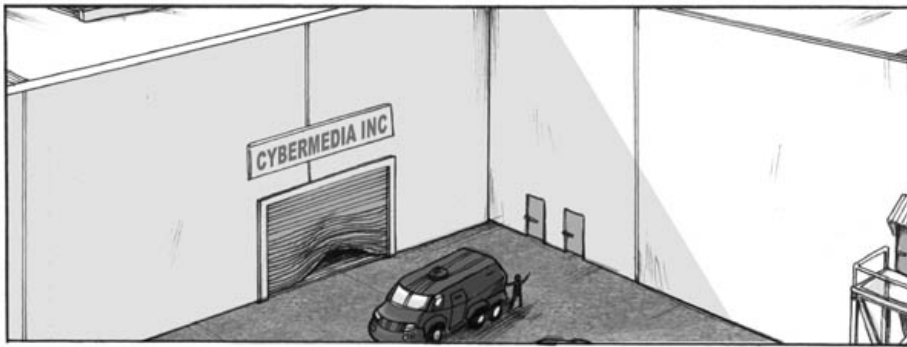
*I'm Jesper Nordqvist, aka 'Ragathol', a comic artist and illustrator from Sweden, specialized in fantasy and SF comedy and drama. Mondo Mecho was my first longer drama comic, published as a web comic between ca 2006-2009. It was supposed to be a long epic story, but sadly couldn't be finished due to other things coming in between, like getting a contract to make another Science Fantasy comic for publication. That was TANKS, and although it's only published in Sweden, I've been making a lot more comics since then, most of which are available at [gumroad.com/ragathol](http://gumroad.com/ragathol).*

*Mondo Mecho was a lot of fun to work on, and I learned a lot — which you'll be able to see clearly as it goes on. I hope that I'll be able to pick it up again (or rather, to remake it) some day. I hope you'll enjoy it — although it's a bit silly in the beginning, it picks up a bit as it progresses. Thank you for reading!*

---

Clouds on Mars actually are not as uncommon as one may think. With humans and human devices releasing more water and steam, the clouds can build up even a little more.





MONDO MECO PAGE 97 20050331 © JESPER NORDQVIST  
CO-WRITER AND IDEAS: EMIL OLOFSSON

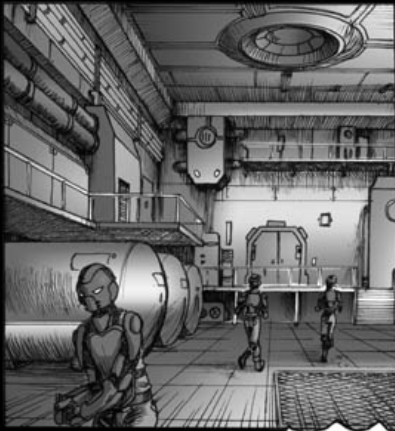
WWW.RAGATHOL.COM

## NOTES

Ahh ... factory environments ... Now all my time playing Doom3 will come to it's right ...



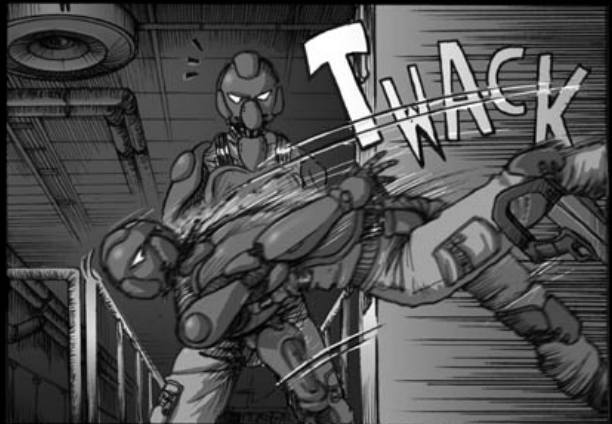




ANNOYING PEOPLE...



SECTOR 1-1 CLEAR! MOVING ON TO SECTOR 1-2!



YOU SURE MAKE A LOT OF NOISE, BOYS...

... AND I'M TRYING TO WORK HERE.

# NOTES

Please do me the favour of looking closely on this page... it took forever to make -\_-





# NOTES

If I made this all from the beginning, I'd pop up their apartment a bit from the start... but I can't really change it now.

A bit empty. The elevator got some new wall panels, though ;)

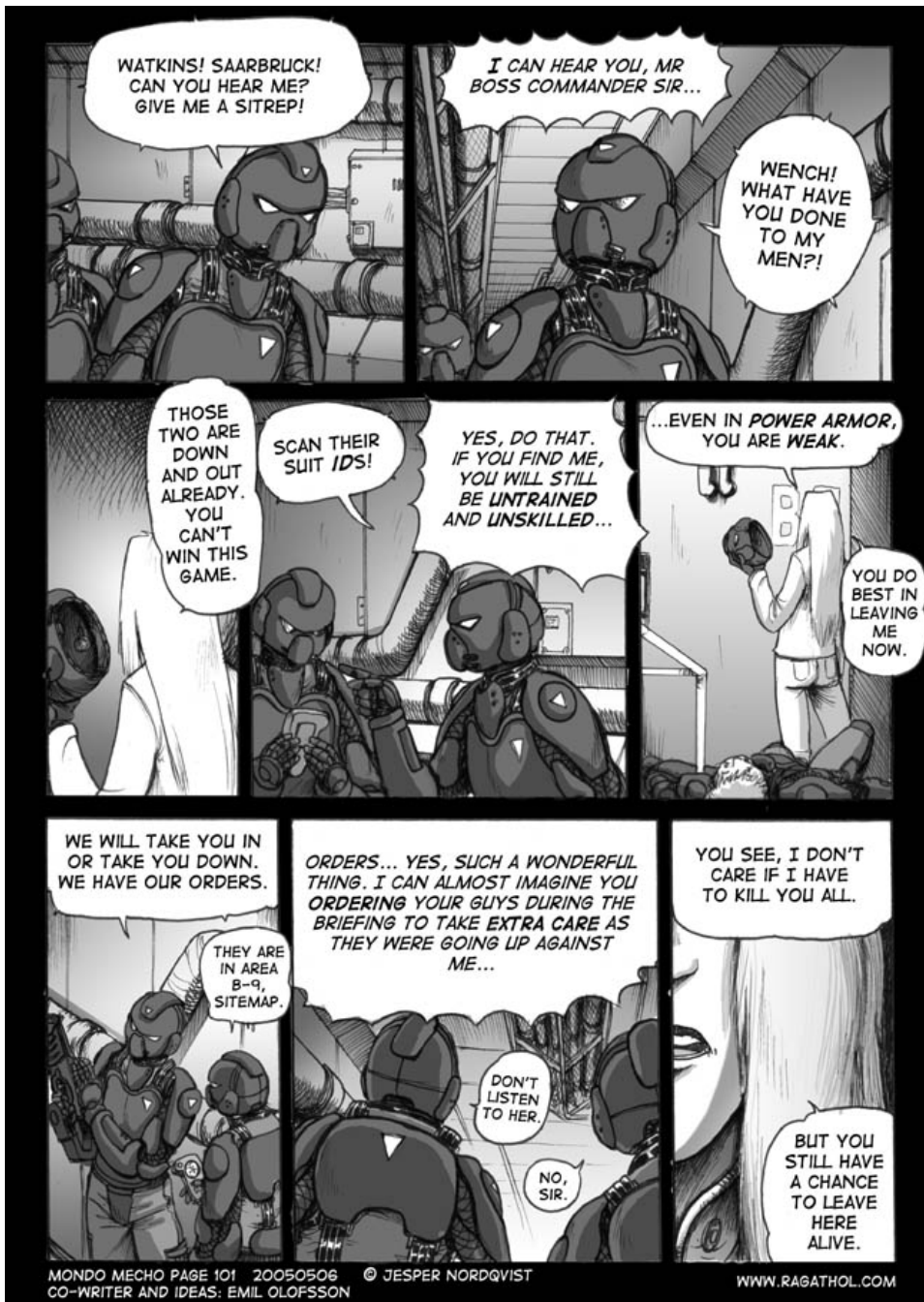




## NOTES

AP Bullets = Armor Piercing





## NOTES

Sitrep = situation report

Sitemap = location on the actual map for the building, as opposed to the tactical map they use in the briefing.



# Contributor's Bios



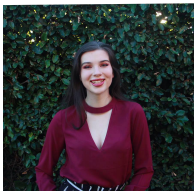
**ED AHERN** resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had four hundred stories and poems published so far, and six books. Ed works the other side of writing at *Bewildering Stories*, where he sits on the review board and manages a posse of nine review editors. He's also lead editor at *The Scribes Micro Fiction* magazine.

\* \* \*



**MAUREEN BOWDEN** is a Liverpoolian, living with her musician husband in North Wales. She has had 157 stories and poems accepted by paying markets, she was nominated for the 2015 international Pushcart Prize, and in 2019 an anthology of her stories, *Whispers of Magic*, was published by Hiraeth Books. She also writes song lyrics, mostly comic political satire, set to traditional melodies. Her husband has performed these in folk music clubs throughout the UK. She loves her family and friends, rock 'n' roll, Shakespeare, and cats.

\* \* \*



**NICOLA BRAYAN** is a young, aspiring artist from Sydney, Australia. She has rediscovered her passion for art during the pandemic. She uses vivid colours and contrast to capture emotions and expression. Her work is a love letter to what it means to be human. More of her work can be found on Instagram at [@an.aesthetic.mirror](https://www.instagram.com/an.aesthetic.mirror).

\* \* \*

**HARRIS COVERLEY** has short fiction published or forthcoming in *Curiosities*, *Hypnos*, *Penumbra*, and *The Space Cadet Science Fiction Review*, amongst many others. A former Rhysling nominee, he also has had verse most recently in *Star\*Line*, *Spectral Realms*, *Silver Blade*, *Scifaikuest*, *Novel Noctule*, *Songs of Eretz Poetry Review*, *Tigershark*, *View From Atlantis*, *Yellow Mama*, and elsewhere. He lives in Manchester, England.

\* \* \*



**SHIKHAR DIXIT's** stuff has appeared in such venues as *Weird Horror*, *Space & Time*, *Dark Regions*, *Journ-E*, *Strange Horizons* and *Not One of Us*. His fiction has been printed in several anthologies, including *The Darker Side*, *Songs From Dead Singers*, and *Barnes & Noble's 365 Scary Stories*. He lives with his wife somewhere in the deep, dark heart of New Jersey. To learn more, visit his website at [SlipOfThePen.com](http://SlipOfThePen.com)

\* \* \*



**TIM HILDEBRANDT** is a writer in Indianapolis, Indiana. His short stories have appeared in *Consequence Forum*, *the Boston Literary Magazine*, *Pandemic Magazine*, *Bending Genres*, *Corvus Review*, and others. You can see his work at: [https://www.instagram.com/ax\\_beckett](https://www.instagram.com/ax_beckett)

Tim has a bootless BFA, he lived in San Francisco in '68, traveled Europe from Amsterdam to Africa, and survived combat in Vietnam. [hildebrandt343@icloud.com](mailto:hildebrandt343@icloud.com)

\* \* \*



**RYAN HYATT** is a former news reporter and author of the Terrafide sci-fi series. He edits the satirical sci-fi news site, *The La-La Lander*, as well as *Not Your Father's Bedtime Stories*, kid's lit he creates with his daughter, author Sage Hyatt. Find him at the beach and his stories across the internet, or connect with him on Twitter/Instagram @ucalthisreality.

\* \* \*



**R. MAC JONES** is a writer and visual artist. His work has appeared in venues such as *Dreams and Nightmares*, *Star\*Line*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Daily Science Fiction*. He has a website, <https://rmacjoneswrote.com/>, that is always in need of updating.

\* \* \*



**HARRISON KIM** lives and writes in Victoria, Canada. Like Maskwa in "The Rock Swimmers" he once worked in a religious fanatic's compound digging a well by hand. Blogspot Link: <https://harrisonkim1.blogspot.com>

\* \* \*



**N.K. LEULLIER's** experience as an archaeologist tends to find its way into her writing, but she mainly relies on her unfettered imagination to craft strange stories. More work can be found in *Sein und Werden*, *Circler Press*, *Literary Orphans*, *Luna Station Quarterly* and others. She spends her time between Boston and Quebec City. (The story "Fire and Particles" was written in part thanks to the inspiration provided by her magical friend Maryse Cloutier-Gélinas.) You can find N.K. on Instagram at: [https://www.instagram.com/natasha\\_inorth/](https://www.instagram.com/natasha_inorth/)

\* \* \*



**TABITHA MARSH** is a UK-based illustrator specialising in ink, watercolour, and digital drawings. She graduated with a BA in Fine Art from Lancaster University in 2018 and has been working freelance ever since, mainly in publishing, but also exhibiting work at galleries in London and Leamington Spa.

In 2019 she was shortlisted for the Stratford Literary Festival/Salariya Children's Book Prize, and since then she has illustrated several books and had her work published in a wide variety of magazines (details of which can be found on her website at [www.tabithamarshillustration.com](http://www.tabithamarshillustration.com) ). Alongside this, she has been the illustrator in residence at the multi-award-winning independent bookshop Kenilworth Books since 2017. You can find more of her work on instagram (@tab\_marshall).

\* \* \*



Emma Neale lives and works in Ōtepoti/Dunedin, New Zealand, where she works as an editor. Her sixth novel, *Billy Bird* (2016) was short-listed for the Acorn Prize at the Ockham New Zealand Book Awards and long-listed for the Dublin International Literary Award. Emma, who has also published six collections of poetry, received the Lauris Edmond Memorial Award for a Distinguished Contribution to New Zealand Poetry 2020. Her first collection of short stories, *The Pink Jumpsuit*, was long-listed for the Acorn Prize at the Ockham New Zealand Book Awards 2022. (image by Caroline Davies)

\* \* \*

**JESPER NORDQVIST**, aka 'Ragathol', is a comic artist and illustrator from Sweden, specialized in fantasy and SF comedy and drama. He's been making a lot more comics since creating *Mondo Mecho*, most of which are available at [gumroad.com/ragathol](http://gumroad.com/ragathol).

\* \* \*



**J.C. PILLARD** is a former academic whose love of gothic literature has made its way into her writing. Her stories have appeared in *Metaphorosis*, *In the Wake of the Kraken*, and *Electric Spec*. When she's not reading or writing speculative fiction, J.C. spends time knitting and running far too many D&D games. Find her at [www.jcpillard.com](http://www.jcpillard.com).

\* \* \*



Originally from California, AmeriBoricua **BOB RITCHIE** now lives on the lovely island of Puerto Rico (it's true, wet heat is better than dry). He and his wife have released five adult children into the wild. He does some editing, yeah, some teaching,

sure, some translating, claro. Ritchie (as his wife calls him) is also a musician who is fortunate enough to have collaborated with Jon Anderson. Bob (as he calls himself) is also a writer of stories and has penned several things he believes are good. Two of his stories were nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Neither won. Oh well.

\* \* \*



**CAROLYN R. RUSSELL's** latest novel is *In the Fullness of Time*, a dystopian thriller published by Vine Leaves Press in 2020. Her new collection of cross-genre flash, *Death and Other Survival Strategies*, will be published by Vine Leaves Press in October of 2023. Carolyn's short stories, poetry, and essays

have been widely featured in magazines and literary journals. She lives on and writes from Boston's North Shore.

\* \* \*

**CARL SCHARWATH** has appeared globally with 150+ journals selecting his poetry, short stories, interviews, essays, plays, or art photography. (His photography was featured on the cover of six journals.) Two poetry books, *Journey To Become Forgotten* (Kind of a Hurri-

cane Press) and *Abandoned* (ScarsTv) have been published. His first photography book was recently published by Praxis. Carl is the art editor for *Minute Magazine*, a competitive runner and 2nd degree black-belt in Taekwondo.

\* \* \*



**MARGE SIMON** is an award-winning poet/writer, living in Ocala, Florida. Her works have appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Dark Moon Digest*, *New Myths*, *Silver Blade*, *Polu Texni*, *Crannog*, *JoCCA* and numerous pro anthologies. She is a multiple Stoker winner and Grand Master Poet of the SF & F Poetry Association. She recently received the HWA Lifetime Service Award, HWA. Amazon Author page: <https://www.amazon.com/-/eB006G29PL6/marge-simon>

\* \* \*



**CHRISTINA SNG** is the three-time Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *A Collection of Nightmares* (2017), *A Collection of Dreamscapes* (2020), and *Tortured Willows* (2021). Her poetry, fiction, essays, and art have appeared in numerous venues worldwide, including *Fantastic Stories of the Imagination*, *Interstellar Flight Magazine*, *Penumbria*, *Southwest Review*, and *The Washington Post*. Visit her at [christinasng.com](http://christinasng.com) and connect @christinasng.

\* \* \*



Canadian poet, fiction writer, and playwright **J. J. STEINFELD** lives on Prince Edward Island, where he is patiently waiting for Godot's arrival and a phone call from Kafka. While waiting, he has published 23 books, including *An Unauthorized Biography of Being* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions, 2016), *Absurdity, Woe Is Me, Glory Be* (Poetry, Guernica Editions, 2017), *A Visit to the Kafka Café* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2018), *Gregor Samsa Was Never in The Beatles* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions,

2019), *Morning Bafflement and Timeless Puzzlement* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2020), *Somewhat Absurd, Somehow Existential* (Poetry, Guernica Editions, 2021), and *Acting on the Island* (Stories, Pottersfield Press, 2022). His short stories and poems have appeared in numerous periodicals and anthologies internationally, and over 60 of his one-act plays and a handful of full-length plays have been performed in Canada and the United States.

<https://49thshelf.com/content/search?SearchText=J.+J.+Steinfeld>

<https://49thshelf.com/Books/A/Acting-on-the-Island>

\* \* \*



**LUKE WALKER** has been writing horror, fantasy and dark thrillers for most of his life after finding a copy of Lovecraft's stories that his eldest brother left in the bathroom. From there, he went on to his dad's collection of Stephen King books and hasn't looked back since. The new novels *The Mirror Of The*

*Nameless*, *The Kindred* and *Pandemonium* are out now as are *The Dead Room*, *The Unredeemed*, *Ascent*, *Die Laughing* and *Dead Sun*. The crime/horror *Winter Graves* will be published by Hellbound Books in 2021. A prequel and a sequel to *The Mirror Of The Nameless* will also be published in 2021. Several of his short stories have been published online and in magazines/books. While writing, he has worked in a library, a hospital (disposing of severed legs) and a record shop (back in the distant past). He is currently working on new novels and short fiction.

Luke is (too) active on Twitter, his site and his newsletter and loves to hear from people who want to talk about books or horror.

He is forty-three and lives in England with his wife, cats, too many bad films and not enough books.







# Leviathan

*(full image)*

by Gemma Amor