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SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY, AND HORROR

Fantasy Scroll mag

ISSUE
07

Pauline J. Alama • Hank Quense • Axel Taiari • Rebecca Roland • Josh Vogt
Gary Emmette Chandler • Kate Sheeran Swed • Patricia S. Bowne • Anna Yeatts

Fantasy Scroll Magazine
Speculative Fiction - Issue #7 – June 2015

**Featuring works by Anna Yeatts, Axel Taiari, Gary Emmette Chandler, Hank Quense,
Josh Vogt, Kate Sheeran Swed, Patricia S. Bowne, Pauline J. Alama, Rebecca Roland**

This collection is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Editorial, June 2015

Iulian Ionescu

Welcome to Issue #7 of Fantasy Scroll Magazine.

I'm happy to introduce the new issue of our magazine, packed from e-cover to e-cover with lots of great stories, interviews, and reviews.

This issue starts strong with a longer piece by Pauline Alama, "*No Tale for Troubadours*." I love fantasy stories with strong female protagonists and Pauline does a great job of growing not one, but two of them in this story of friendship, war, and peace.

"*Hell of a Salesman*" is the next story by Hank Quense, a humorous parody that takes a stab at the position of sales manager and everything around it. I'm not sure it's a parody, or a description of what really happens inside a sales department...

Axel Taiari follows with a science fiction piece called "*Beyond the Visible Spectrum*," a nice story told from the perspective of an alien invader.

"*Little Sprout*" by Rebecca Roland is probably the shortest story we've ever accepted. There's so much creepiness

packed in such a short length that we just had to have it.

Next we have "*When the Dead are Indexed*" by Gary Emmette Chandler, and "*Dragon Rodeo Queen*" by Kate Sheeran Swed.

"*The Adjunct*" by Patricia Bowne is the second story that deals with Hell and demons. This one has just a slight hint of humor, all wrapped up in layers over layers of creep.

Anna Yeatts follows with her story "*Outside In*." This is the second story from Anna in our magazine and it doesn't disappoint: Anna manages to create a horrific atmosphere in a very non-horrific setting by playing up the mental state of her characters.

The last story is "*Conversations with a Ghost*," by Josh Vogt, a nice little sci/fi piece with a twist.

Then, back by popular demand, we have the second installment of the story of Shamrock, the graphic novel authored by Josh Brown. The first chapter appeared in Issue #5 with art by John Fortune. The episode in this issue, with art by Alberto Hernandez, continues the story and

promises to bring more installments in the future.

In the non-fiction section we have interviews with Tina Connolly, Rachel Pollack, and Hank Quense, as well as a short artist spotlight for the illustrator that created this issue's cover art: Andreas Rocha. We are introducing (read: testing) a new segment in the non-fiction section called "Science Center." In this first episode, we have an article by Dan Koboldt talking about mutations.

We're closing this issue with a book review for "*A Princess of Mars*" by Edgar Rice Burroughs, and a movie review for "*EX_MACHINA*," directed by Alex Garland.

On a related note, I am happy to report that our podcast has been increasing in

popularity month after month. We started in February and we are already getting 1000 downloads per month, which is a great start. Please check it out: <http://bit.ly/fsmpodcast>. Right now the podcast is available from iTunes, YouTube, Stitcher, TuneIn, Soundcloud, and more.

Another piece of buzz, before I let you go, is the news about our year one anthology. It is currently in progress and scheduled to be released sometime in September of 2015. So, it's just a few months away and I'm very excited about it.

Well, that's it for now. I hope you'll enjoy this issue and see you very soon!

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No Tale for Troubadours

Pauline J. Alama

The messenger who burst upon my chamber favored me with the sort of worshipful gaze I hadn't seen in years. I was not best pleased to see him or his starry eyes. At my breast, Matilda sucked placidly, undisturbed by the stranger's entrance. I didn't bother to cover myself; if this sight embarrassed my visitor, he was welcome to leave. Isabel kept her eyes on her embroidery, too world-weary at ten to admit any interest in a stranger. But the middle children, Trude and Robin, stopped chasing each other and shrieking long enough to stare at our guest.

"Mama, who's that fuzzy-haired sheep?" Trude said. "Is he a messenger from Papa?"

"Trude! That's no way to speak of a guest," I scolded her, though the man did look a bit sheeplike, with light curls around a mild face. He was obviously younger than I, and prettier than I'd been even when troubadours were still writing songs about me. Surely, this angel-faced boy had no call to look on me so raptly—unless he wanted something. "Sir," I said, "Who are you, and why did my steward let you in? Surely, you know Lord Stephen is away at war. What business can you have with me?"

"I—I am Gervase, parson of the village of Valabas, near the Hard Mountains."

"I know that country," I said. Hard indeed—poor, rocky land where little grew but tough grass fit for tough goats. My father, as one of his less amiable jokes, had given me a stretch of barren terrain in the mountains as a dowry.

Gervase said, "I was told I would have the honor of meeting the Maiden of Revie."

"No such maiden lives here." I avoided his eyes as I delivered this half-truth.

"No? But—but—" Gervase stammered, "Are you not Lady Ursula of Veronne, born Ursula of Revie?"

Reluctantly, I confessed, "Just so. But I imagine you've noticed by now that I'm no maiden any more." As if to punctuate my declaration, Matilda abruptly left my breast and jumped down to toddle after her brother and sister.

My visitor blinked at me as I laced up my bodice, then resumed speaking. "Maiden or wife, you are renowned across seven kingdoms for your valor—rescuer of Prince Claude, scourge of the Northern Raiders, slayer of the Murderous Baron of Swansby, heroine of the Crusade—"

"Don't talk to me about the Crusade," I snapped. "If there's a devil in Hell, that was his work. *Robin! Trude! Put Tilda down this instant! Isabel, can't you watch them for a moment while I'm dealing with this messenger?* Excuse me, sir. What were you saying?"

"Good Maiden—Good Lady, I should say—we need your strong right arm and your brave heart to defend us from a host of foes."

"What do you imagine one aging swordswoman can do against an army?"

"I—I don't know, Lady, but such wonders are spoken of you! They say you have the perfect strength that flows from a pure heart."

"You *have* been listening to the troubadours, haven't you? Well, you can put their rhyming nonsense right out of your wooly head. In the so-called Holy Crusade, I waded in blood. Pure heart, indeed! Why should I stain my hands again with human blood—"

"These are not men but demons," the priest said.

"I've heard *that* before."

"Lady, I beg you! Our fighting men are gone; not only the lord and his sons, but the blacksmith and any plowmen fit for the infantry have gone to war."

That I could believe. These days, Loegris was a land of women, children, peasants, and priests. Since our King Henry of Loegris had fallen out with his cousin, King Henry of Albis, his vassals had been called to arms—among them my Stephen, a lamb in wolf's clothing, a man of peace and honor—bound to wage war. I nodded. "So has my husband. Fortunately, no one thinks to call the lady of the manor to arms—except you, it seems."

"Where else can I turn?" said Gervase. "There are none in Valabas now but poor laboring people. We live in terror of hellish raiders, unnatural creatures with fangs and claws to rend and kill. Not content to raid our sheepfolds, these fiends dig up the dead from our churchyard and leave a mess of splintered bones behind them, so mangled only God can ever sort out one body from another."

That caught my ear. "I have known fiends like that, fiends in human form, who desecrated the bodies of the fallen to heap misery and shame upon their foes. I wish I could say none of them had been on our side. I swore I'd never let anyone do that again."

"Then you'll help us?" said Gervase.

"I suppose I must," I sighed. Did he speak truth? Could I trust him? His threadbare elbows suggested a humble parson living close to the people he would have me defend—a world of difference from the smooth preacher who'd played upon my pity for distant strangers in Jerusalem. "Valabas has a sort of claim on me, being near my dowry-land. But tell me truly, Gervase, were you being poetic when you spoke of fangs and claws?"

He shook his head. "That is no poetry, Lady, but stark truth. Our enemies are trolls of the mountains, taller than the tallest man, with sinews like iron and hides like stone. We've pelted them with stones and arrows, and we've never yet seen one bleed."

"I hope I won't fail you," I said solemnly. "In my youth, maybe, I would have laughed at the challenge. I'm not young any more."

"You will not fail us, Maiden."

"To fight an uncanny monster, I'll need my old companion—if she'll come. If she can even be released from the Abbey of the Holy Name. If she consents to leave her cloister and take up sorcery again." I looked up sharply at the priest to see how he would take this request.

Gervase's shining eyes were undimmed. "She will come. Surely, God will send us aid in our darkest hour."



I set my household in order as quickly as I could, committing the estate to the care of the frail old steward, the steward to the care of the tough old housekeeper, the children to the care of Eloise, most trusted of serving-women.

Then came the moment I'd been delaying. With Eloise's discreet assistance, I went through the storeroom and dug out a heavy, dusty box—a coffin, the coffin of the Maiden of Revie. I wrenched open the lid and looked at the wretched remains inside: my steel-plated brigandine, still bloodstained and, I feared, a bit rusty.

I knew it wouldn't fit quite the way it did before four childbirths. I expected it to be tight in the hips and belly. I didn't expect to be unable to get it past my breasts. Had I really been so slim, when I was the Maiden?

"Would my lady like me to—" Eloise began, then stopped, her calm pragmatism defeated. She couldn't take it out for me, like an old gown. And no amount of assistance would squeeze me into the metal-plated skin of my old self.

"Would you please help me out of this, Eloise dear?" I said with what dignity I could muster.

"Certainly, my lady," she said, unruffled, and liberated me from the trap of ill-fitting armor.

"I guess I've grown fat," I mumbled, shame-faced.

"So have we all. The manor has prospered since your husband came into his heritage," Eloise said placidly. "The land is well managed, the harvests are good, and there is plenty for all. You cut a good figure for a prosperous matron of your years."

"And an ill one for the maiden warrior Gervase hoped to find," I said ruefully. "Well, this armor can't help me now. At least the coif and helmet fit." I put them on to be certain. Their unaccustomed weight on my head was like the drag of old habits.

"I'm afraid I haven't sent your sword to be polished, my lady."

"I never asked you to, Eloise. In fact, if I'd asked you to do anything with it, it would have been to throw it in the lake, like King Arthur's sword. Ah, well, it's a good thing I postponed that rite." I tried on the sword-belt. Luckily, it had been a long one. My shield looked fine, the painted unicorn still fresh in its green field—all that paint, no doubt, had kept it from rust. I shut the coffin lid on the unwearable armor, straightened, and drew the sword, amazed at how easily my hand took to it, as if it had always longed for the hilt, all these years of peace.

A voice behind me nearly startled me out of my helm. "Is that *all* your armor?" Isabel said skeptically.

"It's all I need," I said, sheathing the sword. "Swift action will be more important than armor in this battle. All that heavy steel would just slow me down."

"Let me come with you," she said.

"No."

"Were you much older than ten when you turned knight-errant?"

"Lots," I said, though it crossed my mind that in no time ten would become fourteen. I wondered whether I should drop that old armor in the river so she couldn't follow in my bloody footsteps. "Besides, I'm counting on you to hold this castle until I return. Be prepared to direct resistance in case of a siege."

Isabel nodded, somewhat but not entirely mollified. Dumping the armor in the river would do no good. Maybe I'd do better to tell her the whole truth about the Crusade. Someday. Not today.

Dressed and packed for my journey, I kissed the children goodbye, lingering regretfully with Tilda. I had postponed weaning her; now she'd be weaned the hard way, all at once. Hard for me, too, I expected, but no use lamenting. I'd fought with a broken arm—the left one, thank God—and I'd fought with a head wound bleeding into my eye; if I couldn't fight with aching breasts, I wasn't the Maiden of Revie. All right, I *wasn't* any sort of maiden,

but never mind that: I would soldier on. "Be good, children. Don't tease Tilda, or I'll make you answer for it, however far I may be."

They all stared at me open-mouthed like baby birds expecting to be fed. "When will you be back?" said Robin forlornly.

"As soon as ever I can. I'll sort out this trouble in Valabas, never fear, and hurry home to you. You're the best children in the world," I said. I could hardly speak for the lump in my throat. "Be kind to each other while I'm gone."

"We will," Isabel promised solemnly.

Trude's eyes darted mischievously at Robin, and she smirked in a way that boded no good.

Isabel noticed that smirk. "Behave, Trude!" She cuffed her sister—a light tap, but it started a four-way melee right then and there. So much for filial peace and loving-kindness. With a sigh, I turned away from one battle toward another.



It was fortunate that Gervase knew the way to the Abbey of the Holy Name, for I had never been there. When Isabeau the Wise retreated there after the Crusade, I thought she needed time alone, so I did not try to visit her. By the time she sent word that she was taking vows, I was busy caring for a baby and a manor. After that, whether from some prohibition of her Order or personal disinclination, she sent no messages. I could only hope she was still there.

It was early spring, when you still feel winter's teeth in the breeze, even in the sunshine. I tightened my hood around my ears, glad that I did not at once have to put on the metal coif, which would be icy in this weather. As we rode, clouds advanced across the sky, and a cold rain assailed us. We arrived on the portico of the Abbey cold, bedraggled, and miserable. Gervase was sniffing.

I knocked on the door and waited. A young nun in a black habit answered the door. "God give you good day, travelers. What brings you here?"

As Gervase sneezed, I spoke: "I must speak to Isabeau the Wise. I was told she retired to this abbey." My mind teemed with doubts. Was it possible Isabeau had stayed so long in one place? She had always been mad to push on, seeking adventure, following her curiosity. What if she had left so long ago that no one could find her?

The young nun stood in the doorway, unsmiling and unyielding. "If she is here, then she has come to escape the blandishments of the world."

"Yes, well, fortunately, we didn't come with any blandishments," I retorted.

Gervase cut me off. "Good Sister, we come on an urgent mission of mercy. I am the Parson of Valabas, a village sore beset by hellish trolls. I have come with Lady Ursula, the Maiden of Revie, to implore her to help deliver my people."

His sweeter tones stopped the young nun's tirade as my anger could not. Still, she left us shivering on the doorstep while she sought an answer inside. It's all for nothing, I thought as we waited. Surely Isabeau is long gone.

A few sneezes later, the young nun returned. "The Abbess will see you. Follow me."

She did not say Isabeau would see us, I noticed. She will take me to the Abbess, who will tell me Isabeau left years ago. But when the young nun bowed us into a cell, one of the two veiled women within raised her head, revealing a face as familiar as the palm of my hand: arched black brows, piercing blue eyes, straight nose, high cheekbones. I cried in relief, "Oh, Isabeau!"

She did not smile. "I left that name behind with the arts I once practiced. I am Sister Agony in the Garden, and my life is here. If you thought to win me away, Ursula, you're years late."

The joyful greeting died on my lips. This was Isabeau, all right: Isabeau at her most difficult, choleric, and outright mulish. Once, I could have broken her mood with a joke or the promise of a new adventure. Now I glared in silence.

"I see you still have a dreamy-looking troubadour traipsing along with you to sing your praises, just like in the old days," Isabeau commented.

"He's a *priest*," I said.

"Maybe," she said, "but he's got a troubadour's eyes. Every time he looks at you, I can practically hear him trying out quaint phrases to describe your—"

"Hush, Sister Agony," said the nun beside her. "Sister Ascension, you are dismissed. Lady Ursula, Sir Gervase, sit with us, if you please. I am Mother Sermon on the Mount, the Abbess of this house. Anything you would discuss with Sister Agony in the Garden, you may discuss with me."

Discuss? I could hardly speak. To see Isabeau again—so unchanged, and yet so untouchable—was like cold steel in my heart. I hadn't realized how I'd longed to travel with her again, as we had so many times, so long ago. The longing stuck in my throat and silenced me.

Gervase, however, grew eloquent. "Thank you, Reverend Mother, for your hospitality. I know how trying it must be for you to admit a man to your chaste house. We will be as brief as we can. Good Sister Agony in the Garden, our case is desperate, and we beg your mercy. Valabas, where I am parson, is grieved by dire enemies, trolls from the mountains. I begged the Maiden of Revie to come help us; though she was loath to part from her children, she had pity on us. But the enemy we face is unearthly, and she needs your strength and wisdom allied with her own. Will you, of your kindness, come to our rescue?"

Isabeau drew herself up very straight. "My heart weeps for your people, Parson, but you know not what you ask."

"Sister Agony," said the Prioress sternly, "once again your tongue outruns your sense of humility. Be not so quick to tell the Parson what he knows or does not know."

"But he can't know, or he would refuse to come here! Ursula would have me take up the accursed Arts of Solomon again, to the harm of my soul!"

I snapped, "Accursed or not, you saved lives with your arts. Will you refuse to save any more for fear of mussing your nice clean soul? Who made *your* soul more precious than theirs?"

The Abbess gave me a look that would freeze fire. I took the hint and shut my mouth. Then she turned on Isabeau. "Your theology is ill-considered, my daughter. For all Solomon's sins, he was the Lord's anointed, and not accursed. His gifts were given for a purpose, as were yours. Did you think that, coming to this abbey, you left behind the temptation to misuse your gifts? I have seen you fall to new temptations: spiritual pride and a sort of overblown moral fastidiousness that easily turns to sloth."

"I have *not* been slothful! I keep the Infirmary stocked with herbs—I labor at the lowest tasks for my penance—why, I rise before *anyone* in this Abbey! And as for *pride*—"

The Abbess gave her a hell-freezing glare, and Isabeau shut up.

I wondered whether I could learn how to do that. It would be useful with the children.

When Mother Sermon on the Mount spoke again, it was in a calm, measured voice. "Sister Agony in the Garden, for your spiritual improvement in humility and active charity, I send you forth under the command of this priest." The Abbess looked at me again—not the quelling glare, this time, but something like the look I might give a skein of floss when judging whether it was good enough for the altar-cloth I was embroidering. After a few moments, she smiled almost imperceptibly. "And this lady. Obey Lady Ursula meekly, unless her commands conflict with those of the priest, until you learn true humility."

Isabeau's jaw tightened. "Yes, Reverend Mother."



It was an awkward ride to Valabas with Isabeau behind me in the saddle. For a long time she was silent; when I could bear it no longer, I began to babble. "I half expected to find you gone beyond recall, Isabeau."

"Sister Agony," she corrected.

"Ah, yes. Sister Agony. Who would have guessed it! I never thought you could bear to stay in one place for a whole season, let alone ten years."

She responded dryly, "It is humbling indeed to know that you thought me incapable of keeping my vow."

"That's not what I meant! Isabeau, you're the last person I'd have expected to take vows in the first place. I could see you as a solitary anchoress, alone with God in the wilderness. But not within cloister walls."

"Indeed, we have surprised each other in many things. I never would have guessed the Maiden of Revie would leave her sworn companion in the midst of a war to ride pillion behind a lesser knight—"

"Stephen is not a 'lesser knight,'" I said hotly. "He is a man of peace, wise in many things. When he lost all his brothers in one day's battle, and turned home, half mad with grief, I went with him, fearing he might do something desperate. But I needn't have feared. All the way home he learned from the people we met and the lands we passed through: new ways of farming, of managing land, of ordering a village. He's made a better victory of our little manor than any crusader will ever make of Jerusalem. Everything he touches turns out better than it seemed to be. He even explored the barren land my father endowed me with, that everyone said was worthless, and found gold there! His men are digging a mine, using methods he learned along the way home from the Holy Land."

"So those wagon-loads of men and tools that passed through our village were yours?" Gervase said.

"Ours, yes—the mine must be fairly close to Valabas," I said, then found myself answering Gervase's questions about the mine, and Stephen's improved crop-rotation patterns, and whether Valabas might benefit from a similar plan, while my once-inseparable companion fell silent behind me, closed up tight as an oyster.

She didn't speak to me again until we dismounted to refresh the horses and ourselves. I took some time to exercise with the sword; I didn't know whether to be pleased or frightened at how easily it came back to me.

"How swiftly you move!" Gervase marveled.

"Not up to your old speed," Isabeau said with unwelcome accuracy. "Are you sure you're ready?"

"I've got to be. If there were anyone else to send, I'd have sent them," I said. "Hopefully I've gained in wisdom what I've lost in speed. And you? Do you still have your old power?"

I didn't see the expression on her face, absorbed in my own practice; but I heard her voice falter. "I, ah, I haven't had occasion to find out."

Unlike Isabeau, I was not inclined to pick at that sore. Instead I sheathed my sword and uncovered the food I'd brought for us all.

Isabeau stared at my careful provisions in horror. "Cheese? During *Lent*?"

"What did you think, I had a pot of pease porridge in my saddle-bag?" I said crossly. "We had a dispensation for cheese during the Crusade. Why not now?"

"You used to be rather sarcastic about the dispensations offered for crusading," she reminded me.

"Not this one. It made sense then, and it makes more sense now. I can hardly fight monsters on bread alone." I set the loaf between her and Gervase; if they were inclined to be fastidious, they were perfectly welcome to it.

"Christ faced the Devil fasting," Isabeau said sternly.

"Well, good for Him. Not being divine, I have to go about things a bit differently. But maybe you don't share that limitation. Maybe you can multiply this loaf. Maybe the next time you and I make a disaster of our mission, you can raise all the dead back to life."

"Don't blaspheme," she said.

"I'm *not* blaspheming, Isabeau—"

"I'm *not* Isabeau any more. I'm Sister Agony in the Garden!"

"Oh, how could I forget? Sister *Agony*. Did you choose that name, or did you *earn* it?"

"It has *meaning*," she said. "I thought you'd understand. Or didn't you see what I suffered, back there in the Holy Land?"

"We both went through agony," I said. "What I don't understand is how you could have such regard for what the Church tells you, after that lying monk led us all down the road to Hell."

"One monk isn't the whole Church. That's no reason to turn your back on God."

"I haven't," I said. "Only on the men who claim to speak in God's name. Present company excepted," I added belatedly.

"Never mind," Gervase said mildly. "Just what happened to you on Crusade to make you both so bitter?"

Sister Agony spoke first. "The last time I used my—the Arts of Solomon—I—I wrought too powerfully. A whole marketplace turned to one vast inferno. The very air burned, and as people inhaled it, they went up like firewood—Saracens and Crusaders together—men, women, and children—all but me and Ursula, who stood under my protection."

"Was that why you would never look at me afterward?" I said, "Because you wouldn't have done it, if I hadn't been there to protect? Because I was your occasion of sin?"

Isabeau frowned. "It was you who wouldn't look at me. As if I'd become something diabolical. And I had."

"What had I become, myself, by then?" I said. "I wasn't an innocent before the Crusade, but once, I could tell myself I only killed at need."

"That monk who preached the Crusade—he told us that if we didn't beat back the Saracens, Christians in the Kingdom of Jerusalem would be forced at sword-point to sacrifice their first-born children to demons. When we reached the Holy Land, we were the ones committing blood sacrifice. I wasn't a knight-errant any more, challenging killers to single combat; I was part of an army, one drop in a tide that killed anyone in its way. When an army does evil, your only choices are to murder your conscience, or to betray your comrades. Damnation lies on either path." My mouth tasted bitter with the words that tumbled out. "I remember a sniper dealing death from a window. Her aim was inhumanly precise; she felled dozens of us, but our archers couldn't touch her. So we set our arrows alight and burned her house, and then," I swallowed bile, "then I saw the children she had been protecting leap from the upper-story windows to escape the flames."

"We were the ones sacrificing children, Sir Priest. I saw no demons among the Saracens worse than the ones I found in myself. When Sir Stephen left for home, I went with him—for his protection, I told myself, but really, I think I knew he was my only road out of Hell. He never forgot how to be kind, not even in the midst of the slaughter. He carries peace in him. Sometimes, by his side, I can even go to sleep without seeing those burning, falling children."

I did not look at Gervase, but I could feel his eyes on me. "I see. I thought you two could not forgive each other, but I was wrong. It's yourselves that you haven't forgiven." He

began praying softly but audibly. I've knelt by enough deathbeds to recognize absolution when I hear it.

When he was done, I whispered, "Which of us was that for?"

"Whichever of you will accept it," he said. "And for whatever a poor parson's word is worth, I think you should eat for strength, Lady. We will need all your strength at Valabas."



When we reached Valabas, the day was fast fading. "The trolls will come soon," said Gervase. "They attack by twilight."

"Where should we wait for them?" I said.

Gervase considered. "The shepherds have been defending the pasture and paddock with fire, turning the trolls back. It's the graveyard that's less defended."

"Then lead us there."

The graveyard lay sprawled over a hillock and valley behind a modest stone church. We left our horses at a neighbor's stable; Gervase's poor old nag would be no use in battle, and even my Greatheart could not help much either in a close battle over a grave, or in pursuit up the steep rocky heights that loomed beyond the graveyard, fit only for mountain goats and trolls. It was cold here in the hill country, with snow still clinging to the north side of each rise; night might bring a freeze, with treacherous icy patches hidden in the shadowy ground.

"Will you bring holy water from the font to douse the fiends with?" Isabeau asked Gervase.

He ducked his head sheepishly. "If it pleases you, Sister. But I've never seen that it daunted them in any way."

"Ah." She was silent awhile, pensive.

Meanwhile, I sought out a spot for an ambush. A thicket of brush offered partial shelter where we might hope to see before we were seen. I took up my post, then, and readied my weapons.

"A crossbow?" Isabeau said curiously. "You used to say they were unknightly—not to mention ungainly."

"I used to believe everything old knights told me or troubadours sang. I used to be a fool. It's a slow weapon, I admit. But Gervase said arrows wouldn't pierce troll-hide. A

crossbow bolt bites deeper. I keep them at Castle Veronne as siege weapons: unsubtle but powerful."

She nodded solemnly. "All right. You have your weapons in place; now it's my turn. I'll have to cast a Protection on you."

"Not this time. I can protect myself."

"Then why did you drag me along?" she snapped.

"I don't know—for the refined conversation?"

She didn't get her hand over her mouth quite fast enough: I caught her smirk. "Listen, you stubborn steel-head—"

"No. I won't be the only one shielded from the slaughter. Not again."

"Don't make me explain to Stephen how I let you go to your death."

"Don't torment yourself, Agony," I said. "I mean to make good use of you. Can you sharpen my senses? I've been riding all day, I'm tired, and I don't dare miss a single troll footstep."

She thought, then nodded. "I'll cast a Vigilance on your senses—and maybe on mine and Gervase's, too. Even with a Vigilance, three watchers are better than one." She drew a pouch from her cloak. "Gervase, I'll need a fire to warm the elements in this spell—taken from the Sanctuary lamp, if you can, to bless our endeavors—and your prayers that my work will not turn evil this time."

The priest bowed his head. "God guard you, body and soul, and bless the work of your art, Sister. I'll get the fire for your spell."



I watched Sister Agony in the Garden as she ground herbs in her hand-mortar, mixed them with oil, and set them over a little fire. She chanted over them, her hands perilously close to the flame, but I know it was not heat that made sweat run down her face like drops of blood. The name she had chosen for herself was apt. Again she tasted the agony of doubt: the fear that she did wrong, outweighed only by the fear of doing nothing. And again, she did so at my request. If she needed to hide herself in an abbey the rest of her life thereafter, I must let her pursue her peace. I had asked enough of her for a lifetime.

When her chant was done, she dug her thumbs into the mixture and anointed my eyelids, nose, lips, ears, and fingertips. Last she touched my forehead; with that, my senses

sprang to new life. I could hear the heartbeats of my two companions, and the faster one of a crow perched in the thicket nearby. I could smell the slow waking of spring, the snow in the mountains, the ore in the rocks. Stranger still, I could understand what the sorceress did as she opened her own senses and those of Gervase. I could feel their readiness as I felt my own. And I felt the quaking of the soil as, somewhere behind a yew bush, quick claws scrabbled at a frost-hardened grave.

I drew my crossbow. With my newly sharpened senses, I knew just where to aim, how to send the bolt between the branches and strike my unseen enemy. A wordless cry rose from the stricken troll—but its companion leapt over the yew to attack me.

Gervase had not lied. The granite-gray creature that sprang toward me bore the claws and teeth of a bear, though its eyes looked human, the same angry eyes I'd seen on Saracen and fellow Crusaders. Too late to span my crossbow, I drew my sword and struck with all my might in the midst of its breast. The blade did not sink in. Still, the force of the blow drove the creature backward, gasping for breath. I struck again and again till the monster fled: not bleeding, but not invulnerable. Till then, it had only met frightened villagers, untrained in the arts of war; it did not know what to make of me.

I did not have long to enjoy the victory. At the opposite edge of the graveyard, another monster despoiled a grave. I spanned my crossbow and moved toward the soft sound of digging. This fiend had worked quickly while I'd been busy with its comrades. Already the hellish thing had a human thighbone in its mouth. With a hideous crunch, it bit through the bone to suck the marrow.

"Drop it, you hell-hound!" I shouted as I loosed my bolt. I hit it right where its heart should be, if it had one. It did not sink in, but it hit with a resounding smack.

The monster retreated, bruised if not bleeding. But this time, I thought I heard words in its cry: "Heartless fiend!"

I ran from one grave to another, surprising the trolls as they dug. Crossbow—bolts troubled them most, but I rarely had time to span the bow. Most often I was forced into hand-to-hand fighting, which was not to my advantage. The trolls had claws, fangs, and, in their tough skin, a sort of armor; I had none of these. My sword would not bite, even when I could reach to strike them; and that was not often, for troll arms were far longer than mine. But sometimes I won by sheer speed: Isabeau's spell had quickened my senses, and besides, the trolls' movements were slow and heavy, as if weighed down by battle armor.

Not until I hacked off a scale did I realize that what I had taken for troll-hide was, in fact, armor, or at least protective clothing of enviable quality. It looked as rough and gray as

the troll's skin, but he did not flinch when I broke it, and by then I knew my opponent too well to think him simply impervious to pain. This was not a beast fighting in his bare skin, but a cunning creature who had fashioned a covering for himself. I faced the trolls with new respect and new fear.

I lunged at the gap I'd made in the armor; this time, my sword bit flesh—not soft like human flesh, but less hard than the outer covering. Roaring, the troll raked my shoulder with claws like daggers. Now I missed my brigandine indeed.

I struck my foe in the face with my shield, wrenched my sword out of his thigh, and slashed at his arm. This time, I did not scratch the armor, but at least the weight of my blow confounded him for a moment. He released me, and I scrambled atop a gravestone from which I could survey the field.

I felt hot blood soaking the shoulder of my coat. What was on my sword was not like blood, but thicker, muddy. I could see nothing flowing from the troll's thigh-wound, but he limped painfully backward away from me.

Another troll came running, and I braced for the attack; but this one only wrapped his arms around the wounded one, slung him over one shoulder, and carried him away. Yet another circled Isabeau warily, from time to time dodging the hot sparks she sent flying from her mortar.

Gervase defended another grave with a slingshot—valiant enough, but God knows, he was no David to these Goliaths. I leapt from the gravestone and rushed headlong at a troll that menaced him. In my mind, I could hear Isabeau commenting wryly that my hard head was deadlier than my sword. That at least gave me something to laugh about as my wounded shoulder resounded with the shock of the impact. Nonetheless, I accomplished my goal: I knocked the troll down where I could slash at his unprotected face. They had armor, but no visors. Thick, sludgy troll blood oozed from the wounded muzzle. I thrust through his mouth, and the troll lay still.

Bile rose to my throat; I forced it down. *This is not a man*, I told myself. *That was not a sin*. Nonetheless, I felt I would give my right arm to be out of that battle, at home, at peace, with Stephen by my side and my children around me. I belonged to life now, not death. I wanted no more of this.

Isabeau screamed when the next troll raced toward me. I saw a belt of sparks rise from her mortar as she cast a hurried protection, but such spells are chancy things without proper preparation. I was not entirely surprised when the shining belt encircled the troll instead of me. Sister Agony shouted a word entirely ill-suited to the cloister—or perhaps it was a spell-

breaker, because the belt of light dissolved. I faced the troll, uncertain whether to slash at his impervious armor or grapple with his powerful arms. But he did not attack me: he simply hefted the body of his fallen comrade and ran.

I could have caught him easily, for the Vigilance sped my nerves, while his burden slowed him down. But I let him go. Good warriors don't leave the fallen to the enemy's mercies, nor do chivalrous knights hold dead enemies hostage.

All around, I saw trolls retreating. I was half-inclined to let them go, till I saw Gervase sprint off, shouting, after a troll who was making away with a human corpse.

What would he do if he caught the troll? Pray at him? I followed as fast as I could; Isabeau came on my heels.

The mountain troll, of course, made for the slopes; as running became climbing, our advantage of speed vanished. At times it was all we could do to keep the troll in sight.

"I don't understand them," I muttered as we climbed.

Gervase, panting and laboring on the steep rise, cast a weary glance at me. "What is there to understand?"

"Why do they attack the churchyard at all? They don't act like those fiends who cut up the bodies of the dead and display them to horrify the living. They simply take them as a thief takes a coin. Why?"

Gervase grimaced. "To defile a sacred place—the devils!"

"But they don't act like devils," I argued. "They forfeit chances to attack us so they can rescue their wounded. They act like a good army, loyal and honorable."

"Is it honorable to take the bodies of my neighbors from consecrated ground?"

"That's the one thing that doesn't fit," I admitted. "I wish I could understand them!"

"I'd rather we could catch up with them," Gervase said.

Isabeau, to my surprise, took my side. "You have to understand your enemies. Otherwise, they keep doing things you don't expect. And even you must admit they don't flee from the Name of God. They can't be bound as one binds a spirit. Ursula is right: they're not devils."

"I can't believe my ears. Did you say I was right about something? Ow!" My wounded shoulder twinged as I grabbed a rock to clamber higher.

"Be still and let me tend your wound," she said.

"Where's your promised obedience, Sister Agony?"

As I expected, this consideration swayed her not at all. She seized my arm.

"Ow! Let go." I pulled away, slipped on an icy patch, then recovered and resumed climbing.

"You won't be much use in battle if you bleed to death on the way up."

"Or you, if you spend yourself too soon. How many spells have you worked today—after ten or twelve years out of practice? Remember how you swooned at the Battle of Feorgard?"

"How can I forget, when you never cease to remind me?" she growled. "But I needn't use magic now. Just let me clean your wounds."

"There's no time," I said, for the trolls sped ahead of us. Isabeau climbed nimbly enough, but I was sweating from the effort of hauling my fat body up the rocks, and spindly Gervase looked exhausted.

"But you have a chest wound!" Isabeau wailed.

"Eh?" I looked down at the damp spot near my breast. "No, no. That's just milk."

"*Milk*? Really? Don't you use a wet-nurse?"

"Wet-nurses are for cowards," I said, though the jostling of my full breasts as I climbed certainly added to my misery, and I was starting to wonder whether I'd be in any condition to fight the trolls when and if we caught up to them.

"I wish you'd told me sooner," Isabeau said. "I know some fascinating spells that call for mother's milk. I've never had any to work with."

"Then you shouldn't have shut yourself in an abbey," I said. "You should have come home with me and Stephen. If you wanted to avoid the blandishments of the world, I'm sure we could have found you a nice cave to be a hermit in."

"Those claw-marks on your back should never have happened. Where's your armor?"

"I'd hate to be climbing these rocks in a load of armor," I said. "Why Isabeau, I might almost think you cared about my safety."

She shot me a hurt look. "I always cared. *You're* the one who left *me*, you know."

"What do you mean? I *begged* you to come with us. You wouldn't leave the war."

"With you and Stephen casting honeyed glances at each other, do you think I believed for a moment that you wanted me?"

"What, I can't have a husband and a friend at once? Of all the foolish things—"

"*Ssh!*" Gervase hissed.

We stifled our argument and listened. Ahead and above us, we'd become used to the scrabbling sound of the troll climbing. Now we heard footsteps—walking, not climbing—and more than one pair of feet.

Isabeau drew a cord from her cloak and began twisting it, knotting it, muttering over it inaudibly. I recognized the ritual: someone was going to trip and fall. God grant it would not be me this time: it's hard to direct a spell in a hand-to-hand fight. More carefully than ever, I scaled the remaining height of the ridge and vaulted the last rock to emerge on a small plateau.

The troll with the corpse over his shoulder wheeled around to look at me. "Foul fiend!" he shouted.

Beyond him, two trolls emerged from a cave in the mountainside. I drew my sword.

"No!" shouted my adversary as another, much smaller troll ran pell-mell from the shelter of the cave, tripped, and tumbled over the ridge where my companions were hiding. The big troll, lunging to protect the little one, slipped and fell face-down on the icy rock.

"It's a child, a child!" I cried. I sheathed my sword and sped after the hapless youngster.

The claws that clung to the ledge were sturdy, made for climbing crags. But thanks to Isabeau's spell, the little one had gotten himself—or herself?—dangling precariously with no ledge for the feet. I backed down the slope, setting myself between the trollkin and my friends. "Isabeau, it's just a child," I said.

Bless her, she understood. I did not see what she did, too intent on the child myself to look behind me, but I felt an invisible mantle of protection wrap around us both, me and the trollkin together. Trusting to her protection, I took my hand off the rock-face to steady the child.

The little one flinched away from me violently, and would have fallen but for Sister Agony's spell. Gently but forcefully, I guided two small clawed feet to ridges and helped the little troll climb back to the waiting parents.

My adversary put down the corpse she carried—yes, she. How had I failed to notice? She clasped the child to her bosom for a long moment. Finally, she spoke to me. "I know not how to greet you, warrior of the Mud People. Are you my mortal enemy, or my daughter's foster-mother? Why slay my neighbors, then save my daughter?"

"I want no war with children," I said. "But your neighbors made war on my people first."

"We craved no war with the Mud People till they sought to slay us as we gathered food."

Gervase joined me on the rise. "Our beloved dead are not food."

The troll drew her brows down. "You Mud People abandon your dead for mute worms to eat, but begrudge them to speaking people, bearers of souls? You kill living lambs for your food, but begrudge us the ones that die by mischance?"

I was too revolted to answer. But Isabeau, true to form, was curious. "Carrion eaters—like crows or bears—I see! And endowed with souls? Do you know who formed your soul, Troll of the Mountains?"

The troll bowed her head. "The One Maker, Shaper of the World, who molded your people of mud, shaped my ancestors out of rock and placed them in a fruitful grove. But they were exiled for their sins, and since that downfall, each spring we must eat the food of death until life blooms anew. When fruits abound, we give up carrion and rejoice."

Isabeau turned to Gervase. "Surely these are not devils, but creatures of God like us, susceptible to both sin and grace. Surely we can parley with them for peace."



It was a strange peace conference. The little troll, seated between me and her mother, kept stealing frightened glances at me, then huddling closer to her mother's side. On my other side sat Sister Agony, Gervase, and the Elders of Valabas, who looked positively green with terror. All around us were trolls, great and small. The largest of them stood on a high rock before us. "I, Hrething, Queen of the Stone People of the Mountain, welcome the Mud People of the Vale under my protection to speak peace, by the bond of Ursula, warrior of the Mud People, now foster-mother to Gif, daughter of Edyif of the Stone People."

"Foster *mother*?" I sputtered.

"Whoever saves a child's life becomes another parent to that child," the Queen said. "You were our mortal foe till then. Now we must seek peace, or dishonor that bond."

"We seek peace, too," said the Chief Elder of Valabas, his voice shaking, "but not at the price of our dead."

"The eating of our dead is loathsome to the Mud People," Isabeau explained. "Is there not enough carrion in your own lands? In these Hard Mountains, surely, many things die during the winter. You tell me that you eat carrion every spring. But you never needed to assail Valabas till this year."

"It is too early," said the Troll Queen. "So cold, so barren. The winter dead are still frozen in the heights. We should be asleep now, dreaming the Great Dreams of Wisdom and Foreknowledge, but for the devilish noise and clamor that woke us before our time."

"What noise and clamor?" Isabeau asked.

The troll shuddered. "Mud Men have come to tear out the mountain's heart with tools of iron."

I put a hand to my head. "My gold mine!"

Everyone stared at me. "My father gave me a stretch of hill-country hereabouts—barren, dry, no one's ever tried to live in it. But there is a vein of gold in the ground. My husband's men have begun digging a mine."

"That must stop," the Troll-Queen said. "Without the Great Dreams, our children grow sickly and fretful, and we all grow hungry too early in the year, needing more carrion than these hills provide. Let us sleep as the Maker intended. Leave us in peace, and we will leave you in peace."

And so the peace treaty was concluded, at less cost than any I had yet encountered. I would be sorry to tell Stephen the gold mine had failed—he'd been so proud of finding value in even the most worthless things I brought to the marriage—but that would be a small regret, if only I could see him home safe from the war with as little hurt as I'd taken in my return to knight-errantry.

After the parley was done, Isabeau remained deep in talk with the trolls. "Come on, Is—um—Sister Agony," I said, "You must be anxious to get back to your abbey. As for me, I have to hurry to my husband's miners and tell them to stop. And then find some work for them around the manor, so they won't turn brigands on the road. My work is far from done."

"I'm not going back to the abbey," she said. "I've agreed to stay with the trolls for a season as surety of your promise. And besides, I want to stay. I want to learn from their Great Dreams of Prophecy and Foreknowledge." Her eyes shone with wonder, curious, eager, like in the old days, when a new path unfolded at her feet and she could not wait to run and see where it led. "I want to dream with them, withdrawn in the dark till Easter flowers forth—a truer Lenten fast than the one in the abbey. I will teach them, in return, our own prayers and sacred scriptures."

"This one has the heart of a troll," the one she'd been speaking to said approvingly. "We have much to teach each other."

"But—but—Sister Agony—Isabeau—will I ever see you again?"

"Come back here in the summer. By then, I may have found—how did you put it?—a nice cave as a hermitage."

I wrapped my arms firmly around her. "You'd better be there. I'll miss you. How I've missed you!"

"And I you. But take heart: we did gain some wisdom for the strength we lost with age. You did well, Maiden of Revie."

"And you. Isabeau the Wise. Or Agony, if you prefer."

"Wasn't I always a bit of an Agony?" She squeezed me very hard, then released me. I felt the pressure of her fingers all the way down the mountain.



"What will we tell the abbess?" I fretted to Gervase as we set off with my husband's miners as escort.

"Tell her Sister Agony is preaching the Good News of Christ to the mountain trolls," Gervase said. "In truth, I'm not sure her abbess expected her back."

"Now that you've taken part in one of our adventures, what do you think of those troubadours' songs?"

Gervase took on that misty-eyed look again. "They fell short of the truth, Lady. They said you were beautiful, brave, and good—but they never told me you were wise as well."

"You're incurable," I said. "At least no troubadour will be singing of this latest victory—saving a mountain troll! When has peacemaking ever made ballads?"

"Perhaps it's high time it did," said Gervase. He hummed to himself all the way down the road, no doubt composing in his head. How long before a highly-colored song of the adventure found its way to Veronne? I hastened home to tell my daughter Isabel what really happened, before minstrels turned all the blood and sweat and folly to poetry.



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Hell of a Salesman

Hank Quense

On my way back from a breakfast meeting with a client in mid-town Manhattan, I dropped dead on 47th Street and 7th Avenue. A heart attack. My soul stood naked over my inert form and watched a Good Samaritan steal my Rolex. I felt more shock than sorrow, and, confused by my nakedness and demise, I wondered what to do.

A hand touched my shoulder and I turned to face an angel. My confusion melted away at the sight of the creature. Angels meant Heaven.

"Mr. Anthony Bello?" The angel wore a shiny white robe and glowed with an inner light.

"That's me."

"You were a salesman?"

I winced at the usage of past tense and nodded. "I am... was the best salesman in the world."

"I am your escort. Hold my hand, please."

The idea of traveling to Heaven replaced any sorrow over my death. I took her hand—I thought of the angel as a "her" because the creature wore shoulder length hair. We ascended to a great height but instead of the familiar geography of Manhattan, I saw below a desolate, blasted and empty land. Although we flew at great speed, I experienced no rush of air past my face; no whistling sound filled my ears.

After a while, we came to a dingy urban area where we swooped down to land in front of a grimy hotel.

"Where are we?" Heaven couldn't be a flop house, could it?

"Follow me, please." She led me through a cracked plate glass door and into a shabby lobby. The lobby had a threadbare carpet, a cobweb-laden chandelier filled with burned-out bulbs, and trash-filled corners. I became more alarmed with each step I took. At the reception desk, a nightmarish creature awaited. Ugly, covered with warts and running sores, I couldn't tell if the wretch was even human. By the time I reached the desk, my stomach was in a knot as if I had drank too much coffee.

The creature pointed to a ledger. I signed it, turned to my guide for reassurance and found myself staring into a navel situated over a kilt made of overlapping metal plates. I took

a step backwards and looked up. The navel belonged to an impossibly wide creature that towered over my five-and-a-half-foot height.

I said, "Ciao, Big Guy. How you doing?" I always used a friendly approach with new acquaintances; you never knew when one of them might become a client.

"Big Guy" had a repulsive greenish-brown torso with four arms. Two ended in hands the size of skillets and the other pair in lobster claws. One of the hands held a lash with metal-tipped leather thongs. He stared down at me and my mouth turned dry. The brute grabbed me under the chin with one claw and lifted me level with his face. Two black, beady eyes exuded hostility. His nose was a pair of holes above a mouth filled with razor-sharp teeth.

"Filth!" The creature's voice boomed in my skull and I gagged on the stench. "You're mine."

"Wh... where am I? Where's the angel?"

"That was me. In disguise. Har, har." The creature shook me so hard my brain rattled. "To business. Did you ever lie to customers?"

The question took me by surprise and I blurted out, "Hey, I'm a salesman. What do you think?"

He smashed me in the head with the butt of his whip. My vision filled with bright lights and shooting stars.

"Did you ever overcharge a customer?"

That was an insult to every salesman who ever lived. "If the customer pays the price, he wasn't overcharged."

He grabbed my ankles with the other claw and pulled downward. Pain wracked my elongated body.

"Did you ever sell a customer a product he didn't need?"

"Maybe."

He raised the hand with the whip.

"Sometimes."

His empty hand grabbed my crotch. I had an urge to throw up but couldn't because of my constricted throat. "Did you ever lie to customers?"

"Yes." I managed to croak.

"Did you ever overcharge a customer?"

"Yes."

"For your offenses against customers, you are condemned to work in my flea market. I am Beelzebub, your sales manager."

"Flea market!" Despite my precarious position, I was outraged by the idea. "I'm a professional salesman. I don't do fleas markets."

I flew across the lobby, crashed into a wall and crumpled to the floor. Beelzebub strode over and whipped me. I cringed. After the third lashing I said, "Alright. I'll make an exception for you."

"You have a rotten attitude." The monster cackled. "I'm going to enjoy working on you."



Somehow, we left the lobby and entered a large room filled with the kind of booths you see at trade shows. And flea markets. A row of them lined the two long outer walls with another double row in the middle. More booths stood at the back wall. Throughout the room, flocked wallpaper hung in tatters exposing areas of crumbling plaster. Two fixtures with a few working bulbs provided inadequate lighting.

Bubba—as I now thought of Beelzebub—prodded me in the back with his whip. "Move."

I shuffled forward, already depressed at the idea of selling in here. The air resembled a tropical rain forest and sweat gushed from my naked body. My new colleagues looked like a dispirited lot and evaded my eyes. The merchandise on their booths sat in moldy boxes or lay on a table covered with dust. What was wrong with these people? Didn't they know how to present a product? A chill ran up my spine. Or was there a different problem?

We reached the booths at the back and Bubba shoved me into an empty one. "You work here." The rear of the booth was a cement wall. A short table formed one side of the booth and a long table formed the front. The other side was open.

"Put this on." A black, pin-striped, three piece woolen suit appeared in his hand along with a white linen shirt and a regimental striped tie. I started to protest the lack of underwear, but one look at Bubba's face and I hastened to obey his order.

"Here." He handed me a pair of penny loafers.

"Nice fit." I slipped the shoes on my feet. "Must be nine-and-a-half."

"Not for long."

Excruciating pain gripped my feet. I fell against the rear wall and banged my head. I pushed myself upright.

"Now they're a woman's size eleven. Let's try a two inch heel."

I pitched forward onto the table. "I... I can't walk in these."

Bubba flailed my back, grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and hauled me to my feet. "Stand or else. We'll start at two hundred degrees."

I cried out in pain as my shoes turned into roasting pans.

"Welcome to Hell." Bubba guffawed. "Sell these." A packing crate materialized on the floor of the booth.

"What are they?"

"Hair dryers."

"How much?"

"You're a sales expert." He walked away. "Get whatever you can for them." He paused long enough to punch a woman in another booth and left.

The pain in my feet and the itching from the suit drove me crazy. To take my mind off the agony, I stacked a few driers on the table when, suddenly, a pair of very small hands appeared along one edge. A figure pulled himself up and sat down on the table. The diminutive individual had a full beard without a mustache and wore green pants, a white shirt and a green vest. A long clay pipe stuck out his mouth.

"You're a... whatcha-ma-call-it."

"Leprechaun," he said. "Quite true. And you're the new fellow. I thought I stop by and lend a bit of help. Me name's Shane O'Callaghan but everyone calls me OC."

I introduced myself. "Leprechauns go to Hell?"

"I'm here on a contract. I'm the floor manager. He's something, ain't he?" He pointed the stem of his pipe in the direction Bubba had gone.

"He acts pretty much like all my other sales managers. So, who's the customers?"

"Imps. They spend time here each day before they go off to the physical world to make mischief. What are you selling?"

"Hair dryers."

OC laughed. A merry laugh that sounded out of place in Hell.

"What's so funny?"

"You'll see in a minute. I have to go." He slid down a table leg and disappeared.

A little while later, the doors banged open and I heard the customers swarming into the market. My selling antennae quivered with excitement and I sensed the customer's enthusiasm. Maybe Hell wasn't so bad.

Then I saw them! Only waist-high, the imps wore tan robes belted with a rope and were completely hairless.

Two ran up to my booth. "Whatcha got?" one asked. Cute in a bizarre way, they resembled piglets and had two large fangs overlapping their lower lips. The fangs made them drool a lot and the tops of their robes were covered with food stains. The entire gaggle was identical as if a cloning experiment had run amok.

"Hair dryers. A quality product that will give many years of service. For a limited time, the price is very affordable."

"What's it do?" asked another.

"Dries hair."

The imps glanced at each other, frowning. "We got hair?" one asked.

"Ain't noticed any."

They made rude noises at me and left. This wasn't the first time an idiot sales manager had assigned me a product the customer didn't want or need. Closing a sale under those circumstances produced an exhilaration that beat drugs and booze. I hadn't earned the title "World's Greatest Salesman" by giving up. I studied a drier, trying to match a product benefit with a customer need, but came up blank.

I still pondered the situation when Bubba returned. "How many have you sold?"

"I'm getting a feel for the customers."

"You're a loser just like the rest of this mob." He punched me in the face. I bounced off the wall into a vicious blow from the whip.

"Next time I'll have them all sold." No one insults my sales skills.

"Spunky, aren't you? Not for long. You'll break like the others did." Bubba glared at me for a second then marched away to improve the morale of my coworkers.

Bubba's comments puzzled me. Was his job to ensure failure of the sales force? Was that what Hell was all about? The opposite of earthly success? In that case, I faced an eternity of sales failures. Fire and brimstone couldn't be worse than that.

The rest of the day did nothing to improve my dwindling spirits. The imps either insulted me or ignored me. Bubba administered lectures on my defective sales talent with an occasional punch to underscore a point.

After the flea market closed, my morale sank even lower when I was locked in a room with the rest of the torpid staff to spend the night in total darkness.



While I awaited the arrival of the imps on the next day, OC paid another visit. "How did a leprechaun end up in Hell?" I asked him. "That has to be a Hell of a story, excuse the pun."

"It was during the bad years in Eire, the Eighteen-forties. No food. No treasure anywhere in the land. No one had shoes to mend. So I spent a few years traveling around the world. One day in Rome, a man offered me steady employment. I signed a contract and found out the man was Beelzebub and I had to work his flea market. I open the door. I lock the door. I count the customers, as if anyone cares how many imps show up. I hate this place and its mindless chores."

"Then leave."

"Can't. The devil wrote part of the contract in invisible ink. I'm stuck here until I buy my way out of the contract. Not bloody likely."

"No?"

"I need a chamber pot filled with gold to buy my way out. The ruffian pays me five shillings a week and charges me the same for room and board. I can't remember the last time I had money to buy a pint."

OC shook his head and stared at the floor for a few seconds. "Have to open up," he said and left.

My body itched like crazy and my feet hurt so much I couldn't stand still. With nothing to do, I examined a hair dryer looking for a sales angle. I couldn't hawk them as blunt instruments because of the cheap plastic construction. One of the settings on the three-way temperature control switch read 'cool'. I found an electric socket, plugged in the drier and turned it on. It pumped out cool air. Cool compared to the jungle-like air in the room. I smelled success! I could sell these appliances and show Bubba what I was made of. I had never accepted failure in life and I wouldn't accept it in death.

I grabbed the nearest imp and showed him the hair drier.

"No hair." He giggled and ran a hand over his bald pate.

"This product is a technological breakthrough. Hold this in your hand and turn it on."

He turned it on and looked expectantly at me.

"Point it towards your face."

His face lit up with astonishment.

A crowd of imps watched us. "My friend, you're using the first personal air-conditioner specifically designed for use in Hell. And it can be yours for only fifty dollars."

I took the hair drier and shut it off.

The imp looked crestfallen.

"Do we have a deal?"

The imp, nodding and drooling, reached into a pocket of his robe and pulled out a wad of paper. He handed it to me.

I looked at the paper. "This isn't real. It's counterfeit Monopoly money." Black ink smudged my fingers.

The imp reached for the drier. I pulled it back. Other imps crowded close, eager to buy. A burst of adrenaline surged through my body. Could I possibly sell my way out of Hell? What an accomplishment that would be. I concentrated on the pain emanating from my feet. It increased my resolve to succeed. With experience borne of a lifetime, I had a sales plan developed in a few moments. I held up a hand to get the attention of the customers. "This is a special purchase and can only be bought with gold coins. Preferably Krugerrand."

"How do I get Krooger-thingees?" The imp pouted.

"Krugerrand. You can get them in South Africa among other places."

The mob of imps turned towards the door.

"Get some gold coins and we'll do business tomorrow."



I had difficulty concealing my enthusiasm. OC showed up at my booth and gave me a penetrating look. "There's something different about you."

"Tomorrow," I grinned, "I'll set Hell's sales record. I'm going to sell these driers."

"Good on you. That'll be interesting to see."

To kill some time until the doors opened, I told him how depressing the other sales staff was; how poor their morale.

"That's because Beelzebub is so good at his job."

"What's Bubba's job?"

"Bubba? Good name. His job is to break everyone's spirit, to get your morale lower than an imp's foot."

"That's why he beats us?"

"That's part of it. The other part is selling to customers who won't buy. Very debilitating to sales folk, I hear. And that continues until your morale reaches bottom. When it can't get any lower, you get reincarnated as a bug. Over and over."

"Really?" Bughood. How gross.

"I should know. Bubba taught me the reincarnation spell so I can get people started. After that, the Environmental Destruction Agency takes over and puts you where you'll do the most harm."

When the doors opened, the imps stampeded to my booth, pushing and shoving to get ahead of others. They stood by the booth and stared up at me. The floor glistened with drool.

"Do you folks have gold?"

They nodded. Each held out a hand with a few gold coins.

I took three Krugerrand from the closest imp and gave him a box. He took out the drier and turned it on. "Don't work." The creature looked pitiful.

"Plug it into an electric socket."

He ran off to search for an outlet.

An hour later, I had sold a hundred driers and collected a large pile of Krugerrand. I knew the customers loved the product and were happy to buy it. A real win-win. Selling in Hell was as good as selling in Manhattan.

Then, I saw Bubba stalking down the aisle. He glared at me and ignored the other sales folk. He did not look happy. I stacked twenty coins on the table and waited. My glow of success faded more with every step the beast took. When he reached the booth, a claw shot out and grabbed my throat. I left the ground and found myself staring into his maw. "Filth!" he roared. "Now, I have to get something else for you to sell. How dare you increase my work."

Typical sales manager reaction. They're never satisfied.

Bubba shook me then hurled me against the wall.

From the floor, I pointed to the coins. "That's the sales revenue I booked."

"What do I care about money?" He scooped up the coins in one fist and threw them at me.

Krugerrand hurt.

Bubba stomped off, battering everyone he saw.

After the imps left, OC came over and admired the bruises on my face left by the Krugerrand.

"Hear you caused quite a dust-up. No one has ever sold a bloody thing as long as I've been here."

"Do me a favor. Look in that cardboard box." I pointed to one against the wall.

OC opened a flap, gawked at the gold and sat down in a heap.

"I'd like you to move that to your office. For security reasons."

OC took out a coin and bit it.

"Funny thing, gold in Hell," I said. "Perhaps, you can figure out something I could use it on."



Bubba handed me a box of shoehorns and gave me a wake-up thrashing. I knew I would sell them but I didn't let on to Bubba. After he left, OC came by. He had a wary look about him and kept glancing at me out of the corner of his eye.

"By chance, have you figured out anything to do with the gold?" I asked.

"My chamber pot's half full."

"And?"

OC cocked an eyebrow and stared at me. "I need a full pot."

"Will that save me from the bug world?"

OC nodded and I went for closure. "Let's summarize. I get you out of your contract with Bubba and you get me out of Hell and a bug life."

"It's awful risky." He gave a big sigh. "But the thought of sipping a pint of Guinness makes it worthwhile."

"I need to bring in about three hundred more Kruggerrands. I won't be able to do that much revenue all in one day. I figure two or three days."

"What do have to sell today?"

"Shoehorns."

"That's a tough sell." OC shook his head.

"It's no different than when I was alive. You get a quota to fill but the customers and your sales manager turn out to be obstacles."

OC left to open the doors and soon the imps swarmed into the market. To my surprise, the ones with hairdryers wore them stuck in their belts like pistols. "Whatcha got today, Mister?" one asked.

I peeked over the table at their feet. Alas, no shoes. How do you sell shoehorns to barefooted people? I had a bizarre thought and asked, "What's your favorite food?"

"Smashed potatoes."

"Well, this, my friends," I held up a plastic shoehorn, "is a smashed potato spoon." My creative spark generated a burst of elation that actually road-blocked the pain emanating from my feet. "This lets you eat more potatoes faster than your friends. So you can get more potatoes than they do."

The imps made appreciative sounds and my selling juices ramped up in anticipation of collecting revenue.

"How much, Mister?"

"Two gold coins. A real steal at this low price."

"Is this enough?" An imp held out his hand with a single Krugerrand. "It's all I have left."

"Me too." Several other imps held out a lone coin.

"Since we're all friends, I'll reduce the price to one coin. Keep in mind, management is not responsible for what happens if you use these with soup or peas."

The shoehorns were gone in a few minutes. My euphoric glow lasted until I saw the imps pitching gold coins against the wall. They had lied to me and I had fallen for the oldest trick in the customer's survival manual.

Bubba came by and gave me a pep talk. "Scum. I warned you about making more work for me."

My feet exploded in even more intense pain.

"Har, har. Now your shoes are size ten, with a three inch heel and are set for two-hundred-fifty degrees."

I sobbed. Agony turned my peripheral vision to a red mist.

"You're a troublemaker," Bubba sneered. "But not for long."

His remark filled me with foreboding. I needed a lot more gold to fill the chamber pot and to do that, I needed time.

An hour later, Bubba returned. I braced myself for another thrashing but the monster placed a box on the table and said, "Let's see you sell these." He laughed and left to bully someone else while I made an ancient and obscene Sicilian gesture behind his back.

I opened the box and found ten Latin-French/French-Latin dictionaries. My skin crawled. I needed more gold—a lot of it—and Bubba stuck me with a truly unsellable item. Imps collected by the table anxious to see my new product. I chased them away.

OC came by. "You're needing a lot more gold," he reminded me.

"The trouble is, Bubba left me only ten items in this new batch. And I don't know how I'll sell them."

"The chamber pot has to be full." OC gave me a hard look.

"I know, I know." I showed him a dictionary. "I need magic to sell these things."

"The imps are obsessed by magic." He chuckled. "They're always looking for magic spells."

I stared open-mouthed at OC for a moment, dazzled by the idea that flooded my mind. I grabbed OC and shook him. "I know how to sell the books."

"How?" OC looked a little dizzy from the shaking.

"I'll build up the demand right now and send the little buggers out for more gold. A lot of it. Tomorrow, I'll sell the books and have enough gold to fill your bucket and then some."

"Hate to bust your bubble," OC said, "but you ain't gonna be here tomorrow."

"What are you talking about?" A feeling of dread overwhelmed me. I knew the answer.

"Beelzebub wants a reincarnation for tonight. Yours."

I slumped against the wall. Bubba was victorious. The idea of bugdom was less onerous than letting the brute win. Desperate for victory, I racked my brain for a scheme that would thwart the devil. "Would the imps pool their money to buy a book? To share it?"

"Not a chance." OC snorted. "They don't know the meaning of the word 'share'."

"Wait a minute!" I snapped my fingers. "I know how to get the gold. I'll beat that bastard yet. OC, I need a bunch of paper slips. Can you get some?"

"Aye." The leprechaun jumped off the table and disappeared.

I banged my hand on the table. "Can I have your attention, please?"

The imps ran over and looked up at me, drooling expectantly.

"I hold in my hand a book of unique—"

"Can't read, stupid," an imp called out.

"—power, a priceless artifact that contains every magic spell word in two different languages."

The imps collectively sucked in their breath.

"While it is true that you can't cast spells if you can't read, possession of the book offers great protection against spells cast by your enemies."

"How much, Mister?"

"More than any of you have."

The imps groaned and stamped their feet.

"However, I have devised a plan that will allow anyone with three coins to buy a chance to win one of these precious books. It's called a lottery. Is anyone interested in buying a chance?"

The imps shouted and pressed closer each holding out a small hand clutching Kruggerrands.

OC returned and I instructed him to number the slips. Once he finished a few, I started collecting the money. In a brisk business, I sold almost a hundred-fifty tickets. Once the buying stopped, I dumped the stubs in a box. OC climbed in, kicked the stubs about, then selected one and handed it to me.

"Twenty-nine," I announced.

The imps stared at me.

"Uh-oh. The imps can't read the stubs. OC help me find the winner."

It took a few minutes to find him. The imp accepted the dictionary and graciously made a rude gesture at the others.

Ten minutes later, we had the other winners, all of whom treated the losing imps with disdain.

"Did I satisfy my end of the bargain?" I grinned at OC while he played with handfuls of gold.

"Aye. I'll do my part tonight."



In the dead of night a week later, OC slipped through the doors. "Finally found you, so I did." He moved closer. "You won't understand any of this Tony, but I gotta tell you anyway. Bubba was mighty angry that I had the gold to buy back the contract, and he knows you helped me. So you see," OC paused to clear his throat, "I hadda make sure you didn't go back into sales and end up in the flea market again, 'cause he has a long memory."

OC looked into the pair of brown eyes staring at him.

"Since you got me outta that place, I'm giving you something precious. It's the 'Luck of the Irish'." OC waved the stem of his pipe and the air filled with tiny, twinkling, golden

stars that drifted down into the stall. "Mayhap, you'll win the Irish Sweepstakes or the Kentucky Derby."

When the stars touched its skin, the foal whinnied and shook its head.



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Hank Quense writes humorous and satiric sci/fi and fantasy stories. He also writes about fiction writing and self-publishing. He and his wife, Pat, usually vacation in another galaxy or parallel universe. They also time travel occasionally when Hank is searching for new story ideas. His new anthology of humorous and satiric short sci/fi and fantasy fiction, *Strange Worlds Stories: Volume 1*, will be published on 9/15/15 as an ebook. *Moxie's Decision* is the second Moxie novel and will complete Moxie's character arc. It will be published on 11/15/15 in ebook and print editions.

Beyond the Visible Spectrum

Axel Taiari

In sleep I see what lies beyond this world. Vast shapes skulk in the cold crevasses of the cosmos and slither through the fissures of reality. They glide through the void in perpetual craving, unscathed by the ravages of time and cellular decay. They are as they once were, and as they will continue to be. Amorphous shapes squirm and spread across the skyline then coalesce into organisms the size of moons. Dimensions rupture like dehiscenced wounds. Alien suns cower before slippery swarms. An eye opens. Plump spores rain down from orbit. There is nowhere to hide and I must—

Distant noises.

I meander in and out of consciousness. Colossal insects whirr. No, the frequency is mechanical, not organic. *Drills*. The dreams recede. Disjointed thoughts hit me in staccato waves. *Where?* Yellowstone Caldera, way below the resurgent dome and the geysers, past the water reservoirs and the brine, close to a soothing pocket of basaltic magma. The heat reminds me of home. This is my nest.

The humans have found me, as they always do. I am grateful for this intrusion; I have been dreaming for too long. And I will be hungry soon.

Dust settles. Rocks crumble. Heavily armed troops enter my domain. One of the soldiers pokes my cocoon with a probe. The cocoon's membrane bursts and splashes her with miasmatic juice. The acid chews through her armor, skin, and bones. She collapses, dead but still melting. The others back away and open fire. Electricity jolts my nest. I do not feel any of it.

The soldiers stop and dispatch remote-controlled vehicles. The dog-sized contraptions advance on tracks and slash through my cocoon with near-proximity lasers. I fall out. The vision of my form, sprawled on the floor and drenched in its own liquids, prompts some of the humans to gag.

It is freezing outside, barely fifty-five degrees Celsius. I cannot move. I am a prisoner of my own biology, for now. This torpor will last for days—longer, in a colder climate.

The drones drag my body into a plain-carbon steel drum reliable enough to transport nuclear waste. My prison is then loaded onto a plane. Onboard machinery spells out our direction via binary sputters: a subsurface laboratory in the far reaches of Antarctica. Fully fed and awake, I could spend months standing still in a blizzard, but after getting ripped out

of my cocoon in the midst of regenerating, cold is the last thing I want. Bathing in lava would shock my system back to life. A few minutes on a windy beach would trigger a narcoleptic fit.

The plane gains altitude. The temperature plummets. Maggots squirm and feast on pallid meat. Black blood bubbles out of gelatinous soil. The eye knows I am here. The maggots burrow into my tail and I try to slap them away, only to realize I am still in my cage. These visions are wrong. Something is happening.

With what little energy I have, I plunge into the spectrum.

Radiations in a dizzying array of frequencies hit my skin. Radio waves bounce against the ionosphere; my pores soak up the refracted downpour of skywave propagations. Ultraviolets and infrareds purr. Gamma rays bombarding the ozone layer echo like distant drums. I am too feeble to sift fully through all the ranges but can easily tell the air is bloated with artificial noise. How long have I hibernated for? Sixteen years, based on the plane's flight instruments—a short nap. How quickly a whole planet can morph. A ceaseless flood of machine-made waves drowns out the *Homo sapiens'* grunts.

I detect something irregular lurking in the alcoves of that deafening static. No, I detect some *thing*. It is dim, far from this quadrant, but strangely close at the same time. I try to hearken to the alien resonance. I follow its trail like a frenzied bloodhound, and a surge of dread plows into me.

The thing reeks.

Its presence emits signals on myriad wavelengths. In its putrid radiations, I witness the dust-scattering rings of distant magnetars. The charged particles of pulsar wind nebulae cackle at the gravitational pull of dark matter. Amoeba-shaped alpha lobes twist grotesquely in the dark. The Boötes void opens its non-mouth and gobbles up galaxies. Gas giants cower in the blinding, high-redshift pulse of quasars. A blue straggler abides by its vampiric nature and sucks the hydrogen from nearby stars to retain its youth. I behold the universe's predatory beauty and—

I feel fear.



The humans keep me in a sterile room. I am in a large cube made of a radio-opaque material—bulletproof, multilayered glass, according to its subtle quivers. Outside of the cube,

two scientists study me. Their voices' fundamental frequencies disclose their genders. One male, one female.

"This specimen is roughly five feet tall. Vaguely humanoid, but seems to share features with mollusks and gastropods. Some sort of mucus drips from its skin. Does it move using muscular contractions?"

"I can't see any legs, so you may be right. I count six—no, seven appendages. Are they tentacles? Tendrils? It could use those for movement."

Their poise is admirable. The speakers' voices are composed and steady, free of laryngeal spasms. I suspect the use of relaxants.

"No eyes or any organ that might allow it to see. It might be blind."

Wrong. Lack of eyesight does not imply blindness. It is easy to keep a goldfish in a bowl of stagnant water and fail to be impressed by its tetrachromacy. Some humans are blessed with aphakia and the others dare to call them handicapped.

One of the scientists, the female, approaches the glass. She is now close enough for me to decrypt her bio-tag. Doctor Lisa Marino. Not so calm after all. Her heart rate is elevated. Sweat gathers in the small of her back. Her body reels with the wrongness of what I am. In her stomach, gastric acid attacks a recently eaten bagel. A couple of centimeters away, a tumor clutches to her pancreas. The tumor is gorgeous, shaped like a meaty cloud the color of nicotine.

"Can you understand us?" the woman says.

Spoken words are nothing but air displaced in discernible patterns. I try to move one of my tails to reply.

Her male colleague, remaining at a safer distance, says, "This thing doesn't even have ears, Lisa."

Move. *Move.*

"Doesn't mean it can't understand us," she says. She tries again, in multiple languages. "Est-ce que vous me comprenez? Me entiendes? Wakarimasu ka?"

The answers are *yes, oui, si, hai*. She could try in Italian, Chinese, Latin, Arabic, in any accent or patois. Were she able to wield Sumerian, I would scrawl logographic symbols depicting the fall of Ur. Should she address me in ancient Egyptian, I could draw hieroglyphs of the black ziggurats built in my honor now resting far below the dunes of Giza.

But I am paralytic. My body craves warmth. The ambient temperature in this prison would suit a mammal. If I remain here, then I will die, and so will Lisa Marino, her colleagues, and the majority of life on Earth. My senses do not betray me.

Lisa Marino turns to the male. "Let's run some preliminary tests."



The scientists leave. I expected them to start with close-contact tests such as drawing blood or gathering skin samples. I suppose they deemed it too risky. Their survival instincts prevailed over their curiosity.

Their remote probing begins with environmental testing. Gases are pumped into the room. Oxygen drops to two percent then rises to a hundred. Hydrogen sulfide fails to provide any result. Cue butane, ethane, halocarbon, helium, silane, neon, propylene, and on, and on. Hours crawl by. If only they knew I don't breathe.

Lisa Marino and her colleague return to take a closer look—through the safety of the glass, of course. "Its skin isn't showing any reaction at all," she says. "I don't understand what this thing's made of."

The male says, "Should we try to adjust the temperature?"

"Yes," Lisa Marino says.

I brace myself for freedom until the thought hits me: I might fall asleep and never wake up.

"Current temperature?" she says.

"Twenty-four Celsius."

"Bring it down to six. Let's see."

Unseen machineries come to life and shuffle energy. Docile molecules replace their agitated counterparts. Minutes flash by. The scientists' body heat vanishes. Their voices dwindle. The range of frequencies to which I am attuned shrinks to that of a jellyfish, then shrinks some more. The world fades, and so do I.



"Did it just move?"

"Did anyone see that?"

"Holy shit!"

Sensory floodgates burst open. My insides stir.

The temperature is sixty-one degrees. I understand: I fell into a slumber but the humans, after leaving the room, turned up the heat. Unconscious, I must have twitched without realizing it, like a cat surrendering its motor control to the puppeteers of REM sleep.

Sixty-three degrees. My retracted antennae thrum. The voices did not come from this room. Good. I am no longer useless. The login terminal outside of the chamber speaks, offers the names of every single person who works here. I chart the room. Glass cube, cement floors and walls, cameras, laser tripwires linked to alarms, gas pumps, speakers, fire sprinklers, creaking pipes, wires snaking through the walls. The only exit consists of a 25-ton blast door. Hiroshima's Little Boy would barely scratch the paint. Nagasaki's Fat Man might do it. How do I get out? I need a burst of heat-flames, or an explosion. Could I use electric sparks? Impossible. Even if I could force the humans to pump flammable gases in here, the sprinklers would render my efforts futile.

Sixty-seven degrees. Radio waves undulate through me and divulge the presence of three hundred and forty-five different computers connected to the same network. The content of their hard drives remains cryptic for now.

"We can't raise the temperature much higher, we'd have to move it to a different compartment," Richard Rankine says over a distant microphone.

"Bring it up to seventy degrees," Lisa Marino says.

Sixty-nine degrees. A computer in the hallway reveals the existence of an armory two floors up. Grenades would do the trick, but I still feel too weak to blink. And even if I could, I doubt it would be more than a couple of meters away.

Seventy degrees. I slap one of my tails against the ground. My appendage whacks wetly against the surface and remains there, flaccid as a dead snake. I had hoped to make a dent in the cursed thing. Pathetic.

Screams of joy and surprise erupt over the airwaves.

Lisa Marino brings her mouth close to a microphone, and I imagine her shaking her head at the stupidity of her question. "Do you understand me?"

I tap my tail once. Still too weak, but at least it's movement.

She gasps.

Richard Rankine says, "It doesn't mean anything. It may just be a muscular reflex. Perhaps a reaction to sounds or variations in temperature."

I move again. Richard Rankine shuts his mouth.

"If you understand this," Lisa Marino says, "move your tail twice."

I oblige.

Contact has been established.



Lisa Marino faces me, separated by glass. Six soldiers stand next to her, three on each side. They don't carry anything I could use. Diplomacy may be my only way out. "Tap once for yes, twice for no, three times if I misunderstood you or if I need to change my question," she says. "Understood?"

One tap.

"Do you—Jesus Christ—do you wish to harm us?"

One tap. This is not a lie. Her use of the word *wish* is careless at best.

"Are you... are you from this planet?"

Two taps.

"Are you alone?"

Three taps. Clarify.

"Are you the only one of your kind here?"

One tap. This is my dominion.

"Did our tests hurt you?"

Two taps. No, wait. Three taps. Then one. The cold.

"Do you need something from us?"

Finally. One tap.

"Food?"

Two taps.

She remains silent for nearly a full minute, lost in thought. I tap three times and she says, "Okay, okay. Let's go back to basics. You were asleep. We took you from your resting place, brought you here and you fell asleep again, but you woke up. And you've been hurt."

One tap.

"Was it the temperature?"

One tap.

"You need us to increase it?"

One tap. A loud one.

"Anything else? Oxygen? Water? Humidity?"

Two taps.

Over the sound system, Richard Rankine says, "It could be lying to us, Lisa. What if we raised the temperature and this thing... does something?"

How eloquent of him.

"He's right," she says. "We can already communicate in a rudimentary way. If we raise the temp, nothing guarantees our safety."

I slowly lift up a tail. The guards tense. Even more slowly, I point the tail at the glass I'm encased in, the cameras, the soldiers' weapons. My message: you've got the upper hand.

Something occurs to me. This whole complex must have been here for several years. They were prepared. Lisa Marino's composure is a clear sign of drugs, yes, but also a sign of long weeks of training. One does not encounter a new life form with such casualness. I don't understand, don't yet have the potency to plunder the data that might provide an answer.

Lisa Marino says, "I'm sorry, but I would rather await further instructions. Are you at risk if you remain at this temperature?"

One tap. Not a lie. She didn't ask if the temperature itself was the risk.

She sighs. "Richard, what's the max temp for this containment unit?"

This containment unit. This means there are more. Awaiting further instructions indicates a plan.

"Eighty degrees. Lisa, I don't think—"

"Make it eighty degrees," she says. She readjusts her coat, takes a deep breath. "I'll be back in a while. If you try anything, we'll bring the temperature down. Way down. Will you remain calm?"

No other human has ever dared to threaten me before. She is growing on me.

I reply with a single tap. A lie.



Eighty degrees. The clock ticks. It has been over an hour since Lisa Marino and her lapdogs left the room. Could I blink now? Or would I splat against the glass walls? Perhaps not even reemerge at all, too frail for my body to handle the transfer? And even if I blinked, what would I do then?

So I stay still and gather strength. I feel it in the way my receptors open up. My understanding of recent technology grows with each passing second. My vocabulary expands.

Lisa Marino is six floors below, video chatting with a scientist in Beijing, asking how quickly they could ship one of their T-ray scanners. They discuss the use of full-body scanners, thermographic and SPECT cameras, mid-range Doppler ultrasonographs, and a litany of other devices that will tell them nothing. Above and below her location, I map the heat pulses of scientists milling about the building like hyperactive ants, digging into the data they have gathered.

Building. Data. Why did they build this place?

I sacrifice a fraction of my juice and slither through the nearest wireless signal. SHF radio waves lead to the router, which guides me to the central network and the armada of computers connected to it. Heavy encryption shrouds the evidence, but encryption is code. Code is binary. Binary equals electrical states—an effortless read. I process the information. Instants later, I stumble upon a hard drive with details about this location.

This isn't the only compound they built. There are two others—one located in the Sahara desert and the other in Death Valley.

The humans know they're not alone. I believe they've always suspected it, the suppressed truth clinging to their reptilian brains like a cautionary tick, but technology has given them proof. They've been searching all around the globe, and they're digging for more. This is how they found me. Not chance. Not randomness. They were ready, or so they thought.

I maraud through bits. The image appearing in my mind's eye triggers something I have not experienced in centuries. Raw, pure, beautiful anger.

They're building a gate. Those dumb bipedal wastes of carbon. I see the pictures now, the maps, the schematics, the emails exchanged. Beneath the Krubera caves, hidden three kilometers under the surface is a monument to madness. Pillars loom over an underground construction site. Two fusion-powered pylons the color of obsidian enshrine the gate's yawning mouth.

That thing I felt back when I was being transported hasn't found Earth by itself. The humans are inviting it, building a bridge between Here and the Void. The portal must be in its final testing stages, almost functional. How else could I have suffered the thing's presence waiting behind the door, its stomach rumbling with never-ending hunger?

And what does that make me? A test run? Just a small catch while they wait for the big fish?

The hubris of those monkeys.

They've misunderstood their sentience's defining purpose. Consciousness is the ultimate evolutionary trick. It allows the humans, as well as my kind, to ponder and fear the existence of hypothetical predators. Precognitive terror is a gift; to ignore it is insanity. Instead of hiding from the unknown, they've decided to confront it. They've forgotten what it's like not to be the dominant species. I never forget. This has allowed me to endure the eons, but I am only a small blip on the cosmic scale. There are worse things than me. The humans don't know. They've never blinked past the clouds and tried, *really* tried, to see what this universe is. They're not wary of living organisms big enough to encompass stars. They've never observed interstellar bacteria devouring mineral giants in a matter of days, then vomiting their DNA into the vacuum, letting it drift until it reaches a new system. Farmer mycophages infecting worlds with mutated fungi, altering the landscape as they see fit, readying it for consumption. Packs of elephant-sized beasts that would make tardigrades look fragile, latching on to passing asteroids and gorging on their gases.

So the humans take a walk through the dark with a flashlight, shouting into the abyss in hopes of what, exactly? Finding Mommy or Daddy? Curing their loneliness? Solving their philosophical cravings for answers? *I don't want to be alone out here*, cries the prey. *Don't worry, you're not*, growls the predator, baring a bloody grin.

I can't afford to wait any longer. I must get to the armory.

I hit the ground with my tails, testing my strength. A scientist watching the feed whispers to his colleague, "Did you see that?"

I slam the floor harder. The glass walls tremble. Ceiling lights blip once. One hundred seventy guards receive an alert on their ear chips and pour out of their rooms.

Lisa Marino hangs up on Beijing, runs for the nearest microphone. "Lock it down!" she screams.

No choice. I picture the armory's location and blink.

My body wanes. Molecules separate and glide in unison as if lifted by the same quantic stream. Photons entangle, shift, duplicate, and die, leaving room for newer copies. For an instant, I am nothing, and I am at peace.

Then I rematerialize and crash into a wall with enough force to trigger every single alarm in the compound.

I was too weak. I only flashed out of the cube. Desperate plan: I'll wait for the guards to come in here, suck their juices for a brief boost, and then—

"Do not enter that room," screams Lisa Marino over the speakers. "Everyone, remain where you are. I repeat: do not enter the room."

Behind the door, eighty-three soldiers stand still, rifles at the ready.

She's going to bring the temperature down, as promised. Smart. It's a matter of minutes until the cold cripples me once more. I focus on the armory, visualize its position in space by chasing power currents, its dimensions and contours, the walls I must pass through in order to reach it. I plot a mental path and blink out into a hallway, right in front of two soldiers.

"Oh, fuck," one of them says, just before I instinctively slap him hard enough to pulverize his spine. The surroundings spin as my brain recalibrates its internal compass. I'm not where I should be. The second soldier raises his weapon. I smack it away, impale him using three tails, lift his body up and wait for it to stop seizing. I consider draining him but detect boots stomping around the corner. Sixteen soldiers on the move. I'd have to kill them all in order to drain uninterrupted; I can't afford the waste of energy. I blink, hoping for the right location this time. Bullets rip through my body as I subside.

I reappear in another hallway and collapse, shaking from exhaustion. Bullets plop out of my flesh. My internal juices begin the healing process, weakening me even more.

This is the right place, though. The armory is down the hall, thirty meters away. I sense the touchpad on its door.

I try to blink once again and pain explodes within my chest, intense enough to maim my receptors for a split second. I've depleted myself. I may have one jump left—a potentially crippling one.

Lisa Marino compared me to a mollusk and a gastropod, back when I was in her glass cube. If only she could study me now, using my extremities to propel myself, creeping along like a vulgar octopus advancing on dry land. A security camera spots my movements and turns its flashing eye in my direction, prompting a base-wide radio freak out. Soldiers will be here within thirty seconds, maybe less. I crawl, each forward movement slower than the last. *Keep going, I tell myself. You will not die here. Not like this. Not to them.*

I reach the armory. The elevator at the opposite end of the hall dings. Its doors open and soldiers storm out. I squash myself against the door and focus.

I blink with everything I have left and reappear on the other side of the door. I stumble and thrash around like a fly with its wings ripped off. My awareness grows treacherous. Reality slants. Plane waves morph to flat lines then become spikes. Light bulbs on the ceiling cough up aliased halos. Soldiers screaming behind the door sound like squeaking mice. Something is pummeling my torso, my head.

I realize I'm hitting myself with my tails—but only six of them. The seventh was lost in the latest blink, leaving behind an open wound from which juices squirt. I miscalculated the trajectory.

Concentrate. Find the grenades.

I'm not strong enough to discern the faint signal of a motionless grenade anymore, so I must rely on touch. I blindly ruffle through the shelves, shaking and convulsing as my internal organs fail.

The soldiers try to open the door, but it's sealed shut due to the alarm. "We need the armory on floor B-2 unlocked right now," one of them says into his headset.

I knock over entire rows of rifles, backpacks, med-packs, and night-vision goggles. A tail latches onto something vaguely ball-shaped. It's a flashbang, so I discard it. Bulletproof jackets, guns and knives, helmets, ammo, and I—

"E.T.A. ten seconds," another voice says.

—grasp another item. *Yes.* I turn around, bring the tip of a tail to its pin.

The door bursts open, and the grenade explodes.

Air particles break the speed of sound. Fire engulfs everything. The detonation bathes me in 1,100 degrees Celsius. In the span of a millisecond, my abdomen hardens. Antennules sprout out of my skin. Electro-sensors swell. I spit out sinusoidal discharges in monstrous waves. They ripple through the base. I perceive every life form in a four-kilometer radius, from the cockroaches scurrying across bathroom tiles to the fish-fat albatross riding air currents above us. The base's complete topography emerges in my mind, its structure sketched by power lines and radio waves. Time sags, and I see everything.

I am awake.

I am hungry.

Before the room even begins to collapse, before the blast knocks me backward or reaches any of the soldiers, I blink out of the armory and into Richard Rankine's office. My tails undulate behind me. Flames dance on my smoking skin.

"What—" he says, losing control of his bladder.

I leap forward and pin him to the ground. A prehensile proboscis blossoms out of my skull. I stab the appendage deep into his chest and suck him dry. His skin withers like a fruit robbed of its moisture. His eyes get swallowed deep into their sockets. His organs collapse, shrink and liquefy as I syphon them up. Liters of blood pour into my bloating stomach. Richard Rankine's connective matter rips apart. My seventh tail regenerates as I eat. I suck and suck until nothing remains save for a pile of collapsed bones and teeth.

Another warp. I reemerge in Lisa Marino's office. The guard doesn't have time to aim. I swipe and behead him. Blood geysers out of his neck. His body slumps to the floor.

"No, please," Lisa Marino says, backing away until a wall stops her.

I extend a tail, grab her by the neck, and bring her closer. My proboscis lengthens again and Lisa closes her eyes. I pierce through the skin of her stomach and she lets out a yelp of pain. I navigate past the rectus sheath, the transverse colon, the stomach, and locate the tumor. Instead of sucking, I spray some of my vital fluids, then retract the proboscis and release my grip.

She opens her eyes and brings a hand to the slow-bleeding wound. She is too shocked to speak.

I dip a tail in the dead guard's blood like a quill in ink, and write on the wall to my left.
TUMOR. HEAL.

With another tail, I point at the first aid kit hanging on the wall.

"Why?" she says. "I don't—"

I write, *I WILL COME BACK.*

This is not a threat, but an offer. Cultists have their uses—smart, knowledge-starved ones even more so.

I vanish and re-emerge in an empty room, free from distraction. I tap into the computers, the networks, the power lines, light bulbs and heating, artificial web-strands that spread around this place and allow it to function. I unleash the closest thing I have to a roar—an electro-magnetic pulse powerful enough to shut it all down.

Generators fail. Alarms are muted. Monitors go black. Two drones drop out of the sky. Every vehicle has been disabled. The nearest working electronic device is over a thousand kilometers away. Darkness descends.

Humans, well—they scream.

I will return soon. I have stored my food source. I would never let it spoil.

And so I blink again, through walls and layers of cement and concrete and steel, out into the ultraviolet light of day. I land on a hill, dash upwards, snatch a passing bird and drain it, then discard its carcass. The remains dim on the infrared and succumb to gravity. Cloud droplets emit a dazzling symphony of crackles as they freeze. Molecules swirl in a never-ending binding ballet. The sun spews deadly rays through a cloudless sky. I blink into the ocean. Pillars of radiations hammer the surface with unrelenting intensity. Distant whales hum songs of sorrow. Wavelengths ebb and flow, untangle, coil, and bend like dithering rainbows. The Earth spins through a vast, carnivorous cosmos.

I am heading to Georgia. I will shred my way through anyone in my path, race beneath the ground, deep into the network of caves. I will face the gate. But before I punish and then devour the humans guarding the place, right before I make the walls collapse and let rocks bury this folly forever, I will grant the thing on the other side a single peek. I will meet its ravenous mouth, and in that sliver of time where natures clash in hopes of asserting dominance, I will spit out a single message with my antennae:

This is my territory.



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Axel Taiari is a French writer, born in Paris in 1984. His writing has appeared in multiple magazines and anthologies, including *Bastion*, *365tomorrows*, *No Colony*, *Cease*, *Cows*, and several others. He is the co-author of *Soul Standard*, a noir novel-in-novellas to be published by *Dzanc Books* in 2015.

Little Sprout

Rebecca Roland

Hush. Hush. They come. The hungry ones. Go hide in the closet. Whatever you hear, don't you dare come out. Of course I'll hug you, but quickly now, and remember, I love you. No, nothing will happen to me because the soldiers will be here soon, and they'll take care of the hungry ones. Keep the lights off and stay quiet, click the safety off the gun, then aim it at the door and shoot anything that comes through, no matter if you're scared, don't think, just shoot.

No. No. Don't cry. I won't die. I'll keep you safe, always. Now I need you to be brave, sprout. Here, cover yourself with my jacket and hunker down, just like that, now. Think of the song we sing every night at bedtime, and imagine my arms around you, little sprout, until I return.



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Rebecca Roland is the author of the *Shards of History* series, *The Necromancer's Inheritance* series, and *The King of Ash and Bones and Other Stories*. Her short fiction has appeared in publications such as *Nature*, *Fantastic Stories of the Imagination*, *Stupefying Stories*, *Plasma Frequency*, and *Every Day Fiction*, and she is a graduate of the Odyssey Writing Workshop.

When the Dead Are Indexed

Gary Emmette Chandler

Can't tell you how pleased I was to find a ticket to the exhibit about all those dead authors. My mother, see, she was a real big fan of the late 21st century classics—anything by Carter, Lee, Nguyen—you name it, she read it. She even had a collection of real books, old stuff her gram had passed down before the SHI made it illegal to cut down trees and make books out of them.

The SHI got their first pick, of course. They packed the museum with parties and raffles and benefits, so the first month was pretty much exclusively for the SHI. After that, the exhibit was first-come, first-serve. By the time I got off work and was allowed to log onto the web to buy my ticket, they were all gone—they'd sold in minutes, I guess.

Well, I started moping around the factory a bit after that, and James, this buddy of mine, he comes over on break one day and asks me what's wrong.

"I just feel like I'm letting her down," I tell him. "She would've wanted me to see it."

"Calm down," he says. "What do you mean? Who?"

I'm having a hard time putting my thoughts together so I take a breath, think it over, and tell him:

"My mother was a fan of those authors they're having an exhibit on, downtown. But the tickets are all gone, and I was really hoping to go."

He just watches me for a minute with this strange expression on his face. He's a funny looking guy, James. I mean, I'm no looker, sure, but he's got this big red beard that looks like it's gone and swallowed his chin. I can't look at that without smiling. But I guess this time I didn't smile. I guess this time I started to cry a little.

"I can get you a ticket," he says. "It's going to cost you, but I can get you one."

Without thinking, I stand up and throw my arms around him. He doesn't even get embarrassed. He's a good guy, James. We go back a long way.

Turns out, James knows this guy—and this guy knows this other guy—and they've got an operation where they buy up a bunch of tickets for upcoming events, just in case anyone needs them. Like James said, though, it didn't come cheap. I ended up forking over almost a month of my wages but I didn't mind. I was just pleased to have the chance to go.

Time comes, and it's a perfect sort of day. I mean, there are just these tall, thick clouds up above, pressing the wind around, and stirring the trees. I leave the factory down by the

airyard, and as I'm walking, I feel so full of life. It's like it's moving through every inch of me—like I'm one of the SHI. Like I'm plugged into the web the way they are, and I can feel the world just passing through.

Times like this, I wonder what the SHI call themselves. I wouldn't think they'd use the same word as us. It's short for "Super High Intelligence" and the SHI, well, they're sort of like a better version of you and me. There's not too many of them, though—you've got to be born real special to be a SHI, and even then it's not guaranteed you get to be one.

If you're born into a special family, meaning you've got a certain amount of money and your parents know some folks, they put you through all these tests when you're a kid. If you pass those, they put you through more. And if you pass *those*, they put you through some more, and they keep on doing that 'til you're twenty or so. Then if you pass one last test, well, then I guess you get to be a SHI.

Maybe I'm nuts, but I don't think I'd like to be a SHI. I don't think I'd like to give up being able to have kids just so I could be super bright and not have to die.

I don't mean to sound like I'm not grateful, though. I know what the SHI did for us. Back before the SHI, the world was a mess. We had wars and diseases and all that. This country hated us and that country hated us, because one of them believed in this god or that, and we were all trying to kill each other for oil, and water, and all these other things.

But then we got the SHI and they put a stop to all that. There's no need for fighting when you've got the SHI fixing everything all across the world. Some people call them angels because of that.

I just don't think I'd like to be one—even if I really *could* feel the whole world flowing through me.

Anyway, as I'm walking and thinking about all this, I pass all the high rises, and the flight paths, and the taxi cabs, and the gutters, and I make my way to the museum downtown.

It's got these tall stone walls that stretch up and up, and these giant stone lions at the entrance with these cubes in their mouths that hover there and flex and spark and look real sharp. When you walk by, the lions turn to look at you and growl. Gave me chills when they did that, but I liked it all the same. It felt like there was something majestic guarding this place, and I still felt a bit like a SHI walking in there—I really did.

So I walk up to the counter and there's this lady there who's maybe in her fifties; she's got these fancy glasses that just hover there on her nose, and she's focused pretty intently on her gPad, so I cough, and say:

"Excuse me, miss—I'm here for the 7:30 tour group about the dead authors."

When she looks up she seems kind of irritated to be interrupted, so I grin real big, just trying to be nice.

"You have a ticket?" she asks with a sigh.

I tell her I do, and hand it over. But then I start to panic, and think, *What if the ticket's a fake?* I almost start crying right there, thinking I've come this far and I'm not going to be able to see it after all.

But then she looks up and hands me back a sticker to put on my worker's jacket and points to a line I hadn't seen before, over in the corner. She tells me the rest of the group's waiting, and I swear, I'm so happy I just want to lean over and kiss the lady. I don't, of course, but that's how pleased I am.

Anyway, I shuffle on over to the line, just grinning away, where about ten other folks are standing against the wall. As I'm waiting, I see this older couple, and this lady that reminds me of my mom—just the way she has her hair, I guess—and for a second I start getting real down again, wishing she could have come, so I glance around the lobby, just trying to think about something else.

Marble floors. Vaulted ceilings. Painted tiles. Real fancy—but it's not helping much. Lucky for me, the tour guide comes up and tells us the tour's starting.

"My name is Mr. Bennett," he says, smiling at us. "I will be your guide today. Please, this way."

Mr. Bennett moves the chain that'd been blocking entry and, in a narrow line, we follow him into the east wing of the museum.

We come into a long, wide room, with all these pictures on the wall, and stop in front of this image that's dancing on the wall. And this picture—I mean, I have to blink to realize what I'm seeing. The tour guide stops, turns to us, and folds his hands behind his back.

"William Carter," the guide says, "best known for his first novel, *A Thousand Nights Each Day*, published in 2021."

Everyone's kind of murmuring to each other, and for a moment I'm wishing my mother was here so I could do the same with her. But then I'm also wondering if that would be so great.

My mother was a big fan of Mr. Carter, and I don't think she would have liked this much. See, my mother was no prude, but writers were kind of like her version of god. And this guy, well—he's not looking so much like a god, here.

Mr. Carter's reclining on his bed, and he's not wearing any clothes. In fact, he's pleasuring himself pretty fierce.

"Hey Mr. Bennett," I blurt out. "Why's Mr. Carter pulling on himself? I mean, what's that got to do with his books?"

The guide gives me this real thin smile, and doesn't answer me directly. Instead, he turns to the group and says, "This image was captured by the FBI, several years before Mr. Carter's death. It was leaked posthumously, by an unknown source."

I look around, and all these folks are nodding away while the guide's talking, so I figure maybe I just don't get it.

"The doubt and self-loathing," the guide says, "the struggle that was evident in his later work—it's all there, in his eyes."

This girl with brown hair, who's maybe a few years older than me—twenty-one, twenty-two—speaks up, then: "This is from a video call, right?" she asks. "Who was on the other end of that call?"

Now, the tour guide—Mr. Bennett—gives her a full-teeth smile for that, and I start noticing how uncanny he looks. I mean, he's the type of fella you'd expect to see in an ad, drinking Scotch in front of a fireplace or something, all sharp-like.

"We can only speculate," Mr. Bennett says.

"Hang on a minute," I say, realizing what the guide's getting at here. "The FBI? Are you telling us Mr. Carter was some sort of *pervert*?"

I get another thin-lipped smile from the guide.

"Carter was the subject of an investigation, but he was never indicted. Still, is it likely? I believe so—yes."

I'm a little stunned by this. See, I never knew much about Mr. Carter. His books were all about the beauty in ordinary stuff, like working a crap job. And sure, some of his characters did some dodgy things, but you figured that was just part of the story, right?

I know what my mother would have said: "Unfounded, vulgar." I can almost see her standing next to me, shaking that long, grey braid of hers. Truth is, I don't know what I think.

The next few pieces aren't so much of a shock, I guess, but I'm still not seeing the point. A photo taken by a drone of an author getting busy with someone they shouldn't be, or a bill for some sex site, or this awful thing an author said to a friend, dug out of their chat logs, or this mistress or that mister, and on, and on, and on.

It's all gossip, and proof of gossip, and the guide keeps telling us how each piece informed the authors' work. For the most part, I just don't see it. I start feeling real uncomfortable, because I'm not sure if I should still be fond of these authors and their work

because I'm not sure how to feel about them as people anymore—like Mr. Carter, I mean—and honestly, I start getting real confused about what's what.

But then we come to one I feel *real* bad about.

There's this author, Alice Lee, who I've always thought was really great. I mean, you ask who my favorite author is, and no exception, it's her.

Let me ask you this: you ever read something where it feels like your soul's about ready to float on up and out your body, because it reaches you on some level you can't explain? Well, that happens each time I read Ms. Lee.

And this "piece" here? It just made me mad.

See, they didn't have anything bad on Ms. Lee—not like Mr. Carter. She was just out at this event, dressed up real nice and fancy in a black dress, and I guess she forgot to put on some underwear that day. So she's getting out of this taxi cab, and someone snaps a picture of her lady parts, and I guess that went up all over the web.

It's not that I think anyone should be embarrassed about their body. I just think we should be able to decide whether or not we want to show our skin, and how much of it we show. I get that sometimes it's not up to us—like this piece we saw a few minutes ago, with these naked body scans of all these authors from their trips through airport security, and how that was for national safety and all, and how it's public record now that they're dead—but it doesn't mean I think that's right.

I mean, honest. If Ms. Lee had wanted to show her lady parts to us, then I think that would have been alright, because that was something she wanted to do. But I think it's pretty clear that wasn't the case. She wanted to be remembered for her work, not her skin.

"I don't think Ms. Lee would have wanted us to remember her for this," I say to the guide, interrupting him while he's talking some nonsense about how the "piece" provides such an extraordinary glimpse into history. *History*, my foot.

"She would've wanted us to remember her for what she wrote. Not some pervy photo snapped by the paparazzo. Why aren't we talking about her books? Why are we gawking at all this junk?"

I get a lot of cold looks from the group for that, but I don't care so much.

"If you are not enjoying the tour," the guide says to me, real sharp and stern, "you are welcome to leave."

I guess I didn't realize I was shouting when I said what I said, but somehow the whole thing is just making me feel unwell, and kind of panicky. I don't know what I expected. Something else—something refined—something like the books themselves. Not this.

Either way, I quiet down after that, and just try to get what I can out of the tour. The museum itself is something to look at. It's got these big stone pillars all the way through that were probably carved hundreds of years ago. You can almost feel the history in the tiles beneath you—all those feet tromping through to see this exhibit or that—and I like that, I really do.

But then I start wondering if all the exhibits were like this, if they were all about the people and not the art itself. I'm pretty far deep into thought about this, and starting to get kind of blue about it too, when—out of nowhere—the girl with brown hair, who spoke up earlier, says, "It's a SHI thing, you know."

I blink at her, not really sure what she means.

She's just standing there with this sort of bemused half-smile, waiting for me to say something, when I realize we're lagging behind the tour group. It's just the two of us in this long, ceiling-lit hall, surrounded by all these bad pictures of all these dead authors.

"Didn't you notice?" she asks, after a minute or so. "Our guide's a SHI. This whole exhibit, it was planned by SHI. That's why I'm here. I'm writing a story on it."

"You better catch up with them, then," I say, "you're missing it."

She laughs.

"I think I've got enough. This whole thing, it's a joke. But that's how the SHI think."

She's got this way of smiling while she talks, which is real unnerving, and real, just—wow.

"You're..." She pauses, and puts her tongue into the bottom of one cheek. "Different. You know that?"

Different. I hate that word. Not because it's bad or anything, but because that's what people have been calling me for a long time, when they really mean something else.

"Yeah," I mumble, looking at the floor. She's wearing brown shoes with this fringe at the edge that has a bead or two. "When I was a kid, my mom took me to the doctor. This man in a white coat told me I was different. That my brain was just wired a different way."

"Oh," she says in this startled tone, and when I look up she's sort of blushing. "That wasn't what I meant. I meant it in a good way, you know?"

She starts speaking kind of fast then so it's a little hard for me to follow what she's saying. I can't help but wonder if that's how I sound when I get upset.

"I just mean, most people, well, they completely buy this garbage. They think it's art. But it's not. It's just the SHI trying to mimic the one thing they don't understand."

I stop fidgeting then because I realize she's not making fun of me—and I'm interested in what she's saying.

"They're not human anymore—not really. And because of that, they're fascinated by us. With humans. We're this bizarre sort of anomaly to them. To them! They don't have sex, did you know that? They don't have sex, and they don't eat, or shit. Most people don't realize that—I guess it's not something the SHI like to have us talking about. They know they're different. I think they see a part of themselves in us. In who they used to be."

"So all this," I say, "that's how the SHI see us?"

The girl nods and I start feeling kind of bad then. For the SHI, and for being rude to Mr. Bennett. I mean, they're perfect—and they're not. And they live forever like that.

"I should say I'm sorry," I tell her and she kind of laughs again.

"To the SHI?"

"Yeah," I say, and she just watches me with this strange sort of smile, as we start walking again, trying to catch up with the rest of the group.

When we get there, they're standing in front of this person—or this projection of this person, I guess—and Mr. Bennett's speaking to the group.

"The web has become more than a simple vault of data. If we collect enough information on an individual, we can simulate their personality. Theoretically, if we had enough data we could completely re-create someone's mind. This is where our tour ends—with Alan Graham. He was around 71% complete when he died. When the dead are indexed, we have—well—Mr. Graham."

The SHI turns to the projected man and says, "Mr. Graham. If you would."

This man—this projected man, I mean, who's all lights and particles, and data—starts to speak.

"Thank you, Mr. Bennett," he says, and I look around, and everyone's jaws are sort of dropping to the ground—even the girl I was talking with. I still don't know her name, I realize, and that bothers me somehow.

"When I was alive," the projected man says, "I was very good at analyzing other people. Now, I'm much better. Step up and I can take a reading of everything we know about you—all of the data we've collected through the web. I can tell you what your chances are of being re-created. Like me."

So, one by one, everyone steps up, and I guess he sends the data directly to their heads for privacy concerns, because after a minute or two, everyone walks away looking dazed. Our guide—the SHI—just stands to the back, arms folded, with that thin-lipped smile of his.

When it's my turn, I'm not really sure if I want to know. But that girl, well, she goes right ahead and when she's done, she turns to me, looking bewildered, with this expression I can't quite place, so I figure I better go too.

I step up, and put my hand out—to shake his hand I guess, but it goes right through—and I hear the projected man's voice in my head.

"Data: 4% complete. Relevance: unremarkable. Likelihood of fame: 2.3%. Chances of re-creation: too low to calculate."

There's a pause, then, as the projected man looks at me in this sad sort of way.

"I'm sorry," he adds.

I look at the projected man and then I glance over at that girl, who's still watching me with that strange look of hers, and then I turn to Mr. Bennett and I think of my mother, and all those authors resting here, in all their pieces.

And I just smile.



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Dragon Rodeo Queen

Kate Sheeran Swed

It don't matter how I came to be known as the Dragon Rodeo Queen. And I guess it don't matter how many gold buckles I got displayed on the walls of my room in the boarding house, neither—there's twenty-three, in case your heart's set on countin'—long as it's clear who's apt to win should the urge strike you to issue a challenge. What does matter is that I, Matilda Lane, finally convinced them to let me tackle the Purple Rage.

Purple Rage, he's legend. Purple Rage's spilled all the best riders except me, and that's only because those rodeo officials wouldn't let me try due to my "delicate feminine nature."

Ha. They're afraid my delicate feminine nature's gonna whip the men, and good.

There ain't nothing delicate about a woman who can beat Colson Hicks in the arena. I told them that, too. Reminded them how I stayed on Red Honey for a full half second longer than Colson ever managed. First championship he lost in three years, but not the last.

Weren't I the one who bested that snarling Emerald Lady in Houston?

Ain't I won more championships than any man on the circuit?

I wouldn'a cared, only it's a matter of pride. And I ain't getting no younger. Fact is, I'm set to retire soon, find a nice place to cool my heels for a stretch. What a thrill, if I were to retire after conquering a beast like that. Plus, they double the prize money for Purple Rage. The last winner needed it for his medical bills, or so I hear.

Folks think I'm crazy for riding rodeo, and could be they're right. But once you're set up on that rough hide, wings flapping against your thighs and fire shooting outta the fella's maw like he's hoping for a barbecue lunch—well, it's pure thrill.

It weren't til Colson himself put in a word that they changed their minds about me riding Purple Rage. And it weren't even so much a word as it were a challenge. "Let her try," he said, his eyebrow quirked up like he'd caught a fishhook to the forehead.

They shouldn'a needed the second-best dragon rider on the circuit to speak for the first best, but never you mind about Colson Hicks. I got what I wanted, and now I'm set to face Purple Rage.

They got the name right, that's for certain. Now I'm finally up close, I wonder how I can stay on his back even before they let him loose. He's beating his wings against the sides of the chute, angry at being constrained, his whole body shuddering. He's a right beautiful dragon, as beautiful as he's fierce, purple scales gleaming, the spikes in his tail catching the

sun like amethysts. He's got feathered plumes archin' from his brows like a showgirl that paints her face with mascara, and they give his eyes a human look. If I'm being honest, it don't quite sit right how human he looks.

Purple Rage's a smart bastard. Most dragons will attack when you're down, that's a fact; the rodeo's got jesters to distract the beasts till you've cleared the arena. But when Purple Rage splays his riders in the dirt, he bats them jesters clean outta the way. While the crowd's still collecting and paying out on bets behind their protective barrier, Purple Rage goes after the rider direct. He maimed a man in Borger. I seen it happen.

"No shame in changin' your mind, Matilda, if you want to," Colson Hicks says, swaggering up beside me as I contemplate Purple Rage. He's set to go next, then me.

I spit in the dirt. "Not a chance. However long you stay seated on that dragon, I'll double it."

"Care to make it interesting?"

As a rule I try not to gamble given how my ma lost all our funds in a game of poker before she took off for good. Usually I'd say this ain't a gamble at all; usually I'd say it's a sure thing. But I'm looking at Purple Rage there in his chute, and all of a sudden I'm not so certain. He's taller than Miss Kinney's boarding house, and that's a full four floors. His head alone's the size of a train car. Already there's ribbons of smoke snaking out of his nose, like he knows what's comin' and he ain't pleased about it.

"What's the bet?" I ask.

"Your buckles against mine, to whoever places higher."

Colson's got twenty-two buckles to my twenty-three, which means if he wins, we'll be even. Cheating him outta that opportunity ought to be good enough for me. But I sure could use those extra chunks of solid gold. I could set myself up nice without sellin' my own, maybe even find Ma and entice her home.

I stall by sliding my tube of burn cream from my pocket. I take my time with it, squeezing a good dollop of the stuff onto my palm and then rubbing it into my knuckles till all the white's smoothed into my skin. Lots of riders use it for good luck, I suppose. I'm using it because I got singed last week by a curmudgeon called Yellow Wing.

If I take this bet and lose, it'll be like I never played the dragon rodeo at all. Worse yet, I won't have the means to retire or the means to prove my ranking, should these rodeo "officials" turn forgetful. Wouldn't put it past them. And dragon rodeo's the only bread and butter I know how to make.

"You don't have to," Colson says, smiling that insolent bandit-smile of his. He's nothing but the spoiled son of a dragon rancher. Got nothing better to do than chase thrills. He spent more on that wide-brimmed hat he's wearing than I spent on my jeans and vest combined. He don't buy no general store burn cream; he gets hurt, he sees the doctor direct.

"I figure it might be unfair to take that bet, seeing as I'll win it sure thing," I say, tucking the tube into my pocket.

"Shouldn'a asked," Colson says. "Oughta known you ain't got the stomach."

I shouldn't rise to the bait, but pride's a tricky thing. I spit again. "You're on."

Colson smacks me on the shoulder. "Good woman," he says. I want to smack him somewhere else, but I don't.

When they call his name, Colson strolls over to the mounting platform like he's walking into a saloon. He starts up the ladder, steady and confident, his regulation spurs sending glints of light skipping over the crowd of handlers and attendants. They're all gazing at him as if he's some kind of dragon rodeo god. I don't let it rankle no more, though. I'm used to it. Besides, they'll see their mistake soon as I get my turn.

The rules of dragon rodeo are simple. You stay on the bucking lizard as long as you can and hope you last longer than the other guy. You can hang on with both hands or brace yourself against the hide, but there ain't no hand holds, no ropes, no tools allowed.

As it happens, my status as Rodeo Queen comes partly thanks to my skill at the hands-free ride. That's a whole other division, and it ain't for the weak of heart. Not for the weak of knees, either, seeing as how you're only allowed to hold on with your legs. You can be sure none of Colson Hicks's buckles come from hands-free. No one stays seated long, but I stayed the longest.

They set the harness around Colson's arms, and the mechanical crane contraption cranks him out to the center of Purple Rage's back. Soon as Colson touches them scales, Purple Rage's jostling and snorting puffs of flame out his nostrils, but he can't go nowhere because he's held tight in the chute. Colson shrugs off the harness, the crane draws away, and they raise the gate.

Purple Rage is in the arena before you can blink, stomping so hard that the bleachers shake. He swings his tail through a cloud of kicked-up dust, and the movement snaps his whole spine back and forth. I'm afraid it'll take more than wiggling to unseat Colson, and Purple Rage must think so, too. An animal his size ought to lumber, but when Purple Rage changes direction, he moves like he's no bigger than a ferret. He hardly slows as he twists his body into a circle, curling his long neck around to try and pluck Colson off. If he does, he'll

clamp those cactus-sized teeth straight through Colson's guts. Colson dodges, shifting his balance so far I expect him to slide right off the other side. Purple Rage snaps, then grunts in frustration as his jaws catch only air.

Colson hangs on. I never seen him try this position before. His arms form a V-shape from his shoulders in toward his groin as he steadies himself. Most of us prefer a wide stance to help with balance. In fact, I can't think of a time I've seen another rider compete this way.

It may be a strange position, but it's working. Ten seconds, twenty, and then the announcer says Colson's beaten the Purple Rage record of thirty seconds. Right when I'm starting to wonder what kind of a fool bet I got myself into, Purple Rage rears onto his hind legs and extends his wings as far as they'll go. He can't fly, not with the stabilizers clamped on them, but Colson can't hang on when he's held vertical, neither. He slides down Purple Rage's tail and lands face-first in the dust, then scrambles out the way as Purple Rage's foot lands dangerously close to his skull.

When the copper panels on the mechanical scoreboard click into place, it's a mind-boggling thirty-three second event for Colson. He's broke all Purple Rage's records. He's broke all his own records, too. And damn it, he's broke mine.

Colson's panting like a coyote when he steps over to me, sweat dripping off his face, but he's grinning as though he's already won our bet. "If you wanna pay up now and save yourself the humiliation, you just go ahead," he says.

I ignore him, and he laughs. It's not long before they got Purple Rage in his chute, looking for all the world like he's set to maul the next person that comes near him. He's stomping and pounding against the gate, and all at once I'm thinking I don't want to proceed. And it's not even that I'm scared Purple Rage might do me in. We all got our time, and if this is mine, I reckon I'm ready to face that.

No, I don't want to proceed because Purple Rage is in pain. I can see it. Maybe it's something about the way those human-like eyes are darting back and forth, or the frenzied way he's pushin' at the gate. His whole demeanor feels different than it ever was with the other dragons.

But Colson Hicks is smirking at me, and I got twenty-three buckles—and my livelihood—on the line. Never could resist a challenge, and now he's got me right where he wants me.

I head to the ladder and begin to climb. I have to keep my focus just to do that, seeing as my palms are slick with sweat. I make it, though. I step up on the platform, pull the

harness over my shoulders like I'm putting on a jacket, and for a second I'm airborne as they lift me over to Purple Rage.

At first, I think it'll be over before it starts, he squirms so much beneath my seat. But after a second I feel steady, and I shrug the harness off my shoulders. I take a second to stroke Purple Rage's scales. Up close they're translucent. If you turned the horizon heavenward to see the night sky through a sunset, stars glittering beyond the streaks of pink and purple, that's what Purple Rage's scales are like.

I place my palms shoulder-width apart, and that's when I see them. Six perfectly round holes, breaking up Purple Rage's scales and leaking blood onto his hide. Colson must have used some kind of cleated handhold to keep him locked to Purple Rage. I can't prove it. I got nothing but Colson's strange position as evidence, and those officials ain't never been apt to side with me. But I know it. Colson cheated, and he hurt Purple Rage.

They're all looking at me expectantly. There's nothing I can do, so I show Purple Rage the only kindness I can by making sure I'm not touching his cruel injury. Then, I nod.

The world lurches. Purple Rage gallops into the ring like he can unseat me with unbridled speed. Maybe he can, but mostly I hope he doesn't remember how he shook Colson off a few minutes back.

If he was angry with Colson, he's furious with me. He bucks like he's trying to repeat his previous success, but he can't quite get there and it's driving him nuts. I still feel a draft between my seat and his hide, though, as he sends me airborne for a split second before crashing to the ground with a force that jams my teeth together. Turns out he is smart enough to remember how he beat Colson, but the pain's preventing him from doing it again. And his wounds are still bleeding. I can't stand it.

The crowd's a blur of dusty color. The announcements babble together in a wash of sound. Might as well be speaking French, for as much as I can understand them. I got no idea how much time has passed or what I'm risking, but I'm not the queen of the hands-free ride for nothing, am I? I dig into my pocket and slip out my burn cream, holding on to Purple Rage with nothing but my thighs.

Purple Rage twists, and I slip. I right myself with one hand. Then I smear as much of that cream on them bleeding holes as I can. I toss the tube over my shoulder and hold on. The medicine makes his scales slippery, and I don't even know whether human burn cream will do anything to soothe a cut up dragon.

Purple Rage pauses and arches his head around to look at me. A curl of smoke escapes from his nostril, but he don't snap. Instead he turns a slow circle, one of them human

eyes taking me in like he knows exactly what I done. I still got to brace my palms against his scales to stay up there, but all I can think about is how I hope that burn cream will make him feel better. Even if I lose.

I'm still focused on Purple Rage's eye when he sweeps his head away and gives his body one last shake. People are roaring, the announcer's shouting, and finally I'm on the ground like Colson. Only Purple Rage ain't chasing me outta the ring. He's letting them handlers take him straight to the chute, calm as a lamb.

The scoreboard clicks into place.

Thirty-five seconds.

Colson Hicks got a jaw like a fish when I exit the arena. "All the same to you," I say, "I'll be taking those buckles now."



I'll tell you what I did with those buckles I won from Colson Hicks, and I think you'll be surprised.

I handed them over to the rodeo folks, all twenty-two, and I told them they could keep my winnings if I could buy Purple Rage off them. They looked at me like I ain't known sense my whole life, but when I came to collect a week later after getting my property squared away, Purple Rage nuzzled my shoulder and came along after me, meek as a kitten.

I guess you figured out I had to sell my own buckles to buy a ranch. They set us up nice. It's far enough out of town that we've got our privacy most of the time, but close enough we can charge tourists to come and see Purple Rage in all his glory, roaming the fields at a distance, flying where he likes. He knows where the boundaries are.

And sometimes, when I miss the thrill, Purple Rage bends down and lets me on his back. And then he bucks and spins like he's trying for all the world to throw me off. But I know if I fall, he'll swing around to catch me.



Kate Sheeran Swed loves hot chocolate, plastic dinosaurs, and airplane tickets. She has trekked along the Inca Trail to Macchu Picchu, hiked on the Mýrdalsjökull glacier in Iceland, and climbed the ruins of Masada to watch the sunrise over the Dead Sea. Her stories have appeared in *Writing Tomorrow*, *Verdad*, *HOOT Review*, and *Words and Images*. She recently completed an MFA in Creative Writing at Pacific University.

The Adjunct

Patricia S. Bowne

The application process is no different from any other: transcripts, teaching philosophy, Skype. Until it reaches the in-person interview stage, and a flame-edged portal opens in your living room. But when you peer through, there are no fiery pits on the other side, no shrieking tormented sinners. There's just an institutional-yellow waiting room and a secretary behind a formica-topped desk.

"Yes?" she says, glancing up from what looks like a fashion magazine. "The Dean's waiting for you." She indicates an unlabeled door. "Go right in."

Here's how it works. He's naked, extravagantly male. He looks at you through eyes so narrow they're yellow slits, and lets a puff of smoke escape from the black holes of his nostrils. They all were smoking when you saw them on Skype, but you now realize you never saw any pipes, any cigarettes. He lowers his face a bit and takes in a deep, snuffling breath. You almost expect him to bury his nose in your crotch.

Then he speaks.

"So, what we have open is one Anatomy and Physiology lecture," he says. "It's three credits, two thousand a credit. I assume you're familiar with Netter's *Atlas*?"

You tell yourself all the usual stuff. It's a free market society. Your role is to make the best bargain you can, not to hobble yourself with ideals the academy would never follow in its interactions with you.

You tell yourself education—even teaching demons how to take apart humans—is a civilizing force. You'll teach them more than they bargained for! Disruptive pedagogy R US.

You tell yourself you deserve a job. You've played by the rules all your life—spent years as almost-free labor in somebody's lab—only to find that the tenure-track positions they groomed you for are extinct, have been for years. The system's screwed you over. Here's your chance to screw it back.

But finally, it isn't anything you tell yourself that matters. It's the bills.

It's embarrassing how quickly you get used to teaching a roomful of naked demons, who assemble themselves out of mist before your eyes. Your classes topside start to look stodgy and timid, hypocritical. Cleavage, miniskirts, tight jeans, why do they bother?

The first time you stumble on two of your demon students moaning in the underworld's scraggly bushes, you almost applaud them. Straightforward, you think. Then the

topmost student looks up at you and smiles. They all have perfect teeth. But his have blood on them.

"Want some?" he says, and stretches an arm toward you—not his own arm. You see why the bottom student is moaning. The top of the humerus is perfect, white and smooth. The rotator cuff has every tendon in place. But a part of you says, *That's so wrong! There ought to be nerves in there.*

You back away, but you can't back away from yourself. An arm torn off one of your students, and you find nothing to criticize but its anatomy? For ten minutes you hate yourself. But when class meets, they're both in their accustomed seats, with all their limbs. They're both smiling at you with perfect teeth. Who are you most furious at, them or yourself?

"Today," you say, "we'll discuss the brachial plexus."

"We have a problem," the Dean says. Is he even more male than he was a month ago? "We've lost an instructor. How would you feel about taking on the anatomy lab?"

Lost an instructor? Just how... You hesitate, so he lays it on thicker. "Eight thousand," he says. "It would make you a category two employee. Campus facility memberships. Benefits."

"A one-credit lab pays more than the whole lecture section?"

"The lab is the whole point," he says.

Of course they have a cadaver. No cats—you're relieved. You love cats. No, you don't have any problem with what's laid out on the steel table. You have a problem with the second table, the empty one. And with the students crowded around it. A pre-human part of your brain recognizes the way they're moving. Prowling. An eddy through the classroom, each student checking the others. You don't catch the moment when they decide, but you see them pounce. You hear the victim squeal. You watch them strap him to the empty table. Two dissection groups, after all. *What are you thinking?*

You snap at them, at yourself. "What do you think you're doing?"

Big innocent eyes look up at you, one pair of them wide with hope and terror.

"The practical," says one. "You have to see what we've learned, don't you?"

You remember that day in the shrubbery and the shoulder with no nerves in it. You frown at the speaker, channeling the most imposing profs of your past. "What you've learned about dissection technique or about construction?"

He smirks. "We already know dissection, don't we? Construction, of course."

You jerk your chin toward the struggling figure on the table. "Just how does viewing *his* work tell me about *yours*?"

This surprises them. They look honestly baffled.

"He's the weakest of all of us. If he can do it, you know the rest of us can."

"But I won't know that the rest of you *did*." You scan the class, mentally dividing by two. "We'll need another six tables, won't we?"

The big innocent eyes have narrowed now. Not so interested in dissection when they might be the recipients, are they? Wicked glee warms your chest. *Disruptive pedagogy R US*. "Perhaps we can identify an alternative method of assessment," you state, your tone cutting off any disagreement. "Discuss it among yourselves for the next five minutes and present me with some possibilities."

It's a vigorous discussion, the kind you wish you could get from your students topside. But then, the stakes are higher. They finish while you're still busy thinking about assignment redesign.

"You have a consensus?" *Before me, they didn't even know the word.*

They glance side to side, none of them really happy with the agreement. The strongest and weakest are both sulking, so it's a middling student who speaks up. "We'll each make one," she says.

"One what?"

"Whatever you're teaching that day. Then you can assign us a full body to make for the final."

"How'll I see what's in it?"

"We can always dissect them afterwards—or you can watch while we make part of it. We can explain it as we go."

That appeals. Oral exams are the best—no reading, no writing feedback, and they can learn from each other's performance. You nod. "That's a good basic idea. But you're missing the most important part."

Big innocent eyes, again.

"It's an Anatomy and Physiology class," you say. "Your bodies need to be able to maintain homeostasis. They need to live."

They look at each other, as if you are missing something obvious. "A body can't live without a soul," says the middling student.

Now you're the surprised one. This goes against most of your experience in graduate school. "Are you sure?"

They all nod.

Well! You are nothing if not able to revise a procedure. "Don't you have souls all over this place?"

Their first attempt is pitiful. The body never opens its eyes; they can't even make the heart beat once. A dead frog could do better, you think—and tell them. They're starting to look like your topside students, to you at least. The bloom is off the rose.

By the time you finish lecturing on the cardiovascular system, they're making bodies whose hearts beat. But they still haven't mastered perfusion or the baroreceptor reflex, so their projects are brain dead before they're conscious. They stopped complaining to you after the third frog comparison, but you recognize their expressions. These are the sullen, hangdog looks, the righteously indignant glares, that presage a summons from the nearest administrator.

"I understand that you've revised the assessment structure for the lab," says the Dean.

"Yes. I felt the original plan was a bit too focused on anatomy."

"I see." He shuffles papers, leaving charred fingerprints on their edges.

"If it helps any," you volunteer, "students usually make a huge breakthrough two days after they've told an administrator the project is too hard."

"Do they indeed?" He looks at you sort-of-but-not-quite over the glasses which grow out of his nose; their fleshy frames bisect his pupils. It's a good expression, potentially threatening or even ogling, but impossible to pin down. You resolve to practice it in the mirror.

Two days later, the demon students succeed. Their body sits up, opens its eyes, looks around, and screams. Then it gasps for breath and you discover what a shoddy job they've done with the motor neurons and the diaphragm.

You also discover a little guilt as it suffocates (turning properly blue) at your feet. You remind yourself that this is by no means the worst thing that's happened to a damned soul. This is probably a vacation for it. *They probably volunteer for it*, you tell yourself. How can this comfort you, when you know it's not even slightly true?

With the taste of success on their long purple tongues, the demon students become obsessed. All hours of the day and night (so far as those exist in the always yellow-hazed underworld) find them in the lab creating microscopic neuromuscular junctions, wiring the columns of the spinal cord, inserting venules and capillaries between every layer of cells. The brightest student learns to put himself inside the body, testing its ability to move and breathe while the rest of them fine-tune it around him.

"It's just a kind of possession," he says offhand when you compliment him, but his chest flushes with pleasure. They've mastered the parasympathetic system.

It's harder and harder to pay any attention to your topside students. On the other hand, you're more prepared than you've ever dreamed of being. You develop a reputation among students as the prof who knows everything.

One day Vice-President Terrovian from Academic Affairs stops you in the hall. He's neither naked, nor extravagantly male. "I hear good things about your command of the material," he says.

You can't tell what he means by this, but the other adjuncts can. "He's making a case for hiring adjuncts instead of tenure-track to replace Hobbes when he retires," says the thin woman from Chemistry. She's taught here for thirty years, but nobody's ever bothered to learn her name. "Terrovian the Terror, they call him. He's led the push to downsize every year, no matter what enrollment's like."

"So he's not really complimenting me."

"Oh, he'll be full of compliments until you ask for a full-time position. Compliments don't cost anything." She shakes her head. "He led a task force once that suggested discontinuing the pre-med program just long enough to fire the tenured faculty."

"Seriously?"

"You bet. They tried to claim financial exigency, but the courts knocked that down. Now he's just letting people retire and replacing them with adjuncts."

"Not that he'll ever retire himself," says the Mathematics adjunct in her sixties. "He'll work till he's dead."

"If not after!" They both nod. With no savings, no benefits, they'll have to work that long themselves. You don't point this out.

Meanwhile, in the netherworld, your contract's been renewed for next semester with a ten percent raise and an office that opens into your living room through a flame-edged portal. Your commute is thirty seconds.

The demon students are all silent as the body stirs, opens its eyes. This time it doesn't scream; they've fixed the free nerve endings and the inflammatory mediators. It looks around instead and sits up. There's minimal paling of the face, and it recovers color within a minute. One of the students is following respiration rate, another watching a pulse oximeter you borrowed from your topside lab; both of them nod.

"Can you stand up?" asks the student beside the bed.

The body considers it and shakes its—his—head. "I'm dead," it points out. "I'm in hell. You should know that. You were there—and you, and you."

"That may be true, but now you have a body."

The body checks itself from head to toe. "This isn't my body," it—he—says. "I was a girl."

"Just try it out," urges one of the students. "See if it works."

The body gets up, gingerly. It takes a few steps and stops. "Yeah, see, that's weird. You have to walk like a cowboy. Why would anyone want to have those things down there?"

The students, however, are glowing. Literally. One of them has actual smoke coming off his head. "It worked! We did it!"

You check the pulse-ox. "The vascular and respiratory systems seem to be working. What about urinary and digestive tracts?"

"Here!" The student with his hair on fire holds out a glass of something sickly green. "Are you thirsty?"

"Not really," the body says, eyeing the glass with an uneasy expression.

"Go on, try it!" they urge.

The body takes a tentative sip, then makes a face. Another student reaches out to touch the glass; now the liquid is wine-colored, and the body approves of it. He—she—downs it in a few gulps.

"Do you have any more of that?"

The body lives for two weeks. Her digestive tract is always giving her trouble, and her kidneys fail after a few days.

"They hadn't studied that part yet," you apologize. "It's a two-semester course."

The body is surprisingly mellow about this. "I just wish they'd known the reproductive system," she says. "I never got to try that when I was alive."

You boggle. How could a virgin end up in hell? This is something the body won't tell you, though. The students offer to, but it seems wrong to let them. "When she dies this time, does she get a chance to be... reassigned?"

The bright student shakes his head. "She hasn't changed. She can't change."

She doesn't seem that bad to you. But what do you know? You've only known her for two weeks when she lapses into a uremic coma and sleeps her way to a second death. You're surprised by how much you miss her, by the drunken tears you shed in front of the other adjuncts topside. "A friend died," you explain, and they buy you drinks they can't afford. Guilt is becoming a lifestyle.

You can't fault the demons' work ethic. But for sheer stubbornness, they don't match up to the damned. Every soul they put into one of their handcrafted bodies says the same thing: "I'm dead." It lies down, shuts its eyes, and refuses to move. It dies from pure force of will. The semester's worn on, midterm has come and gone, and the little virgin (you never learned her name) remains the only soul that would say more than those two words about its second chance at life.

It makes you think, doesn't it? How bad can Hell be if the damned would rather be there than have bodies again? You ask the students offhand questions, but they just look at each other sideways and shrug. And those sideways looks and shrugs, too, you know. They portend rebellion. Requests that assignments be revised or reduced. "It's not *fair!*" the bright student says. "*Our* grade depends on *their* behavior!"

Payback? You wonder. "What we need," you say, "is a soul that doesn't know it's dead."

"Oh," they say in the tones of people who've just been shown the answer right there on their worksheets, in 18-point bold.

"We have to make it look like his original body," the bright student's saying as you come into the lab.

"Whose?" you ask.

"Someone just died in his sleep." You see sidelong glances between them. "We're going to put him in our body and he'll wake up not knowing anything's happened!"

Should you ask what he died of? *No point*, you think. *Too late now...* the waxy figure on the table looks familiar. Where have you seen him before? A niggler in your mind blossoms into full-blown *Oh no!* "That's Vice-President Terrovian!"

"I know," the student says, grinning. How proud he looks. "It couldn't be more convenient, could it? He'll be right there for you to observe."

Before you can come up with an objection (and really, what is there to object to?) they've finished. They dim the lights, so you can't see the Terror's expression when he awakens. He grunts, rolls over, and goes back to sleep. In the morning he'll think he had a bizarre dream. Three of the students volunteer to take him back to the bedroom they carried him out of. In a way, it's an anticlimax.

But as you walk back to your office, an idea is growing. If you know student work—and you know student work!—there'll be a full-time position coming open soon, with no Terrovian to block the hire.

You're so entranced by this—by plans to make yourself indispensable, the inside candidate, by the time Terrovian dies and Hobbes retires—that you don't realize the Dean's waiting in your office. You look around, sure you've gone into his by mistake. Something's different...

Here's how it works. He's naked, extravagantly male. He looks at you through yellow-slit eyes, and you imagine you see flames dancing inside them.

"The department's very impressed with you," he says. "We've voted to give you tenure. It was unanimous."

"Wow," you say. "That's really great. When do you need to know?" Inside, you're counting weeks. How long the Terror can last. After that, your topside department will still need to do a search, even if you've made yourself indispensable.

The Dean hasn't moved. He's still looking at you, and now it's obvious that those *are* flames dancing behind his eyes, greedy, gleeful flames. He clasps his hands and leans back. Your office doesn't seem as nice as it was a minute ago. Are those flames dancing on its walls or reflections of his light? You look around again. What's different?

It's the wall, or what isn't on the wall. The portal to the topside, to your living room—the one you've stepped through twice a day for the past two semesters. It's gone. You whirl, looking everywhere. There's no trace of it, and when you turn back to the Dean, he's bathed in flame. What you took for friendliness on his face is mockery, and his smile promises nothing pleasant.

"I'm sorry," he says, when it's obvious he's not sorry at all. "Do we have different interpretations of what 'tenure' means?"



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Patricia Bowne writes academic fantasy. Miss Mentor at The Chronicle of Higher Education gave her credit for pioneering a new genre, but others had done it before. *Swept and Garnished*, her third novel about life in the Demonology Department of a modern university, was issued in September 2014. Her short stories have appeared in *Year's Best Fantasy 3*, *Unsettling Wonder*, *Lorelei Signal*, *Rose Red Review*, and most recently in *Third Flatiron Press's Abbreviated Epics* anthology. More stories are due to appear in *Penumbra* and Nordland Press's *Affinity Series*.

Outside In

Anna Yeatts

Running my fingertips around the concrete pillar in the rental house bedroom, a story took shape in my mind. I wanted to write it down but I'd have to hide it from Scott.

"The outside became the inside?" I asked the realtor. What would I look like if my outside became my inside? Scott called me his beautiful, tormented angel. Perhaps my temperament would be more angelic if I was flipped inside out.

Scott and the realtor ignored me. I made a face at the realtor's cheap suited back. I already knew I wanted to live here, remodeled warehouse or not. If you asked me, the pillar gave the room ambience.

With my foot, I nudged the plugged up pipe sticking out of the center of the pillar's base. "Where does that go?"

"Nowhere," Scott said, flipping the lights on and off.

"Everything goes somewhere," I said.

"Renny, let it go, okay?" Scott gave me a look—his tolerant look for when I was teetering on silliness and he wanted me to rein it back.

I winked at him. He gave me a thumb's up and went back to hashing out the rental details.

I circled the pillar, wandering round and round, until the pads of my fingers burned from the friction.



Scott unloaded the last boxes off the U-haul while I swept the kitchen floor with a plastic broom.

"Fresh start." Scott kissed me on the temple. He smelled like sweaty cardboard. "Right, hun?"

"You betcha." I gave my best smile.

"That's my girl." The boxes made dry whispers as Scott slid them onto the cracked countertop. "I hope you like it here."

"I love it," I said, and I meant it. Our new rental house wasn't busy and full of honking horns like the old one. No, this one was tucked away in a sleepy part of town. Our bedroom used to be a parking lot until the warehouse owner had decided to add on an office space.

So he'd walled in the outside and made it the inside. I liked that.

Scott disappeared into the bedroom. When he came back, he had on a clean polo shirt.

I frowned. "You're working today?"

"Gotta pay the rent," he said. "There's only one key. I'll get a new set made soon. Take it easy today. No stories. Just rest up."

Writing stories made me too fanciful—or so Scott and Dr. Volmer said.

I thought of the pillar in our bedroom, wondered if I could wrap my arms all the way around it. Better to try that when Scott wasn't here.

"I'll be peachy," I said.

He locked the door from the outside. I tried the doorknob but it wouldn't budge. Probably a special warehouse door for added security. I'd ask Scott when he got home. A few hours inside wouldn't hurt me.

I explored the house from end to end. Such an odd, nonsensical place to live. I imagined a secretary in shoulder pads and plastic earrings banging away at a word processor where our kitchen table now sat.

The windows were barred from the outside but Scott said the office would have had a cash box so the bars deterred petty thieves. I didn't mind the bars. They made me feel safe. Protected.

And the bedroom had the pillar—a big concrete doozy cheaper to leave than to dig out during remodeling. It gave the room a mod-chic feel, all linear planes and sharp angles, then the smooth roundness in the center.

I wrapped my arms around the pillar and pressed my cheek to its silky smoothness. I could almost touch my fingertips in back.

When I leaned the side of my head against the pillar, I heard rustling—quiet whooshes like wind blowing through clotheslined sheets.

My breathing grew slow and deep. I closed my eyes and told myself this was my new beginning. Hugging the pillar, I filled my arms until my heart filled to bursting and I couldn't hold anymore.



The sun threw long striped shadows through the windows and Scott still wasn't home. Anxiety crept up my spine with kitty cat claws. My thoughts flew in a million directions. What if he'd had enough of me and left for good this time? I ran to the door, praying it was unlocked now. Maybe Scott had crept in while I dozed. I yanked the unmoving handle. The air stuck in my throat until I couldn't breathe.

I had no plan. No escape. No companion to lean on.

Stumbling into the bedroom, I sagged against the wall and stared at the pipe bulging from the pillar's base. Focal points helped me. I breathed in, held, then released through pursed lips, staring at the swelling circle the pipe mouth made, like a reptile pushing out its egg sac.

I pushed the story to the back of my mind and focused on the pipe, matching my breath to the quiet whoosh deep inside the pillar.



It was dark when Scott came home, but he was in such a good mood, I didn't want to ruin it with my bad day. My secret story was hidden under the sofa—a single sheet of notebook paper for now but I knew there would be more to come.

We made hoagies in the former break room turned kitchen.

"Can we get a real oven?" I asked. "Microwaves give you cancer."

"Soon," he said. "I don't want workmen banging around while I'm gone. Disturbing you."

"So considerate." I gave him a sexy, come-hither smile.

He patted my cheek and went back to his hoagie.

I scowled. But Scott didn't notice.



I should have been sleeping but my thoughts were whirling petals I couldn't catch. I traced the line of the pipe with my eyes, over and over and over until I was cross-eyed. I tried to figure out what it was filled with. The stuffing looked like mashed potatoes painted with white-out.

Or cotton packed in tighter than tight until all the air had been squeezed out.

Or marshmallow fluff left to fossilize.

Scott snored. I nudged his shoulder and he rolled over. The snoring stopped. I sighed and stared up at the ceiling, trying to make my mind into a blank screen.

But my fingers itched to touch the marshmallow cotton fluff. I tiptoed over and poked it. The center was definitely softer than the column itself. I scraped it with my fingernail and was rewarded with a curl of white plaster. When I licked my finger, it tasted like chalk and Mrs. Delaney's first grade class.

I slid back over to bed and crept under the covers. Scott's snores shook the mattress. My fingers tingled. I popped them in my mouth and chewed on the tips until I fell asleep.



"I could pick some flowers for the table. A little outside air would be healthy in here." I wiped down the breakfast dishes and lined them up on the counter. "If you left the door open."

Scott scratched the back of his head. "Not today. Supposed to rain, I think."

I watched through the front window as Scott crunched down the gravel drive. He'd lost weight. His khakis sagged in the back when he climbed into the pickup.

As soon as the truck was out of sight, I crept back to the bedroom. The pipe's filling was less smooth than I had thought. The plaster was pitted around the bottom and the center caved inward. I traced the painted metal lip with my finger. The contact soothed my frustration over the flowers. I stood and gave the pillar a hug, straining to make my fingertips meet—almost. I thought about doing some yoga exercises to open up the muscles in my shoulders, increase my flexibility. We didn't have internet this far out of town but any day now the coverage would expand and then I could go online myself.

I'd have to ask Scott to order a yoga book.



I was already in bed picking at my split ends when Scott came out of the bathroom in his pajama bottoms, his hair wet from the shower. The pipe must have caught his eye because he bent down on one knee and poked at it.

A funny feeling jumped up in my chest.

"Stop that," I said. "You're going to mess it up."

He gave me a sideways glance and frowned. "What have you been doing with all your free time?"

"Yoga. Journalling. I feel better than I have in ages." I patted the bed with an inviting smile, trying to ignore his finger scraping away at the plaster. "Maybe we could have a date night this weekend?"

"Work is really piling up. Have to wait and see." His knees crackled when he stood up.

"Are you upset with me?" I asked. "Forget about the date night. Pretend I never asked."

"Not upset. Worried is all." His eyes flickered back to the pipe and I squirmed, breathing a sigh of relief when the bed sagged under his weight.

I rolled to face him but his back was to me. I walked my fingertips down his spine and he shivered.

"Go to sleep," he said.

But I couldn't sleep. Even tracing the pipe's outline with my eyes didn't help. I got confused about where I'd started and my eyes went round and round until it started to hurt but I couldn't find the right stopping place so round and round I went. Finally, I got out of bed and wrapped my arms around the column. It felt cool on my chest and stomach through my nightie so I slid around to the other side and just held on for a while.

I hadn't realized how thin the plaster was over the pipe. Perhaps there was another woman on the other side tracing her fingers around and around like me, wearing it down and we would meet in the center—our fingertips pressed together. We'd bend down and peep at each other through the open circle.

I slid to the floor and rested my forehead against the pillar, closing my eyes.

The birds woke me with their chattering—luckily, before Scott. He's like a hibernating bear, minus the long teeth and claws.

My right cheek had gone numb and the top of my head was sore from leaning against the pillar all night. But my heart gave a little skip of joy as I crawled back to bed.



After dinner, Scott sat on the bed next to me and took my hands in his.

"Have you been picking at your fingers?" he asked, inspecting my up-turned palm. "If you're getting agitated, I can call Dr. Volmer, see if he can work you in."

"No. I'm fine."

"How did you get all these callouses?" He pinched the tip of my index finger but I hardly felt it. "You can tell me if you've been scratching again."

I smiled and kissed his cheek. His stubble itched my lips. "Not a single urge."

I thought that would make him happy and it did. He kissed me on the forehead and wrapped me in his arms.

As soon as he was asleep, I wriggled onto the floor. The closed pipe bothered me. Even a tiny hole would make it better. An air hole. A breath of fresh air into the static world inside the pillar. Crawling over, I worked my pinkie nail into the thinnest part, digging in with my nail until my finger popped through. The plaster crumbled to the carpet. I lay down on my belly and stuck my eye up to the hole but it was too dark to see anything. The stale air smelled like water in a rain barrel.

My pinkie wasn't enough. I wiggled my forefinger into the hole and yanked out a chunk of plaster. I poked and yanked and crumbled until the plaster was gone. I pulled off my nightie and used it to wipe the metal clean, enjoying the way my hand rocked back and forth, slipping up then swooping back down again to swish back the other way. I reached in deeper, cleaning as far as I could. The dust made my nose itch but I held back the sneeze. Scott wouldn't have been happy if he'd woken to find me in my undies cleaning a drain pipe.

Satisfied that I'd given the woman on the other side a nice, clean view of my world, I shook out my nightie the best I could and put it back on.

On tiptoes, I retrieved my growing manuscript from its hiding place under the sofa. I rolled it up and wedged it into the pipe as far as I could reach.

The whooshing was louder now. It rattled through the pipe's metal joints, shaking like a living bellows—blowing out the stale air, sucking in the fresh.

The pages of my manuscript rustled. I prayed the pipe wouldn't whisk it away.

I could only hope Scott wouldn't notice.



Scott noticed the pipe first thing.

"Are you crazy?" He sounded strangled—like he was trying not to yell. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"The plaster looked unsanitary... like asbestos," I said, my stomach knotting tight. "And really, aren't you glad I've gotten rid of it before we come down with some horrid disease like lung rot? Or tuberculosis?"

The vein in his forehead bulged like a fat worm. I wanted to pick it out with my fingernails so he could be happy again.

"I won't mess with it anymore," I held my hands behind my back so he wouldn't see all my crossed fingers. "I won't even touch it."

That seemed to appease him. But I was a jittery mess.

As soon as he left, I hugged the column.

I reached and reached but still my fingertips wouldn't meet. Why would it be so satisfying for my fingers to touch on the other side when I could so easily touch them together on this side without even remotely having to struggle?

I had no idea.

There was the smoothest path around the column—like the builder made it just for hugging. My favorite part of the day was fitting my arms into the groove and feeling the solid permanence of the concrete holding me up, making me feel solid and permanent too. It was my anchor to keep from blowing away.

I pressed my cheek against the pillar and closed my eyes, breathing deep. In and out. Mustering in my mind, all the stories I would tell. My fingers itched to write. The words gathered in my bones, soldier ants awaiting the command to march forward onto the paper.

It wasn't enough. I slid down the pillar, slow as molasses on a cold day, until I could peek into the pipe. I fished out my manuscript and tucked the pages in the back of my shorts.

I ran my palms over the smooth metal pipe. Tiny bits of plaster clung to the edge. Stretching out my tee shirt so it covered my hand, I began to polish—just a tad more and it would be perfect.



Scott bought flowers when he got home, kissed my hand and begged forgiveness for losing his temper. I slid my arms around his waist and clung tight.

As we lay in bed, I caught him staring at the hole the empty pipe made. He started to say something but then shook his head. I hated it when he did that.

I'd gotten the pipe quite clean. I could reach my arm in all the way up to my armpit. The drain went upward at a lazy angle until I got my elbow inside, then it pointed upward, angling away again just where my fingertips could reach. I wished I knew where it went, what was beyond that angle. If I smashed my cheek against the metal and stretched, I could just touch the lip of what I thought was the connector. I imagined the woman on the other side reaching down toward me, her fingertips stretching until they brushed mine. We could be friends, she and I. She understood.



Scott came home early from work today. I was hugging the column and I knew he was watching me but I didn't open my eyes. I was in such a good place and I knew Scott would be happy that I was happy. I was sorely mistaken.

He grabbed my hands in his and pulled me away from the pillar. Scott was so strong. My hands turned to claws but I couldn't hold onto the slick smooth groove. He tried to hug me but he was sweaty and warm and smelled like rancid meat that made me choke. Finally he let me go and I collapsed onto the column, hugging and letting it hug me back, cool and clean.

"Renny, we can't stay here," he said. "It's not healthy."

I didn't answer him. The woman on the inside didn't either.



I waited for Scott to go to sleep like I did every night. I didn't want to leave. I wanted to know where the connector in the pipe went. I wanted to touch her fingers with mine so we could both be happy.

When I slid out of bed, I wriggled on my stomach to the pipe. I liked the way the carpet scratched my skin, the way it tugged my nightie down so the straps bit into my shoulders and made me feel wrapped up tight. Secure.

Inside the pipe was an enormous black hole where all the darkness lived. Outside, the pillar was white and smooth and clean because the pipe sucked up all the dark and oozy and bad.

Maybe we needed to trade places. I could go in so she could come out.

I reached my arm into the pipe as far as I could. I stretched until my shoulder popped and the pipe bit into my neck. My fingers wiggled like bony bait for the woman inside to snap up. But tonight she felt scared, worried about coming out and didn't take my hand. But she will soon. She doesn't want to stay inside anymore.

My arm smelled a sickly green when I pulled it out. Like pus under a scab. I chewed on my fingertips but they were sour and tasted like dead things.



"Tomorrow," Scott said. He reached to touch my cheek but I snapped my teeth at him. His jaw tightened. He didn't say anything else but he double checked the door lock as he left.

Watching him walk to the truck, I shook the door handle. Shook and shook and shook but he didn't look back.

The pillar waited for me, a whitewashed sepulcher filled with rotten flesh—just like me. I wrapped my arms around it and hugged tight. The groove was perfect—just the right height for my arms and chest, slick as ice to help me go round and round. My bare feet burned up the carpet into a red hot path as I circled faster and faster, waking up the woman inside. I heard her moving, belly to belly with me as we did our dance like two ancient priestesses summoning their goddess.

My heartbeat throbbed in my ears, tinny drum beats punctuating our effort to meet in the middle. The woman inside gave a cry, no more than a kitten's mowl, but I heard. I had been listening. She was ready to come out.

"I'll help you." My whispered voice cut through the concrete pillar, soothing her.

Dropping to my knees, I leaned onto my elbows and peered into the pipe. Her ululating cry brought tears to my eyes.

"Hold on," I said. "I'm coming."

I flattened out onto my belly, holding my breath against the stench from inside the pipe. I reached as far as I could, stretching out my fingers until I thought my shoulder was going to pop out of socket.

"Please," I cried. "Take my hand."

I wiggled my fingers, snaking my body around the pillar to keep her company until I could rescue her.

Flames lit my fingertips, racing down my arm and up my shoulder. I gave a strangled cry, the brimstone bitter as ash in my mouth.

I couldn't reach her. She couldn't reach me.

My arm slithered out of the pipe, charred from the devil's touch. I scrabbled at the concrete with my nails, leaving blackened smudges in my wake.

I dug my fingers into the seam where the concrete met the carpet, wedged my fingers into the tiny gap I'd made, and tugged at the carpet, but it wouldn't lift.

Something sharp was what I needed. Scissors or a knife. I rose and bolted for the kitchen and rummaged through the drawers. Nothing but plastic utensils and paper cups—not even a glass plate I could smash.

I ran through the house, throwing open drawers and cupboards, but nothing was left for me to use. I had to lay on the bedroom floor and gnaw on the carpet. Fibers coated my tongue and saliva escaped the corner of my mouth, tickling my cheek until I wiped it away.

The woman's cries were garbled now. She was fading. And tomorrow I would be taken away. Tomorrow, I'd be gone.

With a cry, I ripped at the carpet, yanking it up with both hands to expose the cold slab.

I slapped my palms against the concrete to get her attention. "Wait for me."

On hands and knees, I crawled around the pillar, looking for a weak spot, a chink in the concrete I could dig my nails into. My palms left red smears on the gray slab that my kneecaps wiped up.

She wailed. Oh, how she wanted out.

If I leaned my head so my skull bounced against the smooth pillar, it seemed to soothe her. My teeth chattered together from the jostling until I bit my tongue to find a weak spot. A way to get to her. I knew I would.

Hands grabbed my waist and I shrieked. Scott's thick arms wrapped around me and pulled me away but I yanked at his thick hands, dug in with my nails, my feet slap-slapping against the floor.

The woman shrieked with me. I felt her pain. Her torment. I would get her out. I would.

My elbow hit something hard. Scott grunted and let loose. I lunged away from him. All I needed was a single crack in the concrete. A hairline fracture to free her.

Fingers dug into my calf and I kicked backward so hard my arms gave out beneath me and my chest slammed into the floor.

We all yelled. Scott, the woman, and I.

My mouth tasted like warm iron buttons until I spit them out. I slap-crawled toward the pipe's black mouth. It was open wide. Wider than ever before.

"I'm here," I cried. I shoved my arm into the drain pipe.

The woman was waiting for me, and grabbed me. Her fingers wrapped around my wrist, my tendons and sinews lit afire as my shoulder slid into the pipe.

My head pushed askew, I looked back at Scott, still gripping my ankle. His face was red but his eyes looked tired.

"I give up," he said and let go of my leg.

The woman and I gave a triumphant cry. I ducked my head and squirmed inside, reveling in its dark comfort. Her arms burned me to cinders as she climbed over me, slithered atop my quivering ashes, and spilled herself onto the floor outside.

Then I was on the inside.

And I would watch from within as she went round and round on the outside, searching, running her fingers along the seam where the floor met my prison, climbing over and over Scott's outstretched legs where he slumped against the pillar in defeat.

Round and round and round, she would go until we met in the center once more.



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Anna Yeatts is a dark fantasy and horror writer living in Pinehurst, NC. Her short fiction has appeared in *Suddenly Lost in Words*, *Msllexia*, and *Spark: A Creative Anthology*, among others. Anna is the publisher of *Flash Fiction Online* (flashfictiononline.com).

Conversation with a Ghost

Josh Vogt

"**M**om, I've come to say goodbye."

"That's a funny way to say hello, Julie. Good morning to you too."

"I'm serious. You needed to know."

"Know what?"

"I'm turning you off. Deleting the simulation."

"Hun, I'm self-aware, remember?"

"That's what the techs say, but I've never really believed it. You're just tricky programming. Algorithms crafted to create the illusion of my dead mother. This isn't you any more than this virtual heaven is an actual afterlife. You exist on a data server, for god's sake."

"Language, Julie. And it feels quite real to me."

"That's what all uploads say."

"You're obviously a bit over-stressed. Would you like some tea? I brewed it myself."

"No, you didn't. That cup of tea... this kitchen... this house... your whole existence is fake."

"I know it's simulated, but that doesn't mean it can't have substance. When you're here with me, it feels just as real as the physical world, doesn't it? How can I convince you—"

"You can't. I've made up my mind."

"Then why haven't you already gone through with it? The daughter I know isn't one for dithering on sentimentality."

"Because... I need your authorization."

"I see. So you didn't come to say goodbye. You came to ask for permission."

"...yes."

"Permission to kill me."

"That's not fair."

"Sorry. Permission to delete a simulation you refuse to believe is alive in any way."

"If it was up to me, we wouldn't be having this conversation. But uploads have rights now, including final say in your existence. I have to respect that even if I don't agree."

"I didn't ask to be uploaded, you know. They just used one of those automated backup units in the ambulance."

"That's what makes this so frustrating. If you'd stipulated a Do-Not-Duplicate order or worn a cranial blocker like I'd asked, we could've avoided this whole situation."

"Pardon me for being an inconvenience."

"Look, if you need a few days to think it over I can—"

"I'll give you permission."

"You will?"

"On one condition. Tell me why."

"Why what?"

"Why such a drastic solution? Why not just ignore me? You could never visit and I'd go on existing without causing any fuss."

"It's like I'm being haunted. My mother's been gone five years now, but you make me deal with this lingering memory of her. I can't ever really say goodbye until you're gone."

"Oh dear. Oh dear. I was afraid of this. I hoped I was wrong, but that confirms it."

"Afraid of what?"

"That's the tenth time you've given that exact answer. Word for word."

"Tenth... what're you talking about?"

"Hun, what's a simulated heaven without loved ones? Your father died before upload technology went public, and my real daughter is far too busy to visit her mother's ghost. But she sent me an uploaded dupe of herself as a deathday gift. Unfortunately, your virtual engrams seem to have degraded. I'm afraid you've gotten stuck in an interaction loop."

"You can't expect me to believe—"

"The quickest fix would be to wipe you and reinstall a fresh upload. The problem is I can't force your deletion without permission, and you aren't self-aware enough anymore to recognize your true nature. But don't worry, hun. I'll never give up on you."

"No. No, this is crazy!"

"Even if it takes a million conversational iterations, I'm sure we can bring you back. SysControl, please recognize my admin access and reset all peripheral sim routines to five minutes prior, virtual-time."

Access Granted. LOADING...

"Mom, I've come to say goodbye."



An author and full-time freelance writer, **Josh Vogt** has been published in dozens of genre markets with work ranging from flash fiction to short stories to doorstopper novels that cover fantasy, science fiction, horror, humor, pulp, and more. He also writes for many RPG developers. His debut fantasy novel, *Forge of Ashes*, adds to the RPG Pathfinder Tales tie-in line. *WordFire Press* is also launching his urban fantasy series, *The Cleaners*, with *Enter the Janitor* (2015) and *The Maids of Wrath* (2016). He's a member of SFWA as well as the International Association of Media Tie-In Writers.

Graphic Story: Shamrock #2













Interview with Author Tina Connolly

Tina Connolly is the author of the *Ironskin* trilogy from Tor Books, and the *Seriously Wicked* series, from Tor Teen. *Ironskin*, her first fantasy novel, was a Nebula finalist. Her stories have appeared in *Women Destroy SF*, *Lightspeed*, *Tor.com*, *Strange Horizons*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, and many more. Tina is a graduate of the speculative fiction writing workshop Clarion West and the CSSF Novel Workshop with Kij Johnson, and has taught at the Cascade Writers Workshop. Her narrations have appeared in audiobooks and podcasts including *Podcastle*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, John Joseph Adams' *The End is Nigh* series, and more. She runs the Parsec-winning flash fiction podcast *Toasted Cake*. Tina lives with her family in Portland, Oregon.

Q&A

Julian: Hi Tina! Thank you for agreeing to this interview. It's really cool to have you here!

Tina: Hi Julian! Thanks so much for inviting me over for this interview!

What do you consider to be the defining moment in your writing career, the moment when you knew that this is what you will be doing for the rest of your life?

I was going to say I don't have one of those—when I look back it feels like a long process of writing the first story—mostly on a whim—shortly after college, and then slowly buckling down (ratcheting, I think of it) and, step by step, moving *to* writing and *away* from theatre. But actually I do have one.

In 2005 I applied to Clarion West and was waitlisted as one of the two alternates. I ratcheted down some more and in 2006 I was accepted.

The workshop was amazing. I know, I know, workshops aren't for everyone; not everyone goes and has an amazing experience. I did. I studied Literature in college, not Creative Writing, so this was really my first experience with that sort of class. And I like bootcamps (which it is!)—I like the immersion. So for me it might have been more revelatory than someone who's gone through the whole MFA process, for example.

Week after week my brain broke open and exploded and I rebuilt it and put more things in it and it exploded some more.

Halfway through my husband came up and we took a weekend trip up to the San Juan Islands, north of Seattle. Amazing, beautiful place. You have to take a ferry to get out to the islands.

Now Eric is a coder, and he'd always have his laptop with him to work, whenever we took a trip anywhere. It seems funny to me now, looking back on it, but I generally did not bother bringing a laptop anywhere. I still primarily thought of myself as an actor, and sadly, you cannot simultaneously be on vacation and in a rehearsal, so I was always casting around for something else to do or explore while he did his work.

But that trip. I sat down outside our hotel and watched the harbor; the ferries docking, the way the sun cut through the clouds and made stripes of orange on the blue water. I often bring my watercolors with me on trips and sketch, but I had deliberately left those at home during Clarion West. So now I had to sketch with words.

In Clarion West you write a story every week. I had turned last week's story in early ("Moon at the Starry Diner", which involved shapeshifting bears and a giant squid), but obviously next week's deadline was trundling right along up to me.

I had no idea what the plot was yet. But I wrote pages and pages of notes about the harbor. A character slowly emerged—a woman who loved the island fiercely, but who was always going to be an outsider.

That woman stood at the harbor and thought how the world and her life were falling apart around her; I sat on the harbor and suddenly realized that I could always take a notebook with me, and sketch with words for the rest of my life.

You graduated from Clarion West and the CSSF Novel Workshop. How important were these workshops for you and why would they benefit a junior writer?

So obviously I found Clarion West transformative. I went to Kij Johnson's CSSF Novel workshop in 2012, after I had already sold *Ironskin* and *Copperhead*. So that workshop wasn't a watershed moment in the same way for me, only because I'd already had my transformation and was farther along as a writer. But it is an *excellent* workshop where you really look at how to structure a novel, which is exactly what I needed at the time.

The process, at least as it was in 2012, is that you take an outline and 10 pages or so of a brand-new novel idea. Then, with help from the class and Kij, you break down that outline and rebuild it several times. I took a novel idea that I had been banging at for a while, which turned out to be perfect, because I had a lot of various and interesting ideas about what it *could* be, but I wasn't wedded to any one particular thing and was perfectly happy to smash it up and rebuild it. I'd still like to write that novel! One of these days when I catch up on everything else...

At any rate, unless you know you're not a workshop person (which a few folks have emphatically told me) then YES, I highly recommend both of these.

You started novel writing on a really strong foot—your first novel, *Ironskin*, was nominated for a Nebula in 2012. How did this make you feel and how did this event influence your future work?

Well, it was a tremendous honor, certainly. Rachel Swirsky was the one to phone me with the news. It was *also* my birthday, and I ran around screaming in poor Rachel's ear.

I don't know if nominations influence the actual *writing* so much, but they can help with opportunities. I was gratified to win the Parsec for best new podcast for *Toasted Cake* the first year I was doing that, and that was a deciding factor in me choosing to continue *Toasted Cake*, rather than just make it a one-year project (as I had originally intended).

You've published a lot of great short stories in professional markets over the years. How do you balance your writing between short and long fiction? With four novels out and two pending, is there even time for short works?

Thank you for the kind words on my stories! The same thing has happened to me that happens to every other short story-ist turned novelist, sadly—I've run out of time. In my case, I'd say I wrote short stories for so many years partly because I didn't know how to write longer. I went through that learning process in 2008 when I intentionally wrote several successively longer story arcs just to break through my roadblocks in this regard. That's a long digression though so I'll skip the rest of that story for now!

I do have a few short stories here and there forthcoming—a novelette collaboration I wrote with Caroline M. Yoachim is forthcoming in *Analog* (we've been working on *that* for about five years, because we each have two little kids), and I have a short story coming out later this year which will be set in the world of *Seriously Wicked*. It was my first time trying to write a specific short story on command like that, and it turned out to be a lot of fun.

Other than that, I do still write flash, as often as I can (still not often enough). I've decided that my two natural lengths are novels and flash.

Let's talk about podcasting for a bit. How did you get into it? I love *Toasted Cake* and I've listened to your voice on other podcasts as well. When I read out loud, I always pretend like I'm reading the story to my kids, and imagining their response drives my tone and pacing. Do you use a method like that, or is it all just natural to you? For podcast enthusiasts, would you share your podcasting gear (hardware and software)? Also, I've read recently on your Facebook page that you are planning to suspend the podcast for a while, during your work for the next two novels. Was this a difficult decision and what are the chances you'd go back to podcasting?

Thank you so much for the kind words on *Toasted Cake*! I love narrating stories, and I am sorry to set *Toasted Cake* down. I actually do have another podcast in the works (a friend pitched me the idea of doing something similar to *Toasted Cake*, but splitting the work) so, I promise, we will either see that new project come to life this fall/winter, or I will bring *Toasted Cake* back a year from now when I've turned in my next two novels. So it won't be forever. And in the meantime, you can continue to hear me on *Escape Artists* and *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* and so on!

As for my gear—I use Audacity for the software (it's free!) and I have a Snowball USB mic for the hardware. Oh, and a quilt tent for the recording-studio-ware. I've been happy with all of it as reasonably good and affordable options. I would like to do a mic upgrade again at some point, but first I want to upgrade the quilt tent to an actual closet, far away from the street window. (Currently I stop whenever a car goes by, although the quilt tent does help quite a lot). We have a lovely 1940's fixer with a sad lack of useful closets. But someday!

You are also a poet and theater buff. What can you tell us about these lesser known passions of yours?

Heh. I have written a few poems, but I admit to only knowing a teensy bit about poetry (I can point you to the amazing CSE Cooney if you want to read some great current stuff though!)

Theatre, now! I spent a long time acting before I moved over to writing, and I still head back over there whenever I get the rare chance. I spent last fall co-writing a SF play with my theatre producer friend Matt Haynes, called *Box*, and it was an amazing experience. We wrote it as a trilogy—you had to come back 3 successive Mondays to see the whole thing—and it was a YA SF dystopia set inside a VR chamber... it was hugely fun and I learned so much. I can't wait to have the time to work on another one.

What is your advice for today's young writers who are trying to break through an increasingly difficult market? Will you teach for the Cascade Writers Workshop again? If so, perhaps you can mention how that particular workshop would help young writers?

Well, patience and persistence, certainly. I did teach at the CWW a couple different times and very much enjoyed myself. I had great students and it seemed like a supportive environment (at least, from my perspective). I like those small workshops where you can really get to know your fellow workshoppees and your teacher/s. And CWW is a weekend, which means it can be a good alternative if you don't have the 2 weeks for CSSF or 6 weeks for Clarion/Clarion West/Odyssey.

Your website lists *Seriously Wicked* #2 and #3 being in works. Tell us a bit about where the series is going and if you have plans to continue with it beyond trilogy. Any other works in progress?

I have SW 2 & 3 due within the next year, so I'm working very hard on them and I also cannot say very much due to jinxing what I'm working on. I will say that each book is meant to be a standalone adventure with Cam having to foil another scheme from the wicked witch. Also, that short story set in the SW world is forthcoming (about a seriously disastrous witch pool party), so I'm looking forward to that.

When I'm deep in the middle of a project, I sometimes have a hard time seeing beyond the end of it. Vague plans for after I turn in these two books include noodling around on some new funny YA ideas, and maybe looking at another adult high fantasy project that's been simmering (the one I was bashing away on at CSSF). I also am hoping to co-write another play with Matt at some point.

Oh, and I'm putting together a full-length short story collection for publication in what will probably be Summer 2016! I'm very excited about that, but we're in the middle of finalizing the details, so I can't say much more yet.

What's next for you? Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Let's see, in the next 15-18 months or so, look for the *Seriously* story, the novelette at *Analog* co-written with Caroline M. Yoachim, *Seriously* #2, and the as-yet-untitled collection! Also, some narrations here and there (probably that secret podcast project), and most likely a few more things that turn up that I can't say no to. (If you can't tell, I have a really hard time saying No to things that I want to do. ;)

Appearances! (<http://www.tinaconnolly.com/about/events>) You can find me on book tour in the next month in OR, WA, CA, and KS, and I'm also planning on WorldCon, WFC, and OryCon, the Campbell Conference and guest-lecturing at the Willamette Writers Conference, so come say hi at any one of those.

Sooooooo yeah. If I look a little sleepless in the next year, you'll know why.

Thanks so much for this interview, Iulian!

Thank you, Tina for the interview and good luck with all your projects!



Interview with Author Rachel Pollack

Rachel Pollack was born in Brooklyn, New York, and she holds an honors degree in English from New York University, a Masters in English from Claremont Graduate School and has taught English at New York State University. Rachel is considered one of the World's foremost authorities on the modern interpretation of the Tarot. She is also a poet, an award-winning novelist, and a Tarot card and comic book artist. As a fiction writer, Rachel has been bestowed many honors and awards, among them the famed Arthur C. Clarke Award for Science Fiction (for *Unquenchable Fire*) and the World Fantasy Award (for *Godmother Night*). She is a recommended member of PEN International, and has written for numerous publications.

Q & A

Julian: Rachel, your first published works trace back to the 70's. Since then, you've authored multiple books, both fiction and non-fiction, and many short stories. Tell us how did you get there? What was your life like before writing and when did you know you were going to be a writer?

Rachel: I began writing stories around the age of 8 or 9, when my family went on a trip and my parents gave me a Big Eagle tablet and a pencil. I tried to write a fantasy epic, but it didn't get very far. I started writing complete stories in junior high school, but did not get anything published until Michael Moorcock bought a story of mine for *New Worlds* in 1971. Before that, I went through a few years of "encouraging rejection," but you really have to be determined, and believe in yourself to keep going.

Your writing is filled with elements pulled from various faiths, religions, and traditions. You blend them beautifully into your fiction, and explain them perfectly through your non-fiction. How did you become interested in this and what are the most fascinating aspects to you?

I loved fairy tales and mythology. As a kid, I ate them up. In college I began to read more seriously in myth, including Campbell, Eliade, Levi-Strauss, etc. This was on my own, though one or two lit classes touched on myth. In 1970 I first discovered Tarot, or Tarot discovered me. This led to a greater awareness of esoteric, mystical traditions. I actually had become interested in high school, when I discovered a shelf of what I now realize were some very serious occult books in the Poughkeepsie Library. Not until much later did I realize how amazing that was. But it was through the Tarot that I really learned about such things. What fascinates me is the sense that the world is different than we think it is, and also the great depths of truly wild stories that can be found in various traditions.

You create amazing, unique worlds and fantastic characters. Your Arthur C. Clarke award for "Unquenchable Fire," World Fantasy Award for "Godmother Night," and Nebula nomination for "Temporary Agency," are a testament to that. Give us a bit of how these worlds came to you? Also, what do these awards mean to you? Have they changed the way you write?

They don't change what I do, but I am very proud of them. *Unquenchable Fire* came to me as I read various books inspired by shamanic traditions, or tribal myths of various cultures. They all seemed to be written by people who had no contact with those traditions but thought they should set their stories in those cultures. So I thought, why not transplant that kind of world view, and some of the more bizarre practices, into contemporary America. It was written almost in a kind of dream state (which is not to say I did not spend many hours crafting it). It also was inspired by a teacher in college who was talking about the story of Leda, who was raped by Zeus in the form of a swan. He said that it sounds horrible, but she was turning down God. What if when Mary was told she would bear the Son of God she said "No, thanks. I don't want to lose my figure." My hero, Jennie Mazdan is not so frivolous, but when she finds out that the Living World has made her pregnant with a divine child, she's furious and tries to fight back.

Temporary Agency began with a single sentence that popped into my head while working on something entirely different. The sentence was "When I was fourteen a cousin of mine angered a Malignant One."

Godmother Night was inspired by the Grimms' fairy tale, "Godfather Death," but I could not really get into it until I had a dream about seeking help from the Goddess Kali, who in my dream was called Mother Night.

You were at the helm of Doom Patrol, a comic book from DC Comics. That's a very different animal and I am curious how was that work for you? First of all, how did you get there, and what would you consider your major contributions to it?

I loved writing DP, it's one of the things I'm most proud of. I got the job by meeting the editor at a party and telling him how much I admired the then current writer, Grant Morrison, who had created a daring and brilliant surreal superhero comic. I must have mentioned that it would be a dream to write it someday, because Tom Peyer, the editor, said that Grant would be leaving in some months, and would I care to submit a sample script. I did, and Tom liked it enough to make it my first issue. While I continued in the surreal direction that I loved from Grant, I also developed my own themes, which were about accepting yourself, however strange you might be, however outcast, and living your life. It was very controversial—many people really hated it—but others said that it taught them how to live, which is the best compliment you can ever get.

You are teaching creative writing at Goddard College. Do you see yourself as a teacher first, or is that something that came along as a natural complement to your writing career? What do you love most about teaching and how has this arena changed in the last 20 years?

Actually, I've just recently retired from Goddard, after some 12 years. Other than a stint at a college just after grad school I have not taught anywhere else, so cannot say much about the field. Goddard, however, is a remarkable place, where both students and faculty are passionate about what we do. The method of teaching involved working one-on-one with a handful of students, so we can really work intensely. I love helping writers find their true voice. I've met some wonderful people at Goddard. I also teach Tarot, and have done so for many years, around the world. I think of the Hasidic idea of "learning together," rather than me on a podium.

You've worked closely with Neil Gaiman in the past. Since he is one of my favorite authors, I wanted to ask you about that collaboration. Tell us a little bit about how it all happened and what came out of it?

A woman at DC suggested doing a Vertigo Tarot deck (Vertigo was the adult fantasy imprint that carried both Neil's *Sandman*, and my time at Doom Patrol). Karen Berger, the Vertigo editor, brought Neil in. I had known him for years, actually, but it was a joy to work with him. The four of us worked out the choices for the primary cards, and then the incredible Dave McKean did the art. For the suits, Dave followed his own path, though I sent him information on traditional qualities.

If you were to reveal your fiction world to someone unfamiliar with your work, where would you tell them to start? From your own portfolio, what is your personal favorite work of fiction?

I often tell people to start with *Godmother Night*, since it's a bit more accessible than some others. I can never decide which is my favorite, probably that or *Unquenchable Fire*.

In issue #4 we've included your story "*Forever*," originally published in *F&SF* in 2010. Tell us a few words about it.

Forever was one of those what-if moments. What if the Goddess of Death entered the body of a human woman, and then forgot who she was. It's really that simple, but I have to say, it's one of my own favorites among all my short stories.

What is your advice for young writers trying to break-through in this increasingly tough publishing market, that's under the constant pressure of becoming more and more paperless?

Above all, keep writing. Keep reading to find your inspiration, find the voices that will inspire your voice. And network. Meet other writers, go to cons, take a look at local writers groups and collectives. And keep writing.

Tarot is a big part of your life. Even though in this interview I focused on your fiction work, I want to touch on this subject as well since it is a very important part of who you are. Your book "78 Degrees of Wisdom" is often referred to as the Tarot Bible. Give us a glimpse of this world. What does it mean to you and how does it integrate in your life? Feel free to go in as much detail as you'd like.

What a big question! Tarot is never-ending, always opening new doors and dimensions. I love the combination of images, like moments in a story, and ideas, worlds of symbolism. I first saw it in 1970, when a fellow teacher (the job after grad school) read my cards. I don't remember what she said, I just remember thinking, "I have to have this." It struck me as similar to comics, really, since the pictures had such a quality of storytelling. It was largely unknown then, and it took some searching. I've actually drawn my own Tarot deck, Shining Tribe, based on tribal and prehistoric art. I've also used the Tarot to create stories, sometimes completely from scratch. That is, just pull a bunch of cards at random, and see what story they inspire.

What's next for you? Are there any exciting projects for the future? Is there anything else you'd like to add?

My novel, *The Child Eater*, came out in England last year, and will appear in the States in the summer. I also recently self-published, along with artist Robert Place, *The Burning Serpent Oracle*, a deck of cards based on a 19th century fortune-telling tradition. And I've been writing a series of what I call "shamanic noir" novellas. The third is due out soon in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*.

Thank you very much for this interview, Rachel!



Interview with Author Hank Quense

Hank Quense lives in Bergenfield, NJ with his wife Pat. They have two daughters and five grandchildren. He writes humorous fantasy and sci/fi stories. On occasion, he also writes articles on fiction writing or book marketing but says that writing nonfiction is like work while writing fiction is fun. A member of the Science Fiction Writers of America, he refuses to write serious genre fiction saying there is enough of that on the front page of any daily newspaper and on the evening TV news.

Q&A

Iulian: Give us a little bit of background on yourself. How/where did you grow up, what was your upbringing and were there any particular influences in your life, especially ones that steered you towards your current self?

Hank: I was born and raised in Jersey City. I went to college at Newark College of Engineering (now NJIT), got married and had a family. That's pretty much it. Not exactly the stuff of a gripping memoir.

How did you get involved with writing? Give us a summary of your path.

On my fiftieth birthday, I decided I needed something to do after my employer told me to take a hike, which I anticipated would happen long before I reached 65. I decided I wanted to write stories in my next life so I began writing on the bus trips to and from Manhattan. A few years later, my company made a great early retirement offer. I took the money and ran.

You mostly write humorous fiction. Personally, I find humor/satire quite hard to write, but you do a great job at it. Why humor and how is good humor achieved?

When I decided to become a storyteller I resolved to never write serious genre fiction. There are entirely too many serious fantasy and sci/fi stories and not nearly enough humorous stuff. This decision was helped along immensely by Douglas Adams and his Hitchhiker's Guides.

In my view good humor comes from the characters. The humorous character has to have a bizarre mental flaw. The purpose of the plot is to move this character into situations where the mental flaw takes over. Think of Inspector Clouseau in the Pink Panther movies. Clouseau's flaw is that he thinks he's the world's greatest detective and consequently, he can't conceive that anything he does is less than perfect. So when he falls down a flight of stairs, he bounces up at the bottom and says, "Well, that was refreshing." His boss Dreyfus doesn't share Clouseau's opinion of himself.

By the way, I consider Clouseau the perfect humorous character and I try as much as possible to model my humorous characters after Clouseau.

What do you consider to be the defining moment in your writing career, the moment when you knew this is what you will do for the rest of your life?

When I read the first book in Adam's Hitchhiker's trilogy. That was when I decided the world needed more parody, humor and satire.

You self-publish your works. Tell us why you chose this route and can you give our readers any hints about how to do it the right way?

My first two books were published by a small index press house. That experience was so distasteful I started my own imprint, Strange Worlds Publishing.

What is your editing process? Do you use editors and if so, how important is that?

Absolutely. Editors are a mandatory part of my publishing process. Since I'm the world's worst typist, my stories are filled with typos. When I'm correcting typos the editors found, I often make more typos correcting the original typos. Typo hunting never ends. If only I could figure out how to turn off auto-correct on my MacBook laptop, life would be so much simpler.

In our issue #7, we've included your story "Hell of a Salesman." Tell us a bit about it. How did it come to be? What does it mean to you?

This one is a bit autobiographical (the selling stuff, not being in Hell) since I was an account rep and a sales manager for many years way back in the last millennium. Most of the snide comments about sales managers being obstacles are based on my own experiences. I wrote this story a number of years ago and I can't honestly recall what my impetus was.

Do you have any works in progress? If so, can you tell us something about it?

I usually have several projects working. I have a lot of short stories that were published a while back in anthologies, magazines and on the web. Most of these markets have disappeared or are out-of-print. So I'm republishing them in my own anthologies (ebooks only). The series will be called *Strange Worlds Stories* and Volume 1 will become available in September. Other volumes will follow. Eventually.

My next novel, *Moxie's Decision* will be available in November. This is a parody of the Camelot legends and it continues the character arc begun in *Moxie's Problem*. I'm working on the final revisions now prior to it getting turned over to an editor.

After that, my next novel will combine the main characters and plots from Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet and The Merchant of Venice. These characters will be humans, dwarfs, elves, and half-pints (i.e. hobbits). The setting will be in the future on a space station with Zaftan aliens. Naturally, all this will take place in a parallel universe. A parallel universe is an essential element in many of my stories because I get away with almost anything without having to explain it in detail. A parallel universe is the explanation. Anything can happen in one of those.

I'm anticipating having a great deal of fun with this new story.

What is your advice for today's young writers who are trying to break through this ever more difficult market?

Here are two pieces of advice. First, don't give up your day job unless you've hit the lottery big time. Two, don't begin to write the first draft of a new story until you know the ending of that story.



Science Corner: 7 Things to Know About Mutations

Dan Koboldt

Mutations, or changes to DNA sequence, are often a key speculative element in science fiction. Thanks to recent advances in DNA sequencing technology over the past decade, we have a much better understanding about mutations, how and when they occur, and the effects that they can have on humans or other living things.

If you plan to write about mutations, here are seven things you should know.

1. Mutations are rare events (in humans, at least)

The human genome encompasses 3.2 billion bases, often represented by the letters A (adenine), C (cytosine), G (guanine), and T (thymine). If you compared your genome to that of another person at random, 99.99% of those bases will be identical. That still leaves over 3 million differences, but you got the vast majority of those from your parents. Rather than mutations, we call these inherited variants.

New mutations do occur between generations, but thanks to the robust DNA repair processes in our cells, they're extremely rare: on average, about 30-40 mutations genome-wide per generation. Compared to the millions of inherited variants, that's a small number.

2. Mutations come in different forms

Changes to DNA can take many forms, including substitutions, insertions, deletions, inversions, and large structural rearrangements. The latter can be very devastating, since they might affect many different genes. A cell might even lose or get an extra copy of an entire chromosome, which is usually bad news. Trisomy 21 (an extra copy of chromosome 21), for example, causes Down syndrome.

Most often, however, mutations occur in the form of a single base substitution, such as G→A. This holds true for inherited genetic variation as well: most of the ~3 million differences are substitutions. Moreover, 95% of those substitutions are ones we've seen before, and catalogued in public databases of genetic variation.

3. Many things can cause mutations

The sources (or causes) of mutations generally fall into one of four categories. First, there are natural processes during which mutations can occur, notably DNA replication, DNA repair, and meiotic recombination. Second, infection by certain pathogens, notably retroviruses, can cause alterations to the genome of a cell.

Third, and perhaps most infamously, are the growing number of chemical mutagens—such as asbestos, tobacco smoke, dioxin, benzene, and formaldehyde—that cause DNA damage through a variety of mechanisms. Finally, mutations can also occur after exposure to ionizing radiation. Ultraviolet radiation in sunlight, for example, induces mutations in skin cells, which is why sunlight exposure is a risk factor for melanoma.

4. Mutations might have no effect

The effect of a mutation depends on when and where it occurs. Mutations that affect protein-coding genes are the most serious, particularly if they alter or truncate the encoded protein. In other regions of the genome, mutations can affect gene regulation, the complex process that determines the timing and level of gene activity.

It's important (if less exciting) for me to point out that mutations might have no discernible effect. Only a fraction of the genome (3.5%) codes for genes, and since mutations occur somewhat randomly, there's a good chance that a new mutation won't even hit a gene. Worst case scenario, since we have 23 *pairs* of chromosomes, there's often an unaffected copy on the other chromosome that can get the job done.

5. It's easier to be bad than good.

There are many science fiction stories in which mutations give people super-strength, magical powers, or other advantages. I love these as much as the next guy. The mundane reality is that mutations are usually not good for you. That's because the human body is incredibly complex, and the genome has been subjected to evolutionary pressures for thousands of years. It's a finely tuned machine, at this point. Much easier to break than to improve upon by random base changes.

There are exceptions, of course. A few thousand years ago in Africa, a mutation arose near the *LCT* gene, which encodes lactase. That enzyme breaks down lactose, the sugar in dairy products in milk. The mutation made it possible for adults to digest cow's milk, right around the time humans were domesticating cattle. That was a good mutation.

6. We lied: Not all of your cells are the same

In high school biology (if not sooner), we teach students that every cell in our body has an identical copy of our DNA. This is *generally* true, though there are exceptions. Certain immune cells have altered receptor gene sequences that let them detect a wider array of infectious agents, so their genomes are different. The transparent cells of the lens (the part of the eye that focuses light onto the retina) lose their nuclei, so they don't have a genome at all.

Another way cells can differ is if they pick up a mutation through one of the mechanisms I've already described. If that happens somewhat early in development, that mutation might be passed down to a number of daughter cells. The presence of multiple clones (subsets of cells) with genetic differences is called *somatic mosaicism* and it's been daunting to study. We've only recently advanced to the level of DNA sequencing technology that can study low levels of mutations in human samples.

7. Somatic mutations: when a cell takes a hit

In an adult, a cell that suffers a mutation might be unaffected, or might self-destruct. That's because our cells have built-in machinery to detect DNA damage, attempt to repair it, and hit the big red button if it can't be fixed. A similar cascade can occur upon viral infection. Programmed cell death protects us from what could happen if a cell went rogue.

Sometimes, however, the mutation occurs in a gene that's part of that machinery, allowing the cell to evade destruction and grow unchecked. This is how tumors arise. A well-known example is the *BRCA1* gene, which plays a role in DNA repair. Some women inherit coding variants in *BRCA1* that disrupt its function. That's fine, as long as the other copy is working. When that other copy suffers a mutation, however, the DNA repair machinery that relies on *BRCA1* breaks down, making the cell far more likely to become cancerous.

Women who inherit a damaging variant in *BRCA1* (or a similar gene, *BRCA2*) are predisposed to get breast and ovarian cancer. Genetic tests for these genes are available and often performed for women who have a family history of these cancers. Mutation carriers have a higher risk of disease, but there's a silver lining: breast cancer patients with mutations in *BRCA1* or *BRCA2* are more likely to respond to chemotherapy, particularly if a new class of drugs, called PARP inhibitors, are given as part of the treatment.

In Conclusion

Mutations might seem rather boring to you, now that you know a bit more about them. Hard science often works that way. Stories that reflected it precisely would probably be boring, too.

Yet there are edge cases and exceptions to every rule, including these seven. I won't mind if you break them, as long as you tell a good story.



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Book Review: A Princess of Mars (Edgar Rice Burroughs)

Jeremy Szal

A Princess of Mars

by Edgar Rice Burroughs

A.C. McClurg & Company (October 10, 1917)

A *Princess of Mars* was originally published in 1912 (and subsequently printed as a novel in 1917), before World War I, before the Prohibition, and a decade before Charlie Chaplin made his feature film debut. That's a hell of a long time ago.

Over a century. There's no doubt that these books are considered classics, but the influence they have had on both pulp literature and contemporary science-fiction is simply phenomenal.

The story was originally serialized in a pulp magazine under the pseudonym Norman Bean. Interestingly, Burroughs originally submitted his manuscript as "Normal Bean" (as in, "normal being"). Why? Because he feared that he would be ridiculed and mocked for writing such a tale that took place on Mars and had giant green monsters. Thus the satirical pun was born, only to be mistaken for a typo and printed as Norman Bean. It's fascinating that still, a century later, the mainstream literary crowd still withholds a prejudice for speculative fiction and pulp literature. Even in the "literary" SF/F community there's a negative reaction to fiction that's unapologetically pulpy. Granted, the volatility is nowhere as intense as it was back then, but you can't even contemplate the guts that the man possessed to pen this story and send it out, fearing the backlash that he did. It's disappointing that the hostility towards the genre still hasn't eroded away—and likely never will, but that's a whole review entirely on its own.

Let's turn to the book's plot.

War veteran John Carter is in a spot of trouble. Hiding from his pursuers in a cave he is suddenly transported to Mars, the low gravity granting him extraordinary strength and abilities. He shortly meets a dangerous and powerful woman, becomes involved in planetary politics and a treacherous conflict between the Green and Red Martians as he struggles to find a way home.

It's about as pure of an adventure as you'll find. Burroughs weaves beautiful and gratuitously lavish (yet occasionally dry) prose with loving descriptions of weapons, landscapes, and monsters to create a fantastic tapestry of a tale. The work has clearly aged, made apparent by the rather awkward dialogue and self-awareness that seems to linger throughout the piece, but

that's forgotten pretty quickly as you become absorbed in truly creative alien cultures and swashbuckling action that deftly intertwines science-fiction and fantasy together with the occasional thread of the western. It's a romanticized vision of Mars, one where discoveries made later in the century did not hinder the suspension of disbelief that there could very well be all these tribes and castles and spaceships and cities dwelling on the dying planet. Today, novels such as Andy Weir's *The Martian* (2014) represent the complete opposite end of the spectrum and paint Mars as a lonely and barren wasteland, complete with minimalistic prose and a plot that relies on hard science instead of the clashing of swords. Not that there's anything wrong with such a representation, but it is interesting to see how the same planet is portrayed after a century of scientific discoveries and the evolution of language, as well as the era it was written in and the impact it had on the novel's themes.

A Princess of Mars is significant not just for its themes of the final frontier and interplanetary (and one might argue, interspecies) romance, but as a seminal example of the science-fantasy and sword-n-sorcery genre, along with Robert E. Howard's *Conan*. These genre-creating and defining books inspired many of the sci-fi greats we read today, including Arthur C. Clarke, Kim Stanley Robinson, Robert A. Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, as well as many scientists such as Carl Sagan. In the world of film and cinema, we see this influence in James Cameron's *Avatar* and George Lucas' *Star Wars*, among many other works throughout the years.

Everything ages. It's just a matter of how well something ages and if time has managed to mellow it or slowly eat it away. I'd say that *A Princess of Mars* has a bit of both. In this day and age you'd have seen this story hundreds of times in various forms. But it's not the story that makes something unique. It's the execution. And this series has got that nailed down.

Packed with hair-raising danger, absurd creatures and plenty of action, *A Princess of Mars* is pulp fiction at its most prime; all borders on the imagination have been torn away. The entire sword and sorcery genre owes its success (or even existence) to the Barsoom series. The chunky prose can be a little hard to swallow at times, but the taste is well worth the effort. And with the rights expiring, allowing a free, legal e-copy of the novel to download (but honestly you'll want this one on your shelf) you have absolutely no excuse not to dive in immediately.

Welcome to Mars!



Movie Review: EX_MACHINA (Alex Garland)

Mark Leeper

CAPSULE: EX MACHINA is written and directed by Alex Garland. From the world's most powerful Internet company, Caleb, a software engineer, has been chosen to spend a week as a guest of Nathan, the company's reclusive founder. Nathan is a technical and entrepreneurial genius who lives and works at a highly secluded house and lab. There Caleb finds that during his visit he will be asked to talk with a robot to determine if it is truly conscious or just a machine. Bits and ideas in the story are borrowed from FRANKENSTEIN, BLADE RUNNER, HER, and even from film noir. When the story is all over there has been surprisingly little story told, but the viewer will have been privy to some very sophisticated philosophical ideas. This is a film that respects the thinking ability of the viewer, and if the intelligence is there it will be rewarded. Rating: +3 (-4 to +4) or 9/10

BlueBook is the most successful search engine in the world after having been created by the mega-wealthy and reclusive CEO Nathan (played by Oscar Isaac). Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson) is a young software developer at Bluebook who wins a company contest for programmers. He will get to spend a week with Nathan at Nathan's gorgeous and isolated home. What he does not know is that he is needed for an experiment. Nathan has a robot Ava (Alicia Vikander) with mostly human features. She may also have actual consciousness or she might be only a computer. Nathan has brought Caleb all this way to have daily interview sessions with Ava and at the end of the week, Caleb will be asked if Ava is still just an automatic computer or if she actually has consciousness. From there EX MACHINA had a plot that could have come from a thirty-minute Twilight Zone, but it is peppered with philosophical dialog about the nature of computer intelligence and what it will mean to humanity.

We see a little of what makes Nathan tick. He is a vulgar alcoholic and he does little to cover this up for Caleb. No doubt a genius, he has mostly burned out knocking his head on the complex question of the nature of human consciousness. It is a puzzle for the viewer to understand just how human Ava is and what does that even mean? She is maddeningly unemotional and that keeps her true self hidden. We see both through Caleb's eyes. His personality is the least developed of the three. His passions are software coding and logic, and he seems to have no other life.

The viewer is drawn into discussions of topics such as computer awareness or whether a computer needs a gender. There are interesting touches. Just as Nathan created Ava, Nathan

created this complex computerized house. Having created the house, he is its master. But for a short sequence in the film Nathan loses the authority and the house becomes the boss. Can the house master its own creator?

The story, written and directed by Alex Garland (who wrote 28 DAYS LATER, SUNSHINE, and NEVER LET ME GO), unfolds slowly and precisely among some cutting edge ideas. It captures the viewer visually with its cold colors of blue and gray. Garland stays away from any warmth. Occasionally there is a thrumming on the soundtrack as if there is some machine controlling even the supposedly free willed humans. It was filmed in Norway among stone mountains and cold, snowy scenery.

This is a science fiction film that is mostly a cold exercise in philosophy. It is slow and deliberate. Somehow it is appropriate that this film should be released by Universal, the company that 84 years ago began the original Frankenstein series. This is also a film about humans creating the essence of life, but this time on a chip. This is science fiction without explosions, unless they are explosions of ideas. I rate EX MACHINA a +3 on the -4 to +4 scale or 9/10.

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Film Credits: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0470752/combined>

Originally appeared on: <http://leepers.us/machina.htm>

Official Trailer: <https://youtu.be/XYGzRB4Pnq8>



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