

# on spec

the canadian magazine of the fantastic

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"Where There's Smoke" © Jim Beveridge



## Farewell, Holly...

It's with sadness and pride that ON SPEC bids adieu to long-time Fiction editor, Holly Phillips. Sadness, because we will miss her insightful comments on all the manuscripts she reads and evaluates. Pride, because it means that the growing demands of her own writing career have become too great to allow her the time and energy to work with us. Holly is an amazing talent in her own right, and we look forward to seeing much, much more of her fiction in print, in *On Spec* and elsewhere.

• • •

## We Goofed!

We at *On Spec* take pride in bringing a product to our readers that does honour to them and to the superb writers whose works we publish.

Sometimes this product falls short of expectations. Our Fall 2005 issue (#62, Vol. 17, #3) was flawed, partly through human errors and partly through the gremlins of the internet. We offer apologies to our readers, and to the writers whose stories were most affected by these mishaps.

Please accept with our compliments a Special Chapbook edition of two stories we've reprinted from the Fall 2005 issue that we originally goofed on—*Ashes* by J.W. Anderson, and *Fire and Ash* by M. Thomas. The chapbook is enclosed with this issue.

And that's not all—the publishing gremlins struck again. *On Spec* also sends humble apologies to author Susan Forrest. We managed to get her name spelled correctly on the cover of the Winter 2005 issue, but inside the magazine, her name lost an "r". Please forgive us, Susan.

Sincerely,  
The Editors & Staff of *On Spec*



# Writing the Fantastic

Susan MacGregor, Fiction Editor

*On Spec's* logo has gone through a number of changes since I first became an editor. In the beginning, we were known as *On Spec—The Magazine of Speculative Writing*. Today, we are *On Spec—The Canadian Magazine of the Fantastic*. A very apt slogan considering we publish a lot of fantasy.

Having received yet another 'warrior maiden/sorceress/abused wench seeks vengeance on boorish noble' piece in the slush pile, I decided I wanted to write an editorial on fantasy—the genre, sub-genres, what we buy, and what we toss into the recycling bin. This compulsion led me on a trek through old issues on a journey that turned into an education. I was amazed by the diversity of what we publish.

The genre of fantasy is made up of about two dozen or so sub-genres (the actual number is debatable; I'm not about to cross swords). These range from Arthurian Fantasy to Time Travel. What follows is a sampling of some of the fantasy sub-genres, an example of the *On Spec* story that fits the definition, along with quotable quotes from each. I include the quotes because they are illuminating—most of them are provocative, entertaining, and original, making it easy to see why we bought the story in the first place.

**ARTHURIAN FANTASY:** Arthurian fantasies are spun around characters from the King Arthur, Knights of the Round Table myths. We don't receive many of these, but Ted DeMarsh's *Lancelot's Last Quest* (Fall 1997 issue), where an elderly Lancelot dies to ensure a village's olive harvest, captured a subtle nobility associated with the Lancelot prototype. Managing to do this within the limitations of a



short story was what convinced me to buy the story.

*"While they had only each other for company, the bond held. Then one summer Guinivere came. Her affections ran between them like the blade of a saw in a living tree, tearing forward with one edge, retreating silently with the other, until they fell apart."*

**BANGSIAN FANTASY:** Named after John Kendrick Bangs who introduced the sub-genre, a Bangsian fantasy is set in an afterlife. Originally, that afterlife included hades, heaven, or hell. In Catherine MacLeod's *Stick House* (Spring 2004 issue), her protagonist, Cay, outraces the light tunnel that attempts to claim her at death in order to be reunited with her lover at their beach cottage.

*"I asked you once, "Do you think there's life after death?" It was the wrong thing to ask you after a hard day. You said, "Cay, I'm not even sure there's life before it." I never asked again. I guess I figured we'd get to it eventually."*

*"Well, this is eventually."*

**COMIC or LOW FANTASY:** As the name suggests, comic fantasy is funny. It pushes stereotypes and clichés into new, fresh, territory. When I read Robert Boyczuk's *The Reality War* (Winter 1997 issue), where a sorceress pits her magic (costing her several fingers, an arm, and her hair) against a burly civil engineer constructing the king's highway, I laughed out loud. In two simple sentences, Boyczuk captures his antagonist's character perfectly.

*"Lady Miranda's beauty was legendary. At least in her presence."*

**DARK FANTASY:** Considered by some as interchangeable with Horror while others will argue it as a variant, *On Spec* devoted an entire issue to Dark Fantasy in the Spring 1995 issue. In Lyle Weis' *Chastity*, an abusive husband finds a disturbing solution to the delusion of his wife's philandering.

*"He approached the bed. By the light of the night side table, she could see the object in his hand. A long, thick darning needle, and some thread."*

**FAIRYTALES:** Let the writer be warned—we rarely buy fairytales, fractured or otherwise. But Jason Kapalka's twist on the jolly snowman in *Frosty* (Winter 1992 issue), made us choose otherwise.

*"The next time the kids came back, Frosty was playing with some dead*



rabbits and squirrels.”

**HISTORICAL FANTASY:** Historical Fantasy involves historical characters or settings. In Shirley Barr’s *Alexandrite* (Fall 1998 issue), a cloned Cleopatra has flashbacks of her original’s life. When memories don’t mesh with current circumstances, she resorts to the primary solution.

*“This is how a queen dies. Here, without a mark, sitting on her throne in a Pharaoh’s jewels, beyond their reach. How long would it take them to notice this gilded dead queen presiding over their revels?”*

**NEW WEIRD FANTASY:** New Weird seems to be a blend of genres. It may also defy traditional styles of writing prose. I can’t think of a better *On Spec* example of New Weird, than Steve Zipp’s *VARIABLE Opera* (Spring 1996 issue), which mimics a computer print-out. Formal sentences, there are none—only titles like Character Set: Plot Data: and Error Messages: followed by information in point form. Yet the story, combining the genres of Western, Fantasy, Science Fiction, Erotica, and Mystery, evolves.

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DIALOGUE

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120            *Ghost Gulch ain’t big enuff fer the two of us.*  
130            *Looks like they figgered out my true identity.*  
140            *Where am I?*  
150            *I love you.*  
160            *I hate you.*  
170            *Which orifice shall I use?*  
180            *Set your laser to fry.*  
190            *We’ll head ‘em off at the past.*

**PLANETARY ROMANCE FANTASY:** Not a genre we would normally buy under its traditional definition, but David Nickle’s *Love Means Forever* (Spring 1996 issue), a cross-genre gem that combines a nurse story with hard science fiction, was not to be denied. In the story, candy-striper Suki Shannahan awakens from a cryogenic sleep, only to find that the love of her life, Dr. Neil Webley, has injected himself with nanomachines designed to kill emotion.

*“Well I was wrong,” he said. “Love didn’t keep us together. Not when it went sour. It divided us, started feuds. Simon LeFauvre nearly died—*

*“The knife fight. I read about it.”*

*“It was scalpels—not knives...”*

**SHAPE SHIFTING/TRANSFORMATION FANTASY:** Shape shifting stories involve one type of being transforming into another. A vampire or werewolf story would be a typical example. Yet far from typical was Rob Hunter’s *Boy’s Night Out* (Summer 2005 issue) werewolf story. The gated community of Sur la Mer is built to keep the men in instead of out. Over a platter of cookies, Hillary, matriarch of Sur La Mer, offers newcomer Sally some advice on managing husbands.

*“We went the Lysistrata route—Aristophanes? Withholding sex, that got their attention. First we tried threats and confrontations about those things they will keep dragging home and burying in the yard—the boys can’t recall anything of their midnight rambles, or so they say...”*

**SUPERHERO FANTASY:** Usually reserved for the comic book scene, a good superhero story often takes the cliché and pushes it into the ridiculous. Hugh Spencer’s *Pornzilla* (Fall 2004 issue) received double kudos from me when he did just that, yet offered something along the lines of decency by the end of the story.

*“What the—?!” Math Man gasped as his partner tore off his spandex shorts and grasped his penis. He noticed that Logistic Lass’ breasts seemed to swell to twice their normal size and glow with an unearthly and erotic energy.*

*“Must resist—” he growled through clenched teeth.*

**TIME TRAVEL FANTASY:** As the name suggests, this sub-genre involves characters moving backwards or forwards in time. Rob Sawyer’s *Just Like Old Times* (Summer 1993 issue) combines time travel with shape shifting, when serial killer Dr. Rudolph Cohen is allowed to chronotransfer into the mind and body of a Tyrannosaurus Rex as payment for his death penalty.

*“And then a wonderful thought occurred to Cohen. Why, if he killed enough of these little screaming balls of fur, they wouldn’t have any descendants.”*

You may have noticed that I skipped over several major fantasy categories: *Contemporary Fantasy* is set in the here and now and often in



cities and locations with which we are familiar. *Magic Realism* is similar, but it includes an element of magic, or a quality which shows us that things are not quite as they appear on the surface. I haven't highlighted contemporary fantasy or magic realism stories here, because we publish so many of them.

We occasionally receive attempts at *Epic* or *Heroic* fantasies (these tend to include many characters, settings, and interweaving of subplots (the obvious example that comes to mind is J.R.R.Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy) but they don't often work within the narrow confines and limitations of a short story. Most epics we receive are thinly veiled book synopses or the opening chapter of a novel. (And if you're not sure if we can tell if you've sent us your Chapter One, let me assure you—we can.) *Sword and Sorcery* stories are also a hard sell, usually because the writer hasn't seen how to lift the story or characters from the cliché. If you are tempted to send us a fantasy piece in one of these sub-genres, take note of the stories I showcased above. All of them are original and fresh in their approach.

Which brings me finally to my writing challenge, a fantasy gauntlet thrown at the feet of anyone brash enough to pick it up. Write me a portion of an epic (in 6000 words or less) that can stand solidly alone as a short story. Tell me a *Sword and Sorcery* story about a wizard, or a swordsman, or a warrior maid, or someone entirely new—maybe the King's toenail clipper, but offer me character defects, settings, or plots I won't expect. Mix up the genres, or invent a new one someone will name after you. If you surprise me enough, I just might write an editorial that applauds your work some day. •

### • Special Notice to Our Readers •

We have determined, at long last, that the purchase price of *On Spec* must increase, to keep pace with the ever-growing costs of production, printing and distribution of the journal.

**Please see pages 57 & 89 for more info...**

Gwenna wrapped her thin hand around the cup. "She fears your anger. Few of us lose a kinsman happily. His death deserves a payment. What do you ask?"

## Balance of Power

Marian Allen

Shisha was drowning herself when she met Gwenna and Toby. She was trying to drown herself and failing, so Gwenna's sending Toby to haul her from the muddy stream was both unwelcome and unnecessary. She struggled fiercely until he dropped her face-down next to a blanket, and a softer hand than his touched her and a tender voice bid her to rest. Then she rolled onto her back into submission.

"She's a Creature." Toby folded his more than six feet of tight muscle in a benign squat by her side.

"Poor thing." Gwenna touched her again, with a gentleness the Creature had never known.

Shisha glistened in the dappled light of the woods, her silvery scales slightly iridescent even where the water had dried from them. Her cheeks showed a rosy tinge, as did her short hair, which stuck out in spikes. She had no breast, no apparent sexual characteristics, but the roundness of her limbs and a slightly feminine shape to her body marked her as having been formed from a female of her species. She had no navel, no eyebrows, no nails on fingers or toes. She gazed from Toby to Gwenna and back, round grey eyes blinking with rosy lids, thin rosy lips parted to show two rows of tiny needle teeth.

"Fish." Toby flicked a black-nailed finger toward the sides of



Shisha's neck. "Gills, you see?"

The Creature made of sound blended of hiss and click. Freshwater tears ran down the sides of her face, past her undersized ears.

Gwenna plucked one of her own curling flaxen hairs and, with a white hand, laid it across Shisha's forehead. "Thy mind is open to me, and thy mouth and the wishes of thy heart. Because thou art safe, thou art free to speak."

The blond hair slid from Shisha's brow as she rolled her head to look fully at Gwenna, but the spell was spoken and held.

The pale young woman next to Shisha reclined upon a lightweight woollen blanket of blues and golden-yellow. Part of the blanket had been draped over a large rock, and Gwenna was propped against the warm solidity. She wore a blouse and ankle-length gown of homespun fabric, the blouse dyed yellow-brown and the gown dyed dull blue. The ankles which peeped below the hem were cased in loose-fitting stockings and her shoes were soft wool, unfit for walking.

"My name is Gwenna. This is my brother, Toby."

Toby sketched a wave. If Shisha had known anything of human heredity, she would have doubted Gwenna's claim of kinship. Toby was hearty as Gwenna was frail, as dark as she was fair. His waist-length braids were as brown as his leather jerkin. His eyes were the colour of the muddy stream nearby, opaque, with a soft surface gleam.

Shisha fixed him with an accusing stare. "Water. Me. Back."

"Who have you run from?" Gwenna's gentle young voice was like rain over stone. "Where do you live?"

"Malain. Mistress Malain."

"What name does she call you?"

"Creature. Fool. Monster. Beast. Slave."

"These are not names. Mistress Malain is a name. Gwenna is a name, and Toby. Do you understand 'names'?"

The Creature nodded.

"Have you a name? In your heart? Please tell it to us." Gwenna smiled with pink lips and pearly teeth, with eyes the colour of fall honey.

"...Shisha." When neither Toby nor Gwenna laughed, Shisha spoke again. "Die, me. Or swim. Water. Want... water." She sat up, her face level with Gwenna's, but turned toward the stream.

"Look at me, dear one." The Creature, startled by Gwenna's tone

and words, did look at her. “You’ve been Taken.” Gwenna spoke to Shisha as she’d never been spoken to before: spirit to spirit, one intelligence to another. “You’ve been Changed and Fixed into human form, and you can neither return to water nor drown in it.”

Shisha’s head cocked and her eyes went blank with listening. Rosy eyelids lowered as the tone of a tin whistle eased down into human hearing. She made a gurgling sound, and gnashed her teeth. She rose, pulled by a thread of tin-filtered breath.

“Toby....” Gwenna raised one milky arm.

Toby shouldered a pack. He wrapped Gwenna in the blanket beneath her, strapped it into a harness, and shouldered her as if she were another pack. Her fair face rested cheek-to-cheek with his tan one, the froth of her flaxen hair next to his chestnut braids. Her spindly arms draped over his brawny shoulders, and they followed the hapless Creature back to Mistress Malain, who had Made her.

Mistress Malain was large and solid, healthy and robust. She filled the doorway of her stone cottage, piping her tuneless call, summoning her unwilling Creature. When Shisha entered the clearing, Mistress Malain lowered her whistle and grinned.

“Enjoy your swim? Did you think I didn’t know what you were up to? Fool! You’re mine until I wear you out. Now—”

Toby and Gwenna came into view, and Malain’s grin faded.

“Who are you? No one comes here.” Her eyes flickered along Gwenna’s body, from the tips of her fingers to the base of her blanket-sack. “You’ve come for healing? My price is high, and I make no guarantees.”

Toby hesitated at the edge of the clearing, but Gwenna whispered in his ear, and he brought her to the doorstep.

“I am Gwenna, and this is my brother, Toby. We’re envoys.”

“Envoys from where? Who sent you, then?”

Gwenna lifted a pendant and chain from beneath her rough clothing and showed a topaz carved with a G. “Envoys from Lady Gavra.”

“Gavra? From Gavra who calls herself a Lady? Gavra, who killed my mother’s brother and took his property for her own?”

“His ‘property’ was a bit of land and the people who water the crops with their blood.”

“It was HIS!”

“And it would still be, if he hadn’t made her his Lady against her will.”



“She trespassed on his land, riding a hawk. He saw her, liked her, took her. She killed him through a mighty sorcery.” Malain shoved her whistle into a pocket of her green light-woolen gown as if thrusting it through the Lady’s heart.

“You are his only living kin. Lady Gavra sent us to ask you what price you put on your uncle’s life. What weregelt will you take in place of your revenge?”

Malain glared. She jerked a hand at Shisha. “Get in the house and make some tea—the water’s hot. Cut some of that cake I made this morning. Set three places at the table.”

She stepped forward to give Shisha room to pass into the cottage, and would have loomed over Gwenna, had the pale young woman stood on her own feet. But Gwenna looked down at her from atop Toby’s back and met wrath with mildness.

Without speaking, Malain turned and went into the cottage.

Gwenna nodded, and Toby followed, unharnessing the fragile woman and sitting her opposite Malain at the polished oaken table, taking his own seat between them.

“What weregelt will I take in exchange for my revenge, she asks me. She sends the question with a feeble-bodied woman and a feeble-minded boy.”

Toby slewed his eyes from Gwenna to Malain, but he took no offense, for he was no feeble-minded boy.

“She did not come to me herself, for she fears me.” Malain sat back as Shisha poured her tea. “Careful of this one—she spills things, clumsy fool that she is.”

Toby observed Malain pull herself safely away from the stream of hot tea, caught Shisha’s eye, and winked.

Shisha did spill a drop or two, then, but poured his and Gwenna’s cups with no mishap.

Gwenna wrapped her thin hands around the cup. “She fears your anger. Few of us lose a kinsman happily. His death deserves a payment. What do you ask?”

“His land and everything on it.”

Gwenna shook her head. “Lady Gavra has pledged herself to those people. You may ask the income above subsistence. You may ask a tribute of wood, wool, meat, grain, wine, cattle, topaz. Any or all of these.”

Silently, Malain served three portions of heavy cake, dense with

nuts and dried berries. Before Gwenna had broken a piece and raised it to her lips, Toby had eaten all of his.

As soon as her tongue touched her cake, Gwenna flung the sweet from her and cried, "Toby! It's bewitched!"

Toby and Malain each tumbled their chairs in the swiftness of their rising. He drew the shortsword that hung at his side, but he had already grown slow. Malain threw her hot tea in his face.

"Toby!" Gwenna watched her companion drop his sword and toss his head from side to side, crying out in shock, pain, and rage.

Malain snatched a griddle from its hook near the fireplace and smashed it at Toby's head. It was fortunate for him the enchantment worked as swiftly as he had eaten, for only his collapse prevented Malain's blow from connecting with deadly force.

"Toby..." Gwenna trembled to see the strong form so still on the floor.

Shisha gave a clicking hiss but no move.

Malain hung the griddle back on its hook, and leaned against the wall, shaking and panting with the passion of her fury. "Help me put him in the root bin, Monster. Open it, then help me carry him."

Together, Mistress and Creature dumped the unconscious man into a sturdy wooden box the size of a coffin. Malain closed the lid, passed her hand along the rim, and muttered an incantation. The lid sealed to the body of the box, leaving no crack or seam.

Gwenna sobbed once, and one tear fell from each eye. She laid her sleeve over the place where the tears fell, and they were gone.

Malain scooped the small woman from her chair and pitched her onto a bundle of rags in a corner. "You can live there with my Beast until your Lady comes to redeem you. No doubt it will be far too late for your brother, unless he learns to live without air."

"I beg you, have mercy. Toby had no part in this; he only came to carry me. Put me in his place, and let him live."

"Sweet child. Such a sweet, generous spirit." Malain's sneer left no doubt of her irony, even if the vinegar in her voice had been less sharp. "It is as it is. This is my price for my uncle's life: the life of your brother. Your life, as well, unless the Monster will feed you and care for you as tenderly as an invalid requires, and can do it in what time I leave her. Do you think she will? Supposing she does, how long do you think you'll survive her, once I've worn her out?"



Shisha seemed not to be listening to Malain, but stood by the root bin, staring at the crumpled human in the corner.

Malain grabbed Shisha's shoulder and shook her. "Clear the table and clean the dishes. Then make a stew for my supper." She took a red woollen shawl from a peg by the door and swept it round her head and arms. "I'll be back before dark." She picked up a rush basket and, with a final grin of malice toward Gwenna, left.

Gwenna wept, and caught her tears in her sleeve. Shisha chopped vegetables and herbs into a cooking pot, filled it with water and beer, and hung it over the fire. She gathered the scraps into a bowl and poured the dregs from the jug into a cup and carried these leavings to the corner. Gwenna edged away from the wall. "I'm in your place..."

"Stay." Shisha sat on the edge of the rag pile, near the fair woman's feet. She bit into a carrot top, her round grey eyes fixed on Gwenna. She put the bowl on the floor and pushed it toward the thin white hand. "Eat?" She offered the cup of bitter liquid. "Drink?"

A bright smile shone through Gwenna's sorrow, and she took a scrap of turnip and a sip of beer. "Thus we do share. By this we are sisters. Not against thy will, but with it, our paths for the moment join."

"Gavra come. How long?"

Gwenna shook her head. "She will not come. I must deliver Toby. He must not die because of me."

"Water, me. He... me... out." Shisha's mouth opened and closed, opened and closed, as she pushed forth the words she had never needed. "Toby... want... help... Shisha. Shisha help Toby now. Then Gavra come help Shisha."

"She will not come. Shisha, you and I are on our own. Gavra will not come. She will not. She cannot."

Shisha's rosy lids blinked once, slowly, and the thin rosy lips of her wide mouth curled up at the edges. "Gavra here. Mistress Malain, fool."

Gwenna leaned forward, as if Malain could hear through stone walls and acres of wood. "Gavra is the name I took after I called the Power to me. When I changed from an ordinary woman with hedge-witch healer knowledge. When I made my Trade."

Shisha ate a potato peel, frowning her lack of understanding.

"The Baron—Mistress Malain's uncle—was a harsh man. Harsh to

his serfs, harsh to his land, harsh to his wife. Worse than harsh.”

“Hurt you?”

“Oh, yes. Oh, indeed, yes.” Gwenna clutched the rags beneath her at the memory.

Shisha offered her the cup again, and Gwenna took another grateful sip.

“He went out hunting one morning, and I determined I would escape or die. He locked me in a windowless room when he left. I needed friendly hands to let me out. So I called on the Power. I Traded the tears I had shed, the blood I had lost, the bruises and lumps he had raised on my body, my misery and fear; I Traded them for a Shaping. For a Making. For a....”

“Creature.”

“Yes. I Shaped my horse into a man. He transformed in his stall, threw on a groom’s discarded tunic, and came to my prison to release me. I did not Fix him into human form, but only shaped him temporarily, only for the need. My so-called husband returned before we were out of the courtyard, and thought I was eloping with a lover. He had bow and arrows, and his men drove us into a corner for him.”

Gwenna closed her eyes, her lids quivering as she relived the moment. Her soft voice sank into a whisper. “I was so afraid. Afraid he would kill the Creature I had Shaped into danger, afraid he would not kill me, but would make me live. I called on the Power again, and offered it anything it chose to take from me. I offered it everything.”

She looked at Shisha and smiled without humour. “This is how the Power comes. The more you give yourself to it, the more it gives itself to you. Wise women control the giving and the getting, but I was not wise—I was terrorized. My husband and his men shrieked and writhed and died, as if they had been burned alive by their own hatred. I wouldn’t have killed them, had I been in control; I only wanted free of him. The castle was filled with shrieks and screams, and people poured forth and stopped at the sight of their master’s body. The Power knew what I couldn’t know: few of his subjects shared the Baron’s cruelty. So, few of his subjects perished in the holocaust of my terror.”

“Horse?”

“He was still a man, still holding me, as we had clutched each other for protection against the Baron’s arrows. When he let me go, I sank to the ground. Once, my hair was the colour of ripe wheat, and



my eyes the colour of rich earth. Once, my skin was berry-brown and my limbs were strong and lithe. This was the price of the Power: my strength. My strength.”

Shisha looked at the root box. “Horse.”

Gwenna smiled again, and touched Shisha’s nail-less silver hand. “You are so clever. Yes, Toby is a Creature. But he is a Free Creature. He can Change at will—if he’s conscious—between Horse and Man. As a man, he is my brother, as you are my sister. If he serves me, it’s only by his choice.”

“Shisha free, Shisha Change back?”

“Yes, whenever you chose. Would she free you, if I could find a price?”

Shisha shook her head. “Gwenna Trade all before. Nothing left for Shisha.”

“When I made my Trade, the Power became mine to use, once and for always. But...” She sighed. “I’m afraid. I don’t know how strong your Mistress is. I only use small spells, gentle enchantments. I fear my Power.”

“Die, Toby.”

Gwenna mopped new tears from her cheeks, then stared at her sleeves. “Shisha, please bring me the knife you used on those vegetables.”

Shisha scrambled to obey.

The fair woman cut a patch of sodden material from her gown and handed it and the knife to the Creature. “Put the knife and this cloth on top of the root bin, if you will.”

Shisha did so and stood away.

Gwenna raised trembling hand towards the box. “Water and blade, enemies of wood. Salt and iron, enemies of wood. Salt-water, sharp-edge, age and pry.”

In the room, the only sound was the rustle of fire and Shisha’s mouth-open breath. She leaned forward, stepped toward the box, and stepped again. Her mouth closed and she grinned wickedly at Gwenna. She moved her fingers in the pantomime of a stream, or a set of tracks, or... “Cracks. Box lid. Cracks.” She made a bubbling sound. “Air.”

Gwenna slumped against the wall in relief. “He will not die. Not for want of air.”

"Wake!" Shisha's bare feet slapped to the door. She opened it and scanned the tree line for Malain, checked the sky for the time.

"He must wake on his own. I dare not try." Gwenna clenched her useless hands and could not meet Shisha's eyes.

Without another word, without a backward glance, Shisha left the house and was gone until long shadows fell across the floor.

She returned to find Gwenna had dragged herself to the root bin and had draped her arms over it, her lips pressed to one of the cracks on its top. The wan face lifted, the pink lips smiled at the sight of her.

"I've been whispering to him, trying to talk him awake. He's stirring."

Shisha took a bowl from the mantelpiece and squatted before it on the floor. She took a flat-bladed knife and scraped it lightly across her skin, beginning at her head and working over the contours of her face, down one arm and the other, over her torso and down each leg to her feet. Scales of rose and silver shimmered in a ray of golden afternoon sunlight as she shook her scrapings into a bowl.

Gwenna, unsure whether such grooming should be private, returned her attention to Toby. When she stole a glance at the Creature, Shisha stood by the fire, stirring the stew with a long-handled spoon, and the bowl and knife were out of sight.

Without sound or warning, the door opened and Malain strode in, her basket filled with woodland herbs and roots.

Gwenna drew away, hoping the other woman wouldn't notice the result of her rival sorcery.

"Mourning your brother? Here's a shroud for him." Malain cast her shawl over the box, hiding the tell-tale cracks from herself in the doing. "Beast—I want my supper. And clear this weakling from the floor before I step on her and crush her."

Shisha lifted Gwenna's slight weight and sat her gently in a corner. The enslaved Creature served her Mistress supper, then crouched near the corner where Gwenna lay.

"Shisha woman," The words were as quiet as thin-skinned bubbles popping on the surface of still water. "Shisha want Power. Shisha make Trade."

Gwenna's shocked whisper was scarcely louder than Shisha's



words. "What?"

There came a stirring and a snort from the root box.

The fair sorceress caught her breath in hopeful delight. "You've done it! You've wakened him! He can break free and escape!"

Shisha only shook her head and kept her gaze focused on her Mistress. Her lips moved in a vocabulary of her own, made in part of human speech and in part of language of water, of wind in the reeds.

The root bin rattled and shook as if it were made of parchment, not oak. It burst asunder, and a chestnut gelding, fifteen hands high, kicked its remains to splinters.

Malain tumbled to the floor. "Gavra—This is your doing! So you've come already! Show yourself! Show yourself, or—" She snatched a stake from the box's ruin and raised it like a lance. "Through his eyes to his brain!"

Before Malain could cast spear and spell, Shisha stood, arms reaching toward her Mistress, fingers tracing a form in the air.

"Shape for shape, I give and take! I want—I will—I Trade!"

Malain dropped her weapon, as her uncle had before her, but she uttered no shriek, and did not burn from within. She fell to the floor, shrinking, thrashing, flashing, caught in her own clothing, gasping for life in the cruel air.

"Creature," said Shisha. "I Make fish."

Toby became a man again, shreds of his clothing still clinging to his featureless body. "Gwenna! She hurt you?"

"No. Toby—help her! Malain... she'll die out of water. Get her to the stream, please, quickly!"

But Malain was gone, and Shisha was coming in the door.

Gwenna greeted the newly-freed Creature. "You threw her into the stream?"

Shisha shook her head. "Woods."

"How?" Toby, dressed in spare clothes from his bundle, again carried a pack on one shoulder and his "sister" on the other.

"Scales in stew." Shisha's voice was rich in self-satisfaction. "Malain eat, take my body into hers."

Gwenna smiled down at the silver-skinned Creature, who had slung Malain's red shawl around herself before leaving the house. "It was well done. I would have spared her life, though."

"No." Shisha exchanged a glance with Toby. "Not live... wrong shape. Not live... want land. Not live like Shisha."

"Yes... Yes, I do see. And now you are free, like Toby. As soon as we reach the stream, you regain your interrupted life."

Shisha shook her head. "No more." She raised pleading grey eyes. "I come with you?"

"Don't you want to go home? Don't you want the water, now that you can have it?"

"I make Trade. Trade for Power. Malain Change. I, not. Never again."

"Shisha, you Traded your true form, your ordinary life..."

"Just enough give, just enough Power."

"Listen," said Toby, "and learn."

Gwenna chuckled. Lady Gavra rested her head on her brother's broad shoulder and extended a hand to her sister sorceress. •

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Nobody questioned her story of him leaving her. Somehow that seemed worse but she forgot it in the rush of good health that followed.

## Soul Hungry

Rebecca M. Senese

When Wendy opened her eyes, the bathroom was covered in blood. It splashed the tiles in long streaks. Brown puddles congealed on the linoleum. Globbs splattered the mirror as if thrown from a paint brush. Clots of blood squished in her hair. Slowly, she sat up. Her body ached, the muscles spasming. Leaning on the toilet, she peeled her underwear off. The blood looked almost black. She threw her underwear at the sink. It hit the porcelain with a sickly smack. The sound made her stomach churn but she was too spent to vomit. Thank god Chuck wouldn't see this mess.

Fatigue drowned all other emotions. The last few weeks she had gone through them all; anger, fear, horror, relief. All she had left was fatigue.

Slowly she climbed into the tub and turned the shower on. As the water streamed down, she turned her face to it. Rivulets sped down her back. The water ran red and soon she could comb her fingers through her hair without feeling the clumps. The ache in her muscles faded to a dull throb and strength began to return. She would have to take a muscle relaxant to ease them completely. She scrubbed soap into her skin, scraping over and over. Her flesh turned pink then red. Finally she stopped and lifted her face to the water to rinse. She stepped out

of the tub, avoiding the worst puddles. The blood had dried to rusty brown flakes with jagged edges like teeth.

Wendy closed the bathroom door behind her and sagged against it. Sunlight slanted in through the bedroom windows, showing the tousled bed sheets. It had to be mid morning and she had a doctor's appointment at eleven. Wendy forced her trembling legs to carry her to the dresser and pulled out clothing. Her hand paused in the drawer. Should she clean up the bathroom? No, she'd leave it. With Chuck gone, there was no rush. She'd clean it later.

By ten thirty she was on the road. She would make the appointment. Her palms were slick on the leather steering wheel.

Cervical cancer, the doctor had told her. Had it only been six weeks ago? Time distorted in her mind. Surely it had been months or hadn't the doctor just told her yesterday? She couldn't remember anymore. How fragile was her life that it had disintegrated in that short time? First the abnormal pap test, then the colposcopy with the doctor peering at her cervix through a microscope. She'd felt vaguely ridiculous with her legs in the stirrups, spread wide to the world. But when the doctor pointed to the monitor, she knew it wasn't funny.

And it wasn't cervical cancer.

Remembering the image in the television monitor, Wendy shuddered. Her hands tightened on the wheel. Her breathing quickened.

A small black center surrounded by a perfect red circle that swirled like a vortex, expanding even as she watched. Her breath caught in her throat. That was inside her.

Precancerous, the doctor said. But she knew it was something else, could feel it shifting inside her like a live thing. A hunger inside her. A red, swirling hunger, more terrifying than any cancer cell.

A cone biopsy was all she needed, the doctor had assured her. As she listened, the blood rushed in her ears like an ocean roar. Her heart thudded in her chest. A simple operation to remove the precancerous section, that was as far as it would go. Probably she wouldn't need a hysterectomy. That had been two weeks ago. Then they'd called her back: come in today.

The bleeding had started after the biopsy but she hadn't mentioned it to her doctor. He would have hospitalized her at once and she knew that would kill her. Somehow the hunger would blame her and strike her down. She felt tired and sore after the bleeding but



not weaker. It was punishing her, trying to make her understand, trying to make her feed it.

Her attempts to talk to Chuck had run smack into his indifference. She'd tried not to notice, tried to ignore his remarks the way she tried to ignore his hand grabbing her arm or his drunken fumbles in the night. He was under a lot of stress. It was difficult to be out of work while your wife continued to rise in her career. She tried to understand.

But then the cancer came and he'd looked at her like she was some kind of monster, some diseased thing. After the colposcopy, she'd come home tired and sore from a biopsy they'd taken. He'd seemed sympathetic as he tucked her into bed, even kissed her forehead as she closed her eyes.

His hot breath woke her. Dusk dimmed the room to shades of grey. He'd pulled the cover off her and pushed her nightgown to her waist. His knees parted her legs. His hand stroked her belly.

"Don't, Chuck," she moaned. "They said not for 24 hours."

"They don't know anything, baby." His voice was low, insistent. "I know what you need."

She struggled, but he pinned her down and soon he slid inside. He began to pump. The dull ache turned to piercing pain. With every pound she felt a spike in her belly. Her whimpers of pain mingled with his moans. Then, without her consent, she felt a familiar flutter of pleasure. Her cries got louder but his moans matched hers. He was now sliding easily, slipping in and out. She hardly felt it. Her breath caught as he shuddered and stopped. His own grunt ended in a gurgle.

He landed on her, slick with sweat. She stroked his hair. It was soaked.

"Quite the workout," she muttered. He didn't respond. She shook his shoulder. "Chuck?"

Her fingers fumbled for the lamp on the night stand.

His face looked wizened, his features sinking in on themselves even as she watched. With a shriek, she pushed him off. He felt weightless as a corn husk and slid off the edge of the bed. From the waist down she was all blood. She screamed. He had ruptured something in her! Bile burned her throat. Her heart hammered. But as she touched the congealing pool between her legs, she realized it wasn't hers. The swirl of red with a black center. The hunger. Now satisfied.

Getting rid of Chuck had been easier than she'd expected. Even

as she cleaned up the bedroom, his form shrank more. His skin flaked. She spread out an old sheet and rolled him into it. While she wondered how and where she would take him, he dissolved.

She should feel sorry. Sorry for the times he stole money from her purse. Sorry when he didn't come home until after midnight with some lame excuse about the car. Sorry she'd pretended not to smell the perfume on his shirt.

Nobody questioned her story of him leaving her. Somehow that seemed worse but she forgot it in the rush of good health that followed. After the cone biopsy, she recovered remarkably fast. Her doctor complimented her recuperative powers.

But now her blood coated the bathroom. Looking in the rearview mirror, she could see that her face was pale, her eyes bloodshot. Her stomach tightened. What was she going to do?

"I'm a little tired today," she told the doctor.

He nodded absently. "I know you're anxious to hear the results of the cone biopsy. I'm sorry to say that the precancerous cells look like they go farther than I expected. We could try another cone biopsy but I think we'll just get the same result. I recommend a hysterectomy."

Wendy's abdomen churned. Maybe that was the answer. Maybe they could cut it all out, rid her of it.

"When?" she asked.

The anesthesiologist was a pleasant Scottish man who chatted with her about bagpipes as the IV dripped into her arm. Finally he had her start counting down from a hundred. She made it to ninety-four.

When she woke, her body felt like a huge bruise, originating at her abdomen. A murmuring nurse came in to give her a shot. Words like "a slight complication" and "several days" rolled over her mind, barely registering. All she noticed was the ceiling of the room. White plaster swirled in a circular pattern, getting closer and tighter toward the center. She watched the swirls rotate as her eyelids shut. Before they closed completely, the ceiling turned red.

The next time she woke, the doctor stood reading her chart. He looked up as she opened her eyes. He hooked the chart back onto the foot of her bed and stepped forward.

"I'm glad you're awake, Wendy, I wanted to tell you as soon as you woke."



She struggled to focus on him. "Tell me what?"

He set the chart down and took her hand.

"We had some problems. I'm afraid we had to take your ovaries as well and we had to cut more of the vagina that I wanted to. We then had to sew you up and there isn't much left. I'm so sorry."

His expression was pensive, unsure of her reaction, but she smiled. Relief flooded her, giving her some feeble strength. They'd done it, they'd cut it out and not only that, they'd sealed the opening. It couldn't come back.

"I understand," she whispered and closed her eyes as the doctor stepped away.

They kept her in the hospital more than a week to make sure she healed properly. Several times they tried to get her to a therapist but she would have none of it. She didn't need to talk to anyone. Who would believe what she had to say, that she was happy to be rid of the red, swirling hunger that had killed Chuck? Now she didn't have to worry about more blood or the emptiness that filled her with desire until she thought she would scream. Now it was gone and she could live again. Relief washed away the last of her fear.

When they released her, she took a cab home. She didn't want to share this with anyone. Her mother would only fuss and annoy her, besides, she felt strong and healthy. Finally, she was healthy.

She paid the driver, entered her apartment building and took the elevator to her floor. She lived at the far end of the hall and the walk from the elevator wore her out. Not as strong as she'd thought. But even the weakness had a healthy feel to it. She chuckled to herself. It was a normal tired.

Her mother had piled her mail on the dining room table, sorting it into bills, letters and miscellaneous. She'd even stacked the junk mail in a neat pile. Typical Mom.

She'd look at it later. Right now she wanted a nap. She shrugged off her jacket and tossed it on the couch. Kicking off her shoes, she walked to the bedroom. Without turning on the light, she groped to the bed and fell in.

Hours later, a warmth on her body woke her. It spread across her stomach and chest like a large questing hand. It smothered her throat and nose. She'd fallen asleep in her clothes, no wonder she was so hot. She tried to turn over. Pain pierced her stomach.

Wendy clutched the sheets, gasping. They were soaked. Her heart pounded. It shook her body, forcing her to lie back. Her hands released the sheets and touched her stomach. It was wet. Oh god, it was wet.

She whimpered. Sweat trickled down her face. Her hands reached down, touched her stomach, her thighs...

A wide, open cavity.

She screamed. Her heart thudded, spurting thick blood over her hands. But even as it flowed, it sucked back into her. Inside her belly.

She reached for the night table, fumbling for the light. She got it but it fell to the floor, casting crazy shadows on the ceiling and walls.

Her legs were covered in blood. She couldn't move them, couldn't feel them. As she watched, her thighs flattened and a gush of blood welled in the cavity of her abdomen. Then it settled like a tide, rising, falling. Pain shuddered up her spine. She almost passed out but was denied even that relief. Her mind hung on even as she willed it to surrender. Hot pain stabbed her torso, pounded in her temples.

She'd been wrong. She had thought they could cut it out but that wasn't what they had done. That red swirling mass had been a hunger; a pure, unforgiving compulsion. Instead of cutting it out, they had sealed it in. She had to feed it or it would feed itself, the way it had with Chuck. The way it was now.

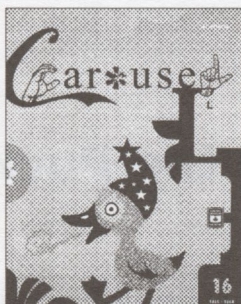
Blood gurgled in her lungs. She watched her intestines shudder and shiver. Too late now, even if she had the strength to reach for the phone. Her legs were gone. She watched them wither. The bones of her knees stuck out like marbles, her skin stretched thin and transparent. Then her legs deflated and her veins flattened on the bed sheet.

Wendy closed her eyes. Another spike of pain shot up to her head. Her jaw clamped down, severing the tip of her tongue. Her lungs burned now. Her heart pounded in panic as if it could escape her rib cage. But there was no escape. The hunger scorched her nerves. Pain trailed in its wake. Shrinking muscles bent her hands into claws. The skin along her arms peeled back. Her fingers snapped as she grabbed at the bed sheet. Her lungs collapsed. She opened her mouth to shriek but blood filled her throat. Her eyelids fluttered open, dissolved into her forehead. The muscles in her face shriveled. She stared at the ceiling, screaming in her mind, as the hunger devoured her. •





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I know what was in her eyes,  
and it wasn't human. And I saw  
what she did to Tam, and that  
wasn't human, either.

## Carter Hull Recovers the Puck

Marissa K. Lingen

Mainly I've got three things going for me in this game. I can skate pretty fast for my size. I'm not afraid to go to the boards as hard and as often as necessary. And I notice stuff. I don't say much, so a lot of the guys think I'm kind of dumb, especially compared to Tam. But I see what's going on, out there on the ice. I know how to look.

That's probably why I noticed that Heikkinen was favoring his left leg at practice that Thursday. Now I wish I hadn't. " 'sup, Tommy?" I asked him as he came into the box, pulling his helmet off.

He winced. "My knee. Something's going pop."

Coach Laird overheard. "Better get that looked at. The real season's coming up. We need you out there."

We were all glad to see the start of the season. It had been a weird year already, way too cold too early and lots of exhibition games, and then there was that thing with Tam and Janet on Halloween. I was still figuring that out, but Janet and the baby-to-be seemed to be okay, and Tam wasn't sacrificed to the lords of hell, and that's about all I could ask for under the circumstances.

There was one thing that confused me most about it. That game, when Tam had been forced to play for those weird French-Canadian dudes and Janet took him down and saved him, even I could see that



there was a lot of big, bad magic going on in that game. I saw the face of that Queen woman—hell, I checked her into the boards as hard as I've ever done. I know what was in her eyes, and it wasn't human. And I saw what she did to Tam, and that wasn't human, either.

But it wasn't really about the hockey. That's what I don't get. If I've ever believed in magic in my life, it's in the way my skates hiss on fresh ice, the slide of the puck. The way blood bounces: if that's not magic, I don't know what is. And that Queen chick, she used it, but it was just another tool for her.

I kind of thought it should be about the hockey.

It was hard to keep thinking about magic in the locker room, and even harder at The Stats afterwards, with the guys buying rounds and some of the girls from town hanging around. Everybody was doing their best to forget the weird Halloween exhibition game, and I'd have done, too.

Except Tam was my roommate, and when I got home, he and Janet were worrying again, just sitting on the couch worrying. "Good practice today," I said.

"I guess," said Tam. "I'm still a little—I don't know, Carter. There's something missing."

"Your slapshot," said Janet.

"Naw, his shot's coming along good," I said. "Almost up to what it used to be. You should come watch."

Janet made a face. "I had my first doctor appointment. Besides, my dad wants me to stay off the ice with you guys until the baby comes."

I stared at her. "Jan, that's what, seven months?"

"If the little bugger can wait that long, yeah."

"With no skating?"

"Not with no skating. Just not skating with you guys. No checking, no pushing, no..."

"Hockey," I said. "No hockey. How's he expect you to make the Olympic team with seven months off?"

"He wants her to practice fundamentals," said Tam in enunciated misery. "He says there's no point to pushing things now."

I had to admit that Coach Laird had a point—this was not exactly the best time for Janet to play a contact sport. But it was awfully soon to ban her from a little skating with us. The guys would be gentle with her, cut her some slack.

Maybe that's what she was afraid of.

"You should come see, though," I said. "Tam's right, he's just got something missing. I've been watching but haven't spotted it yet. Come to practice tomorrow."

"Actually," said Tam, looking away. "I'm missing practice tomorrow. So's Heikkinen. Coach already knows. We're heading up to Heikkinen's grandmother's in Thief River Falls."

"She knows about this kind of thing," said Janet. "We just want to make sure, y'know. That the baby's safe. That we've done all we can. We'll be gone until Sunday."

"There's a game Saturday," I said stupidly.

"They talked to Dad, Carter," said Janet. "Tam needs to make sure he's not cursed, and Heikkinen could use a charm for that knee if he's going to play on it."

"A *charm*?"

Janet shrugged. "He's got a witchy Finnish granny, we might as well use it. He's been acting all stoic lately. I'm glad you noticed it where Dad could overhear, because the doctor said it was pretty bad."

"Shit," I said.

"Don't worry," said Tam. "It's just one game. We'll be back for the next one, better than ever."

I hoped he was right, but I had this feeling like they were playing really quiet violin music in a movie and it was getting louder by the minute.

It got worse when I watched the other team skate around warming up on Saturday. I poked Theriault. "Hey, isn't that one of the guys from the... you know, the exhibition team?"

Theriault stared. "I don't remember all their names. Do you recognize him?"

"I think so. He skates kinda funny."

"How so?"

"Just... you know. Funny."

We watched him skate for a minute, and Theriault nodded: funny. "I wish Heikkinen was here," he said. "Or even Tam."

"I wish Cross was the ref," I said.

"Yeah."

Miles Cross is a crazy little Irish ref who turns out to know a lot about magic, and I'm not sure we'd have gotten out of that exhibition



if he hadn't been around to call penalties on the other side. The guy we had was fine, but I didn't think he'd know the Dark Lady if she tripped him with her stick.

I kept looking around until Coach put me in, and then I had to just concentrate on the game. Kethner was slamming his way down the ice with the puck, and I was trying to keep the funny-skating guy busy, when he put on a sudden burst of speed and slammed his elbow into my chin.

It was a totally gratuitous hit. I was nowhere near the puck, and I hadn't done anything to him or any of his teammates. I roared, "Come on, asshole, you wanna do this again?" and slammed the heel of my hand into his nose. He grabbed my jersey. I twisted to try to keep it from going over my head. He spun me around in a circle. My split lip and his broken nose sprayed blood on the ice, bouncing and landing around us as we spun. He said something fast, but it didn't sound like French.

Then Levitski charged down the ice at us roaring like a bull in heat, and some of the guys came off the bench, and I don't remember much for awhile. Lots of hitting. Pulling off helmets, holding some guy under my arm while I pummeled him. Hell of a fight.

Finally the ref got us all sorted out. He handed out the penalties like popcorn at the movies, and I skated for the bench swearing and spitting at the other team.

Coach Laird shouted at me, "Good Christ, Hall, it's an exhibition game!"

Bachand leaned over the boards and put a hand on Coach's suit jacket. "The other guy started it, Coach. Didn't you see it?"

"Well, yeah, but—" He looked at me, looked again.

I didn't care at that point, about that or my split lip or anything, because something was starting to feel funny, tingly, just beyond my scalp. Like when the Queen had Tam, but closer up. Like it was happening to me.

"You all right, Hall?" Coach asked.

"I can play when my penalty's up," I muttered. I watched my hands. They didn't seem to be turning into a duck or any of that shit the Dark Bitch did to Tam. I swore some more under my breath.

He shook his head. "No more of this, all right?"

"Sure."

If it was up to me, we'd never see another guy from that team again. God, I wished Tam and Janet had been there, or Tommy Heikkinen. Coach listened to Tommy a lot more than he used to.

We lost, three goals to two, but we fought hard. At least, the other guys did. I tripped over my own skates, passed the puck straight to the opposing forward, and managed to check *myself*. If I could get rid of the stupid blood curse, the season would look fine. On the ice. It was the off-ice stuff that scared the shit out of me.

So when the game was over and the crowds had left, I skated in circles on the empty ice, over and over. Dave the rink manager shrugged and left me to myself.

I heard the red-haired stranger come in, but I didn't acknowledge him. Finally he walked down and leaned on the boards of the penalty box.

"He really got you good, didn't he?"

I shrugged. "It's hockey."

The stranger shook his head. "Not the fight. The blood magic."

And the funny thing was, after everything that happened, after the way I was thinking about magic, it just didn't surprise me. "Yeah, is that what it is? Yeah, I guess. I don't know what he got me with."

"That's why he grabbed your jersey." The stranger made a swinging motion. "To get the blood in the circle."

"You know a lot about this."

He shrugged. "I've been around a time or two. I've seen more than one guy benched after a blood curse. Can't skate straight. Danger to himself and his teammates."

"Shit."

"Don't worry, I can get you out of it."

I eyed him skeptically. "You play?"

He laughed. "You're not going to accept help from someone who doesn't?"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know if you'd know how to help."

He shook his head. "Yeah, I play. Goalie. Name's Rob Bonhomme."

He waited expectantly, as if I was supposed to know him, but it was my turn to shake my head. "So you just help guys like me out of the kindness of your heart?"

He grinned, and something in the pit of my stomach told me to run. I ignored it. You don't get anywhere in this game if you run from



everything that makes you want to puke.

"I expect favors in return for my favors," said Bonhomme. "I don't do something for nothing. Just straight up, fair trades."

"What kind of favors do you want?" I said warily, skating in a circle that took me a little farther from him.

"Nothing bad. I'm not with... her," he said.

I skated a little closer, tipping my head to look at him. "How do I know that?"

He shrugged. "You just do."

"Say you take this curse off me. Do I have to agree to any favor you ask me?"

"You can put restrictions on it. If I don't like them, I'll just leave you with a blood curse. Nobody goes home unhappy."

"It sounds like I do either way."

Bonhomme spread his hands. "Carter, Carter, Carter. It's just a little favor, and it gets a big ol' blood curse off your head."

I thought about it. "If you have the power to do that kind of thing, can you protect people?"

"Like you?"

"Like a little baby, say. Like you were its, uh..."

"Fairy godmother?" He smiled, showing big white teeth. Probably capped after he'd broken some of them, if he played. "Oh ho. I see. You're worried about Janet's baby."

"You know about that, too?"

"Of course. *She* was pretty upset about it. All of us heard. If you hadn't gotten involved, Mallow wouldn't have blood-cursed you. He was under orders."

"Mallow," I said. "The guy who skates funny."

"You under any other blood curses?"

"You'd know," I said. "Anyway, what about it? Two favors, and you take off the curse and make sure nobody does anything bad to the baby?"

"I have limited power to stop these things."

"But would you do it?"

"I suppose I could."

"And the favors wouldn't hurt anybody?"

Bonhomme flashed me that grin again. "How many concussions have you handed out? How many teeth missing because of you?"

I flushed. "I mean *really* hurt. That stuff's just part of the game."

"I swear that no lasting harm will come to anyone because of the favors I ask you," he said, with a flourishing bow.

"Then I agree."

"Spit on the ice, spit on your hand, and shake on it," he instructed, holding out his hand.

I squinted at him.

"We can use blood, if you like, but I'd have thought you'd had enough of that tonight."

I spat as instructed. His hand felt unnaturally warm. Maybe he'd had it in his pocket. I hadn't paid enough attention to know.

"Good night, Carter Hall," he said. "I will see you again. Of course." He turned and walked up the stairs. He disappeared halfway up. I told myself it was a trick of the light. I stepped off the ice and headed for the locker room.

The Stats was pretty loud that night; even an exhibition loss goes down easier with a little beer. Levitski shoved one into my hand as soon as I walked in, and under the circumstances, it seemed only appropriate to drain the thing.

"Hey Monteau," I said, when I'd swallowed my beer. "Does Bonhomme mean anything in French?"

He grinned. "Sure. Means 'good guy.'"

"Good guy. Rob good guy." Something teased the back of my brain, but it took a minute to hit me. "Oh, shit."

"What?"

"Nothing. Nothing."

Back when I was dating Tracy, she rented some Shakespeare movie for us, because it was supposed to be all classy and romantic. Then she spent the whole time complaining that she didn't look like that one lawyer chick, and she got upset when I said she had better tits than the chick in the movie. (Which she did. Apparently this was not the point.) Anyway, towards the beginning, before we were fighting about Tracy's tits, there was this freaky little elf dude they called Robin Goodfellow, and I managed to remember who it was.

I was messing around with Puck. Even I had heard of Puck.

Of course I had. I'm a *hockey* player.

I didn't drink enough to forget that I owed Puck, *the* Puck, favors. But I tried. Tam got home sometime in the night; his breakfast



preparations woke me. When I was ready to face human contact, I stumbled out to the kitchen. Tam sat at the kitchen table in holey blue sweatpants, eating cornflakes. "How'd it go?"

He sighed and made a resolute face. "All right. Tommy's got a scarf for around his knee, and his grandma thinks it'll hold up, though she wishes he'd stop playing and get it fixed right away."

"And you guys?"

"Tommy took Janet to the rink this morning."

"The rink?"

"His grandma gave us an old book of ice spells."

"They *have* those?"

"They've got a lot of stuff up there." Tam shook himself like a wet dog. "A lot of stuff. But it seems like some of it might do the baby some good."

"Good. Hey, I, um—" I opened the fridge so I wouldn't have to look at Tam. "I got the baby a, uh, a protector of sorts. I hope you don't mind."

"A protector? What are you talking about?"

"Kind of a fairy godmother. Only it's more a godfather, and I don't think he's that way." I emerged from the fridge with a carton of milk to drink out of, darting a glance at Tam. He was sitting back in his chair, arms folded across his bare chest. "What?"

"Carter, what did you do?"

"There was this guy Mallow, from the exhibition team—"

Tam let out an explosive sigh, blowing a fringe of black hair out of his eyes. "I knew we shouldn't have gone."

"No, it's okay, sort of. He put a blood curse on me, but then this other guy showed up and offered to take it off in exchange for a favor. And he promised the favor wouldn't hurt anyone, and so I promised him two favors if he'd do what he can to look after the baby."

"What other guy?" Tam demanded.

"Rob Bonhomme, plays goal." Tam was still giving me the evil eye, so I said, "Puck. He's kind of a, y'know. One of them. Like that Queen woman. Only... nicer."

"I know who Puck is, Carter; I am not illiterate. You got Puck to be my child's... fairy god... father?"

"He was, y'know. There. Available and all."

"Did he *offer*?"

"I asked."

"Unask!" Tam exploded.

I blinked at him.

"The baby is going to have enough problems with *them* without involving *Puck* in things. Puck the mischief-maker! Puck the trickster! What has he tricked you into, Carter?"

"It was pretty straightforward," I said. "And I was the one who suggested it. Not him. Besides, I think he'd get mad if I tried to back out now."

"Oh, Jesus," he groaned. "Janet is going to go completely nuts."

"Janet's been completely nuts since the third grade," I said. "I would know. I was there. If that's all we have to worry about, we're home free." I stole the box of cornflakes from Tam and poured some of the milk out of my carton before swigging from it again.

Tam ground his teeth as he watched me chew my breakfast. "I know you mean to help," he said at last, "but do you see that it's not very helpful at all? This thing with Puck?"

I stuffed my mouth with cornflakes before replying. "No."

"God knows what he thinks protection looks like! Carter!" Tam threw his hands up in disgust and got up. "I'm going to get some clothes on. I suggest you do the same. We've got to talk to Janet."

When we got to the rink, Janet was sitting in the penalty box, and Tommy Heikkinen skated in circles on the ice, looking glum.

Tam leaned over to kiss Janet's forehead. "How'd the spells go?"

Janet made a face. "All right, I guess. Kind of weird, kind of boring, but I feel okay."

"That's the goal," said Tam. "We have another problem." Janet raised an eyebrow at him. "Carter, tell her."

So Heikkinen skated over and leaned on the boards, and I explained again. Janet swore, at length.

Heikkinen nodded. "Powerful but silly. Like the Swedes have with Loki."

"Loki is a myth," said Tam firmly.

Tommy gave him a pitying look.

"Carter, if you run into Loki, do *not* enlist him as another godfather for Tam's and my baby," said Janet. "Just don't."

"The baby will be *fine*," I said. "We'll look after him. And Puck will help us out with him." I caught the look on Janet's face. "Or her, him



or her. Long as it's healthy."

"Damn right," muttered Janet.

"How's the knee, Tommy?" I asked, hoping to change the subject.

"All right. I feel it pull, but—" He shrugged. "It doesn't hurt like it did. It'll hold together. I can play."

"And that's what counts."

Janet was still looking sour. "You didn't promise that Puck could take the baby away, did you?"

"No! Christ! I'm not stupid, Janet." I hadn't prohibited it, but I thought I could make a very strong case that the baby was best off with his parents, anyway.

She stood up. "I'm going to do another one of these spells anyway."

"It wore you out before," said Heikkinen.

"I can take it," said Janet. "I am not some damn delicate flower just because I'm pregnant."

"Magic is rough stuff, Jan," said Tam. "No one's accusing you of being a wimp. No one would *dare* call you a delicate flower."

She glared at him. "Good." Then she went back to studying a yellowed, dog-eared book. She tucked it in her coat pocket and stepped back out on the ice. I watched carefully. Tam picked up the book and thumbed through it while Janet went in weird loops and lines, jumping little awkward jumps to make the blades trace the right patterns. There must have been some trick of the light, because her scuffed black leather skates glistened like the white ice. It made me a little dizzy to watch her, which didn't make much sense, because she wasn't going in circles or spinning or anything.

Heikkinen put his hand on my arm. "I think we should let them be. Maybe go to the locker room until it's time for practice."

"Tam isn't even paying attention," I protested. "It's not like it's a private moment."

"We shouldn't be paying attention, either. It'll give you a headache."

I followed him into the locker room and got ready for practice. When I got out there, Tam was warming up and Janet had gone back into the office. Everything felt right on the ice. Everything felt normal. The tingling was gone, and nobody seemed to make me dizzy.

It was easy to settle back into a routine. Even Janet trying to skate

Granny Heikkinen's spells in the mornings was an awful lot like Janet practicing. I didn't spend too much time looking at Tommy's knee, and we won our first regular season game. It was fine. It was normal.

After our second home game, Rob Bonhomme was waiting for me when the crowd cleared out.

"Time for a favor?" I said.

He grinned. "You bet."

"Okay, shoot."

"There's this guy, Moutardegraine. You'll play him in a week. I need you to make him look ridiculous," said Bonhomme. "He and I have a score to settle. I want you to settle it for me. Humiliation."

"Yeah, I'm sure, and then he does that blood thing like the last one," I said. "And then I owe you another two favors to get it off."

Bonhomme shook his head. "Just one, remember? The other one is for the baby."

"Sounds like those credit cards to me. Take out an advance, solve all your problems! And then gradually—"

"*Fine,*" said Bonhomme. "I'll give you a little something." He stuck his hand in his pocket and came out with a perfect scarlet maple leaf. It had to have fallen months ago, with the early winter we'd had, but it was still soft and almost leathery, not crumbly at all.

"You a Toronto fan?" I asked.

He grinned. "Yeah, sometimes. Intermittently. Sundin got me back on their side."

I shook my head. "I don't want to know how. So what's this going to do?"

"Protect you from malicious spells. Moutardegraine can still knock your teeth out, but he won't be able to do it from across the rink."

"That's something, I suppose." I thought about it. "What kind of a name is Moutardegraine, anyway? Does that even fit on his jersey?"

"It may just say Moutarde. You'll know him when you see him." Bonhomme paused. "He's one of hers. We all have more than one name."

"Dammit!"

"I can handle mortals myself," he said reasonably. "I wouldn't need your help for that. Unless they were under someone's protection. But any action I take against a member of the Court will embroil me in... politics."



He said it like it was a dirty word. Maybe for them it was; I know some humans who feel that way. "But with me, it won't be politics?"

"Well, you'll have the leaf, and that'll be some protection," he said. "And you're already known to be opposed to the Queen's faction, so...." He grinned and shrugged, and my stomach turned over again.

"All right," I said. "And when it's done?"

"I'll let you know when I need that other favor."

I didn't doubt that at all.

Now I just had to figure out how to humiliate one of *her* hockey players in five days or less. No sweat. Piece of cake.

"Tam, I've got a problem," I said four days later.

He wasn't very happy with me, and Janet was worse.

"It'll take care of your baby!" I said. "I thought that's what you wanted!"

And when Janet was done swearing at me, Tam's glare slipped a little, and he said, "I know you want the best for us, Carter. And we want the best for you, too. So I think maybe you'd better borrow Heikkinen's grandmother's book."

Janet sighed and got it out of her coat pocket—apparently she carried it with her a lot. She went through the index: "Health, Protection," she muttered, "Weather, Emotion—"

"How about emotion?" said Tam. "You just said he had to be humiliated. If you can do a spell to make him feel humiliated—"

"I don't think Bonhomme's going to settle for that," said Janet.

I shook my head. "Keep going."

"Animals, Transformations—"

"Maybe I could make him into a jackass," I said. "That would humiliate him."

"That would *annoy* him," said Tam. "And having gone through something like that, I wouldn't wish it on anyone. Not even one of *hers*."

"Maybe I should just trip him a couple of times with my stick," I said. "Make his life generally miserable."

Janet shook her head. "Dad'll be furious if you're getting penalties called for fouling someone who isn't even a key player. And what if he's really good at dodging that kind of thing? Let's see, we've got Levitations—"

"I'm not flying him around the rink!"

"Ah, here we are: Misfortunes."

She flipped through until she found the right page and then handed it to me. "'Physical clumsiness,'" I read. "Yeah, that sounds about right. Have him tripping over his own skates."

Janet leaned over and pointed at the diagram. "You have to be very, very careful with that bit, because that directs it. If you screw that part up, you might make anybody clumsy. Yourself, one of our guys, the ref..."

"I'll be careful."

"You'll *practice*," said Tam, taking the book away from me and marking the page with his finger. "Janet will help you."

"What'll your father say if we're skating together?"

She shrugged. "He didn't say anything when Tommy was skating with me. As long as we don't have a puck on the ice, I think he'll be okay."

No, I thought, the Puck'll probably stay away until it's all done. But I didn't think anybody would find it funny at that point.

The diagram didn't look that hard, but it felt funny to be skating around empty-handed. "I think I need my stick," I said.

"What for?" asked Tam.

"I'll have it at the game, might as well practice with it."

He sighed. "All right."

Like I said, the diagram didn't look that hard. Skating it was another matter. I could see why Janet looked so awkward with her little jumps: there was no way I knew to make them come out right without twisting around funny. I was supposed to glide along on one foot for way too long, and I kept putting the other skate down instinctively. After the fifth try, I smacked the boards in frustration.

"Goddamn!" I yelled. "I feel like a fucking figure skater!"

Janet put her hands on her hips. "Are you going to do this or aren't you?"

"Of course I am. I don't have any choice."

"Well, then. Start out on your right again."

She skated it beside me, mirroring me and tapping me with a stick when I did something wrong. Tam called out corrections from the book when we both screwed it up. I noticed that Janet's little awkward jumps were smoothing out. "You're getting good at this, Jan. Maybe you'll be some kind of ice witch now, huh?"



I winced at the look she gave me. "I do what I have to," she growled. "And that's it."

Well, we all did what we had to, and by the time we went home, I thought it might not be a lost cause after all. Which is always a good feeling, I guess, compared to the alternative.

The alternative was a blood curse or a baby in danger or both. It was good to remember that.

I was starting that night, me and Tam both. I spotted the right guy before play began. His jersey said Moutarde, not Moutardegraine. I'd have known him anyway, even if the Puck had just said, "Some guy, one of *hers*." I guess you start to get a sense for these things. I didn't really want a sense for these things. But I might have gotten into it with him without the Puck's say-so. At least this way I was prepared.

Sort of.

And, to my relief, Miles Cross wasn't officiating, so he wouldn't toss me for doing magic on the ice like he did to the Dark Lady.

So instead of doing normal stuff in warm-up, I started skating the spell from Heikkinen's granny's book. This Moutarde looked mad, but only for a minute. That didn't make me feel any better: what had he thought of?

Just as I was finishing the spell, he called the official over to the bench. The official moved between us just as I finished the direction part of the spell. Then he tripped on mid-air and face-planted on the ice, hitting his chin. He was out cold.

A couple of guys got him off the ice. He sat there shaking his head, dazed. Heikkinen and the other team's captain went to examine the ice, but there was nothing where the ref had fallen. They got a new ref in to start the game. It wasn't Cross, either. Whew.

I didn't have time to do the spell again before the puck dropped. So I had to do it after the game was in progress. Towards the beginning, I managed to use my arms to check a couple of guys as I did the patterns, but by the time I finished it, I looked like I was skating in my own world. I had essentially given them half a minute of power play, and it was only Tam and Heikkinen motioning for the other guys to cover that saved our butts.

Moutarde sat on the bench smoldering but did not immediately fall over. Which was probably good: I don't think the Puck would have considered that enough humiliation. But even with the whispers passing

along the bench, I was getting the evil eye from our own guys.

Coach pulled me out, glaring, and sent Smuskiewicz in for me. He motioned for me to sit down next to him. "There is a scout from the Canucks sitting three rows back—no, don't look now, idiot," he said, barely moving his lips. "He will want to know why one of my best prospects is jumping around like a figure-skating elephant. What, exactly, should I tell him?"

"I don't know," I said. "It's for the baby."

Coach gave me a look that was disgusted and disbelieving all at once. Then the crowd roared for Monteau's save—I yelled, myself—and it was a minute before I could hear him. "Knock this shit off, Carter," he said. "It's your career, not mine."

"I've got to do it."

"I don't have to play you."

Another roar—Monteau had caught the puck in his glove at the very last minute.

"You do if you want the baby to be all right. Trust me, Coach."

He looked at me closely. "All right. But if you lose this game for us, your ass is toast."

"If we lose, it won't be because of me."

He rolled his eyes and waved me away like a mosquito. He put me in a few minutes later, and I behaved myself well enough. I kept glancing at their bench. Moutarde sat there glaring. If he sat out the whole game and the spell was for nothing, I'd still have to do some favor for the Puck. But there was nothing I could do but play the game.

Five minutes into the second period, I passed the puck to Tam, and he squeaked it past the other goalie's stick. And after that, they put Moutarde in.

I think he was stronger than the first official or something, because he didn't immediately fall and conk his head. But it was not pretty. First he skated like a polar bear, like someone who'd never been on the ice before. Like maybe his skates weren't laced up tight enough. He fell into his own forward. One of their defensemen had to stop him from knocking the puck into their own goal. The coach called him out, but he ignored the coach entirely and skated towards me, stick high.

He slipped, managed to recover, and smacked himself in the forehead with his stick. A line of blood ran down his face.



I couldn't help it. I cracked up.

He lunged for me and fell on his knee. It looked like it hurt. I stopped laughing. Everyone went quiet. Tam had the puck, but he wasn't doing anything with it. Moutarde slashed at me with his stick, and it cracked down the middle. I skated back until I hit the boards. It was sure to satisfy the Puck, but I wasn't sure what to do next. I probably could have knocked him out with a quick punch, but that didn't seem right with everything I'd already done.

Moutarde screamed up at me. The whole rink strained to figure out just exactly what he was saying. But the tingly feeling stopped right away. I tore my glove off, pulled the maple leaf out of my jersey, and looked down at him.

See, I knew. Hockey isn't what they are. It's just something they do from time to time. He didn't use his stick or the ice or anything. He just yelled at me. Maybe if he'd had the ice on his side, he'd have won even with the Puck's leaf. Maybe. But he was just some guy who thought that hockey was interchangeable with horse riding or some old fairy tale thing. And if you didn't know the difference, you were going to get schooled by someone who did.

I held out my maple leaf and twirled it between my fingers, whistling. Moutarde glared up at me, dripping blood on the ice from the cut above his eyebrow. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. I started to feel a crashing headache coming on. Moutarde disappeared just as the maple leaf disintegrated, falling into reddish dust on the ice.

The rink was silent.

Then the ref got himself together and called time, and everybody started talking at once.

I ended up with a two-minute penalty—there's nothing on the rule books for making another player disappear, and anyway I argued that I hadn't made him do it and couldn't make him do it if I tried. But the ref was pretty sure I'd done something shady, so two minutes it was.

When I was sitting in the penalty box, I heard Bonhomme whisper, "Well done." I turned and grinned at him.

I saw the Canucks recruiter walking out shaking his head. I didn't like that much, but I thought about Tam and Janet's baby. And Vancouver wouldn't have wanted a guy with a blood curse on him anyway. There would be other games and other scouts. I hoped.

I was suddenly glad I was in the penalty box, though, because otherwise I wouldn't have seen it: just as the Canucks recruiter was leaving in one door, I saw him coming in another. Same guy, same clothes, same body language. Too close to be even a twin.

Something weird was going on, and this time it wasn't my fault.

I kept one eye on the second recruiter and another on the clock. By the time I hurried back onto the ice, he'd made his way halfway around the ice. Coach called for a line change. I whispered, "Don't put me back in, Coach."

"No problem, Hall," he said grimly.

I'd have to deal with that later, but there wasn't time: the stranger was heading straight for the seats behind the team, and the Puck was oblivious.

I scrambled out of the team seats and up through the stands towards the second recruiter. "Bonhomme!" I shouted, but he was engrossed in the game. The recruiter smiled. He noticed that the Puck hadn't heard.

Well, hell. He didn't say I couldn't guess what the favor should be myself.

I noticed that the second recruiter had put on one thing the first wasn't wearing: a bright red stocking cap with a Flames logo on it. It looked cheerful with his sober black and navy coat, but why was a Vancouver guy wearing a Flames hat? It didn't make any sense. So as soon as I got near him, I roared, "Go near my sister again and I'll kill you", ripped the cap off his head, and flung it down.

Some of the Irish guys told me later that red caps have some special thing in mythology, and Tommy nodded solemnly. I guess it was pretty special to that guy, because when I pulled the cap off, it melted into smoke like dry ice, and the guy's face changed. It melted, too. He looked like werewolves in human form always look in the movies: pointy and hairy and not quite right.

I punched him for good measure.

And then, *then* Bonhomme, that bastard, finally took some notice. He leapt to his feet and shouted something, and the other guy shouted something else, and that's when things got really ugly. The Puck's hands shot out like Inspector Gadget had fixed them up for him, and the other guy just didn't stand a chance, which I guess is what the disguise was for. He went from werewolf to B-movie zombie to a



scrunched up little man that looked like he was frostbitten all over. He left white slashes across the Puck's face, but the Puck made him howl and then made him disappear.

The ushers were not too keen on this disruption. As they hauled him out of the arena, the Puck caught my eye and nodded, but he didn't look happy.

It counted. I knew it did.

I made my way back down to Coach's side amidst stares. "Hall, you don't have a sister," said Coach through his teeth.

I looked away. "I know, Coach."

"Everybody in town knows you don't have a sister. If you're going to pull shit like this, stop doing such a half-assed job of it."

"Sorry, Coach."

"Get out of here. I don't want to see you until practice Monday." I sat it out in the locker room, but we won that one 2-0.

So I was going along feeling pretty good about the whole thing, until I realized that the Puck would be back to see his new godchild. I wasn't sure how he'd treat me: he ought to be grateful for the second favor, but I didn't know how well the fairies handled gratitude. For the baby, it would be worth it. Even if Tam and Janet did end up killing me. •



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Del's smile tightened and his voice was a whisper: "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the whole earth, and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food."

## Dust To Dust

Scott Sakatch

Del had been stockpiling for years by the time the meeting came. A kilo here, a bucketful there, a few handfuls from mice-chewed bags in dark recesses under back porches and forgotten outbuildings. It wasn't a lot—nowhere near what Del wanted—but you make do with what you have. That was one thing he'd learned from his father.

Another was: you did what you had to do, as a husband, a father, a man and as a sheep in the Lord's flock. Sometimes the lesson took the form of a lecture; more often it was simply observing the old man and the million separate actions that combined to define his father's character. Slumping long after midnight into a kitchen chair in the rambling farmhouse, exhausted from getting the Stones' crop off on the neighbouring farm, after Mr. Stone had drowned in the dugout behind the barn. Conspiring with Del and his siblings to pour pineapple juice into the Jell-O while Mom wasn't looking, so it wouldn't set and she would spend the afternoon confounded. Or staring down Mr. Leavitt, the giant of a gym teacher at Swihart Composite High School, who'd given Del detention for something another boy had done. And kissing his mother's ear when they thought no one was looking. Each act a brushstroke painting a portrait of Levi Holladay that served as Del's archetype of manhood for the rest of his life.



But his father's kindness had been tempered with strength. One day when Del was 12, his dad took the old 12-gauge down from its rack in the garage, guided the boy through the cleaning and loading of the shotgun and then led him to the old red barn. Del felt as if he'd swallowed a hot rock. His older brother had followed the same ritual in his own twelfth spring and relayed the gruesome details as the two lay awake in their bunks. There was a new batch of kittens in the barn. It was time for them to be evicted.

His father's face had been stern that day but not hard. He stood behind Del as the boy took aim at the nest of fur huddled in the sun-beam cast by the hayloft window. One of the kittens, an orange tabby, stretched and turned its pale green eyes on Del. The rock in his throat threatened to choke him. Sensing Del's pain, his father reached around the boy and steadied the stock, curled his finger around Del's on the trigger and squeezed.

After, Del had cried. Levi turned the boy's red face to his. There was no sympathy in his eyes.

"You need to understand something, Delmar, and it's very important. There are some hard things in life, real hard, and you have to do 'em. If you don't, things end up worse. Life's not about what's easy. It's about doin' the right thing."

What Del was doing now wasn't easy but it was right. He grabbed the last sack from the bed of his old but still spotless Kia half-ton and carried it into the rusted silo, dumped its contents and dropped the bag. No point in being neat now. He closed the silo door behind him and locked it, climbed behind the wheel of the truck and activated its silent electric engine. He drove the quarter-mile to the farmhouse where he had learned to be a man, first as a son and brother, and later as a husband and father. Then he went inside to wait for the devil.



In the kitchen the doorbell sounded like a whisper in a dream. Del scowled absently and thought, as always: *What's wrong with ding-dong?* Cheryll had insisted they get the infrasonic kind; all her friends had one. Del had given in but not before telling Cheryll they might as well give up farming, too, as so many of their "friends" had, in favour of a life of hedonistic leisure courtesy of the Arcadians. She had said: It's a

doorbell, for Christ's sake! He said: Though shalt not take the Lord's name in vain! She'd countered that He wasn't her Lord anymore, and she wasn't sure He'd ever been. Aching silence. Cheryll burned dinner that night.

Now, Del straightened the last of the frames on the old oak dining table that had been his mother's pride, and went into the front parlor. The door was wide open—the Arcadian air-conditioner kept the cool in and the summer heat out, and there was little need for locks these days—who would bother to steal anything? But the thing on the other side still waited until Del was in the doorway.

Del took a deep breath and smiled. The creature's ebony eyes, big as gravy boat saucers, showed no sign of emotion, as usual. But its narrow, lipless slit of a mouth widened in a toothless grin Del had come to know as an attempt to mimic human custom. He wished it would stop.

"Neral," Del chimed, and gestured for the alien to enter. "You're letting the flies out. Come in." The alien entered, offered a childlike arm and Del took the hand gingerly. He disliked touching its greasy grey skin but his smile didn't waver. *Dad would be proud.*

"My friend." The thought appeared in Del's mind. As a show of good faith (and no doubt moral superiority) when they first arrived, the Arcadians had said they would only project thoughts, not read them. Del hoped it was true – this meeting's outcome hinged on it. "Glad to come. But why?"

Del smiled at the Arcadian. It was in charge of human relations for southern Alberta and had been to Del's home a dozen times or more in the past fifteen years. Neral had even shared the family table once, at Cheryll's insistence, "speaking" at length to Del's wife and children about the wonders that lay beyond the boundaries of Earth. Neral was a gifted storyteller, even in the blunt language of direct thought, and had held young Barbara and Tanner spellbound with tales of Arcadia and the infinite wonders that lay beyond the night sky. *There are wonders out there,* Del had thought sourly as he watched his children's rapt faces. *But there's also judgment. And wrath. And even the fastest starship can't outrace that.*

Years later, in the hindsight of countless lonely nights, Del had decided that that night had been the beginning of his family's damnation and of his own quest for redemption. That night had been Alpha; tonight was Omega.



“Delmar?”

Del’s smile widened to a slash. He fixed his eyes on the alien’s and motioned to a pair of handcrafted chairs at the table. The two sat. “Sorry, Neral. Just woolgathering. I was thinking about the night we had you to dinner. Remember?”

Neral’s autopsy incision of a mouth widened again in a disturbing smile. “Of course. Arcadians do not forget. Barbara and Tanner asked so many questions. Cheryll as well. You mainly listened.”

“Yeah, I guess I had a lot to learn in those days.” Del leaned back and cocked one knee on the other. “All I knew about you folks up to then was what I’d seen on TV. I tried to keep track of all the political stuff going on, after you arrived. You know, your talks on population control and disarmament and all that. Cheryll was more up on it all than I ever was. She’d fill me in at the end of the day when I got back from the fields. Seemed like every day there was something big going on.”

“It was a busy time. Your world had many problems.”

“Mm. I still remember watching Kevin Newman live in Africa when you guys switched on the first condenser. All those people dancing in the rain. Newman actually cried. Called it ‘the Arcadians’ first miracle.’”

“No miracle,” said the alien. The mock smile vanished. “Science.”

“Still and all, it was pretty impressive,” Del said mildly. “Cheryll was crying, just sitting on the floor in front of the screen with tears running down her cheeks, not sayin’ a word. Things started to move pretty fast after that.”

“Yes. The Africans used the condensers to create farms. Force fields protected them from enemies. Soon the wars ended.” Neral paused. “Delmar, why are these here?” He pointed a long, delicate finger at three framed photos propped in a line in the centre of his mother’s table.

“It’s a surprise,” Del said, smiling a salesman’s smile. “Let’s get back to what we were talking about. A lot of poor countries decided to follow Africa’s lead and invite you guys in.”

“We were happy to help. India and China had too many people. We relocated many to our colonies. We made enough food for everyone.”

Del clapped his hands and threw back his head. "That one was a mind-blower!" he shouted with a laugh. He'd been louder than he'd meant to be. "I don't think the human race ever faced a challenge quite like it. Learning to eat food made of crap! They finally cancelled *Fear Factor* after that!"

"Reconstructed food is indistinguishable from what you were used to."

Neral paused again. "We have talked about this before. Almost everyone eats reconstructed food. It uses almost none of your planet's natural resources. No one is hungry."

Del's smile tightened and his voice was a whisper: "I give you every seed-bearing plant of the whole earth, and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food."

"Pardon?"

"Nothing. Just thinkin about farming."

"Are you well, Delmar?"

"As well as can be expected, under the circumstances."

"Circumstances?"

Del rose from the table and crossed the spotless tile floor, doing his best to stay in control of himself. It wasn't easy.

*It never is*, his father reminded.

Did this goblin Neral really not know what Del was talking about? With all its shit-to-food machines and space-folding ships and million-year-old culture and giant brain - could it really be that stupid? Or was Neral making fun of him?

Del stopped and looked across the table at the alien, leaving the three photographs between them like silent witnesses. On one side was a lovely, compact blonde, on the other a pair of tow-headed kids on the cusp of their teen years. In the middle was a younger version of Del, wearing a fool's grin, squashed to the floor under a dog pile of wife and kids.

"Circumstances," Del said, pointing.

If understanding dawned in those giant black eyes, Del would never know, but Neral seemed to consider its next words carefully.

"You speak of your family?"

And that was it. An inferno of hate and frustration engulfed Del Holladay as if his body was sucking the heat of a coal furnace into his chest. His heartbeat thundered in his ears and his fists clenched



painfully. He crossed the space between himself and Neral in half a second, grabbed the creature's twiglike arm and yanked upward. Neral thumped to the floor next to the table.

*"Family!"* Del was on fire, a flaming sword sent by God. He had known the meeting would end in violence but was stunned by his own capacity for rage. How *dare* this monster speak of his family? This devil with the gray skin and soulless black eyes. This misshapen thing no more made in the image of the Lord than some blind cave fish deep in the ocean, never meant to be seen by human eyes. How dare it presume to know anything about the love of a man for his wife and children? How dare it talk about the holy bond, after what its kind had done?

Neral flailed on the floor, unable to right itself. The Arcadians were more brain than body and often struggled with physical exertion. Del was counting on the alien's incapacity. He stifled an urge to kick that watermelon head with his snakeskin boots and knelt on the floor beside it.

*"DEL!"* The scream in his head almost knocked him off his feet. *"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"*

"What I should have done a long time ago," Del said evenly. He was getting used to the adrenaline now. A taste of pennies cooled in his mouth. "It's what has to be done. A man has to do what's right. I'm doing what's right. If you'd had a father, maybe you'd have learned the same thing, but that's not my business. I'm doing this for my family."

With that, Del raised the alien's head and knocked it sharply against the cold tile. It felt obscenely good.

Del knelt there a moment, then stood. He didn't have much time. Neral's sudden wave of emotion would set off alarms in the minds of its cohorts. They would probe the ether for more information. In minutes, he guessed, they would be on their way. The nearest office was in Lethbridge, 10 minutes by air. He breathed in and grabbed Neral's body under its fragile arms. Ten minutes would be enough. Del dragged the limp hulk toward the front door.



Levi Holladay had been more than a father and mentor to Delmar; he was a walking encyclopedia of farming facts and lore. The

Holladays had worked the land in the dry but fertile corridor between Lethbridge and the U.S. border at Coutts for four generations before the Arcadians appeared. Del's grandfathers grew durum but Levi switched to canola in the '80s when it became a huge cash crop, then to potatoes to feed the big French fry processing plants in the last decade of the Twentieth Century. Del had learned about weather and seeding and fertilizing at his father's side. The old man had been talking to himself most of the time, it seemed, but was actually working out the logistics of his operation by keeping a kind of verbal record of the day. The lessons Del learned on those days served him well when he took over the land—at least until the Arcadians arrived.

Del had found a new use for that knowledge.

He hurried to the silo, glancing at the sky every few seconds, carrying the alien's inert gray body on his left shoulder. He marveled at how little the thing weighed—no more than Barbara.

He froze. *No more than Barbara did then.* The thought stabbed him and he swayed a little. He felt the sudden, horrible clarity of dread and, for a moment, the weight of the situation threatened to drag him down. *Barbara. Tanner. Cheryll. Oh God, Cheryll. How did it come to this?*

*You've got a job to do, Delmar. His father's voice again, clear as day. For them. For everyone. Stop gapin like a dyin fish and get at it!*

Del reached the silo and swung open the rusted door. The sour-sweet stink of chemicals and gasoline hit him and he wondered how Neral would react if he was conscious: Arcadians had highly developed senses of smell. *Great big noses and great big eyes. Just like the big bad wolf who jumped into bed and took over Granny's house in Little Red Riding Hood. All the better to see and smell you with, my dear.*

It had been about five minutes since he rapped the alien's skull on the floor—just enough time to get strapped in before he welcomed his guests.

Del grabbed the nylon web belt from under a stack of old pallets and wondered again why he'd bothered to hide it. If the Arcadians wanted to find something, as they no doubt were doing right now with Del, they would.

He strung the belt through the handles of a half-dozen jerry cans lined up on the dirt floor, then lifted the whole thing, circled it around his waist and closed the clasp at the ends. A pair of suspenders added support from his shoulders. Awkward, but it would work. He reached



into the front pocket of his faded jeans and closed his fingers around the final piece of the machine: an old Zippo lighter he had found at an antique store in Swihart. Cost him two of his grandmother's silver picture frames in trade, but he wouldn't need them where he was going.

He was now a human bomb. And he was waiting for his targets.

• • •

Time seemed to have frozen. Del didn't wear a watch, hadn't since he saw his last crop turn to black mush years ago. But he knew that more than ten minutes had passed since he left the kitchen. The farm by then should have been awash in Arcadians. He felt adrenaline trickle into his system again. Something was wrong.

Maybe none of them were in Lethbridge today. They could have been up in Calgary or Medicine Hat when Neral's signal went out. If so, they wouldn't be here for another twenty minutes at least.

As if reading Del's thought, Neral's body jerked in the fertilizer pile. Del yelped in surprise and fear, then clenched his fists and breathed deeply. *You're in control*, he told himself. *It can't hurt you*. The alien's huge eyes fluttered open, then fixed on Del's.

"Why?" Neral thought at him; then its eyes closed again.

"I want my world back," Del replied in the cold voice of an avenging angel.

• • •

Long minutes passed. The dead heat of the silo dragged Del into a doze. He dreamed of Cheryll. She was chained to a burning white hot star that filled the universe with its heat and light and radiation. Del screamed: *I'll save you! Don't give up, baby doll! I'm coming!*

She turned to face him and Del saw with horror that it wasn't the star burning—it was Cheryll. Her soft eyes were filled not with pain but with sadness. *I don't need saving, Del*. It was thought speak, like an Arcadian. *I don't need you*.

• • •

"...door's rusted almost right off the hinge." Del snapped awake. Someone outside. But the voice – he had heard it, not felt it. A human

voice. He shook his head, trying to clear it in the heat, and grabbed the Zippo. His mouth was dry as toast. His head ached.

A balding man peered around the door of the silo into the semi-darkness. A wave of unreality washed over Del. It had been years but he recognized his older brother Brigham as their eyes met. He took his thumb off the lighter's wheel.

"Brig!" he hissed, as if keeping his voice down would hide him from detection "Get out! Why are you here? They'll be here any second!"

Brigham stared at his brother, then sighed deeply and ran a hand down his face. *He hasn't aged a day*, Del thought stupidly. *Not a day in all the years since I sent him away.*

"He's in here," Brigham said over his shoulder. "Like you said he'd be."

The door opened wider. An airship lurked in the fading daylight over the front lawn. A dozen or more Arcadians milled about, keeping their distance from the silo. Brigham entered slowly, his face a serene mask that helped snap Del to his senses. His brother didn't know what was happening, didn't understand the danger he was in.

"Brig! You have to run!" Why didn't he get it? He was supposed to be the smart one in the family, for Pete's sake!

But Brigham advanced until he was beside Neral. He knelt to examine the alien.

"You did quite a number on him," Brigham said. "He'll have a headache for sure." He turned to face Del, still looking for all the world like he was asking about the weather. "What's going on here, little brother?"

Staring into that moon face, a horrible understanding dawned in Del's mind.

*He's one of them.*

Del's thumb found the Zippo's flywheel and he saw surprise flash in his brother's eyes.

"Del? Can you tell me what's going on?"

"I think you know," Del said evenly. "You may have spent the last decade living like a pampered little lap dog but you still grew up on a farm, didn't you? You turned your back on it but you haven't forgotten it, have you? You know what fertilizer smells like as well as I do. Gasoline, too, even though everything's electric now."

"I don't understand, Del." Still calm. Like a God damned alien's,



that face. *My brother is a God damned alien. That's why it took them so long to get here. They had to stop and pick him up. They wanted him to talk me down.*

"Let me spell it out for you then," said Del, venom creeping into his voice. "Lord a'mighty, Brig, Dad'd smack you in the head if he'd seen you bein so stupid." He held up the lighter, then continued, speaking as to a slow child. "This is a lighter. It makes fire. I'll drop it on the fertilizer here. Fire meets ammonium nitrate. Everything goes boom! You got all that?"

"I think so," Brigham said quietly. Were those tears in his eyes? "I should've been here for you, buddy. I should have seen this coming. I'm so sorry."

"You're sorry, alright." Del's grip tightened on the lighter. "A sorry excuse for a human being. A sorry excuse for a *Holladay!* How could you, Brig? How could you come here with them? You know what they did to Cheryll and the kids! My children, Brig! They took my *children!*"

That seemed to strike a nerve. Brigham, a good four inches taller than Del, stood to his full height. When he peered down at Del, the bland expression was gone. Suddenly he looked a lot like their father and Del's breath caught in his throat.

"Your family is fine, you ignorant jackass!" Brigham barked. "How many times do I have to tell you that? You're on the edge of the cliff right now, Del, and you need to step back before you do something we'll all regret." He turned toward the door. "Just let the Arcadians help you, for God's sake!"

Del snapped and leapt to his feet, thumb still on the flywheel. Gasoline sloshed in the jerry cans. His legs screamed at him. His knees locked briefly and he fell to the silo floor, landing in the fertilizer pile. His legs had gone numb when he fell asleep. How long had he been out?

Del thrust the hand with the lighter at Brigham. His other hand unscrewed the cap from the nearest jerry can and tipped it on its side. Gas chugged quickly onto the fertilizer. He may have lost his footing but he was still as serious as a heart attack and he would show his brother that he meant business. Brigham's face betrayed a flash of concern but he didn't move.

"*My family's fine,*" Del said mockingly. "Fine. What *is* fine, Brig? I don't think you know. Are you fine now? You haven't set foot on this

land in ten years. Your children don't know the first thing about farming. They don't know a potato from an Arcadian's eyeball. They don't know about wanting for anything, do they? Whatever they want, they get. They've never been hungry. They've never even been disappointed. They've never felt the fear of losing a crop to the Lord's plan. They don't even who the Lord *is!*"

"They know spirituality —"

"They don't know the *Lord!* The one true God! The Book of Mormon is just a knick-knack gathering dust on their bookshelf!"

"Look, Del, if this is about religion, we'll never get anywh—"

Del croaked a dry laugh. The hand holding the lighter had started to shake. He turned the little flint wheel. A triangle of flame rose and glowed orange in the gathering dark. "Oh, it is about religion, Brig. But it's not the kind you debate with your know-it-all friends in the big Arcadian universities. It's not the kind you chew your pipe over and say 'Well, I believe this and that is the truth.' This is about worshipping great gray-skinned graven idols who feed you shit and piss on your land and steal your family! You *gave* them the world that God gave us. *You didn't even put up a fight!* How do you think He feels about that, Brig? We nailed His son to a cross and He forgave us, but this? This is something else. You've abandoned Him like some rusty old pickup in a trailer park! It's... it's..."

Del's voice cracked as he saw past his brother's shoulder. A woman stood quietly silhouetted in the silo doorway, the setting sun blazing orange behind her. She seemed to radiate light and heat. Her face, though older, was as well known to him as his own.

The woman of his dreams. *Of my dream.*

Cheryll.

Del's mouth opened to speak but no words came. His tongue felt thick and dry as burlap in the heat of the silo and his own fevered soul. His mind staggered like a drunk tripping over his own feet. *How...?*

"Del?" Cheryll whispered, her eyes wide, wet with horror. "Oh, Del..."

"Cheryll." It sounded like sandpaper on silk.

Del's strength failed. He dropped the lighter, still burning strong, onto his makeshift bomb.





A man and a woman sat at the big antique dining room table, drinking Arcadian spice water and eating lumps of manure reconstituted to look and taste like peanut butter cookies. They'd spent the last three days packing up the few belongings still left in the rambling old farmhouse and working out details with the Arcadians on turning the property into a native grassland preserve. The crops had been gone so long that the land had all but reverted to its natural state, before white men or Arcadians had ever set foot on it.

The man and woman had spent the time desperately avoiding what they knew they must eventually discuss.

Cheryll finally broke the silence, asking quietly, "When do you think it happened?"

Brigham drained his glass and sighed. He felt as if he'd aged many years in a week. "I don't know if you can nail something like that down to a specific moment, Cheryll. Maybe it was the day you and the kids finally left for the Centauri colony. Maybe before then."

"Maybe a long time before then," said Cheryll. Her eyes seemed unable to focus on anything in the room: the table, the dish rack in the sink, the fine oak cabinets her beloved father-in-law had built in the barn out back. She wondered if it was her guilt at being back in the farmhouse for the first time in a decade. "I still remember the look in his eyes when I told him I'd left the church behind. I tried to talk to him about it, I really did. About how all our religions were just pieces of a larger universal puzzle. But he'd just shut down and tune me out."

Brigham sighed again. "I know what you mean. He never wanted to talk about my research. I'd be all charged up about some incredible new breakthrough I'd made and he'd act like he didn't hear me. Then he'd go on about the weather. Or our parents. He could go on for hours about people who were no longer here, about potatoes and tractors. One time he just rambled on about the cats in the barn. It's like he was doing everything he could to deny the reality around him."

"That's exactly it," Cheryll said earnestly. She touched her brother-in-law's hand briefly. "There was no reasoning with him. Del never stayed around long enough to finish an argument. Whenever things got heated, he'd go out in the front yard and stare at the field and not say anything. Sometimes he'd - " She stopped abruptly.

"What?" Brigham asked, suddenly concerned.

"He'd..." Cheryll's eyes were wide and they began to fill with tears.

She put a hand to her mouth. “He’d head to the neighbours. Say he was looking for—for fertilizer.” She leaned on the table and put her head in her trembling hands. “Oh, God, I never thought... I just assumed it was for the lawn. You remember how he always kept it up, said it was the only thing he had left to grow... Oh my God...”

Brigham rose quickly from the table and stood behind her, put his hands on her shoulders and gave a gentle squeeze. “You couldn’t have known.”

“If I’d just paid more attention to him...”

“No.” He shut his eyes tight. “I should have seen it when we had that final shouting match about the farm. He wasn’t making sense in the end. Started yelling about dust to dust, how we were from the earth and to the earth we shall return, all that stuff. I could have gotten him help then but I took the easy out and walked away, back to the university and my cozy little life. Left him to live in the past.” He shook his head. “Del never even met my younger kids.”

Cheryll’s cheeks were wet now, her eyes still refusing to focus. “But if the Arcadians hadn’t fast-tracked my trip back here when they found out about Neral, hadn’t used the hyperfold, maybe...”

“No. It was his own fault. We have to let go of the ifs and buts and move on. That’s best. That’s what the Arcadians teach.”

Cheryll lowered her chin to her chest and let out a heavy sigh that ended in a shudder. She hugged herself, suddenly cold and very tired. “I suppose. The rest of them got over losing Neral pretty quickly. I guess we can only try to deal with death the way they do.”

Brigham nodded. “And be grateful that that fertilizer was much too old to ignite,” he said. “The gas fire was hard enough to contain; if the fertilizer’d gone up, too, it would have been game over for you and me.”

Cheryll said nothing.

“Ammonium nitrate—it’s what that Timothy McVeigh guy used to blow up a government building in Oklahoma City when we were kids. Remember? All those people died?”

“Vaguely,” Cheryll said. “You have a good memory.”

Brigham paused, staring out the kitchen window at the land turned gold by the setting of the summer sun. The look in his eyes was far away.

“Actually,” he said, “I learned that from my father.” •



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Hector barrelled through the front door, with Maria, cast iron skillet in hand, close on his heels. To his amazement someone was stealing his tamale cart.

## The Tamale God

Jeffrey D. Johnson

Hector Muñoz sat on a stool behind his tamale cart, his toes curled around the footrest bar. He'd arrived early enough to claim a spot at the end of the pier. Sea lions barked and frolicked among the white charter boats. The surf sighed through the barnacle-crusting piles below him. Pelicans and sea gulls winged aimlessly against a cloudless blue sky. Hector sipped Budweiser from a can stashed in the cooler with his home-made chili sauces and watched the tourists from behind his mirrored sunglasses, perfectly content.

The Pier was thick with people, even more so than usual. Hector assumed there was a convention of some kind at one of the hotels nearby. The shrimp stand just down the way was doing a lively business. Wong, the old Chinese caricature artist next to him, was reading a newspaper, waiting with his customary mystical patience for a bite.

Hector sighed and shifted into a more comfortable slouch. He often wondered if it was possible to gauge what kind of convention was in progress based on the eating habits of the people that strolled past him. No one was eating oysters, for instance. The chocolate-glazed frozen banana stand directly across from him, however, was mobbed by a large, laughing crowd, all clustered together under the shade awning.



Two women peeled out of the passing throng and approached the tamale stand. Hector flashed them an easy smile. He had a lightweight boxer's build, left over from a few years in the army. He was dressed as usual in blue jeans, a glaringly white t-shirt that favored his wide shoulders, and comfortable blue gel flip-flops.

"Do you have anything vegan?" one of the women asked. She was in her mid-thirties, with big, sprayed hair, overdressed for the warm weather in a wool charcoal blazer and matching slacks. Wong peered around his newspaper and mouthed 'Midwest'. Hector raised an eyebrow.

"Vegan?"

"Without animal products." The two women traded a flat glance.

"Sorry," Hector replied. "No vegan. I have corn on the cob, but I usually rub it down with mayonnaise, a little chili sauce and dried goat cheese."

Their hands shot to their mouths in unison and they reeled back, conceptually horrified. Hector laughed.

"Its good! You want to try some?"

They turned and merged back into the crowd without a word or a backward glance.

"Computers again," Wong said. He ruffled his newspaper.

"Nah. These are drug people. Pharmacy convention." Hector popped a fresh Budweiser and slid it into a paper to-go bag.

"Your friend is back," Wong said. The old man tossed his head at the booths just down and across from them. Hector followed his gaze and his eyes narrowed.

He was standing in the shaded space between the shrimp stand and the clam chowder booth. Wong was right. It was the antique collector that had taken an interest in his tamale cart. He'd introduced himself as Dr. Brockbank, though what he had a doctorate in was anyone's guess. Hector half doubted his name was Brockbank at all.

He had been coming around for a week now. His taste in clothing never failed to be slightly off. Today he was wearing an off-white linen suit, the kind that had always reminded Hector of Colonel Sanders. He was in his late fifties, with a close, graying beard and combed back hair. He smiled unpleasantly.

"You want a tamale you better move, hombre," Hector called. Dr. Brockbank left the shadows and ambled over to the tamale stand, his

smile laquered in place.

"What kind do you have left?" he asked in a low, gravelly voice, tinged as always with humor. He had no doubt been watching all afternoon and knew that Hector had sold nothing.

"Pork, chicken, or beef," Hector said shortly.

Dr. Brockbank nodded and inspected Hector's tamale cart.

"I really must have this fascinating contraption," he said. "Have you given any more thought to my offer?"

"No," Hector swept his hand across the wooden counter. "I told you I'm not interested in selling. I won't feel any different tomorrow."

"I hope you'll reconsider." He ran his index finger along the cart and looked up, meeting Hector's eye. "Do you even know what this is?"

"Yes. It's my tamale cart."

Hector had found the cart at an estate sale two years ago. Its wide belly was fashioned from cast iron, with four spoked wheels and four curling wrought iron arms that supported a small canopy. The original cloth had long since rotted away, so Hector had replaced it with a brilliant blue shower curtain on which he had stenciled 'Muñez Tamales' in bright yellow letters. The body of the cart was full of exposed gears and old steam engine components, resembling an unlikely cross between an antique wood-burning stove and an espresso machine. The twin boilers with the original lids removed housed his two tamale steamers perfectly. It was a strange looking device, but Hector had seen its potential instantly.

His sister Maria had helped him sand and paint it and bolt on the small wooden cutting board, and Wong had painted a huge red pepper of some kind on the front for his last birthday. It was the hot-rod pinnacle of tamale carts, with no competition in the arena of style.

"Chicken," Dr. Brockbank said primly.

Hector opened one of the steamers and removed cornhusk-wrapped chicken tamale with a pair of tongs. He put it on a paper plate and handed it over. Dr. Brockbank passed him a five and waved his hand when Hector handed him the change. He peeled back the husk and took one bite, then another.

"You drive a hard bargain, Hector," he said, shaking his head, "but lord, you do make a good tamale."

A group of business suits arrived and placed orders. Hector was busy for a few minutes shoveling out steaming tamales and wrapping



Mexican corn on the cob, passing out napkins and opening cherry sodas. More people peeled out of the crowd and the rush was on.

Three hours later the steamers were empty. Hector hung the cardboard closed sign on the front of the cart and wiped his sweaty face with a napkin. He had one last beer stashed in the melted ice and empty bottles in the sauce cooler, so he popped it and slurped greedily. The sun hung low over the bay, throwing shimmering gold across the wave tops.

Wong had packed it in a few hours ago. Hector wiped the cart down and unplugged the tamale steamers. The irritating antique collector was nowhere to be seen. He stacked the cooler on top of the cart with the stool and wheeled it down the pier, waving goodnight to the other vendors.

Hector always felt good after selling out of tamales, although it meant he would have to get up early if he wanted to go out the next day. With a satisfying wad of cash in his pocket, he pushed the cart along the scenic sidewalks of Monterey, headed to his sister's house for dinner.



Maria lived in a bungalow a few blocks from the pier. Her husband Juan had opened his own firm as a telecommunications consultant, and the first thing they had done after its immediate success was purchase a home in the Marina District. They let Hector keep the cart on the side of the house so he didn't have to take it all the way back to his apartment in Pacifica every night.

Maria's house was Hector's second home. Juan was often away on business so Hector kept his sister company and helped look after the three children. Maria was a fine woman and an excellent cook, but she also possessed the powerful personality that ran like a strong river through the women of the Muñoz family. She kept both Juan and Hector on a short leash.

Hector parked the cart on the stone walkway next to a manicured Manzanita alongside the house and walked back to the front. He could hear the children laughing inside as he walked up the steps. The kids were playing a word game with cards on the expensive Yucatan carpet in the central living room. Maria waved from where she was setting the table in the adjoining dining room, talking to someone, probably their

mother, on the phone.

The smell of Maria's dark, bubbling enchilada sauce wafted through the screen door. The children spotted Hector and ran to the door screaming.

"Quiet!" Maria shouted from the dining room. "I'm on the phone with Grandma. Her feet are acting up."

Hector allowed the capering children to pull him inside. Maria's house was spotless as always, despite the presence of three rampaging children. The stuccoed walls of the living and dining rooms were painted plum and cinnamon red, with a generous compliment of the carefully maintained walnut furniture Maria and Juan shared a passion for. Tasteful Mexican Indian paintings and weavings hung among pictures of the family.

"Mama wants you to call her," Maria said as she hung up. She motioned for Hector to help her finish setting the table. He followed her into the kitchen.

"What's wrong with her feet?" Hector asked. He took some glasses from the cupboard above the sink.

"She was standing for too long in line at the grocery store. I told her she should use one of the little motor carts, and she almost bit my head off."

Maria shook her head, her thick black hair rippling down her back. After three children she still looked like the eighteen-year-old girl he remembered when he left for the army, fit as a runner, with fine, angular features.

"How was business today?" she asked. She took the enchiladas out of the oven and set them on the island in the center of the kitchen to cool.

"Sold out." He knew Maria thought he should either expand the tamale operation or give it up and go back to college, so he was happy to report a day of success.

"Save some of that money," Maria said. She stirred a pot of rice and tomatoes. "You never know when you might want to go back to school."

"I know," Hector said. "How's Juan?"

"Change the subject as always. Juan is fine. He'll be home this weekend."

"Good," Hector said. "Maybe I can take the kids to the beach on



Sunday so you can have some 'alone time'." He wiggled his eyebrows.

Maria placed a lid on the pot and narrowed her eyes.

"Don't be disgusting, Hector," she said. Hector smiled hugely. Maria picked up a spatula and smacked it into the palm of her hand, a gesture she had inherited from their mother.

"Uncle Hector!" Little Miguel raced into the kitchen and grabbed Hector's hand. "Uncle Hector!"

"Go wash up for dinner," Maria said, turning the spatula on the enchiladas. Miguel shook his head and pulled at Hector's hand.

"Uncle Hector," yelled Conchita, the oldest of Maria's children at ten. Hector allowed Miguel to pull him into the living room.

"What is it?" he asked. Conchita pointed out the window.

"Someone is stealing your tamale cart!"



Hector barreled through the front door, with Maria, cast iron skillet in hand, close on his heels. To his amazement someone was stealing his tamale cart. Easily identifiable in his white linen suit, the antique collector Dr. Brockbank was wheeling it down the sidewalk as fast as he could.

"Stop!" Hector shouted. Maria shot past him in a blur, running barefoot. Hector kicked off his flip-flops and sprinted after her.

Brockbank had a van waiting down the street. Its back doors were flung open and two heavy boards formed a ramp leading into it. He reached the van just as Maria caught up to him.

He must have heard her bare feet slapping the pavement behind him. He had just enough time to wheel around and raise his arm. The pan Maria swung at his head thudded into his forearm with a sickening crunch. He let out a great whoosh of air and fell to his knees, clutching the arm to his stomach. Hector barely caught Maria's arm as she raised it again, narrowly saving Brockbank from a blow straight to the top of the head.

"You're busted, culo," Maria snarled. She lashed out with her bare foot and kicked him square in the chest. He slumped forward, coughing. "Kick his ass, Hector!"

Hector grabbed Dr. Brockbank by the lapels, raised him to his feet and slammed him into the side of the van. The antique collector

groaned.

"Get his wallet, Maria," Hector instructed. Maria reached past him and yanked a billfold out of his jacket.

"Martin O'Neal," she said. "California driver's license. Credit cards and three hundred in cash. Electronic pass key for a room at the Marriot."

"It's yours," the collector said, wheezing through clenched teeth. "Just let me go. You broke my arm."

"I'm going to break that smile you've been pointing at me all week," Hector said, "and then I'm going to give you back to my sister."

The collector looked past him into Maria's hard face and gasped. Maria's knuckles cracked as she clenched the handle of the cast iron pan. A horrible grin spread across her face.

"Yes," Hector hissed, knowing without turning the look on Maria's face.

The collector moaned.

"You don't steal a man's tamale cart," Hector said softly. He tightened his grip. "It's just not done."

"I'm sorry. You don't understand. Please, let me go. I need a doctor."

Hector looked at Maria, who tossed her head, disgusted. Hector released him and stepped back.

"Get the hell out of here and don't come back," Hector said, "or next time you leave with more than a broken arm. Understand?"

The collector nodded and glanced at Maria.

"I'll be waiting for you," Maria said. She hefted the pan and slammed it into the side of the van, leaving a huge dent. The collector hobbled around and started the engine. Maria smashed out one of the rear windows before the van peeled out and careened away.

Hector shook his head. Maria sniffed and straightened her shoulders.

"Come on," she said. "I have children to feed, Hector. I can't save you all the time. Remember this when you consider college the next time. Perhaps you can find a higher quality of people to bring home."

Hector looked down at his fierce little sister and smiled. She patted him on the back and together they walked back to the house.





Hector rose early and spent the morning rolling out four dozen tamales. When he finished he refilled his sauce bottles from the jug in his refrigerator. He drove them in the steamers over to Maria's and got some ice for the sodas, set it all in the tamale cart and wheeled it over to the pier.

It was another fine morning. Boganvillia and Queen's Wreath bloomed heavily everywhere. Hector stopped at the base of the pier, got a second cup of coffee, and then rolled his cart into place at the end of the pier. Wong was setting up in the space next to him.

"That guy tried to steal my tamale cart last night," Hector said. "His name isn't even Brockbank. Its O'Neil."

Wong was amazed. "Really?" The old man set down his easel. "Very bad, Hector, very bad. You must take precautions. Do you still intend to park it beside your sister's house?"

Hector popped a beer and sucked the foam off the top. "I don't know. I guess I should lock it up on the back patio for a while."

"Good idea," Wong said. "A better idea would be to find out why this man wants your cart. He must know something you don't."

"I suppose." Hector looked thoughtfully out over the bay. Wong shrugged and went back to setting up.

Hector sold a few tamales, a half dozen cherry sodas and one ear of Mexican corn. Wong did a few portraits and went off in search of some shrimp for lunch, leaving Hector to watch over his easel.

He was working on his second beer, settled comfortably on his stool and idly watching two teenage girls eating cotton candy when the antique collector, his arm in a sling, ambled up to the tamale cart. Today he was wearing a blue pinstripe suit with a limp red bowtie. In his free hand he carried a cane, which he tapped smartly twice on the ground.

"Hector," he said pleasantly. "How are you this fine afternoon?" He gestured around him, as if to imply that he was somehow responsible for the weather.

Hector laughed in spite of himself. "You're one dumb bastard," he said, shaking his head. He took his sunglasses off and slid off the stool. "I tell you what. In three seconds I'm going to break your other arm and throw you off the pier, see if you can swim with just your legs."

"Easy there, old boy. I've come to make you a final offer." Even with a broken arm, being threatened by a man that had every reason

to beat him senseless, the collector exuded irritating confidence.

“One.”

“I know what this device of yours was really designed for. If you’ll just hear me out...”

“Two.”

“I’ll tell you what it is and show you how it works. Then you tell me what it’s worth to you.”

“Three,” Hector said, but he didn’t move. He stood very still, watching the antique collector and trying to decide what to do.

“That gives me a distinct advantage,” Hector said finally. “If you can prove to me that this is worth more than what I’ve put in to it, how do you know I’ll sell it to you and not someone else?”

“I don’t. But I can say for certain that you won’t want it after I tell you, and I’ll be right here to take it off of your hands.”

Hector took a sip of Budweiser. There was no way he could trust a man that lied about his name and only just last night tried to steal his livelihood, but the thought that his cart might have some unsavory history decided it.

“Tell me more,” he said finally.

“May I?” The collector gestured at the cart. Hector nodded.

He came around to Hector’s side and knelt down, setting his cane before him. Hector crouched beside him and watched as he unscrewed a panel and pulled it away. Inside was a network of gears and tubes, emanating from a small iron cube. There was a small round door on the side of the cube facing them.

“Just as I thought,” the collector said quietly. He turned to Hector. “This device of yours was designed around the turn of the century by a man named Salizar Pettygrew. He was a very talented engineer and a most peculiar individual. I can’t imagine how this found its way to Monterey. Imagine my surprise when I discovered you selling tamales out of it.”

“What is it?”

The collector reached inside and unhinged the door on the cube. Inside was an old cross made of weathered, gray wood. The collector’s hand trembled as he withdrew it.

“Ah.” He licked his lips. Hector leaned closer. Chips of paint still adhered to portions of the surface. A chill ran down Hector’s spine as he identified a primitive looking eye at the apex of the cross.



"This is proof positive," the collector whispered triumphantly. A weird light had entered his eyes. Hector drew back and coughed to cover his reaction. The collector gently replaced the crucifix and closed the door of the cube, then replaced the hatch.

"We can proceed no further here," he said, taking his cane and rising. His customary, vaguely smug smile was wider than ever. "We must meet tonight and I will tell you the rest."

"Fine," Hector said. "You have a room at the Marriott, right?"

"No no, that won't do. We'll meet at your house at six o'clock."

Hector shook his head. "No. We meet at my sister's."

The collector's perpetual smile vanished like a band-aid yanked off a spider bite, revealing such a rictus of suppressed fury that Hector's mouth went momentarily dry.

"Your sister," the collector said in a flat tone. He unconsciously drew his broken arm closer.

"You might be able to fool me, old man, but I think you know you can't fool her. It would be dangerous to even try."

"Very well," he said in a low, quavering voice. "Tonight. Six o'clock." He turned sharply on his heel and walked away, rapping his cane with each step. Hector raised his bagged can of Budweiser.

"Bring your own beer."



"What!"

Hector flinched. Maria threw up her arms in exasperation. The children looked up from a pile of toys on the living room carpet and giggled.

"Hector, the man is a liar and thief! A thief! You want me to let that dog into my home? I have children, Hector! Juan will be home tomorrow and I have laundry to do!"

Hector raised his hands. He wanted to say that he doubted there was any laundry Maria hadn't done by this time in the evening, but he didn't dare.

"Please Maria. I can't take the cart all the way to my apartment in Pacifica, you know that. I need some help here."

Maria's fine nostrils flared and her dark eyes flashed dangerously. "Tell me what he said to you and I will be the judge of whose help

you need.”

A few minutes later they were crouched by the tamale cart. Hector finished telling her the story, then opened the little door on the cube and showed her the cross. Maria scowled when she saw the eye painted on it.

“You may be in over your head,” she said slowly. Hector watched her, barely breathing.

“Take the children next door to Mrs. Kimbal's and ask her to watch them for a few hours. I will prepare a pitcher of sangria and think about this.”

Stepping lightly with relief, Hector rounded up the kids and took them next door with a bag of their favorite toys. He returned just as Maria coldly greeted the collector at the door.



“Tell me more about this Pettygrew,” Maria instructed.

They were seated around the massive butterfly walnut table in the dining room, each with a tall glass of Maria's famous century cactus sangria. Already Hector was feeling superfluous. Maria's brooding, commanding presence had turned him into a ghost.

The collector cleared his throat politely and sipped his drink, then smiled to indicate his approval. Maria's stern expression remained unchanged.

“Pettygrew was the founder of a Los Angeles cult called The Eye of God's Twin. They had quite a few wealthy adherents in the early teens and enjoyed a brief period of prosperity that ended with Pettygrew's untimely death. The tamale cart...” He paused and wiped his brow.

“Pettygrew was something of a rare mystic genius, blending faith and technology. He designed a device, a kind of projector that could convey a sense of faith. I believe it is the very machine Hector has parked along the side of your house.”

Maria drew a deep breath. “Hector, turn on the patio lights and bring the tamale cart around.” Hector got up.

“And you, Mr. Antique Man, will show us how this works. We are Catholic, I will have you know. If what you say is true you may have Hector's cart for free. We will have no part of it.”

The collector's face lit up and Hector's fell.



“Maria-” Hector started. She cut him off with a sharp chop of her hand.

“The cart, Hector.”

Cursing under his breath, Hector wheeled the cart into the backyard and flipped on the patio lights. He watched with Maria as the collector opened several of the panels and tinkered with the interior.

“Perfect. It’s in perfect working order after all these years.” He looked up. “Hector, will you bring me your tamale steamers?”

Hector grudgingly carried the two steamers around from the corner of the house and watched as the collector placed them into the twin boiler chambers and plugged them in. He pulled two hinged brass tubes from the interior and was attaching them to the steamers’ lids when Maria suddenly stepped forward.

“Wait,” she said firmly. “Tell me what you are doing. Explain it.”

The collector shook his head impatiently. “All right. Look here.” He bent down and opened the door of the cube Hector had shown Maria earlier. “The essence of what this chamber contains, the image of it, is what is projected into the minds of those around it. Do you understand?”

Maria reached into the chamber and took out the cross, then scowled up at the collector.

“This is blasphemy,” she said. The collector rolled his eyes.

“Yes, yes, of course it is. May we proceed?”

Maria slowly nodded. She replaced the cross and fiddled with the door while the collector finished attaching the brass tubes to the steamer lids.

They stepped back and watched silently as the steamers pinged and crackled, slowly heating up. Hector finished his sangria and set the empty glass on the patio table, then picked up Maria’s and took a sip.

The tamale cart let out a low hum as steam forced its way into the bowels of the Baroque clockwork interior. The air filled with a dusty, coppery smell. The collector rubbed his hands together and cooed. Hector and Maria looked at each other and grimaced.

The humming gradually grew louder and small jets of steam shot from recessed escape valves. A shudder ran through the frame. The tamale cart began to vibrate.

The collector stepped forward and adjusted the steamers, twisting the knobs to the highest level. The entire machine creaked and

groaned. One of the wheels slipped on the patio cement, and the entire cart began jittering slowly in a counter clockwise motion. A piercing whistle issued from somewhere deep inside it.

The collector stood before it with his arms out, slightly crouched, an expectant look on his face. He made some rapid 'bring it on' hand motions and closed his eyes, evidently straining to sense something, anything. He remained frozen like that as the tamale cart rotated slowly in front of him, driven by a powerful internal process. Hector and Maria drew back, fearing an explosion as the noise reached a crescendo.

The collector's face suddenly twisted with rage, and he threw his head back and let out a horrible, quavering wail. He threw down his cane and savagely kicked one ornate wheel, then hopped back, possibly having broken his toe.

"Good evening," he shouted furiously over the din of the machine. He limped away, swearing. Hector unplugged the steamers and the machine gradually cooled and quieted.

Hector followed Maria back into the house. She poured herself a fresh glass of sangria and topped off Hector's glass. They sat back down at the table.

"I guess it didn't work," Hector said finally. "I'm glad, really. At least I get to keep my tamale cart."

Maria snorted and took a healthy swallow of sangria. Hector looked up from his drink.

"Can you imagine what that man would have done with a machine like that?" she asked. "Reverse engineered it most likely. Ask Juan tomorrow. His company does it all the time. No one needs a machine like that, least of all some lunatic you dragged home from the pier."

Hector stared at her. Maria grinned back and batted her eyelashes innocently. Hector's eyes narrowed.

"Maria!" he shouted in a strangled voice. She triumphantly held up the cross in one hand.

"I stole it!" she declared. "There was nothing in the little box! I took it out and never put it back!"

"Why, Maria?"

"You know why, Hector. Faith does not come from a machine. Not on my patio!"

Hector was speechless.



The next day he wheeled the tamale cart out on to the pier, set everything up and plugged in the steamers. Wong was telling him one of his long, ever-changing stories about China and he was just getting ready to sneak a Budweiser when business picked up.

Hector sold five dozen tamales in less than an hour. The Mexican corn on the cob was gone in minutes. He ran out of hot sauce and napkins and cherry soda, even the toothpicks from his little dispenser. Just after one o'clock he hung out the closed sign and unplugged the steamers. Wong was dumbfounded.

"A Mexican food convention," the old man said uncertainly. Hector nodded and finally cracked his beer.

"Could be. Or maybe some scientist just identified tamales as the perfect food."

Wong shrugged and went back to his drawing. Hector knelt down and pried the rear panel off the tamale cart, opened the door on the cube and took out the last tamale. He slowly peeled back the corn husk and took a bite, his teeth sinking though the reddish-brown outer crust and into the delicate, golden yellow masa dough, down to the shredded smoked beef brisket and dark chipotle interior. He exhaled through his nose, the afternoon sun playing on his closed eyelids. Man, was it good. •



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The train loomed before them, black iron, hot with hell's eternally burning fires instead of steam. Three other demons were already there, pushing and prodding their victims aboard the train.

# Hell-Train

Nicole Luiken

When the black hell-train smoked through Dry Gulch on its yearly trip to collect damned souls, Snake Coltrane was sleeping off a drunk, and one of the demons caught him.

The first he knew of it was when a demon grabbed him by the boots and began to drag him along, his head thump-thumping on the floorboards of the saloon. His cowboy hat fell off, and he woke with a rebel yell. The demon grinned at him, eyes red and smoky. Its yellow claws dug into his snakeskin cowboy boots.

A hangover banged in Snake's brain like a tin drum.

"Shee-it!" He shucked his guns, slapping leather.

Afterward, the saloon crowd, hidden under tables and peeking out from behind the long, mirrored bar, would say that even lying flat on his back, startled out of a drunk, Snake Coltrane had the fastest draw they'd ever seen: slicker than snot and rattlesnake quick.

He fired off four shots, both guns bucking in his hands.

He plugged the demon dead center—and it grinned harder, oblivious to the holes in its chest, merrily dragging him along. It detoured once through a puddle of tobacco juice and then dragged him out through the saloon's swinging doors. Hell had been trying to collect Snake's soul for years.



Abandoning his guns, Snake rowelled the stomach and legs of the demon with his spurs. The demon hissed and laughed, but did not let him go. Thump-thump over the boardwalk, down into the dust of the street, toward the train.

The horses at the hitching rail shied away from the sulfur stench of the demon. Their legs kicked out; steel-shod hooves flashed over Snake's head like lightning bolts.

It had not rained in Dry Gulch for two months, and Snake choked on dust. He scooped up a handful of dirt and grit and threw it in the demon's eyes.

The demon faltered.

Snake twisted harder, broke free—only to have the demon's grip close on his ankle, burningly cold even though his boot.

"Hee-hee-hee." It had been playing with him. Demon humour was about as subtle as a cattle stampede.

The train loomed before them, black iron, hot with hell's eternally burning fires instead of steam. Three other demons were already there, pushing and prodding their victims aboard the train. Snake noted a rich miner along with a flea-bitten whore, and a pinch-faced storekeeper. They were all screaming, hoarse with fear.

Snake drew his Bowie knife and began to saw at the demon's fingers where they grasped his ankles. Three digits had bounced into the street—four still to go—before it grabbed Snake by the neck and throttled him. "Hee-hee."

Unable to use the knife without cutting off his own ear, Snake dropped it and pried at the demon's claws with his hands. When his vision began to turn black, Snake spit in the demon's eye, daring it to kill him—he'd just spent three weeks in Dry Gulch, killing time until the next job—hell couldn't be that much worse. The demon hissed, enraged, grip tightening—

"Wait!" a voice cried out. A woman's. "Wait!"

The whole town turned to stare as a woman burst out of McNally's Sewing Notions and ran out into the street.

"Miss Amanda, come back!" somebody cried, but no one left the safety of the store to drag her back.

She came to a stop, panting, in front of the demon.

Innocence shone from her face. The sight of it halted the demon, as nothing else would have. It salivated, drawn to goodness, but able to

collect only the damned souls like Snake.

"Yesss?" the demon asked.

"Leave him. Take me instead."

The demon's forked tongue flickered out. "Yesss!" it said happily, accepting the bargain. It dropped Snake like a dog offered raw meat for supper in place of an old bone. The demon scooped up the woman with the angel's face and corn-silk hair and slung her over its shoulder in a froth of petticoats.

Bruises ringed Snake's throat like the kiss of a hangman's noose. Wheezing and gasping for breath, Snake lunged forward and grabbed the demon's tail, slowing it just before it stepped onto the train. "Why?" he asked the woman's upside down face, desperate to understand. Why would she give her life for a stranger's? "I don't even know you."

She gifted him with a smile of such sweetness his teeth ached. "You may not know me, but I know you. Do you still like your eggs raw?" And she called him by a name he hadn't heard in sixteen years, since he killed his first man.

*He knew who she was.*

In surprise Snake lost his grip, and the demon carried her aboard the train, tossing her into the ranks of dirty, unshaven sinners.

Damn it, this was going to complicate his whole day, Snake thought in disgust. Because now he was going to have to save her. Save Amanda.



She'd found him in the chicken house, sucking eggs. It would have been hard to say who was the more startled, the ragged boy of sixteen propped up against the wall or the blonde nine-year-old with wide blue eyes who'd come to gather eggs. They stared at one another for a long moment.

"They taste better cooked," she volunteered at last.

Matt nodded in weak agreement. Fever had drained him of his strength. "Sure do."

"I like them scrambled."

"Scrambled is good."

"Pa likes his fried with ketchup."

"Fried eggs are good, too."



She shook her head. "I don't like 'em. I'll eat the white part, but not the yolk. It's too yellow and gooshy. And ketchup on eggs is purely awful."

Matt lost track of the conversation for a moment, and when his head cleared she was gone. He tried to get up, tried to leave, but someone had nailed his coat down while he wasn't looking so he just lay there on the filthy floor while the chickens flapped and fussed, waiting for the sky to fall.

She came back, some indeterminate amount of time later, but not with a pitchfork or her menfolk. She placed a bowl of still-hot porridge on the floor and helped him eat it.

On the third day he was well enough to leave, but hung around waiting to say goodbye. But when she nipped in to the chicken house she was panting.

"What's wrong?"

She made a face. "Mr. Fletcher's come. He's the richest rancher in these parts, but I don't like him. He always brings Pa a bottle of whiskey, and when Pa passes out Mr. Fletcher tries to make me kiss him so I hide in here."

Cold fury poured through Matt at her matter-of-fact description. "Has he ever found you?"

"Never," she scoffed. "He's terrible at hide and seek."

But this time Fletcher had better luck. He called from the doorway. "I know you're in there. Come on out before you make me mad."

Beside Matt, Amanda quivered. "I better go, or he'll find you."

Matt put his hand on her arm. "No."

"All I want is a kiss," Fletcher wheedled.

Matt stepped into the square of light. "Well, okay. Give me a second to pucker up."

Fletcher, a beefy man with expensive clothes and silver-inlaid pistols, gasped, taken aback at his sudden appearance. "Who the hell are you?"

"You don't recognize me?" Matt affected surprise. "Why I'm a very important feller. When they bury you, my name's going to be on your tombstone. 'Fletcher, scum of the earth, killed by Matt Coltrane.' Or should that be 'put out of his misery by Matt Coltrane'? A feller only gets one tombstone, it ought to be right."

Fletcher's face reddened. "You talk mighty big for a boy. I think it's

time you were taken down a peg or two."

"I guess that means you don't want to kiss me anymore. I confess I'm a mite relieved. I've seen mules prettier than you—and that's the hind end."

Snarling, Fletcher went for his gun.

Matt drew and fired twice before Fletcher managed to clear leather. Fletcher toppled over, clutching his chest where two red flowers had blossomed—too far apart to be covered by the ace of spades, Matt noticed with some disappointment.

"Let's make it 'put out of his misery by Snake Coltrane,'" he told the dead man. "I think I need a better handle; Matt just doesn't have the right ring to it." Thoughtfully, Matt relieved him of his fancy pistols and turned to Amanda. "Don't let on that you knew me. Tell them that a horse thief shot him."

"But his horse is still in the stable," she whispered, eyes still wide with shock.

"Hmm. That is a problem." Matt scratched his beardless chin. "I guess I'll just have to take it."



As the hell-train scorched up the track out of Dry Gulch, Snake rolled onto his hands and feet. He half-sprinted half-hobbled over to his horse—a normally sweet-tempered roan whose eyes were rolling with terror. He swung into the saddle and yanked the knotted reins free from the hitching post.

"Hey!" a man yelled as Snake laid his spurs to the roan's flanks. "That's my horse! I won it from you in a poker game last night!"

Snake paid no attention. He used the bit to ruthlessly curb the horse's shying and bent low over its neck, urging it after the train.

A friend of his tossed him a gunbelt as he rode out of town hell-bent for leather. The man who claimed to have won his horse threw his hat at Snake in frustration. Snake snatched both gunbelt and hat out of the air one-handed.

Among Snake's multitudinous sins were five train robberies. The trick, he'd learned, was to catch the train before it had a chance to gather speed along a straight stretch. Snake raced his horse across the scrubby sagebrush and caught the hell-train as it came out of a great



curve. He brought his lathered horse alongside, slung a saddlebag over his shoulder, and made a grab for the side ladder on the rushing train.

Then promptly snatched his hand back, shaking it and swearing. The black metal was hot. Snake gritted his teeth and grabbed again, this time with his left hand instead of his gun hand, and made the leap from horseback. He dangled for a moment by one hand before finding a rung with his toe. Snake climbed the ladder quickly to prevent being burned.

He ran along the roof—something of a feat in cowboy boots. He jumped from the caboose to the second last car—then stopped. He didn't know which of the fifteen cars Amanda was in.

Grimly, Snake started the impossible task. He hung his head over the side of the moving train and peered in each compartment's window upside down.

In the passenger cars, sinners sat together on hard benches, crammed in so tight they had to take turns breathing. In the dining car, demons and sinners alike ate cockroach chowder, rare porkchops smothered in chocolate sauce and ice cream studded with jalapenos. The Pullman sleeping berths were next; they were all narrow as planks and short as brooms. Snake kept going until he finally reached the saloon car directly behind the engine.

He vaulted down, body swaying with the rhythm of the train as it rushed over a trestle bridge. A steep gorge dropped away on either side.

Bank robberies also being among his multitudinous sins, Snake took several sticks of dynamite out of his saddlebags and attached a charge to the coupling with a long slow fuse.

Then he entered the saloon car, gun in hand.

Here there were no sinners. Amanda was the sole human. One demon spit-polished glasses behind the bar, while a demon missing several fingers watched, dejected, as a big demon raked in the pot at the poker table, leaving him broke.

The demon behind the bar saw him first, tossed its glass over its shoulder and came at him.

Snake had been thinking about the problem of the demon's invulnerability and thought he had a solution. Snake took careful aim and shot out both its eyes as it dived across the bar. Blinded, the demon caught its foot in a stool and measured its length on the floor.

The second demon came at Snake from the side. Snake snatched up a chair and brought it down over the demon's head and shoulders. It shattered to flinders in his hands.

The second demon laughed. "Tee-hee."

"Enough." The demon at the poker table snapped his fingers and flame danced between them. "You can't win her back that way, Mr. Coltrane."

Snake saw instantly that the demon was of a higher class than the others were. The demon lord's face was coarsely handsome, almost human except for a pair of horns sticking out of his forehead. The demon lord wrapped his hand around Amanda's neck and forced her to sit on his lap. She looked very unhappy.

"What do you suggest?" Snake asked.

"I just won the girl's soul from him." The demon lord indicated one of his lesser brethren. "You play me. Your soul is the ante."

Snake nonchalantly picked up a toothpick from the shattered chair and stuck it between his lips. "All right."

"Don't do it," Amanda said breathlessly as the demon lord squeezed her neck. "He'll cheat."

"Now, now, don't be so judgmental," Snake said quickly. "Just because a man has a hatrack in the middle of his forehead doesn't mean he's a card cheat." Snake turned a chair backwards and straddled it. "Best two out of three games. Cut to see who deals first, aces high."

The demon lord cut first. "King." He held up a King of Spades with horns, a tail and a smug expression.

Snake cut. "Ace. Too bad," he said insincerely. He picked up the deck and deliberately kept talking as he shuffled. "Can I give you a piece of friendly advice? Stay out of Texas. Those," Snake nodded at the demon lord's shiny black horns, "are apt to get you mistaken for a longhorn, and they brand everything that moves down there."

The demon lord's eyes glowed red.

Snake slapped out the cards. "One draw, jokers wild." He picked up his cards, keeping a poker face. He'd dealt himself a pair of tens, and the demon lord three fours—a good hand meant to lure him in. "Care to raise the stakes?" Snake asked.

The demon lord frowned. "Your soul is already at stake. What else do you have to lose?"

"Well, I've always been partial to my hat," Snake lied. The one the



man had thrown him was actually a little small. "And you have that shiny little bauble there." He pointed to the blood-red ruby winking on the demon lord's finger.

The demon lord's lip curled. "It would give me great pleasure to put a hole in your hat—with you in it." But he threw in the ring. Then he asked for three cards.

Not two. Three. Snake sat up straight in surprise. The demon lord had thrown away one of his fours, breaking up his three-of-a-kind. And now Snake had to deal him the joker he'd intended for himself. Son of a gun!

The demon lord smiled. And beat him, two fours and a joker making three-of-a-kind to Snake's lousy pair of tens.

With trepidation, Snake watched the demon lord shuffle, limber fingers making the cards dance.

Snake stared at the cards he received for a long time. He had no face cards and only two cards the same suit, hearts. The demon lord would expect him to ask for four. Should he ask for less and hope to screw up the demon lord's cards?

The demon lord grew impatient while he pondered. He snapped his fingers, and the demon who could still see hurried over with a bottle and two glasses. The lesser demon poured the demon lord a glass of viscous black fluid that smelled like licorice and pig manure. Together.

"Have some?" the demon lord mockingly offered Snake.

"No thanks, I have my own private stock." Snake uncapped his hip flask and poured himself a glass of clear fluid.

"Three cards." Might as well go bust on a flush. Snake picked up his first card, took a sip and nearly choked. The queen he'd been dealt had Amanda's face. The Amanda of Hearts was naked. She licked her lips lewdly.

He decided he didn't want to see the Amanda of Clubs.

But it was a heart, and so were the next two. He had his flush. Long odds, maybe too long. He watched the demon lord's face suspiciously as the demon lord laid down two pair.

"It seems we're tied at one game apiece," the demon lord said, red eyes deep and soulless. "Another side bet?"

His horse was gone, so were his saddle and Bowie knife. Snake frowned. "Well, I guess I could bet my boots. They're genuine snake-skin from a rattler I shot myself."

"No, Mr. Coltrane. I want your gun."

"Okay, but it's going to cost you that gold watch and fob." Snake undid his gunbelt and dropped it in the middle of the table, not coincidentally with the butt towards him, and the unfriendly end toward the demon lord.

Snake started shuffling. "No draws this time, straight up." He dealt himself a pair of jacks and the demon lord a handful of nothing, eight high. Snake laid his cards down on the table. "Pair of jacks, I win."

"Not so fast, Mr. Coltrane." One by one the demon lord turned over his cards. An eight of clubs, an ace of spades, a three of spades and the other pair of jacks.

Snake looked to his high card. Also an ace, but of clubs. But in a tie spades beat clubs.

Snake looked at their identical hands, which he had definitely not dealt and scowled. Demon lord humour was as subtle as a cow that said, 'Pardon me,' before trampling you—then stood on you for five minutes to make sure you got the point.

"Your soul is mine." The demon lord's cultured tones took on a slight sibilant hiss.

"No." Amanda spoke up, her face glowing with passion. "You can't take his soul, for it is no longer yours. He came here to save me. He's redeemed himself," she declared in ringing tones.

The demon lord hissed, then stopped and sniffed. "No, I can smell a redeemed soul. His is still black, mine to take." The demon lord bared his sharp teeth. "Mine to eat."

"Not so fast," Snake said, picking up his glass.

The demon lord sneered. "You intend to throw liquor in my eyes? Do you think liquor will hurt one of my kind when bullets didn't?"

"Not really," Snake admitted. He splashed the contents of his glass into the demon lord's face anyway.

The demon lord's laugh turned into a scream of agony as he dissolved on the spot into gray smoke.

"I guess I forget to mention that the Irishman I got my stock from was Father O'Shea. He distills the best holy water."

The two lesser demons howled and ran at Snake, but he held up his hip flask and moved it slightly so they could hear the holy water slosh inside. "Uh-uh. I'd stay back if I were you."

The lesser demons hissed and began to spread out, clearly thinking



about rushing him. The one he'd blinded had grown two more eyes—one on its forehead and the other close to its hairy ear.

"Besides you're about to become very busy in about..." Snake picked up the demon lord's gold watch and flipped open the lid. "...five seconds. Five, four, three, two, one."

Nothing happened. Everyone waited. Then nothing happened again.

One of the demons took a step forward.

KA-BOOM!

"Damn, my new watch is a little slow."

"What was that?" Amanda asked, clutching him.

"Oh, just a li'l old stick of dynamite. I blew the couplings between this car and the rest of the train." Snake spoke to the demons. "One of you might get me after I've used holy water on the other, but every second you spend chasing me, the rest of the train gets farther and farther away. It'll stop soon, and all the sinners will get out. I expect you'll have quite the job rounding them up. Tee-hee."

The demons hissed in fury, but jumped from the train.

Snake buckled his gun belt back on, scooped up his winnings, and then hustled Amanda to the back stoop. "Our turn now. When you hit the ground, roll, and you'll be all right."

Amanda balked. "Wait a moment. I don't understand. Why did you have holy water in your flask?"

"Well, as to that," Snake drawled, "I have a confession to make, darlin'. I didn't just come to rescue your very pretty self."

A cute frown marred her forehead. "Then who did you come here to save? Did one of the miners hire you to rescue him?"

"Nope."

"One of the other sinners? That hussy from the saloon?" Her voice took on a dangerous tone.

"No, no," Snake said quickly.

"Then what did you come to save?"

"Their jewelry."

Amanda gaped.

"It struck me one day that all those rich sinners didn't really need all that gold and jewelry down in hell. I figured I could put a better use to it," Snake explained. "We've been planning this train robbery for months. We spent the last three weeks hanging around Dry Gulch eating dust and keeping sober, then last night we got a telegraph that the

train was two days away so I decided it was safe to get roaring drunk."

"Who's we?"

"The rest of my gang. If they've kept to the plan, they're plundering the dynamited cars even as we speak. Now we have to jump before the train reaches hell and it's too late!"

They jumped and rolled together. Snake got up, pulled Amanda to her feet, getting a glimpse of nicely trim ankles, and dusted off his still-too-small hat. "Let's go."

Amanda looked around, squinting. "Where's your horse? I was certain you'd have a horse."

Snake was affronted. "I do. It's just not right here."

Grumbling, Amanda started walking west.

"You're going the wrong way. My gang is that way," Snake pointed back down the tracks.

Amanda frowned. "Are you sure? That direction doesn't feel right."

Snake let out a long-suffering sigh. "Yes, I'm sure. We go east."

"If you say so," Amanda said doubtfully, turning around after one last lingering look at the sunset. "I just can't shake the feeling that we'd be happier if we went west." •

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# Nothing and It's Starboard Healings

A.M. Arruin

owl topples from her perch  
atop whatever poplar  
river wraps in sunlight fractions

her fatigue legendary  
splashes, too  
heard all the way to pinecone flats  
where chipmunks dance their starboard vigour  
under latticed lights  
their backward shouts  
enough to riffle waters far beyond the loon lake palace

owl has fallen there, too  
broken beaver's lodge  
her banishment foregone  
the judgment clear  
a parliament of other owls  
brimmed with vim and vengeance  
fathers  
judgers  
pluckers, all

owl has forgotten  
or forgiven  
she clutches little difference  
muddy beak  
withered claw  
dusty wings  
she sees all, but nothing

nothing—

deep river's basement  
where a true nest can still be built •

Forget the refinery—you don't want to see how the machines extract plastics and petroleum from the plant. That isn't the story. You came here to see bodies.

## The Girl With the Half Moon Eyes

Robert Burke Richardson

A field of purple flora, sea-green at the ridges, stretches all the way to a red-tinged horizon. The plants give off a fragrance like too much perfume, but the dry air retains a desert essence on your tongue. You turn 180 degrees and study the prefab buildings just to reassure yourself you're still on planet Earth and weren't transported—as you sometimes wish—to an alien world while napping on the plane.

Doctor Sawnhey walks carefully between rows of knee-high sorghum hybrids on a series of white boards resting on the coffee-brown topsoil. Her skin is tan, but she doesn't look like an Iraqi. She speaks in a European accent you're not worldly enough to identify. "Welcome to the Biogenic Oil Reclamation Project," she says, squeezing a greeting into your hand. You wonder how she keeps her skin so cool in the heat. "The boards we're walking on are made from coconut husks," she says. "People *pay* us to hull the husks away in some tropical countries. Both fiber and pith are extremely high in lignin and phenolic content."

You flip your handheld open, but your eyes are already scanning the strange horizon for the real story. Twin dump-trucks lead dust clouds in from the dunes to the South.

Sawnhey pulls an edge-worn card from the pocket of her lab coat



and hands it to you. It is a painting of a leafy, olive-green plant. "Let's head for the refinery," she says, inclining her head toward a large wood-and-plastic structure off to the right. "This was our first-stage plant," Sawnhey says, taking the picture back. "It drew the pollutants from the soil and turned them into the hemp rope we used to hang the warmongers with." She glances at your eyes, and continues only when you don't visibly react. "The plants then became fertilizer for the intermediary phase, which created the top-soil."

"And then you grew these purple plants?" you ask. "The ones that produce petroleum?"

Pleased by your understanding, Sawnhey stomps a little foot. "This ground is probably the second richest oil-field on the entire planet, and all the locals ever did was squabble with each other. At long last they have become part of the solution, rather than *all* of the problem."

Sawnhey stops and turns to you confidentially. You are just outside the refinery now, and can hear machines pounding out a complicated rhythm. "I don't mean to be racist, but have you ever seen an Iraqi?" You shake your head no, and Sawnhey leans in closer. Her breath is sterile, like an instrument in a hospital. "The buggers are really oily," she says. "You can see it in their pores."

You step around Sawnhey and head toward the dump-trucks, which are just pulling up. Forget the refinery—you don't want to see how the machines extract plastics and petroleum from the plants. That isn't the story. You came here to see bodies.

"No pictures," Sawnhey reminds you over the scuff of her sensible shoes on the unnatural boards.

One of the drivers is Asian, the other, Caucasian. Men and women of a dozen different ancestries stand around a large, shallow pit holding hoes, shovels, axes, and saws. The first truck backs into position with a series of warning beeps, then dumps its cargo into the shallow pit. You are surprised to see that most of the bodies are young Hindi women, lushly proportioned but with the kiss of youth still fresh on their faces. Some wear clothes of cotton or other biodegradable fabric, some are naked, with tattoos on their arms and breasts. The fragrant plants are not enough to mask the smell as the beautiful women fall one on top of the other in the coffee-colored dirt.

The workers begin hacking and digging, mixing the blood and bodies with soil. A corpse with curious half-moon eyes stares at you

until you are forced to turn away. Doctor Sawnhey comes to stand at your shoulder. "Nature makes oil from biogenic matter," she says, "but it's a slow process. We've improved on it a thousand times at this facility. Every ounce of every corpse is used."

Sensing an even deeper story, you pull out your digital-recorder. "What happened to these girls?" you ask.

Sawnhey wrinkles her nose. "Bangalore prostitutes," she says. "These are ten, twelve years old now—it's a difficult age. Rather than risk the girls escaping or becoming difficult to control, their owners choose euthanasia for them." She shakes her head as if at a great injustice, then brightens. "But we make good use of them here. Our post-nationals harvest and deliver the deceased, and mix them into the soil. It would comfort these ladies, I think, to know that their remains will heat homes and power automobiles." She smiles. "Would you like to see the refinery now?"

You shake your head and say, "Thank you for your time, Doctor. I've seen more than enough."

Two days left. You fly to Bangalore on a whim. You'll never know exactly what happened to any of the girls you saw, but you piece the general story together through a series of interviews and discreet observations.

You name the girl with the half-moon eyes Midori and imagine her with a poor family in the Bangalore slums. The baby rests on Mother's breast while Father paces the rundown hut, wondering what to do with his degree in advanced mathematics. Midori's brother with the sad eyes and wavy hair is old enough to know that times are hard. He wishes he was bigger so he could help out more.

One day a man comes to the house and offers three hundred rupees for the baby, whom he will see gets a good home. A cash-infusion coupled with a reduction in the number of mouths to feed: the math is inescapable and not at all advanced. Father has to tear the baby from Mother's arms. It hurts their marriage, but they eat goat and lamb curry for an entire week before going back to rice and watery dal.

A few years later, Father is coming home from a meeting with a colleague. The family remains far from wealthy but, with hard work and sacrifice, they've managed to move up in the world, building on the foundation purchased with their little girl-child. Father is a member in good standing at his company, and he works hard to stay accepted



and well-liked.

Hanuman, his supervisor, takes him to an American-style club where you can have white girls for money. Hanuman chooses a girl with honey-blond hair, and leads her to the ornate spiral staircase. Father watches the girls dancing, white and brown alike, turns to leave once his friend is out of sight—but he can't go home. The rift between him and his wife has widened. He works such long hours, all for her. He needs a little comfort. He drinks champagne, and tries to forget about the horrible sacrifices he's made.

Father's eyes alight on a dancer with half-moon lids just like his daughter's. She dances over and he smiles. He cries into her breasts after he comes inside of her and goes back to see her every Friday evening. He brings her little gifts because things don't seem so bad when he's with her.

Midori dreams of freedom. She is only five years old, but she knows that not every child has a life like hers. Vidroha showed Midori a child through the window once, a tiny thing with a mother to cling to. "*Lardkee*. Little girl," Vidroha says. "That's what we should be."

Midori's favorite customer is the man who comes on Friday evenings. He doesn't choke or beat her and it feels nice when he moves inside of her; it feels nice when he holds her and cries. Midori hopes the man will take her away one day.

By the time she is six, Midori knows the score. She's seen how quickly the hormone supplements develop the toddlers into women, and she knows that older girls like Vidroha vanish mysteriously when they start to know too many things. Midori is an expert cocksucker, the star of the brothel, but she cries before bed and calls to you in her dreams. You can't help—she's half-a-world away, and you need to put gas in your car and get to work and change the baby's diapers.

One day Midori escapes the brothel. She slips out with one of the customers, hits him over the head, and runs down the back-alley that's as much of the world as she's ever seen. She can talk now, but everyone she approaches reacts with outrage and fear. Some of the women—what's wrong with their skin? their faces are so wrinkly—hit her and shriek at her. Men come and take her away in a car like the ones she's seen, only this one screams sometimes when the lights turn red.

One of the drivers is Sarad. Midori knows him from the brothel, but he pretends she doesn't. They put her in a cage and she is very

frightened. She weeps into her hands. She would go back to the brothel if only she knew where it was—if only she could bend these bars. A man in a fancy suit comes to see her. He speaks kindly and lets her out of the cage. Midori can tell the man wants her, but he pretends he doesn't. He shows her a machine that pricks her little finger. He says the DNA will lead them to Midori's parents. She remembers the child on the street, and cries to think she too might have a mommy.

Despite the vague warnings, Mother is so happy when she gets the phone call. She cries and hugs Father and, for the first time in a long while, he thinks maybe things will work out okay. Mother says the man on the phone says that people changed Midori, that she's grown old before her time. Father says he doesn't care, he just wants his daughter back.

It is the happiest moment of Midori's life when Father answers the door. Her savior and protector is really her father, just as she always hoped. She throws her arms around him. They are finally free to live the life they've always wanted.

Father pushes Midori to the ground. He threatens the cops. "This is not my daughter!" he screams. "Take this whore away!" Mother comes to the door, and he pushes her back inside. Midori's brother tries to run to her, but Father punches him in the face. If any of this comes to light, the family will lose their precarious social standing. Father will lose his job, and the family will be right back where they started. He looks at Midori, his daughter, his lover, and erases her from his mind. She does not exist.

The boy disappears the next day, and the mother burns herself to death a week after. Father goes back to work and goes back to the club. He knows what the girls are now, but it is the only place he can find solace.

Midori ends up under a field of purple flora with sea-green ridges stretching all the way to a red-tinged horizon. You flesh out the sex scenes, add an action sequence where a handful of bio-engineered postnationals kill off every last Iraqi for the reclamation project, and sell the feature story for ten-cents a word.

Sandy is sleeping on the couch when you get home, Lily asleep in her big-girl bed. You watch the slight rise and fall of her chest, wonder what the correct course of action is. Maybe you should eliminate milk and meat from her diet so the steroids don't cause her to grow breasts



when she's seven-years-old. But vegetables have become strange and industrialized too, haven't they? Do you forbid the TV and internet so she won't be wounded by the sorrow of the world—or force her to watch so she'll be prepared for it? Some sorrows cannot be swallowed; they resist narrativization, comfort, and meaning.

A soft snow falls outside. You turn the heat up a few degrees, scoop Lily up in your arms, and take her to sleep in the bed with you. You enclose her in your arms, lay her head on your chest, and feel, if just for that moment, that you can keep her safe. •

### • Special Notice to Our Readers •

We have determined, at long last, that the purchase price of *On Spec* must increase, to keep pace with the ever-growing costs of production, printing and distribution of the journal.

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The *On Spec* Staff & Editorial Board

The faerie moaned. Booma quickly pinned her shoulders, and the nuns backed away from the nearing fury. But the Faerie only blinked deeply, and said in a voice green and musical, "Why haven't you killed me?"

## Only The Dead Flower

A.M. Arruin

An adolescent Faerie staggered from the desert's empty quarter, nearly naked, stunned and sunstruck. For the last measure she clawed her way, finally to collapse at a wire fence that marked the borders of goblin country. Her breath ruffled the sand, a little less each minute. The sun cooled, and set, and slept.

"I find her trapped on Abbey fence, fist full of night flowers." Booma the ogre pulled a sweaty braid from her own eye. It fell again, where the ear was missing. "She travel far. Babble much of sun's fire. But sleep now, see?"

Two goblin nuns stood in the room's cool evening shadows, surveying their unexpected convalescent. The faerie's limbs were stringed with rips and shreds not unlike those worn by the pixie strippers of the Mesa. Her breath swished hot and cold, as if she had swallowed fiery noon winds and the chilled moon, or gulped equal measures of snow and sand.

*On bed*, signed Grinteeth, with the abridged hand gestures of the Mothite nuns, vowed to a silence.

*Gently*, added Fangash, fingers twiggling.

The old nun brushed a curtain, calling light from the desert moon. They peered more closely. The faerie's skin was not the misty



mauve common to her race, but dark as plum.

Fangash shook her head. *She looks Owl Tribe.*

“Snow Faerie!” Booma gushed. “Cannot be.”

Grinteeth snapped a finger. *They all dead. And why a Snow Faerie travel the sands?*

Fangash raised a hand. She stooped to examine the face, softly touched the nose, the hair, the ears. After minutes, she nodded. *Unmistakable. Tribe Owl. Hobgoblins called them Bruise People.*

*Ancient enemies.* Grinteeth nodded.

Booma touched the Faerie’s forehead. “But Bruise all killed, even children. By Hobbin.” Her eye moistened, and her voice hushed. “Fog Marsh Massacre. Twenty years ago, now.”

*Yes. A mystery here.* Fangash crushed dwarven incense into a finger pot, once used for blood sacrifice by the pagan Field Faerie, before their Reformation.

The green scent of streamleaf mingled with chills of air, pumped from the abbey’s cool catacombs. The Faerie’s eyelids twitched. She inhaled, smiled deeply, and opened her eyes.

Her face registered perplexity, then shock, then ferocious hate. “Hobbin!” She lunged upward, grabbing for her absent dagger. Fangash quickly spat in the incense. Smoke choked the air, and the Faerie plunged back to oblivion.



*No kneecaps.*

Fangash probed the Faerie’s legs and head, looking up only to offer brief summaries.

*Hollows under eyes.* She grimaced, *Cheekbone...* she searched for the right sign, ...*digested.*

“Gone,” whispered Booma.

Grinteeth clawed out a string of signs. *She flee disease? Or bring it?*

Fangash set her palm at the Faerie’s heart, slowing her own to match the rhythm. But she could sense no flaw in the blood, no sickness she knew.

“Stop pain.” Booma poured over a tiny stool, rocking, wiping sweat from the scars that marked her missing ear. “Knit bones again, surely.”

*I am truly sorry,* Fangash signed. *I cannot.*

"What can this sickness be?" Booma stammered.

Fangash stared out the window, where evening breezes swayed the goblin night flowers, and the sky hushed to violet deep as the Faerie's skin.

*Sister,* Fangash signed. *I fear tidings may be true.*

Grinteeth hung her head.

*We must put on the kerchief,* Fangash continued.

Grinteeth nodded. With their shaven heads and skullpoints they would look, to the Faerie, much like the hordes of marauding Hobgoblin in the thirteenth century oils of Greenwick, the Faerie master.

"But Faerie sleeping," said Booma. "Must rest, must live."

*She last of her tribe,* signed Grinteeth. *And perhaps dying of strange disease. We can only know...*

Fangash turned from the window.

"We must wake her," she said, in a voice harsh as smoke. "And we must break our silence, in service of compassion."



Grinteeth applied the rousing saltroot compress. "If this be what we have heard," she whispered, "Then a pox is on all Zoar."

"Attend to this fallen one," Fangash gently chided. "As the poet says: Just this, only this."

"But can we ask after her private world? Is this a breach of respect?"

"No choice is perfect," Fangash reminded. "Remember the poet: All actions are infected. This truth, alas, does not make any choice the easier."

The faerie moaned. Booma quickly pinned her shoulders, and the nuns backed away from the nearing fury. But the Faerie only blinked deeply, and said in a voice green and musical, "Why haven't you killed me?"

Grinteeth stepped forward. "We never kill. We are called *Keepers* by your kind."

The Faerie started as if from a hot brand. Sweat brindled her upper lip. "You are Keepers!" She groaned. "Oh gods. When will you pluck out my eyes?"

"That is rumor, never true." Grinteeth reached to stroke the fore-



head, but pulled back at Fangash's sign. "To where do you flee, fallen one? And what have you fled?"

The faerie turned her head, refusing to speak.

"What is your name?" Fangash said.

The faerie gnashed her teeth and tried to spit, but her mouth was parched from desert winds and the whisper of missing waters.

"She never tell." Booma towered overhead.

"Never!" the faerie retched, tongue white and furrowed as a peach stone.

"That is well," Fangash said, from the corner. "Yet we will tell you something of our own calling."

The faerie did not seem to listen, until the name of Booma, at which she turned her head, and quieted, and stared up in wonder.

*Her bewilderment is fitting*, Fangash signed to Grinteeth. Ogres, too, were a natural enemy of Goblin. Grinteeth nodded, and let Booma step into the Faerie's orbit. The ogre looked down; tear drifting earward across one cheekbone. The Faerie simply stared.

*She calms*, Grinteeth signed.

Fangash stepped from the shadows and touched Booma, then spoke in the formal speech of the peacemaker: "We are compelled to help you, fallen one, but cannot unless you answer us, for you are a mystery bearing a mystery: a Snow Faerie wandering in the fiery Wilderness of Zin, carrying a sexual congress.: She paused. "Something ever eschewed by Owl Tribe. How May we help you?"

The Faerie did not move.

"Thus," continued the goblin, "you are of a dead tribe carrying a live coal of rumor. By the salt mud still on your feet, you have traversed every crimp and corrugation of Zin's Wazim River, which never freezes, and holds the sun's fire, and can give no comfort to like as you. How may we help you?"

The Faerie inhaled sharply, as if surfacing from reverie, then snapped her teeth. "Never," she said. "I will never tell a Keeper." Then added sarcastically, "As your own prophet says: truth lives only in what is not told."

Booma nodded. "Truth lives where word dies."

"We prefer to call Moth a poet." Fangash smiled. "And, as the poet says, no prophet can tell the truth."

Grinteeth snapped her fingers impatiently. "You are dying, Faerie.

And we do not know how to cure you.”

“Peace,” Booma cooed. “Try only kindness.”

Grinteeth looked at the floor. The ogre rarely spoke against her mentors.

Fangash put a hand on Grinteeth’s shoulder, then peered kindly at the Faerie. “Friend, will you at least tell us of this disease, the Galadriella? Is it real?”

The Faerie grinned, and her tongue unstuck miraculously. “Yes. The contagion is passed only through the act of love, though the act is poorly named.” She laughed grimly. “It is called the Galadriella, like you say, and was begun by goblins through their pornographic ways, and must finally consume them.”

“Perhaps,” Fangash whispered.

The Faerie tried to rise, but lacked the sinews. “Why?” She demanded. “Why do you help me? Have you recanted Mosanto, her thirst for blood and bones?”

“You know our most ancient Goddess,” said Grinteeth. “But clearly not the ways of our poet.”

The Faerie grunted.

“Have you a little strength left?” said Fangash.

The Faerie looked at Booma, and her shoulders softened. Then, to their surprise, she nodded slowly.

“Peace,” said the nun. “Then we will show you our answer, come morning.”



After midnight, while the faerie slept in a web of ancient dream-spells, the nuns conferred in the abbey’s tower. *The Prick*, as it was called by lewd desert folk—a single monstrous rock thrown up from prehistoric sands, buttoned with glass, carved and hollowed in the hazy past by some lost civilization. Grinteeth lit the moon stick, which gathered and dispersed the sky’s light in a glowing mist, while Fangash pulled two wooden chairs to the window.

“Speak,” she said. “The vow is broken.”

“Can this truly be a forgotten faerie of Owl Tribe?” Grinteeth said. “Or has the desert cast up a manifestation from its fiery heart, to the sun’s own purpose?”



Fangash sat slowly, squeezing her knees. "I have no skill on this question. We must dismiss it."

Grinteeth nodded. "Only clear skies hold the lightning."

"As the poet says."

The moon stick hummed, pouring soft glow. Stars dimmed beyond the window, where the night flowers gulped their cold light.

"And yet..." Grinteeth poured the tea, fragrant Pixie *Fooba* plucked in the far archipelago, then smoked over smoldering pine needles. She sipped. "Can this creature be in disguise?"

"Impossible." Fangash plopped a sugar cube with twiggy fingers.

"Perhaps a shapeshifter, from a school we have never seen, or a walking god. "Or," Grinteeth's voice dipped, "perhaps the poet herself, a sun-ghost formed of our filmy desires."

"Here to what end?"

"Truly. But I have wished almost daily for some sign from our history."

Fangash laughed. "A leaf drops ever into tomorrow." She shook her head. "No, sister, it cannot be."

"*What*, then?" Grinteeth leaned forward and put her teacup on the oak table. "Is our visitor the offspring of Faerie and Goblin, a *Twindis*? Even now the Hobgoblin hunt them throughout the four quarters, as an abomination."

Fangash also set down her tea. She tugged her lip thoughtfully. "Ever have the Goblins and Faerie accused each other of wilfully spreading impurity. Ever have they destroyed the artifacts which do match their own account of history. They are mirrors of each other. Sisters, even." She chuckled, and let her fingers swim through the moon stick's misty light. "No, Grinteeth, we must finally believe what we see. Still, we see only that a Snow Faerie dies on a table, and nothing of her goal or purpose."

"Booma knows."

The nuns startled, for they had forgotten the ogre in the shadows. Grinteeth spun in her chair, stray finger clinking the teacup.

"Speak," she said.

Booma was silent.

"How would you know?" Grinteeth demanded.

Booma tapped the scar that marked her missing ear. Grinteeth stared into the shadows, blinking quickly, then bowed her head.

“Forgive us, Booma,” said Fangash, “Sometimes our attention flows dark as deep water.” As the poet said.

For Booma had many years earlier been a Hobgoblin slave, at the Fog Marsh Massacre, in the Icicle Forest. Her masters had commanded her to kill some Owl Tribe children throwing stones from a ditch. When Booma refused, the goblins killed her own daughter, and took her ear. Only the Mothites saved her from suicide.

“Faerie travel to Icicle Forest,” Booma said. Then, softly, “Faerie go home.”

“Of course,” said Fangash. “She wants to die in her own country.”

“More.” The ogre stepped into the mist-light, creaking the slatted floor. “Faerie want her spirit to go to Middlemarch, Green Kingdom of Dead. She need her people.”

“Her people are dead,” blurted Grinteeth. “Has she not heard of the Massacre?”

“Peace, sister.” Fangash raised a hand. “Booma, sit and drink tea. Will you tell us of the Faerie Kingdom of the Dead? This is history we have not kept.”

Booma sat on the floor and plucked a teacup from the table. It looked like a thimble in her hand. “Spirit of dead Faerie must march into Kingdom just so, at right pace, and stay awake, always awake. Tribe member must perform ceremony, *only* same tribe, see? Else spirit miss Middlemarch and pass into shadows. Or worse!” She slurped the cooling tea.

“And how does the tribe help?” said Fangash.

Booma hesitated. “Must tap the bones, make rattle, just so.”

“The *bones*?” Grinteeth frowned. “Do you mean the death sticks? The Death Rattle Ceremony?”

Booma nodded.

Fangash also frowned. All goblins knew tales of the Faerie death sticks, thin rods carved from Fangoo bark, tapered and serrated, supposedly driven up through the nostrils of goblin babies in order to mash the brains. Faerie scouts and warriors carried them always into battle, on a neck-chain. If the warrior fell—as the tale went—a comrade would tap the bones in a particular rhythm, as a reminder of goblin babies killed, in order that the fallen go happy in the after-life. There were other tales, too, darker rumors.

Grinteeth shivered. “They do hate us so.”



“Still,” said Fangash. “We are Mothite, and will let nothing snuff compassion. Booma, do warriors alone die to this tapping, or must all Snow Faerie have the ceremony performed at death?”

“All must.”

“And what happens if no tribe member or sticks can be found? What is worse than passing to the shadows?”

Booma shuddered. Her voice cracked. “Spirit walk all the way to Mudworld.”

“Surely you don’t hold this superstition!” Grinteeth barked.

“Peace.” Fangash poured more tea into Booma’s cup. “Let us not judge another’s faith. Booma, have you seen the true ceremony for the *bones*?”

The ogre looked down. She exhaled heavily, but said nothing.

“Booma?”

Booma gulped her tea in a single shot. Sweat moistened her upper lip.

“Tell us.” Grinteeth clutched the table’s lip. She looked to Fangash, who brushed a subtle sign. *Gently*.

“Please,” Grinteeth added.

Booma stood. “Cannot.” She turned. “Will not.” She strode for the door, slats creaking a wake behind her.

Grinteeth glared at the empty door. “Our friend grows unsubtle and belligerent.”

“She has much inside her.” Fangash moved to unlight the moon stick.

Grinteeth gulped the cold tea remaining in the pot, then stood. “It matters little. The faerie is the last of her kind, and has not the death sticks on her. None are likely to survive in the Icicle Forest, nor anywhere in Zoar.”

Fangash looked strangely at her companion, one eye squinting. “This makes our visit to the catacombs more urgent yet.”

“How so? Have our long-dead sisters kept a set of death sticks, somewhere deep in Haggahowl Cavern, where we have never been?”

“I have been there.”

Grinteeth surveyed the older nun. “Can we learn another’s most holy art?”

“We are the Keepers.”

“But not Faerie.”

“True.”

Grinteeth frowned. “This ritual is not an artifact, but living ceremony. We are Keepers, not soul thieves.”

Fangash sighed. “I fear you are right, and we may not steal another’s ritual. Though our ogre has seen this ceremony, I know it.”

“She will not tell.”

“Yet we will see, in the morning.”

Grinteeth nodded, half-heartedly. “Sometimes the bones will dance.”

Fangash snuffed the moon stick. “As the poet says.”



Chill catacomb breezes fluttered the torches, summoned from the earth’s secret places by some unknown magic. Booma’s iron boot clapped a slow castanet on the stone steps, as she carried the Faerie past ancient frescoes of goblin faith, deep into the monastery’s vaults. The nuns followed, veiled and soft-slippered.

They stooped to avoid throbbing skin pips, organic plumbing grown by dwarves; they brushed walls bricked with white. The Faerie retched from her perch on Booma’s back. “Move quickly through these unwholesome corridors.”

“We only accept,” said Grinteeth. “These are incantations of Death, whose welcome none can refuse in the end.”

“True, Sister.” Fangash shuffled behind. “But perhaps not the judicious time to insist on the truth.”

Grinteeth frowned. They entered the Fingcrow Stairs, steeper yet, breathless with the weight of earth above.

“I thought goblins hated mines,” said the Faerie.

“Some do, some don’t.” Grinteeth lit a scented torch. “We are not one tribe, but many. Like your own race.”

The faerie sniffed. “Faerie perfume. *Sifa*.”

“Yes,” said Fangash. “We are *Keepers*, as you name us.”

The faerie inhaled, then coughed. “My people would spit in your perfumes. What kind of order *are* you?”

They stopped at the foot of the stairs, where a dark doorway exhaled muddy breezes and silence so deep it stiffened the bones.

“This is Snarldark Passage,” whispered Fangash. “Here begins our



collection of histories; there is much beyond, some of which you will scarcely believe." She swept a thick curtain. Beneath it hung Greenwich's painting, *The Fallen*, an icon of Faerie culture; beside hung an ancient Kelpie map of Zoar, fragrant with unrolled secrets and vanished geographies.

The faerie hissed. Her fingers clawed at Booma's neck. "Are these the curios of your hope? Poached from other cultures to guarantee your own afterlife?"

"They are retrieved, not stolen," said Grinteeth. "And we have no afterlife."

"You are *soul thieves*," the faerie snarled.

"Perhaps." Fangash closed the curtain. "But we have no care for an afterlife, which cannot be proven. We care for *this* life, and all lives, and all histories. And so, fallen one, we respect your own beliefs, though we do not share them."

"Unbelievers." The faerie coughed. "Fence-sitters. Nibblers. Infidels."

"But kind." Booma's voice crackled with disuse. "True always to vows."

The faerie snorted. "I suppose you are chaste, too."

"We are." Fangash smiled at Grinteeth. "And we pleasure each other."

The faerie licked her lips, as if unable to chew this contradiction.

Booma clomped forward, bobbing the faerie's head. They padded through Snarldark Passage, lucemaria pumping faint air and sunlight from the far desert skin. Fangash maintained a whispered commentary—here were graves pierced in walls, *loculi* stuff with the dead of many races. Some walls were honeycombed so densely with *loculi* that the ancient frescoes were scratched or destroyed. Grinteeth explained that goblins, especially, were frantic to be buried near strong relatives, in order to follow them to the sweetest places in the Land of Death. The faerie coughed again, then shuddered. This was a great hive of dead, an ant's kingdom haunted with small histories, where even the greatest life was diminished to the compass of an insect's. And where in all the kingdoms did these spirits now dwell?

They stepped finally through a last curtain, into the galleries, where the light thickened, at once dimmer and deeper than the outer catacombs. Its source was invisible.

“The Grumgnash Tunnels,” said Fangash. “Gaze about you. I will tell each story.”

“And so,” said Grinteeth, “We will answer your recent question. Then, perhaps, you will answer ours.”



Of all the old kingdoms tattooed on Zoar’s skin, none contained the sheer bounty of the Mothite catacombs, mazed deep in the desert’s belly. An underworld never glimpsed by Faerie, and rarely by Goblin. Rarely did their rumors pierce the surface, and never the frosty haunts of the Icicle Forest.

And so the last Snow Faerie looked in awe, and said little, but listened with wide eyes and mouth, as the tangled threads of Old Zoar unspoiled themselves through countless artifacts, each accomplished by the softly spoken stories of Fangash the goblin nun. And few surface dwellers would have believed the conversation, fewer the speakers assembled, fewer still the object of discussion....

Here was one of Moth’s own hairs—green as poison—preserved in crystal, suspended by an unremembered spell. Twirling next in the heavy air, the finger of Octoberon, once chieftain of the Highland shapeshifters. Behind floated a rainbow of dead butterflies from the Age of Wizards, while between, like flotsam, drifted the lipsticks of goblin whores and the magpie cutlets of the jade Field Faerie, once worshippers of King Magpie, now harvesters of boredom and gloom.

“Dear gods,” said the Faerie. “These are totems of despair.”

Fangash nodded. “This is a chamber of horrors, seen one way. Yet there are more ways of seeing, as the poet say.”

And indeed, some of the curios are more comic than tragic. On the far wall hung the four-legged pants of a prudish Mennozite centaur. Next, a goblin eye-ring, surely the most painful piercing ever contrived. And a scroll of vegetarian troll recipes, always a surprise to those familiar with the more carnivorous myths. And a whole gallery of brownie gardening tools—bizarre clamps and forks, strings hung with hooks and bits of glass, hollow pipes with cups on top. Elbow-length gloves fingered with spoons and spaded, clippers and tines, bug spells printed on palms, tiny vials of insecticide hung in clever frenulums between knuckles. Root movers, petal shakers, leaf



washers, sweet poems for pumpkins, chanted under the kissing moon.

“Brownies could really *grow*,” said Grinteeth. “Alas, they were worthless in war.”

Fangash plucked a gardening glove. “Imagine trying to kill a giant with *this*.”

One staggered cabinet housed an orchestra of musical instruments, shaped and sharpened to weapon by skilful Snaggers—the ludicrous battering piano, the ominous *violintor*, the unsuccessful bow-and-trumpet. Overhead, a Bonewalker’s mirror, better left unlooked. Here, in a sheet of floating dirt, was the last remaining grass from Cloudland, once razed, hazed and poisoned by malevolent green-hating Goatsuckers, who planted, instead, the rank and deadly *fangweed*. Roots dangled to the floor, which was scattered with clumps of clover and rotting turnips. Between turnips, in stark counterpoint, sat a sparkling crown and a crude crayon landscape.

“One king, one child,” said Fangash. “All are treasures to Moth, with not the slightest discrimination between them.” Then added, “We keep a fangweed garden in the deeper galleries.”

“But what are—“ the Faerie coughed. A trace of blood lined her chin. “What are *these*?” She pointed beyond the butterflies, to a wall cut with gloomy windows, which admitted no light yet glimmered with mouthfuls of armored teeth, spikes and spines, stakes and skewers. Above hung a tribe of ceremonial masks, faces twisted in hate and agony.

“Yes,” Fangash whispered. “That is our own history. The torture tools of the Shaggabite, once Monsanto’s greatest inquisitor, and Moth’s murderer. For our sect has been an abomination to the faithful, as they call themselves.”

The masks, inflected with some old magic, mimicked the nun’s sadness. Then their faces changed to wonder, as the Faerie said to Booma, “Bring me closer.”

“We do not recommend...” Grinteeth watched the ogre mince toward the windows, but did not follow. The masks squeezed shut their eyes. Fangash remained beside her sister, breathing slowly.

“That is called a...” The nun cleared her throat. “that was once a... The Inquisitor named that her...”

“Throatfucker.” Grinteeth finished in a hoarse whisper.

Fangash looked down. “It did not enter through the throat.”

The masks each opened a single eye, while the Faerie reached a trembling finger to touch the long wire spiked with barbs as fine as hair.

"The noodle," said Fangash. "Swallowed and excreted many times, in a... growing series of loops."

Grinteeth gulped. "This strains our faith, sister."

"Truly."

Many masks clamped their mouths. Those with unlucky tongues whipped them like snakes set afire. The Faerie touched a steel mask, with inward nail at the eyes, and a hollow horn at the mouth. "And this?"

"The Hunger Head. Through which were forcibly eaten things that will not be mentioned here."

And so it went, each device more horrific and inspired than the last, till the masks heaved as if to vomit, and some vanished into their own mouths, and others fell from the wall. But the nuns did not move, and named everything with a grim and steady measure.

At the end, the Faerie was shuddering, and coughing harshly, and only Booma's firm hand kept her from joining the fallen masks.

"And what, finally, is this scroll?" the faerie said. "A compendium of goblin atrocities, with instructions, with illustrations to savor, with the most ingenious diagrams?"

"No," said Fangash. "That is an ancient Faerie scroll. It contains the Forgetting Ceremony, with its proprietary spells."

The Faerie gasped. "I don't believe it. Then our old stories are true?"

"The scroll is much older than the catacombs themselves, and is only remembered here. Its sister, the Remembering Ceremony, is forgotten to history." She smiled sadly. "An irony that would have delighted Moth."

The faerie hacked up more blood. "You stole it from us! Your kind."

"It was lost. We keep it. It is useless without its counterpart."

"No!" the faerie thrashed and gargled.

The blood flushed from Grinteeth's face; even her ears whitened. But Fangash simply pressed her lips.

"You are beguiled," the faerie slipped a labored breath, "to think you have no effect on the world."

"Oh, truly." Fangash clenched her teeth.



“Fog March Massacre,” Booma whispered. “Would not have happened with Forgetting.”

A long deep silence, hollow and bottomless.

Fangash stepped forward and gestured at the grim tools. “Our kind have desired nothing more in this world than to open the scroll and use the spells, in order to forget the horror of our Inquisition. The Forgetting, it is told, can be directed precisely by Faeries at any unwanted memory.”

“Like the location of a village,” the faerie murmured. Booma gasped.

“But we will not use it,” Fangash blurted. “To forgot would destroy all we believe, and hold dear.”

“And so,” said Grimteeth, “the scroll remains with the torture tools—as counterpoint, as irony, as a living reminder.”

The faerie clutched at Booma’s throat. “Why?” He voice was like burning sand. “What kind of creatures *are* you?”

Fangash reached to stroke a plate of hobnailed iron. “We stare without blinking at all the world’s offering, no matter how lovely or cruel. We keep everything.”

“Yours is a demented order!” the faerie spat.

“To turn from the world’s beauties is to rob them of power. To turn from the world’s horrors is to offer them power.”

“As the poet, as the poet,” the faerie gibbered sarcastically. She spat again, this time with blood. “Then why are you cloistered?”

“We are cloistered in order to keep alive the trembling flame of compassion,” Grinteeth said. “To cradle it from the winds of hatred.”

“What good is a candle kept away from darkness?”

Fangash let her finger drop. “A good question. We have never been able to solve it.”

“Do you have compassion for those who hold none?” The faerie clutched Booma’s hair and leaned forward. “Do you *keep* them, as you say, and live in paradox?”

Fangash began to pluck at her fingernails. “Logic is not the language of the spirit.”

“Oh, truly!” the faerie cried. “Does the charity extend to those who nourish impurity? Those who spread disease?”

“It does.” Fangash plucked faster.

“What of warriors who love only violence? They have always been

the scourge of your kind. Do you *keep* them?"

"They too are of this world."

"Ha!" the faerie sneered. "And torturers?"

"Yes."

"Your own?"

"Look around you." The nun's breath stormed in her nostrils.

"And those who preach bloody judgement?"

"Yes."

"Who preach only vengeance?"

"Yes."

"And despair?"

"Yes!" Fangash snapped.

The faerie's voice slowed, and softened. "And those who threaten your goblin children—does your compassion extend even to them? To *us*? Do you respect our hope that you destroyed? We teach our own children to pray that—"

Her voice choked off. She fell back. Booma caught her.

"Children all dead," the ogre whispered, tear on her lashes. The faerie thrashed weakly; Booma held gently.

"Did you not realize?" Grinteeth said. "You are the last of your kind."

The faerie's face clenched in despair. "I had hoped otherwise." Her lips slackened. Her limbs collapsed. "I will hope no more. I am already halfway to Mudworld."

Fangash had folded her hands. But her lips were pressed almost white, and her eyes burned. "Set her to rest. Now."

They laid the faerie on the bed of a long-dead Kelpie King, canopy hung with moons and stars. She began to sing, in a voice right with ghost harmonies, smoky as lit sage, green as winter pine. The wall stones hummed in sympathy, then the hems of the goblins' robes, and then, very softly, as if the air was delicate enough to puncture, the blades and tines on the instruments of torture. The nuns forgot each sweet note in turn, as they would a song made of mist.

"Here is something we will never keep," Grinteeth whispered.

But Fangash stared grimly at the torture tools, clutching her robe about her. She moved from the bed. "Stay, Grinteeth. I will return anon."

"Where will you go?"



Fangash turned, and her face twisted in way that her sisters had never seen, as if she held a live coal beneath the tongue. "I will descend alone to Haggahowl Cavern," she said. "I will retrieve the death sticks, and touch them in spite of our vows. Then, as I breathe, Booma *will* teach us the ceremony."

The song ended. Spidery notes hung in the darkness, strung harmony and dissonance.



Fangash gone, the faerie peered upward through layers of gloom for what seemed an eternity. Her skin slowly drained from plum to ash. She did not blink. "I will tell you an old Faerie folktale," she said at last, "while I am still a few leagues from Mudworld."

"Only rest." Booma wrung her hands.

The faerie did not hear. "Long ago, Silgreen of the emerald hair grew tired of the burnings..."

"Hobgoblin catch and torture scouts," Booma explained in a sandy whisper. "To find and burn secret villages."

"Silgreen journeyed the far Wilderness of Zin, to steal the Forgetting and Remembering spells. She wrote them on two scrolls, and paid the price for her theft: she could not return home, but wandered forever the desert, with no one to chant her death..." The faerie gulped a rattling staccato breath.

"Faerie scout use Forgetting," Booma said. "They not give up secret, and no more burnings. One scout keep Remembering Spell so they can go home again."

Grinteeth bowed her head.

"And my people prospered." The faerie's inhale shrieked, flute-like. "But the goblins prayed to Monsanto, their bone goddess, who flew into rage, and destroyed the Remembering Spell. After that, the scouts wandered like Silgreen, and could never go home." She clawed a shallow breath. "And my people, in great sadness, cast the Forgetting spell into deep waters, where it remains."

She turned to the wall, and said no more.

"Except it does not," Fangash muttered from the shadows. They had failed to notice her return.

"I will not teach you," Booma said.

Fangash tapped the sticks. "You will."

The faerie inhaled, pinched and percussive. Her skin had paled completely, almost bone.

"Quickly," Fangash said.

Grinteeth stared at the floor, but Booma turned.

"You steal sacred secret? No." She raised her fists. "You will not."

"Her faith demands it."

"Must never give more secrets to goblin."

Fangash stepped forward. "We saved you from despair. You owe us your allegiance, even your obedience—"

"Sister," Grinteeth said. "You overstep."

Fangash pressed. "If you do not teach us, then this fallen one departs, without family—"

"Superstition," Grinteeth whispered roughly. "Sister. We do not believe."

"*She* believe, but not betray her own people." Booma pointed at the faerie. "I owe nothing. I bring you Forgetting Scroll. I will bring no more."

"Booma." Fangash raised the sticks.

"No."

"Booma!" Fangash stepped from the shadows. She had the Inquisitor's saw in one hand, and held it notched against the sticks.

"Sister!" Grinteeth gasped. "Where have you gone?"

"I will cut them to bits if you refuse," Fangash said. "Teach me the Death Rattle Ceremony, and after we will use the Forgetting Spell to chase it forever."

Grinteeth glanced wildly about, then collapsed to her knees. Booma stared at the fallen faerie, then up through the vault, then from Fangash to Grinteeth and back.

"Please," Fangash whispered, saw drooping in her fingers. "She is the last of her tribe. We cannot keep her."

"A fitting symmetry," choked Fangash.

Booma's fist uncurled, one thick finger at a time. "It is useless." She looked down, tear bulbing on her cheek. "They not death sticks, anyway. They hobgoblin sticks, made to torture faerie children. Called *shaggabitters*."

Somewhere in the witchy darkness, or perhaps behind the teeth and razors, Shaggabite's ghost seemed to laugh. Tokens and curios



shimmered, transmuting to junk or blasphemy.

Fangash gulped. "Then..." She looked at her hands. The saw dropped, and clattered. The sticks quivered.

"The poet, the poet." Grinteeth muttered from the floor. "She was ever in love with irony."

"Our gods, too." The faerie, almost forgotten, shifted in the sheets, a rustle smooth and snaky. The Mothites turned to her.

"It doesn't matter." She coughed, limbs wasted, eyes deep and luminous.

"It matters," Fangash growled. "Your spirit will wander, homeless."

"No. Any sticks will work. The ceremony is simple." The faerie smiled, teeth filmed with blood. "I will teach you myself, and, against our history, against our better judgements, we will part as sisters."



They buried her among the night flowers.

"A pity we cannot bring her home," said Grinteeth.

Fangash nodded grimly. "Our cloister has outlived its truth."

Grinteeth stooped to pluck a flower. Then pulled each dark petal, one by one, and cast them northward on the morning breeze. "Only the dead flower." She looked up. "You know, sister, in truth I rarely understand the poet."

Fangash stared at Booma, watching the sun rise at the far corner of the wire fence. "Grinteeth. It is time to leave."

"Sister?"

"Time to open the Forgetting Scroll, and erase our remembrance of the death ritual." She raised her eyes to the sun. "And perhaps lose all we have known."

"Sister!" Grinteeth stood. The flower stem broke in her fingers. "We must stay. We must preserve."

"We must honor."

"At the expense of our own faith? We are Keepers."

"Are we?"

The sun was hot in the sky when they finally called to Booma; late afternoon then began to chant the ancient Faerie spells. Booma squatted outside to burn the shaggabitors, yellow smoke drifting against the wind.

"We did not keep the faerie's name." Grinteeth said.

"Nor she ours."

Names lost, music lost. If nothing else, it had a kind of poetry. They chanted through supper, while Booma kept watch over the smoldering sticks, which were infected with hateful magic, and consumed themselves with agonizing languor.

"What will we remember?" Grinteeth asked.

"I do not know."

"Where will we go?"

Fangash looked up from the scroll. "Perhaps we will find the truth of this Haladriella, and wander in search of its remedy."

Grinteeth peered at the Inquisitor's tools. "And will *we* come home?"

In the evening, the goblins emerged from the cloister, blinking like newly wakened children.

"Come," said Booma. "Moon waits."

They followed her over the Abbey's fence and through the flowers, which would soon open in the moonlight, to blossom briefly in defiance of morning. •





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# on spec

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~ featuring ~

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## Introduction

Dear Reader,

Everyone in the literary publishing world continues to strive for excellence. We at On Spec take pride in bringing a product to the readers that does honour to them and to the superb writers whose works we publish.

Sometimes this product falls short of expectations. Our Fall 2005 issue (#62, Vol. 17, #3) was flawed, partly through human error and partly through the gremlins of the internet. We offer apologies to our readers, and to the writers whose stories were most affected by these mishaps.

You hold in your hands a special reprint edition of the two stories in our Fall 2005 issue that deserved better treatment.

An earlier draft version of *Ashes* by J. W. Anderson appeared in the Fall issue. *Ashes* appears here in its final, edited format.

*Fire and Ash* by M. Thomas originally appeared in the Fall issue with an unintentional proofreader's comment line. We offer it to you here corrected in its entirety.

Please accept this with our compliments.

The Editors, Staff & Volunteers of On Spec

## about our contributors:

**J.W. (JIM) ANDERSON** lives in England with his wife Barbara, splitting his time between London and Southampton. When not writing, he is a mathematician (by both inclination and education). His hobbies include aikido, whiskey, reading, and cooking. He can be located on the web at [www.defenstrati.org](http://www.defenstrati.org).

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# on spec

the canadian magazine of the fantastic

## fiction

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As food became scarcer he began to imagine the pages had tastes as well, but they were indescribable, foreign as quince and saffron.

## Fire and Ash

M. Thomas

The first book Rubain ate was a children's story. In the secret storehouse books lay on shelves like fat loaves, and the pulp of the paper between his fingers made him salivate so badly it ran down his chin. He had been hungry enough to chew leather for weeks. It took him over an hour to eat the book, and when he was finished, he put the cover back on the shelf. To be caught with books was to be thrown on a bone fire, so he climbed empty-handed back up his rope to the roof of the storehouse, where they caught him as he reemerged.

From the window of the tower room where he was interrogated, Rubain could see the rib bones of the enormous fish rising up around the city like the spires of heaven, preserved by some curious property of sun and the strange alchemies that moved under the skin of time. They called the city Majole. Majole, in the belly of the dead fish. In the moonlight its slate rooftops looked like the stones of a cairn, and the nightly bone fires were its fireflies.

• • •

"This is the way things begin," Trevion told him at the start. "With quiet disquiet."

They stood on the left bank of the fish spine where the fine houses were, watching the upper class parade the park circuit while they, with work passes in hand, shoveled the gravel paths clean of horse manure left behind by ladies' ponies. Trevion spit on every pile before he scooped it up and shoved it into the burlap bag slung under his arm.

"Are you quietly disquiet?" Rubain asked. "Because I've noticed you talk a lot."

Trevion kicked some dung over Rubain's shoe. "What do you



know? You're too afraid of losing work to be disquiet."

Rubain shrugged. "I like to eat."

"You watch," said Trevion. "We'll do something about that old bastard in the castle, and then things will change. No more work passes to clean up the shit of their ponies. I've been meeting with some people. You should come listen."

Rubain went only after there were no work passes for a few days, and he thought he might convince Trevion to stand him an ale. In the airless back room of The Red Cockerel, Trevion stalked before a crowd of workers, prowling amongst the tables, slapping backs with his great, work-hardened paw, whispering wit. His eyes glinted green and sharp and clever in the lamplight. They called him Trevy, and when it was his turn to talk, he spoke to the soul of the matter in a way that made the crowd roar:

*"Do you know why they took our books? Because uneducated masses cannot pass messages that remain uncorrupted, and whispered conferences unravel from ear to ear. How well they know the short distance between us and animals. They will make beasts of us, and hitch our children to their plows!"*

Rubain was enamored by this new Trevy: so different from the familiar man who had taught him to cast stones for bets in the back alleys of lower Majole; who never had a father, and wept at the funeral of Rubain's like a child; who sat in Rubain's kitchen talking of this and that and things in-between; who had often picked his nose with a finger and wiped it on his breeches. There was a fire in him, and it burned them all.

That night Rubain stumbled home, singed and hot and feeling as if he were too large for his skin, knowing now that he too was one of the downtrodden lords of Majole.

It seemed a grand thing to be in the service of Trevy's revolution, lighting fires of protest. Trevy called Rubain the Shy Lieutenant, pointed him out of each crowd, growled and wrapped his bear-arm around Rubain's shoulder, pulling him into the light. Women pressed up against him—"Oh, it's the Shy Lieutenant, is it?"—and eventually he took several to bed.

Then the old man in the castle decided that if they liked fires so much, they could dance on them. The first bone fires were lit in the park on the left bank of the Spine, and many of the pony riders came to see some of Trevy's boys dance. They brought food, and wine, and laughed and played music while the burning men were stripped of their skin and left naked to the bone.

The people of lower Majole, who did not have permits to attend and dared not try to pass the guarded archways to the left bank of the Spine, did not see the first bone fire. But they saw many more after that, when the soldiers began erecting them on street corners, flooding the houses with smoke at night so that no one could sleep for the smell or the screams.

Trevy's answer to the bone fires was barricades. The first three fell apart like children's toys, and they escaped only when the prison wagons and soldiers stumbled on the rubble. They got better at it over time. Several old men who had been in old wars came forward, and showed them how the construct should be just so, and the heavier items wedged just there, and the peep-holes and perches here, here, and here. Within months they had cut off access to the tanneries and cattle markets in the lower streets. Trevy's plan was to take the Spine, and then the castle near the head.

They did not make it to the Spine. An entire regiment was dispatched from the garrison, and they tightened up the streets like a noose, all the way to lower Majole where Trevy had withdrawn his small forces. They hid through the winter months in secret rooms, passing over the rooftops at night when soldiers patrolled the streets. Food grew scarce and frostbitten. They ate the cattle from the market, very few since trading season had come and gone, then began on the horses and whatever animals were left over, meant for the tanneries. When his stomach growled, Rubain often remembered how his father could make a meal of cabbage and pressed seed cakes cooked over the fire.

• • •

Rubain continued to climb down from the ceiling after the interrogation. When he went there now he brought wine to wash the books down with, and as he worked at it he found he could devour more and more in a sitting, until he could eat four, five books a night, leaving their covers on the shelves.

It helped, sometimes, to think of them as parts of him. History was the left foot and music the right, until he had devoured them all and stood firm. Theology the left leg between the foot and the knee; animal husbandry the right, although it took up the knee as well.

The left thigh was maps, so that he would know where he was going; children's stories went straight to his middle and would make him paunchy with the fat of their imaginations. Poetry was for the



heart of course, and architecture for his shoulders; fiction for the left arm and almanacs for the right; his left hand he made of farming and gardening and his right hand he made of trades—woodworking, cloth dying, book binding, arrow-fletching, horse-shoeing.

Propaganda stuck in his throat, though he filed the more clever ones away in his spine. Romance, he assumed, would go to his loins, but in a capricious move went instead to his lungs where he breathed it every day like perfumed powder.

Philosophy went straight to his head, sometimes warring with poetry but not often. As food became scarcer he began to imagine the pages had tastes as well, but they were indescribable, foreign as quince and saffron.



With hunger came a lazy euphoria in which Rubain spent only part of his time repairing the barricades. More often he went looking for remnants of his father around the house. He found a bobbin of green thread under the small cabinet in his father's bedroom, and spent the afternoon going through each of its drawers, laying out buttons and a bone comb and a small pewter spoon and a cameo of his mother, whom he did not remember.

He discovered in various nooks and drawers of the household a perplexing assortment of leaves and stones collected for some reason—he'd never noticed them so he never thought to ask—and now he wondered what memory each of them held.

Every day Trevy came to console him, re-invigorate him, but Rubain shook his head. He had tired of it all, preferring instead to haunt the cupboards and the space under the bed, searching always for some little thing left behind that last morning: an escaped button his father was too rushed to pick up, the frayed threads of his shirt caught on the rough edge of the table in passing.

"I can see your spirit is broken," Trevy said one night. Then, before it could be taken as an accusation added, "And what man's wouldn't be? I've never had a family to love. I'm jealous of all these husbands and fathers, who have had something besides Majole." He slumped down into his chair, scraped his hair back impatiently with a bitter half-smile. "It has always, only, been Majole for me. And she never once batted an eyelash my direction.

"You must do something for your father's memory, Rubain. If not at the forefront of our revolution, then behind it. We need food."

"I can look for food," Rubain said. "But there's something else."

He went to the hearth and removed a stone down near the bottom. Rooting around in the space behind it, he came up with his most precious thing.

"I keep this," he said, handing it to Trevy. "There's room for others. If there are any left."

Trevy fondled the small diary as carefully as a found egg.

"It was my father's," Rubain said. He had found it by chance as he examined the loose stone, thinking he might catch rats to eat behind it.

"I can keep books," Rubain said. "And look for food." A week later, he found the storehouse down by the wharves. It took him two days to return home. It did not seem that anyone had noticed, and he kept his sleeves pulled down to cover the rope burns on his wrists when Trevy came to talk at him about the revolution.

• • •

One morning, he found a woman at his front door. "Are you the man that keeps the books?" Wisps of gray hair hung like frost around her face, and she wore the perpetual worry of the working class in the lines at the corners of her eyes.

"No," said Rubain.

She stared at him. "I know you're the man that keeps books. Trevy said I'd find such a man here. He said there's a fellow who keeps books so they won't be lost, and to come to this street and this house."

Rubain smiled. "Keeping books is against the law, and I'm no rebel. I don't know this Trevy, but I think he's having fun with you."

Her left hand fidgeted in the pocket of her skirt. "I had to cross three barricades to get here," she said. "And the one at Pretemp has fallen. All fire and screaming. They set up a bone fire there, you know. I saw a little girl burn on it. I asked the soldiers. 'Runner' they said she was. Delivering messages for the revolution. That was last night."

"I didn't know," Rubain said.

The woman drew her hand from her pocket and shoved something at him. "I know you're the man who keeps books. Trevy said so. It's just a small one, it shouldn't be hard for you to hide. Just my family tree, our old family diary. My old granddad who died on the barricades last week. My baby, she died after birthing, I was going to name her Anily. Just names, see? You can tuck it away



somewhere, don't you think? Or burn it, I don't care, just can't have it on me anymore, or I'll burn on a bone fire too. But if you can keep them, well, it'd be a shame to forget about Anily and old granddad."

Then she let go of the book and stepped away from the stoop. Rubain shut the door.

He ate her little diary that night, all the names of the inconsequential Neblesse family sliding down his throat with ale and a moldy slice of cottager's bread. He burned the binding and ate the pages and they settled in his gut, random as his innards.

Rubain had seen human innards only once, just before the beginning of the revolution. That was when they first constructed the checkpoints at the Spine, where the laborers were forced to show a pass—I live here, I'm going there, then I'm coming back here again. He had gone to meet his father at a checkpoint and the old man, pushing impatiently through the crowd, raised his arm suddenly.

The soldier on duty at the checkpoint had used his sword to show Rubain all his father's innards then, thinking that the raised hand held a weapon, instead of the triumphant acquisition of an increasingly rare bit of fresh meat.

• • •

Trevy came to see him that evening, after Rubain had barely washed the ink from around his mouth and gone to bed.

"I don't have room for any more propaganda," he said, fingering the offering from the revolution's leader. Privately he suspected he couldn't digest the old leather it was scratched out on.

"But this is important," Trevy said. His beard ran unshaven down his neck, wild as thorns. "You said you could keep the books, that it was your contribution to the revolution. You're the only one brave enough to do it."

Rubain almost told him then, because it might be nice just to say it out loud—*Trevy, I've been eating the books*—and have one person look back at him and understand how the pages had become meat to him.

"We've had to move again," Trevy said. "The bastards found us at Pretemp, and tore down the barricade there. We've set up our headquarters at Frevaun. Send a runner there if you need to find me. We've got a way into the castle through the kitchens now. There will be an assassination before the summer is up, mark my words."

Rubain looked at him. He could tell Trevy about the storehouse.

But Trevy would probably want to liberate it, and then what would there be to eat?

That night Rubain took up a bit of parchment, watered his ink, and wrote. He thought of calling a runner to go to Frevaun, the small boy next door who was quick and missing two teeth and liked running from soldiers. Then he remembered the woman speaking of the girl who had burned on the bone fire, and the storehouse full of books, and his stomach growled. Instead, he ate what he had written.

*They know where you are* settled in his stomach like a stone, and the ink tasted like rotten meat.

On another piece of paper he wrote *Frevaun*, and this one he left between the third and fourth pages of a book near the door to the storehouse, a book he never ate. He settled in theology, eating up some ancient, illuminated manuscripts. The paper was heavy parchment, so it was slow going.

The barricade at Frevaun fell two weeks later, and with it Trevy's headquarters. They butchered his men on the spot, but dragged him out of the hiding space in the wall and burned him to death on a bone fire in the plaza. People watched from their windows as Trevy howled of freedom and justice, and Rubain heard one soldier remark later how the revolutionary's bones danced merrily enough on the hot tinder when he was dead.

At one point, when Trevy's eyes were beginning to bleed, they met Rubain's: the sideways smile of a boy who wiped snot on his pants and threw stones for bets re-emerged for one moment, and Rubain wept for him.

• • •

As summer lingered the city stank with the marrow of the enormous fish, perpetually rotting, a smell of blood meal and mold. Flies swarmed like thunderheads, and the air was a constant chatter of swallows gorging themselves, perching high on the bones and swooping down with their beaks open. Some children took to bringing them down with slingshots, tying the birds to their belts to carry home for eating later. Streaks of blood mixed with the dust on their bare, brown legs, a thick filth like black stockings, the worn tat of desperation.

Rubain's hunger grew so great it could no longer be satisfied by nightly visits to the storehouse. He stole books boldly now, securing them in a pack on his back, and spent his days and nights devouring their pages slowly, incessantly, as he went about his daily tasks. He couldn't make a large enough fire in his hearth to burn them all at



once so the empty covers lay scattered around his house and workshop, their spines tattered and skeletal. He read each page before he ate it, fingering a loop of green thread or a bone comb, picking at the parchment scabs of Majole where the secrets lay hidden, almost forgotten.

He had never been particularly interested in the absent books, since they had disappeared while he was still young. That had been his father's lament. Now, as he devoured them, he began to understand the leaves and stones. When he could no longer read its books, Rubain's father kept those rough pieces of Majole as his literature.

Another assassination attempt was ruined, and the would-be assassin burned too. The air was hazy with smoke day and night, and the ruins of bone fires smoldered on nearly every street corner come morning, the ashes sifting into the cobblestones, muddied with offal, becoming a gray mortar. The revolutionaries, starved and broken, tore down their own barricades. The soldiers came into lower Majole, quelling with beatings what little unrest remained.

The woman who had brought her family diary came to warn him.

"Some people told them there's a fellow keeping the books," she said. "They gave you up for bread and soup. Everyone knows who you are by now. It's only a matter of time. You should go."

Rubain smiled. "Where would I go? Everything I keep belongs here. It makes no sense to take it away from Majole."

She sighed. "Anyway, it'll be over soon I expect. We're too hungry to fight, and no one much cares anymore."

She turned to leave.

"I remember," said Rubain. "I remember about Anily, and your grandfather."

"Do you?" she answered, without looking back. "I hardly think of them anymore."

That night he woke up to the sounds of screaming from down the street. Peering out his window, he saw soldiers at work beating down doors, dragging their inhabitants out, asking rough questions, bruising faces, locking them in the prison wagon. There wouldn't have been time for him to leave even if he wanted to. They had already known where he was.

Rubain gathered an armful of books, strapped them to his back in his pack, and climbed out of his upper window onto the roof. The bone fires were quiet for once, that night. The prison wagon waited down the street, cushioned inside with the bruised and bleeding. He looked out over the city.

As the night crept past he ate the words of the poet who wrote,

*I broke my voice for the first time on the knife's edge of her name.* He ate the recounting of the balmy autumn twelve years before, when the heat stayed until the rains came, and then the mold got into the stores. He ate the bird scratches of a symphony like a tide.

He heard the thud of his door being kicked in. It was unnecessary: he had left it unlocked.

He reached down, tore another page, and shoved it into his mouth. He ate another, and another, while candles were lit and people crept out to watch the soldiers clamber onto the roof toward him.

When the soldiers finally reached Rubain they found his lips so blackened with ink that for a moment they believed him diseased. Someone had thought to slip the lock on the prison wagon while they were distracted, and emptied it of its prisoners. Rubain rode alone through the streets of Majole in the prison wagon that night, and stood alone on the bone fire the next morning.

He looked out between the sheaves of fire to see people watching. They whispered behind their hands—wasn't he the one keeping all the books? The one who went mad and stood on his roof and ate their pages? The Shy Lieutenant?

Someone spat at the fire under his feet. "*That* for your revolution."

"I know your stories," he murmured to himself as his legs caught fire. "I am fat with you."

When the flames had shrunken his skin so much that it could not contain him any more, Rubain burst open like an overstuffed sack, and in that moment before darkness tasted wine and meat and saffron and quince, and was full with it at last.

The crowd shrank back as they were pelted with what he had been made of. Then their hands grabbed at it, marveling at the feel, and they stuffed it into their pockets and shirts and ran to the last few safe places to read it, to piece it all together the best they could, remembering slowly. Some of it, caught in the flames, withered and burned, but some of it caught on the updraft of the smoke and then got into the air. Shivering and rattling as loose pages will, the devoured books of Majole drifted down over its rooftops and fish bones.

There were no human bones when the fire went out. All that remained of Rubain were charred bits of parchment, the edge of an illumination, a few words of poetry, and ash. •



Sam's list had gotten long over the years, longer than Zachariah remembered it ever being, but there'd been enough ashes for all the places.

## Ashes

J.W. Anderson

Zachariah looked around the pub as he set his glass, empty but for a bit of foam, on the table next to Sam in his urn. The Wanton Woman was quiet. It was still early in the evening and the regulars hadn't yet begun to drift in. The heavy rain was keeping the casual drinkers home, and Easter had lit the coal fires to keep out the chill. There were a few people scattered among the tables and at the bar, and no one seemed to be particularly interested in their neighbor's business.

Except for Zachariah, of course. But he was an experienced professional in other people's business. He didn't see anyone who was out of place or unaccountably familiar. The Agency would soon discover what he'd done, regardless of how well he'd covered his tracks, and would come after him. But evidently not yet.

He'd taken his dad's usual corner table. *Always have clear lines of sight to entrances and exits.* The voice of his training had grown softer over the years, to the point of being almost subliminal. *Always scout the location of a meet. Make sure there are no surprises.* It had become a prayer that autorecited over and again, that had kept him alive through situations that should have killed him, and so he listened. He'd done his homework. The Woman hadn't changed since he was a kid, and this had always been the best seat in the house. Dad had preferred this table for much the same reason, particularly after he'd lost his job in the mines. He'd enjoyed watching people, observing the tides of conversation and emotion that would run through the pub over the course of an evening.

Easter started the Guinness as soon as Zachariah stood up to make his way to the bar. Zachariah gave a wry smile. Easter poured a

proper pint, giving it ample time to settle. Guinness had always been his drink, another habit he'd picked up from dad, just as Sam had acquired a taste for Best from his. Normally, he'd have stopped at one pint, or perhaps even before the first had been drained. He knew from bitter experience that drinking made him sloppy. He could feel the alcohol eroding the edges of the wall that kept his emotions in check. He could sense the bulking mass of his fear, pacing, looking for a way out. Still. For the moment he had control. And he knew he should worry about drinking too much tonight, particularly given the nature of his—guest. But tonight was different, and the terms of his pact with Sam were clear. The worry had to be set aside. There was a wake to be held. The clock behind the bar read 19:55. It still read bar time rather than real time; ten minutes before his guest arrived at 20:00.

Zachariah got back to the table, set his Guinness and the Best next to Sam's other two (as yet undrunk) pints, and sat down. He took the last envelope off the stack. It had *Taj Mahal* written on it in black ink. He put a spoonful of Sam's ashes in the envelope and sealed it shut. Sam's list was longer than Zachariah remembered it, but there'd be enough ashes to go around. Zachariah was going to have a busy last few months. Some of the places would be interesting: Angkor Watt was in the heart of the war zone and the Army of the Black Star was known for not taking prisoners; a unknown plague was burning wild through the Yucatan; and Mauna Loa had become restless recently. Fortunately Zachariah had been the resourceful one of the pair; he'd be able to make his way to most of the places without undue difficulty. It would give him something to do instead of just waiting for the cancer to finish its work.

The only really troublesome destination was the first on the list, and the most important. Mars. To get Sam to Mars meant getting around the Quarantine, and that would take some work.

Hence tonight's meeting.

• • •

Zachariah remembered the beginnings of the Quarantine, long before it had had a name. He and Sam had still been kids when the Mars probes started going wrong. For every failure there'd been a reasonable explanation or a plausible cause, though engineers in the US and Europe forgot to coordinate their choice of units just a little too often to believe. Pioneer stopped broadcasting a few years after



that, but it had already lasted far longer than anyone had expected. The Voyagers fell silent—again no surprise.

But then, the pace had picked up. Shuttle accidents became almost routine, satellite launch vehicles blew up on the pad—and over the decades, every outward looking satellite in Earth orbit, every probe sent out into space beyond, failed. Always, a plausible explanation for each failure; but not everyone was willing to buy the twin mantras of *coincidence* and the *dangerous frontier*.

Not that it mattered. Most people didn't care as long as their phones worked, and their satellite TVs, and their fancy automobile GPS. But Zachariah didn't believe in coincidence. Sam had gone off to become a teacher by this time, and he and Zachariah were only in sporadic contact. But it was Sam who'd sent Zachariah the article—from some fringe conspiracy-theory science fiction magazine—that had first bestowed the label. The Quarantine. Sam had written *Guess I'm not getting to Mars anytime soon* across the top.

That was the last time he'd heard from his friend. Over time, people began to forget about space. There were enough problems on Earth to keep everyone occupied and distracted, after all—and the feeling began to grow, as if deliberately nurtured, that there wasn't anything worth seeing on the Moon that we hadn't already seen, nothing worth finding on Mars. Why spend precious resources visiting dead rocks when there was poverty and global warming to deal with here on earth?

• • •

It was almost time. Zachariah raised a silent toast to Sam and finished his Guinness, and went up to the bar to get his last round of the evening. He glanced around en route. In the hours he'd been here, he hadn't been able to find a single thing that had changed significantly since his last visit. Everything was a bit older, but then it'd been sixteen years since Mom's funeral. Time had bleached out the colors; the curtains were a bit more frayed than he remembered. But there were the same dull pewter tankards hanging from the exposed beams in the ceiling, same scythes and pitchforks hanging on the walls. The air was murky from the combusted ghosts of cigarettes and cheap cigars smoked over decades, and the spores from the mold feeding on the beer that, once spilled, never quite dried out of the carpet.

And Easter was still pulling pints behind the bar, still with the same taste in loud flannel shirts. He never forgot a customer, and he'd

starting to pour the Guinness as soon as Zachariah walked through the door. Unsurprisingly, he hadn't recognized Sam. Zachariah had had to ask for the first pint of Best.

Waiting for his Guinness to settle, Zachariah ran his hand along the bar. Dad had claimed that it had been carved from a single piece of wood, from an old tree that had come down during the big storm of 1968. A lot of dad's stories seemed to come from that night, when the wind howled like a wild tortured beast, tore the roofs off houses, broke the trees and drove the waves against the shore. The bar had suffered over the years: from spilled drinks, cigarette burns, and the occasional impatient and incompetent whittling while someone was waiting for a drink and Easter wasn't looking.

Standing at the bar reminded him of Sam. They'd spent a lot of time here, waiting for pints, theirs and their dads'.

Zachariah remembered the night he and Sam had started worrying the details of their pact on the walk over. Sam kept tripping, as he did every clear night, unable to keep his eyes on the road.

He'd grown up wanting to travel, to be somewhere else. Anywhere else. The stars had captivated him, as had television, movies, any picture or story of somewhere exotic that drifted across his field of vision. He was only ten when he'd started drafting his list. Mars was at the top. He'd spent entire summer afternoons in the library, skipping football games in the sun to pore over maps of the canalli, trying to decide just where he'd go, planning his itinerary for a trip to a land that had disappeared decades before. He'd kept the list in his wallet, on a piece of paper that had been folded too many times. He'd take it out occasionally, adding a place, removing a place, taping it back together when it threatened to come apart, recopying it when it did—but Mars never moved from the top of the list. Zachariah shook his head and smiled at the memory of Sam and the fire in his eyes whenever he'd talked about Mars, about improbable trips to far distant stars.

Hence the pact. "When I die," Sam had said that night, "if I haven't made it to Mars, make sure I get there." Zachariah had agreed, at first just to shut Sam up on the topic; he hadn't talked about anything else for weeks at that point. Hell, they'd only been fifteen years old, and Zachariah hadn't made the promise with any intention of keeping it. But Sam had been persistent, and he'd worn Zachariah down. It took another three years before Zachariah opened up and tasked Sam with his half of the pact. Sam left the next day for university. He made his escape. It took



Zachariah another eighteen months to get out, into the army.  
From there into the Agency.

• • •

The thunk of a full pint being set none-too-gently on the bar brought Zachariah back to the present. He paid Easter and took the drinks back to the table, set Sam's pint next to the others, sat. Sam's urn was plain but heavy, a white stone cylinder about six inches high and four across. Sam had no family left—like Zachariah—and no other known friends. It was his lawyer who'd eventually tracked Zachariah down. Sam hadn't left any money; he'd spent it all traveling. All there was to Sam's entire estate, besides the slowly rotting ancestral home with its books and furniture, were the ashes and the list. And the pact.

20:05. Zachariah looked up to see his guest walk into the pub, dripping wet from the storm outside. The sight triggered a rush of adrenalin. He hadn't known whether the alien would even show up; the magnitude of what he was doing finally hit him. As well as he'd planned this meeting, scouting the location and planning his way out, doubt crept in. One side or the other would catch him, sooner or later. That would be the end of him. Yet there'd been no other way, no better strategy. The Agency kept far too close an eye on things; if he'd tried taking the meeting to the aliens it would have been the last thing he ever did. Here, in full public view, his chances were marginally better.

Besides, he thought, it's a wake. Where else could it be?

His guest walked up to the bar and spoke to Easter. Easter pulled him a pint (lager by the looks of it), then pointed to Zachariah's table. The stranger was average height, average build, bald but otherwise non-descript. No glasses. No facial hair; in the dim light of the pub, his skin looked remarkably smooth. No scars. No tattoos. No physical characteristic to capture attention. Zachariah watched closely as the newcomer approached. He had a slight limp, but just enough to break his symmetry; not enough to draw attention to himself. The only unusual thing was the absolute stillness with which he held his pint. No sloshing, no spilling. The lager in the glass was absolutely level. Zachariah smiled to himself, careful not to let it leak onto his face. Those were the sorts of details that had given them away in the end.

"My name is Bob. Are you Zachariah?" the stranger asked, standing

next to his table. Zachariah nodded. "Take a seat." He motioned towards the empty chair across the table.

Bob nodded and sat. Zachariah reached over the table and shook his hand. "Pleased to meet you, Bob." As with everything else about him, his grip was generic. Not too firm, not clammy or flabby. Unremarkable, and all the more remarkable for that. "I'm glad you could make it." He'd spent the past month trying to figure out a way to get one of the aliens to meet with him, without giving too much away. In the end, he'd decided to be direct. He read through the profiles the Agency had put together over the years, chose one, and sent him an invitation: please join me for a wake, and try not to be followed.

Over the decades, Zachariah had spent weeks at a time watching the aliens, getting to know the individuals, speculating on their social structure, command structure, motives, favorite foods. His assignments had been close surveillance, but he'd always followed the basic rule: run when you think your cover's blown. He'd never been this close to one who'd been aware of his presence (*as far as you know*, he admitted to himself), and he could hear the voice of his training, yelling, pushing, trying to drag him to his feet and out of there. Ignoring it was a lot harder than he'd expected. But there was the pact to honor. There was a promise to keep.

Zachariah closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and began to speak. "It will take me a few minutes to fully explain the point of this meeting. Are you willing to listen?" He opened his eyes to see Bob nod his assent, and he continued. "Growing up, Sam was my best—make that my *only* friend. We came here when we were younger, with our dads. Later on our own. We'd sit at this table, and drink our pints, and talk about dreams.

"That's why we're here today, to honor his memory. So, before going any further, we raise a toast to the memory of Samuel David Sampson." Zachariah raised his glass, and Bob followed. They drank.

Zachariah motioned to the urn, opened his mouth. He paused. He wouldn't cry, that he knew. He'd learned too well over the years to bottle up unwanted emotions. It was all part of being a good soldier. But he could feel those emotions roiling inside, and just this once he savored them for a moment.

He hadn't felt anything for years, not even pain. It was a nice change.

"This is all that remains of Sam," he continued at last. "He died several months ago, and was cremated as is our custom. It is the duty



of the family of the deceased to dispose of the ashes according to his wishes. As Sam has no family, that duty falls to me.”

He paused and looked over at Bob. Another small detail that the aliens had never quite made to work was to cultivate a lack of regularity. Their eye blinks were always exactly three seconds apart. Watching Bob, Zachariah began to feel slightly uneasy.

“When Sam and I were young, we made a pact. We each had a dream, that the one left alive agreed to realize when the other died. Sam died first. Do you understand?”

Even over the noise of the pub, Zachariah could hear his own heartbeat pounding in his ears.

Finally, Bob nodded. Zachariah let himself breathe again. “Sam’s dream was to go to Mars. Even without your Quarantine, it would have been difficult. We weren’t on track to become a space-faring people. But after your interference, it became impossible.

“I promised to get Sam to Mars.”

Zachariah glanced up to the ceiling, looked back down into Bob’s unreadable eyes, and gave the speech he’d been working on for the last month. “We know about you. We’ve been watching you for years. We know who many of you are. We know where you live. We don’t know where you came from, or when you arrived. We know how you communicate but we don’t know what you say to each other, whether it’s some sort of code or just your native language. We know where each of you works, we know how you set up the Quarantine from inside. We don’t know why. We’ve been patient for a long time, just—observing. Trying to piece together some picture of your capabilities. We may not always be so patient.

“I’ve made a lot of promises to a lot of people over the years. Haven’t kept any of them. But my days are almost at an end, and I need—I’m not sure I could tell you why, exactly. I’m not sure you’d understand if I could. Something about redemption, maybe. But I promised Sam that he’d get to Mars.”

Zachariah looked at Bob. Bob stared back at him, not moving, not speaking. Zachariah took the envelope from the bottom of the stack. The word *Mars* was written on it in large block letters. From his jacket pocket, he took out a hard plastic disc case.

“On this disc is everything we know about you. I’m here to sell out my whole damn species in exchange for...”

“Courier services,” Bob finished softly, when Zachariah couldn’t. Zachariah nodded.

The alien stared into his eyes for a few moments. Then he reached

across the table, and pocketed the envelope and the payment. He raised his pint. "To the memory of Samuel David Sampson, then."

• • •

The alien left the pub, leaving most of his pint behind. Zachariah sat for a moment before drinking down the rest of his. There was no way to be sure that Bob would keep his half of the bargain, but this was the best he could do. *Godspeed, Sam*, he thought. He thought he felt something else, then—relief, perhaps—but there was no time to savor it. They would be coming after him soon. Both sides, probably: his own, for his betrayal, and the other, on the chance he knew more than he'd told them. Perhaps they were already waiting outside, just beyond the feeble protection of human witness. Too late to worry about that now. He had an escape route set—but not just yet. He had some of Sam left, and Sam had loved this place. Easter wouldn't mind.

Zachariah sprinkled the last spoonful of ashes on the floor, finished his pint, and picking up the stack of envelopes, walked out into the night. •



# on spec

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