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SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY, AND HORROR

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12

Anna Yeatts • Carla Dash • Deborah Walker • James Aquilone • James Troughton  
James Van Pelt • Jason Hine • Jeremy Szal • Rebecca Birch

JONATHAN CRAGG

**Fantasy Scroll Magazine**  
**Speculative Fiction — Issue #12 — April 2016**

**Featuring works by Anna Yeatts, Carla Dash, Deborah Walker, James Aquilone,  
James Troughton, James Van Pelt, Jason Hine, Jeremy Szal, Rebecca Birch**

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

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# Fantasy Scroll Magazine Issue #12

**April, 2016**

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# Editorial, April 2016

Iulian Ionescu

**W**elcome to Issue #12 of Fantasy Scroll Magazine.

As spring is slowly finding its way into the American Northeast, our newest issue brings you a stew of heart-warming and heart-wrenching stories, sprinkled with a little bit of humor and little bit of horror. Just the right thing to read on a rainy day. The fantasy theme is prevalent in this issue, so we selected a fantasy cover by artist Jonathan Gragg, who returns with his piece “Monk,” after illustrating our very first issue back in 2014.

Now, let’s see what’s packed in this issue...

The fiction section opens with *Mother Salt and her Sisters* by James Troughton, a story that brings a fresh new look to the myth of the mermaid, and adds a darker than usual twist.

Next is *Apprentice* by James Van Pelt, a story about the relationship between the mentor and mentee, filled with magical mystery that will keep you guessing through the end.

Jason Hine’s *Prosperity’s Shadow* follows, set in a medieval-type of fantasy world where magic is used to control the masses, and we observe the struggle of the enforcer who has

to deal with the weight that his job puts on his conscience.

*The Memory of Huckleberries* by Rebecca Birch is sure to bring a tear to your eye. It’s a heartwarming story of love, sacrifice, and loss.

*My So-Called Life in Reruns* is a humorous sci-fi story that will surely disturb you and make you laugh at the same time. James Aquilone nails the last man on Earth motif in this short, yet poignant piece.

The first horror story of the issue, *What Was Meant to Be Buried* by Carla Dash, is also a psychological tale, diving into the disturbed mind of its protagonist and leaving us with a terrified sense of wonder.

A beautiful story of forbidden love and desire, *Beyond the Turning Orrery* by Deborah Walker takes us into an astonishing imaginary world, where people dream of faraway worlds.

*Boo Daddy’s* by Anna Yeatts follows, a tale set in the Wild West, with a little twisted twist that will definitely creep under your skin. Intrigued?

We end the fiction section of the issue with *Skies of Sand and Steel* by Jeremy Szal, a science fiction story that follows the protagonist in his quest to stop mass exploitation in a world where entire cities float above ground.

Issue 12 continues the epic adventures of Shamrock in a new installment titled *Shadows*, written by Josh Brown with art by Alberto Hernandez.

The non-fiction section includes interviews with authors Angela Slatter and Brian Staveley, a book review for *God of Clay* by Ryan Campbell and a movie review for *10 Cloverfield Lane*, directed by Dan Trachtenberg.

As we push through our third year, I want to invite all new and returning readers to subscribe to our magazine. For less than \$20 per year you get 6 issues and about 50 short stories. Your subscription allows us to continue to publish the very best in speculative fiction from both established and undiscovered writers.

Also, our Year One anthology is out in both print and eBook versions. For a limited time, you can get the eBook version of *Dragons, Droids & Doom – Year One* for only \$2.99 through Amazon or Barnes and Nobles.

We thank you for being a supportive reader, and promise to continue our efforts of publishing great works of speculative fiction.

Thank you!

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# Mother Salt and her Sisters

J. R. Troughton

**W**E SIT, MY SISTER AND I, WATCHING SURF BREAK ON THE ROCKS. In the distance, a lone schooner swings in the storm, white sail all a'panic.

"It's your turn," I whisper. Shaye nods. She cracks open the crab in her hands and sucks out the flesh. She grins, showing jagged teeth.

I offer her the bottle we're sharing. With a flick of my chained wrist I shake it, watch the liquid curdle inside. I hold it steady and it turns fluid once more. Shaye takes it from me, pops the cork, and drinks deeply. She shakes her head, dark hair spraying wild.

On the next rock sit the Jagelli sisters. Beatrix is drinking from their own bottle, Lucia watching on with envy. Reaching into the rock pool behind us, I snap up a fat red anemone and throw the creature. It hits Beatrix on the cheek. She nearly chokes and spills her liquor down her fat chin. I cackle and roll back, grabbing my sides and wailing with glee. A litany of curses come my way, but the noise of the growing storm drowns them out.

Shaye's eyes, once green, newly phosphorous, meet mine. The folds in her neck are tightening now, fleshy slits opening. As she draws breath she falters and makes a few faint clicks within her throat. Dropping her robes, unveiling a body ancient and malnourished, she hobbles to the edge of the sea. With each step her body grows sleeker, hair shrinking away and craggy wrinkles tightening, leaving nothing but smooth skin. She lowers herself into the water. It toils and churns invitingly.

"I'll bring back a good one," she sings, voice angelic.

She slips under the froth like a seal and becomes a shadow under the waves. I watch her swim, beating her feet like flippers and surging away. There are other shadows, too, joining her, all arrowing toward the rocking schooner. All the sisters watch, wishing it was them on the prow, waving safe hunt to their kin, hoping their own sister's chains are long enough to reach the ship.

There are dozens of us sitting on our rocks, watching the water boil and the boat roll. On the one side of me is Lucia Jagelli, now picking at her nails with a knife carved from bone. On the other is old Margo Pascam, chewing on a crab claw and sipping at fish oil. My stomach groans at the sight. Reaching into our rock pool, I pluck out a fisher crab and crack it open, striking it against my manacles. Its claws wave goodbye as I suck out the salty jelly from inside. It does not sate.

A chorus of cackling breaks across the shore. Looking over the waves, I see the schooner has toppled. Ink-like shapes slip and slide across the sail and mast, oily shadows pulling the ship under the foam. I snatch up our spyglass, taken from a ship long ago, and raise it to my eye. I yelp with delight as I see Shaye; she has a land-man and is dragging him with her, skimming across the water at pace, her chain looped under his arms.

"Beatrix hasn't a thing!" I crow in Lucia's direction. "Crab meat for you, for always, for you!"

She waves a hand at me and stares out to watch her sister's inevitable failings. Beatrix hunted as proficiently as a carp.

Soon enough, the ship is gone, stolen under the waves. The wait is not long and Shaye appears at the shore, dragging the coughing and spluttering land-man by the neck. She passes him to me and I check him out, my webbed fingers scouring his face, front, back, and rump.

"A bit lean," Lucia whines, her neck craning.

Shaye wrinkles her nose. "Better lean than a ghost. Your sister'll be bringing you nothing but rope and wood to chew on."

He *is* lean, true enough, but lean meat is still better than crab. Along the shore I see dozens more land-men being hauled, dragged, thrown, or pushed up and onto the rocks to waiting sisters. A chorus of wet slaps echoes as they are dragged out of the ocean.

Ours has passed out. I hit him hard. He coughs up water, splutters in panic, then opens his eyes. They're blue as a calm day's sky, but anything but calm now, flitting from side to side and wide as a cave mouth.

"Shh," I purr. "Be still. We just need to talk a while. He looks delicious, Shaye. Well chosen, well caught." I embrace my sister and try to ignore my baying hunger. Seeing Lucia hungrily staring at our catch, I snarl at her and she shrinks back, her manacles scraping against the rocks.

It never used to be like this. There was a time when storms hit, ships overturned, and we feasted. Not now, not immediately. Mother Salt gave us rules when she came to us and put us in chains. Sneaking a glance over my shoulder, I see her upon her pedestal, watching over all the sisters as we drag in our treasure, her vodyanoi guards at attention.

The land-man is fully awake now. Shaye holds him in her arms, crooning, playing with his hair.

"What's going on?" he mewls. "Who are you?"

I smile, fangs out.

"My name is Kelsa. This is Shaye. We've got some questions for you." The words taste sour. The days when our land-men were for nothing but feasting and I would already have his throat



in two are long gone. Mother Salt demands patience and has set us questions to ask of all the men we bring ashore. Dinner depends on the answers.

He stared through me. I'm not sure if he nods or just shakes, so I continue.

"Three questions, quick as a snap." I break a crab's leg in half for effect. The joke does not register. "Have you ever been to Ender's Boon?"

"Ender's Boon? No," he garbles, words tumbling from his mouth.

Shaye shrugs. It's often the case. It's a big city, I understand.

"Two more to go," I say, licking my black lips. "You're doing so very well. Now, in your life, have you ever married a girl from Castille? Not just agreed to it, but the act itself?"

"Married? Yes . . . once. Long ago."

"You have?" I spit crab.

"When I was young. It didn't end well. She ran off."

Shaye's eyes widen and I see her clench a fist. I shake my head, lank hair rolling over my shoulders. Plenty of land-men get married, after all. Plenty from this foreign town of Castille, too, I'm sure. No need to raise our hopes.

"The girl you married, where did you meet her?"

"I don't understand," he garbles. "What do you want?"

"Answer the question, land-man," snaps Shaye. "Where did you meet her?"

"On a fishing trip to Shale. I met her down by the rocks."

I take several quick snorts through my nose and slap my palm against the rock face, cutting it on an edge. My stomach groans again, so delicious he looks, but Mother Salt will want this one. There's a chance he could be our salvation, the hammer to break our chains. Mother Salt has freed our sisters before, those who have found someone she remembers fondly.

This land-man could mean freedom, I tell myself, trying to drown out the cries of my churning stomach.

"He met her in Shale. Could he be one?" Shaye whispers furiously. Stealing a glance behind us, I see the vodyanoi keepers are out of earshot, marching about with their tridents of coral. Mother Salt, too, is ignorant of our catch. She is playing with a vodyanoi pup, making it leap and bound by dangling seaweed before it. I hear Shaye's stomach howling with desire. We could just tear his neck and have our feast. Mother Salt would never know. It would be a joy to sneak one past the old sea-hag.

I shake my head. Hunger is muddling my thoughts like a devilish squall. This land-man could mean freedom.

I am about to whisper as much to Shaye when she cries out.

"Shale! Did I just hear Shale? We have a land-man who met his wife in Shale?" she shrieks. The storm has eased now and the whole coast can hear her cry. A pair of vodyanoi bound toward us, another leaping toward Mother Salt.

Shaye's eyes meet mine. Our stomachs growl in unison. I hope this gift will please the sea-hag.

Mother Salt is coming toward us now, feet slapping on the wet rocks.

"Sisters, you have something for me? A man who married a girl from Shale? Who has never been to Ender's Boon?" Her voice washes over me.

I nod.

"Then come, come. Bring him with you. Up to my throne."

We stand, Shaye and I, and drag the land-man to his feet. Shaye has returned to her natural form now and we walk behind Mother Salt, stomachs pleading, chains scraping against the rocks. Mother Salt calls it throne, but that is too grand a name; it's a weather-lashed rock, happenchance higher than any other on the coast, decorated with shoal and draped with colored seaweed. At its base run a hundred chains, cast out and secured to all the siren sisters of the bay. I rub my aching wrists at the sight of them.

I cast a look back over my shoulder and see the other sisters, claws and teeth all a'frenzy, tearing through their own treasures, feeding. Lucia glares at me then turns back to watch for the still missing Beatrix. The vodyanoi stand motionless, watching the sisters eat.

Taking a look at our land-man, I try to raise my spirits. He *could* be our key to freedom. Mother Salt has rewarded sisters before, snapping their chains and allowing them to find their own bay. The thought is sacred, but my baying hunger blurs my thoughts and makes it hard to imagine. All I can think of is his flesh.

Mother Salt perches herself atop her rock and motions for us to drag the land-man closer. She takes him by the chin and inspects his face.

"What's your name?" she asks.

"Tomas Ghent," he says. His choking and spluttering voice has gone now, replaced by a hushed whisper.

Her head cocks and she repeats the name to herself three times. Screws her face up and massages her barnacled temples with long and crooked fingers. Her vodyanoi pup wrestles with a knot of seaweed close by.

"Tomas . . . Tomas," she rolls the name around her mouth, as if tasting it. "You met your wife where?"

"On the coast, just outside Shale."

"Where on the coast?"

"Near the old lighthouse at Gheleon's Point. There's a cave there, all green and purple, walls covered in limpets. I used to go there sometimes, to be alone, where none of the other fishermen could find me. One day she was there." His voice wanders dreamily as he speaks of old and treasured memories. Something glints in Mother Salt's eyes.

"Yes, the cave. You were singing a song. *High Tide and the Kraken*. Something about the Kraken being trapped upon the shore. I never liked it. Such a sad tale. I asked you to stop," she whispers.

The land-man's eyes are wet and he shivers with cold. He looks up at Mother Salt.

"That's right, it was that song. How did you know? I don't know you," he whispers.

She steps down from her rock and stands before us, brings her hands high and rubs her face. When she moves them, she is anew. Gone are her bulbous nose and shingled lips, black eyes and barnacle-strewn cheeks. Now she has the face of a land-girl, fresh and dainty and pink. Shaye's nose wrinkles and I suppress a sneer.

The land-man's jaw drops.

"Theresa?" he says, falling to his knees. "Theresa? Is it you? But it's been years . . ."

Mother Salt, now unrecognizable, looks to me.

"What are your names, sisters?"

"I am Kelsa. My sister is Shaye."

"You have done beautifully. Finding this husband of mine and bringing him to me, ignoring those ravenous pangs you must feel. You show iron loyalty, you do." I shuffle my feet on the cold rock and glance at Shaye. "Leave us now. Think on what you desire. I shall treat you both to a single wish. Return to me in three days with what you want." She waves a hand to dismiss us. A vodyanoi keeper steps between us and glares, red eyes bulging.

We nod in unison and make our way back to our rock.

"How do you think she'll treat us?" I ask.

Shaye's hand takes mine as we return to our pool. I know her stomach rumbles as harshly as my own. "She'll give us our freedom, Kelsa."

I squeeze her hand. "We can hope, Shaye."

The storm has passed now and the sky is turning blue. As we approach our rock pool, Lucia lies across Beatrix, head on her lap, chewing marrow from a bone.

"Shim-spreet, what a treat," she sings, sucking on her snack. "You must be hungry, you both, losing such a feast."

"Where did you get that?" growls Shaye.

"I brought home a land-man, of course. Asked him the questions; he wasn't what Mother Salt wanted," coughs Beatrix, almost choking on her meal as she laughs. "So a delightful treat he became. Did you lose your meal? Shame. Must be hungry."

"I thought you said she didn't catch anything." I look at Shaye, my stomach even angrier.

My sister's face knots like gnarled driftwood and she grinds her teeth. I try not to care and instead think upon our coming freedom. I cannot.



We sit beside our rock pool, picking at fisher crabs while our bellies howl.

Mother Salt had kept her land-man up on her rock for days, recounting old times with her one-time beloved, occasionally calling sisters to provide them with crabs or whelks or oysters. The sisters about the cove have picked their land-men's bones clean and are now basking in the sun, waiting for the day another ship will stray too close, ignoring the intrusive presence of the vodyanoi keepers who prowl the rocks.

"Will she truly grant us freedom?" I ask, sucking the jelly from a broken crab.

"I don't know. I hope so. She has done before. Remember the Yeltrix sisters? They were allowed to leave after finding a husband of hers. Oh, to go find our own rocks to sing from, like older days!" We clasp hands at the idea. "We could sing to the ships once more, remember how joyous that was?"

"I wonder what she'll do with the land-man?" I look up to the coral throne.

"I know what she'll do with him," come Margo's scratchy tones. She lies with her sister, Wendsla, on their rock. "As for letting you leave? Breaking your chain and leaving you free to swim past the tide? Don't dream too high on that, girls. Come speak with me."

Shaye and I slide over the rocks and join the old sisters. They are not so unpalatable as Lucia and Beatrix, hunting in silence as they do. They are new to our end of the cove, too. Mother Salt moved them here just seven tides ago.

"How could you know what she does with the land-men? Mother Salt's friends, are you?" I ask.

"We know because we, too, caught one of her other husbands, once upon a storm," said Wendsla. "Many years ago, a frigate like you've never seen, bigger than a whale, toiling in the winds and the surf. We dragged it to the Under and stole away its land-men, as ever, and brought

them here. This was not long after Mother Salt came to us with her vodyanoi and took us all in chains.

"We asked the questions, as she demands. He was a land-man who had not been to Ender's Boon, had married a girl from Castille, met on the shore of Shale. We dragged him up to her rock and she showed one of her masks. Land-man could not believe his eyes, started crying in memory of lost love." Wendsla looks over my shoulder and toward the great rock. "Different mask to the one she wears now."

Shaye scratches her shingled cheek.

"And? What did she do with him?"

"After some days, she set him free."

"She did what?" I cannot believe what I am hearing. "She set him *free*? She ate him, surely. Set him free from the torment of solitude, a lonely land-man on our wet rocks."

Margo and Wendsla shake their heads in unison.

"But where would he go?" says Shaye. "There is nothing here but rock pools and cray. There is nothing for land-men here."

"She let him swim from the far side of the cove, far beyond where any of the sisters could see." She lifts her arm and her chains jangle. "Too few links on most chains. Sisters can't reach around the cove. She let him live there, her pet, with nobody to see, nobody to know."

"How do you know then?" I ask.

"The gift Mother Salt gave us. Our reward for bringing her husband, that let us explore the cove and discover him. We begged for our freedom, as so many have. You know what we were given? What Mother Salt called freedom?" said Margo, rattling her manacles in my face. "Longer chains."



Shaye and I sit on our rock, whittling fish bones into sharp things. The sky is blood orange now, the sun sinking into the horizon. Fish dance around the reef. Some of our sisters play amid them, throwing the bones of land-men at one another and singing siren calls. It's a long time since I sang one of those to call a ship. Mother Salt tells us this way, our bondage, our co-operative ship breaking, is better for us all. More regular, consistent. I don't know about this, though it suits her own needs. Despite its waning power, her magic is still great. Though she would struggle to catch so many land-men on her own.

"More links in our chains? What kind of reward is that?" hisses Shaye. "No. That won't do, Kelsa. It won't do at all." She stares at Mother Salt and her husband as she speaks, spitting saltwater from her mouth. "It's not enough. My stomach aches. Each day it is worse. She must give us more. She must set us free. She must."

I agree, but I doubt Mother Salt's generosity. She came to our island when Shaye and I were young whelps, and took our kind in chains. Would she really let us depart? Margo and Wendsla were still here, manacled hard, despite the extra length on their leash. Others had been released, though. Would our land-man be enough?

I trace a finger across my broken teeth, stare at my chains, sourly remembering my efforts to gnaw through them, so many tides ago.

"Let us speak with her, sister," I say. "Let us make our request." We walk up the craggy rocks to meet her. She is deep in conversation with her land-man. At least, she is talking. He appears listless, staring out over the waves.

"Mother Salt," I begin. "We have thought on the treat you offer."

"Ah, yes. What is it you would like?"

I glance at Shaye. She's scratching her shingles, eyes down.

"We would like our shackles sheared, Mother Salt, and to swim past the tide. We know you have granted this to others before."

Her eyes open wide. They are deep blue, speckled with white clouds, and swim like whirlpools as she matches my gaze. She still wears her mask, face smooth and clean, but as I stare at her, limpets burst from her skin and cavities open, revealing small and curious mollusks that crawl across her face. Her mask slips. I wonder if it is surprise or just her waning power; she is as ancient as the rocks we sit upon.

"Sheared? You wish to leave me? Leave our family?"

"Please, Mother Salt. We found your husband. We would like to go free, as two sisters, and find a cove of our own."

Mother Salt looks to her husband and then back to us. A mollusk creeps across her chin as he watches on with fear and disgust.

"Sit," she commands, and we do. "Let me tell you a story. When I was a young girl I swam far and wide. I traveled the oceans, I visited the southern shores and the freezing northern ice-waters. I had much pleasure with the rest of my kin, long now passed, but found my own haven alone. A backwater town called Shale. The waters there were pleasant and I found the place to have a charm."



"I met a man there, sitting in the cave under the lighthouse, and enjoyed his company greatly. I cannot remember his name, as I struggle to remember any of their names now. The sailors there were of a sort so different to any other port I had known. I made a new face, one likeable to the land-men, and we talked. I found more of an accord than I had thought possible with this man, and we met many times. Eventually, we married. It's their custom and I thought it endearing.

"I was greedy, of course. One sailor was interesting. How much more interesting would others be? I made many masks and met many land-men, each with their own loves and gifts and wants. They spent so much time on the waves in those clumsy ships they build, I needed so many to keep me entertained. Shale was a large enough place."

The land-man turns now and looks at Mother Salt, mouth agape.

"After many years of this, my strength waned. I missed the call of the salt and the sea and of Father Kraken. My masks grew heavier and more tiring. I left Shale and abandoned my many husbands. I returned to the deep." Mother Salt sighs, reaching up to stroke a whelk upon her cheek. "I eventually found this rocky place and your kind. You and your sister and all the other sister sirens. You seemed worth taking, so I did. It has been many years since and I forget many things, the names of my husbands being one. They seemed so important, once. Now they are but salt in the air. I can taste them, I know they are out there, but . . ." She trails off. "I miss them sometimes. That's why you bring down the ships and ask them my questions. So I can speak with them a final time. I do not have the energy to wear a mask and walk upon the land for long, nor to travel the oceans, not now. I cannot return. So I wait and hope for fond memories to return to me. My throne here is a pleasant enough place to wait.

"You have brought me one of my husbands. I am pleased, but there are many more I have yet to see again. I shall not break your chains."

Shaye's hand takes mine. I squeeze hers back. My sister, brave Shaye, raises her eyes to face Mother Salt's gaze.

"But Mother Salt, please. We have done you a kindness," Shaye begins. "We could have ignored your questions and eaten him sharp. You would never have known but for our honesty."

Honesty? Lies, Shaye, lies! So brave of her, so daring, to speak falsities to a sea-hag. Mother Salt's whirlpool eyes look hard upon us.

"You are *my* things. To catch land-men and find my husbands if they ever pass by, that is your life. You shall not leave. I shall reward you, as I have rewarded others who have found my husbands. I shall give you another fifty links to your chains. You shall feast upon land-men that lie beyond the reach of other sisters."

My hopes had been fragile, and now they were dashed. We would not leave to find our own cove. We would stay subjugate. As we turn to leave, I catch the land-man's eyes. He stares at me.

I look away.



Our chains are lengthened. Mother Salt calls upon her vodyanoi to do so, singing to them in the tongue of the Under, and paying them with a gift of two sisters, who scream in anger as they are dragged away to their water burrow.

My sister and I held our tongues. I knew her heart and she knew mine. Our disappointment was overflowing, and it was all we could do not to weep. Lucia watched us close. How she would enjoy seeing our suffering, I'm sure.

It was two days later that another ship appeared. The sun was rising and the sea was a'shimmer, the wind cold and harsh. Another schooner, bearing sails red and blue, riding the waters near our cove.

Shaye passes me the bottle without a word. I shake it and drink the coagulate heartily, taking to the water as gills open in my neck and my ligaments bend, stretching skin and forming fins. It's painful, always painful, but soon my blood burns with fervor and I go to the hunt. The drink makes us much stronger in the water. Faster and sharper.

I am one of the first in the water, but it is not long until the other sisters join me. Bursting through the waves, I can hear them. With muted barks and yelps and clicks they charge, surging like arrows through the cold water. I am at the front with two others, piercing through the water like a merrow's spear. My stomach churns with anticipation.

We hit the ship, raking it with claws and gouging holes in its hull, punching through the hard wood with coral spines that have grown from our wrists, from our fists and feet. As we drag it to the Under, I dream of sawing through my chains with my new appendages, but I know it is no good. Mother Salt's spellbound links cannot be broken by my own means.

My chain is longer now and I swim to the far side of the ship as the land-men cast themselves overboard, all a'panic. I have many choices, unlike my kin with shorter chains, whose eyes glare with envy at the selection of fat morsels out of their grasp. These land-men are better fed than the last ones.

I see one, legs kicking and fat arms flailing, and I loop around twice, catching him in my chain, and with a hard kick of my feet I am on my way back to the shore, catch in tow.

Shaye's eyes burn with pleasure as I haul myself onto the rocks.

"Oh, what a catch! What a find. Well hunted, my sister."

She slaps him awake as I sit upon the rock. Through narrowed eyes I see Lucia has hunted well also, her catch almost as fat as my own.

"My name is Shaye. This is Kelsa. We've got some questions for you," my sister begins.

"Have you ever married?" She speaks quickly, hurried. Urgent with hunger.

The land-man coughs up a lungful of water and looks up with teary eyes.

"Married? No, not I."

Shaye's eyes meet mine and shine with delight.

As we set upon our meal, I hear a shriek of complaint and irritation from Lucia. So typical of her, unable to keep her fat mouth shut.

"Shale? You were married to a woman in Shale?!"



We watch the land-man dragged up to Mother Salt, escorted by the Jagelli sisters and two large vodyanoi. Shaye and I laugh to one another, gorging upon our feast.

"Serves them right," spits Shaye. "Serves them what they deserve."

I nod and smirk, watch them speak to Mother Salt up at her coral throne. I notice the previous land-man, the husband we found, is missing.

"Where's our land-man?" I ask.

"Saw him taken around the bend of the isle while you were out on the hunt. Mother Salt had some keepers march him that way." She waves a thin hand to the rocky cliffs to the west.

"Wouldn't do for hubbies to meet, I guess," she chuckles. "Wouldn't want her memories tainted by a feud."

I try to enjoy the banquet I have brought us but time and again my eyes wander to where Shaye had pointed.

"I'm going out," I whisper to her. She looks at me in disbelief, her eyes dropping to the piles of meat before us and back again.

"Why?"

"See if I can find where our land-man is going."

"Aha," she nods, bearing stained teeth. "Dessert? Mother Salt won't be happy. I'll save you some of this one. Oh, bring me back some liver."

I nod and slip into the water, tears brimming in my eyes. It has been too much. The false promise of freedom has festered and I grow ever bitterer. If Mother Salt insists on keeping us in chains, this shall be my revenge. I'll break his body and chew upon his neck. The thought of her face as she finds his bones makes me smile. And if she does not find them I shall bring them to her.

I swim deep and with care, through coral gardens and seaweed, avoiding the vodyanoi pups that play amid the waves and staying out of sight of the other sisters. I swim around the corner of the bay, where Shaye had pointed, and I gently break the surface of water.

The land-man is there, sitting on a rock, staring out over the waves. I follow his gaze. In the distance is an island. He is humming a song to himself, *High Tide and the Kraken*, and he rolls a pebble around in his hand. I have heard him singing it to Mother Salt these past days and I have learned its words and tune. As he finishes, his head drops to his hands and he makes sobbing sounds. I cannot see any vodyanoi, so I drift cautiously closer.

"Hush, land-man," I croon, bobbing in the water. I speak softly—I need him to stay close to the shore. His head snaps up and he looks at me, eyes red. "Why do you weep? Are you not free? So much better than . . ." I still my lips. Best not remind him of his shipmates.

He laughs without humor.

"Free? This is free?" he waves his hand to the ocean. "No man could swim across these waters. They're full of danger. Kelpies, water-drakes . . . sirens." He spits at me. "I die here, alone and starved, or I die out there, chewed and mauled and drowned in salt."

I look out over the waters. He is right. I have not considered this. The sea is full of terror for land-men. No man could cross these waters and live, not without a ship. What fate must have befallen Salt's other husbands? Where are her other pets? They must have tried the journey. I toy with the manacle upon my wrist, watching the land-man sob.

"Wait here," I say, and dive back under the surf. I have an idea. There is a greater revenge I can have on Mother Salt than eating this pitiful thing.



It is seven days later and our bellies are all crying. No ships have come past in this time.

"Where are they?" wails Lucia, voice warbling. "I've never known such hunger!"

Shaye lies across my lap, eyes closed. I play with her hair and massage her ears. Her lips tweak into a faint smile. She strokes wrinkled fingers over the chains around her wrist.

"Where are the ships, Kelsa?" she asks. "Crab meat is no match."

"I don't know. They'll come."

Mother Salt is upon her throne, instructing a vodyanoi keeper. He is rearranging her coral, adding new colors and shapes. Why does she not feel the hunger as we do? What does she eat to stave off this pain?

"Look there!" cries Beatrix. On the horizon is a ship, white sails billowing in the wind.

"Land-men! Where's the bottle?" she shrieks at Lucia, who is already popping the cork.

More cries go up across the coast as more ships appear. There are five in all, sailing in unison, all too close to our bay.

"What luck, what fortune!" calls Beatrix. "This will be the greatest feast in an age," she swigs from her bottle, passes it to her sister, and shuffles toward the water's edge. "So many land-men, we'll need to go together, Lucia."

Shaye's eyes are open and hungry. She places her hands on my shoulders.

"That was bliss, sister. Thank you. Where is the bottle? We must swim together."

I look away.

"Kelsa?"

I scratch at the limpets below my ear.

"We shall not hunt, Shaye. Sit with me." She looks at me wide-eyed. "We have no bottle."

"We . . ." the word trickles from her mouth. She takes my hands, shaking. "We have no bottle? Where is it?"

"Just sit me with, sister." I put my arm around her. "Sit and be still." Her eyes meet mine and swim with confusion. She is not angry with me. We are sisters, after all. She stares at the ships and places a hand to her stomach. I pull her close.

We watch as the other sisters, all of them, drink from their own bottles and dive into the water. They surge toward the convoy, shadows under the waves, chains stretching, ready to take them to the Under.

They approach quickly, a school of terrors. I can imagine their barks and yelps of excitement.

A series of red and orange bursts from the sides of ships, like anemones unfurling, and the water churns and boils. The sounds of explosions follow moments later.

I hug Shaye close. The water continues to thrash as more explosions erupt from the ships.

Mother Salt is crying out, voice lashing like a whip, screaming at her vodyanoi to do something. They cannot. They look to her and back to the carnage.

More explosions. The sea boils red.

The ships turn their heading. They now approach our island.

The vodyanoi are croaking in fear to Mother Salt now, bounding about the rocks uncertainly, wet feet slapping, all in panic. Another series of ships has rounded the bay now. There are ten in all.

"Get your tridents! Go to the ships, take the land-men to the Under!" she screams.

I feel Shaye's grip tighten on my hand. She trembles, as do I.

"Kelsa, is this you? Is this us? What have you done?"

"Just stay close, sister."

The men of the lead ship are near enough to see now. They are pointing to the shore, some at us, some at the screaming vodyanoi. I see them lower rifles toward us, and the firing starts again. I shut my eyes, but feel no metal tearing into me. The land-man has stayed true to our deal. The vodyanoi are panicking, loyalty fading, and scramble away from the shore, hopping over the bank behind us and racing for the water on the far side. Mother Salt is screeching with rage and fear.

The first ship drops anchor off the shore, bloody surf painting its hull, coral shards embedded where sisters had charged it, and a smaller boat is lowered into the water.

"Kelsa, look!" cries Shaye. In the boat, at its prow, is our land-man, Tomas.

With a shriek of impotent fury, Mother Salt casts herself into the ocean and bursts through in an explosion of brine. Rifles crackle and the water churns, but is she struck? I cannot say. Sea-hags are mighty indeed, yet her magic wanes.

The land-men march up the shore and Tomas approaches. I can see the bottle attached to his belt. He does not smile, does not wave. He does, however, strike our formerly spellbound chains open, before stalking away. This proves to me that Mother Salt's magic has died. Whether she has, too, I do not know.



"But why, Kelsa. Why did he come back to aid us? The land-man could have stayed away, safe and dry." Shaye is basking on a rock, lolling in the sun. We lie in our own cove now, on a new isle.

"Mother Salt was our slaver, but do you think the land-men had any love for her?" I ask.

"How many ships were taken to the Under, dragged down with her chains? How many land-men had we eaten in that time? We made a deal. His life for ours, and a chance for revenge."



I lie upon a rock, eyes closed, the sun beating down on me. There was no sound but the lapping of the tide and the cry of gulls. There had been no gulls on Mother Salt's island. I had missed their call.

"True," replies Shaye. "But we were taking land-men long before Mother Salt took us in servitude. It seems strange that they would come and help, even with the kindness you did for that land-man Tomas." She rubs her wrist, scarred from now-absent bonds.

I shrug. Perhaps it was fortune that gave us a land-man who would repay his debts. I hear not all are so honest. Perhaps it was the idea of a final vengeance on Mother Salt, his erstwhile lover who left him, to follow my plan and release me from bondage? To destroy her net of sirens must have given him pleasure.

Perhaps these things do not matter. She is gone. Whether that is to the deep Under or a new place, I do not know. I am sure she will not return here.

A sail appears in the distance. Shaye stands and waves, arms all frantic. The ship turns and approaches.

"What song shall we sing to them?" Shaye asks, licking her lips. "It's been ever such a long time. I'm not sure I remember any."

"*High Tide and the Kraken*," I whisper. "It's a beautiful song, sister. To think of it makes me happy. I'll teach you the words."

And we begin to sing, once more, just as we did when we were young.



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**James Ross Troughton** is a writer of speculative fiction who lives and works in Essex, England. After graduating from the University of Leicester in 2007, he moved to Seoul, South Korea, where he worked in language academies for three years before returning to the UK. His fiction has been published by *Shimmer*, *Cast of Wonders*, and *The Colored Lens*. He can be found on Twitter at @JRTroughton.

# Prosperity's Shadow

Jason Hine

VICAR EQUATED STEPPING INTO THE QUESTIONER'S HALL to setting foot in the waters of the Riverdun on a hot summer day. It might look tranquil during the approach, but when the undercurrents got ahold of you, they'd never let go. Still, the city outside was burning, and someone had to answer. He'd been here before. Most of the Casters had.

The white-washed walls brought one word to mind—sterile. It was as if the color had been scrubbed off every facet of the Hall. The scent of rose oil lingered in the air, perhaps a remnant from when it had been a bathhouse. It masked the smell of charred wood from outside and was almost enough to make Vicar forget where he was. Almost, because under it all came another scent, a stink so insidious that nothing could wash it away.

Fear.

It oozed from the dungeons below and seeped through Vicar's toes. He tried not to think about what was happening just below his feet. Glaws, the Questioner who had summoned him, stood over a marble basin, his hands dipping into the water. Blood swirled from Glaws's fingers, staining the pool pink. Crimson speckled his pearly apron and flecked his stark white brow. Pupils as blue as snow cover in moonlight scrutinized Vicar in a way that was inhuman.

That reversal of natural form was universal among Questioners, but no less disconcerting to behold than it had been when Vicar was an apprentice. He spoke to distract himself from that stare. "Head Questioner, you wished to speak with me?"

Glaws shook his hands dry, scattering water across the floor. "Caster Vicar, the people need your talents."

Vicar's tongue turned to rigid leather in his mouth. He swallowed to try and regain his speech. "The arsonist provided an answer?"

"They always do."

Vicar nodded. He'd been in the market when the arsonists cracked the first phoenix egg, spewing wildfire through the stalls and devouring anyone too slow to flee its path. Three other eggs had followed, one within a stone's throw of the palace walls. The crier's dirge had gone well into the afternoon. Three-hundred and forty-two dead. Eighty-three missing. She'd spoken the names and their next of kin one after another until they'd lost meaning. Then the rumors started. There'd been another egg that hadn't burst. The arsonist who bore it had been captured before it hatched.

"What was the answer?" Vicar asked.

"He whispered a name before he departed. He sought the forgiveness of Yarrow Illian."

*Yarrow Illian?* A Proderi name. It figured. The Proderi resented the Golden City's very existence. Its success and glory stood as an affront to their way of life. "If I may ask, who is he?"

"Does it matter?" Glaws asked.

Vicar tilted his head. It was a bizarre question. "I mean, was he the alchemist who forged the eggs?"

Glaws dried his hands in the folds of his cotton robes and approached.

Despite three decades of dealing with Questioners, Vicar still wanted to shrink away.

Placing a hand on Vicar's shoulder, Glaws stared up at him through the blue pinpricks at the center of his irises. "You misunderstand your place, brother. It is my role to ask questions and yours to feed the hungry dead with answers."

"It's just not much to go on—a name. If you gave me more I could be sure; a description, perhaps?" There was no going back if the Questioner was wrong. Once Vicar brought the spirit forth, only consuming the life of its intended victim or its Caster would sate its hunger.

"We both know a name will suffice. The spirit always knows. But if you lack certainty, be thorough. The message we send is as important as the deed itself." Removing the hand from Vicar's shoulder, Glaws paced away, back bent as if he shouldered a heavy burden.

What was left unsaid spoke louder than words. Blood and ash stained the streets of the Golden City—someone needed to answer. The right Proderi or the wrong one, someone *would* answer. Vicar's stomach sank as he stared at the floor.

Glaws tipped his head to peer at Vicar out of the corner of his eye. "Perhaps the day's events have shaken your nerves. Shall I summon another Caster to perform this duty?"

"No." The word emerged from Vicar's mouth far too quickly. "No, that won't be necessary. Yarrow Illian will not see the sun rise."

Some approximation of a smile cracked Glaws's lips. "Good. The people of this city will thank you for your service. You will have helped us thwart another Proderi plot against our security." He paused. "I'm told you're a father. Imagine how much safer your son feels knowing that those who conspire to destroy what we've built cannot escape justice."

Vicar did think of his son. He could not allow his personal doubts to bring the loyalty of his lineage into question. "I've brought my ancestor stone with me."

"Good. We've prepared the chamber for your work. I see no cause for delay."

Reaching into his satchel, Vicar removed a felt-wrapped sphere, careful not to touch it. The cold of the artifact permeated the fabric and nipped his fingers. Glaws led him to a stairwell descending to the dungeons beneath the Questioner's Hall—a place where prisoners awaited a

trial that may never come. As he trudged down the spiral stair and listened to the cries of the forgotten, he was reminded of a time when the Golden City hadn't needed a place like this—a time when they'd been isolated from the greater cares of nations. Now, the question was just one more necessary evil . . . an evil that grew by necessity with each passing day.

An iron-banded doorway loomed at the bottom of the stairs. A bench sat outside. Glaws moved toward it, resting his back against the wall. "I await word of your success. Blessed hunt to you, Caster."

Vicar took in a deep breath and opened the door. The confines of the black cell were kept unadorned from concern that distraction might cause fatal interference with the transition. As Vicar stepped inside, Glaws sealed the door behind him, plunging the room into darkness. Only then did Vicar remove the felt covering his stone.

Fourteen emerald motes swirled within the glassy black sphere like fireflies eternally trapped in a bubble of the Void itself. Fourteen souls stolen from fourteen names fed to the hungry dead. Reluctantly, he affixed his fingertips to the stone, spreading them evenly across its surface so his connection would not be disturbed. Something darker than the lightless room stirred within the hollow world clenched in his grasp.

An ancestor spirit—that was the pleasant lie they told. It sounded better than admitting they had no clue who or what the hungry dead were, but with every fiber of his being Vicar knew they were not benevolent grandfathers sworn to protect their descendants. A shudder coursed through him, the chill winding up his arms like a thousand tiny needles. He fed it the true name before *it* fed on *him*. "Yarrow Illian," he whispered.

At once, it felt like his body was being yanked apart and slapped back together all wrong. He soared free of the Questioner's Hall as a shadow, curling in with the rising smoke and ash. The Golden City sprawled below, a seemingly endless hive of humanity. Phoenix fires raged within its walls, their bottomless thirsts not yet slaked. So much destruction, but from this height they were nothing more than candlelight floating in a dark ocean. Even with all their fury, the charcoal smudges of demolished neighborhoods were mere blemishes on the crowning achievement of man.

He flew above the city walls, ever faster as he skimmed the Riverdun and scaled the ice-capped peaks of the Fangreach. He merged with the clouds and became like a storm as he swept onward, everything a blur. Then all at once he came back to himself—reborn in a field outside a Proderi dwelling, a place that must be the home of Yarrow Illian.

With legs longer than his own that bent a second time above the ankles, he trod through a garden leading to the structure. Wherever his shadowy feet stepped, the land died. Plants curled

up and withered away. Green drained to black. Nothing stopped the hungry dead, nothing short of claiming a life.

Fire could stall him, though, and one lit candle glowed inside. With slender fingers like the legs of a spider he stretched and reached for the second story window. He flowed through and around the glass in a dark mist, emerging into the room.

A bed chamber. A child no older than his own son slept here, despite the candlelight. Perhaps he feared the dark? That made him wise. Vicar blew on the candle. The flame snuffed out, and with its light went hope. The only other bedroom on the upper floor was modest—an unattended mattress, a wardrobe, and a desk. Not the lair he expected from an alchemist trying to burn down the Golden City, but the Proderi had grown clever. Their leaders were known to shroud themselves in false modesty while proselytizing hate. If this was a clever mirage it wouldn't save Yarrow Illian now. And if it wasn't . . . he tried not to think about that possibility, or consider the child sleeping across the hall. He slipped back out the doorway and crept down the stairs. Vicar's shadowy outline grew and shrank to fill the space as he moved.

More light below. A room without windows. At the bottom of the stairs, a man with as much gray in his hair as black watched the hearthfire from his chair. The Proderi was alone. Soon, there'd be a fifteenth light floating in his ancestor stone. Weightlessly, Vicar guided the spirit from the landing and stalked toward the man he hoped was Yarrow Illian.

Yarrow must have sensed the looming shadow because he spoke before the spirit's claws closed around his lungs and stole his breath. "You've come for me, haven't you?"

Vicar nearly finished him then, but his victim made no move toward the fire. Either he didn't know how to stall the spirit, or knew the futility of it. Glaws had said Vicar's role was not to question, but this Proderi was not what he expected. Nothing like the fourteen warlords, priests, and smiths he'd claimed before. Instead of consuming the Proderi, he listened.

"I told him not to go, that there would be consequences." Yarrow shook his head. "My brother was a fool. He never listened to a word. Just kept spewing the same rhetoric, *the Golden City needs to pay for what it's done to us*. He never realized most of you are no different than us. Just believing everything you've been told."

Even watching through the veil of darkness that had been pulled over his eyes, Vicar knew they'd made a mistake. Yarrow's brother must have been the one questioned, and he'd spoken a name. Not the name of the man who sent him, but the name of the person he wanted to forgive him, the person who'd tried to stop him from going. Vicar's claws twitched at the end of his onyx fingers. The spirit was hungry and wouldn't wait forever. A freezing emptiness opened

within Vicar. A hollow space demanding to be filled. Someone must feed the spirit—if not Yarrow Illian, then Vicar's own soul would be consumed.

"Finish what you came for," Yarrow spoke. "But I beg you, leave my son out of this."

Vicar sought a way out of his predicament. He was not the monster he wore, and he didn't wish to steal this man's life any more than he wanted to surrender his own. But, even if he sacrificed himself, the Questioners had Yarrow's true name. Glaws would summon another Caster before Vicar's body had gone cold. He tried to speak through the spirit, say he was sorry. No voice emerged from the shadow. Pressure mounted, like a sarcophagus of jagged ice closing in from all sides. The spirit would not be denied. Vicar couldn't hold back any longer. He lunged forward in desperate hunger, plunging his claws deep within Yarrow's chest. He lifted his victim from the floor and held him dangling like a child's doll. Color siphoned from Yarrow's face until his skin went gray and his eyes turned milky white. The warmth that Yarrow granted him was a roaring fire crackling beneath his real skin. A surging pulse of unclean vitality. When Vicar finished draining his victim, he released the body. It fell lifelessly to the ground.

It was only then that he realized another presence had come into the room. Yarrow's boy hid behind the stair's railing, watching between the slats. He gasped when he realized Vicar's shadow had spotted him and shrank back. Vicar could only stand motionless over the corpse of the child's father as the warped ecstasy and relief of the kill dammed off the flashflood of guilt threatening to overtake him.

Something changed in the boy. He sucked in a deep breath and stood. His small hands formed into fists. But it was his eyes that drew Vicar in. They burned—burned the way the markets had when the phoenix egg cracked. In the instant before Vicar was slung back into his own body, he wondered how long it would be until that boy, no older than his son, grew to be a man. How long before that man stood in the streets of the Golden City holding a phoenix egg?

Then he was back in the chamber below the Questioner's Hall. Fifteen lights within his stone illuminated the cell in sickly green light. He'd been brought up to fear the Proderi. They'd been spoken of as barbaric monsters when he was a child. Several people he'd known were slain by their craven attacks. When he'd begun his training as a Caster he'd been willing to do whatever it took to protect the Golden City from the Proderi and anyone else who threatened it. But today . . . today, he was the monster.

Vicar stared at the weapon in his hand with disgust. He wanted to crush the stone on the floor, free the floating souls trapped within, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. If he destroyed one of their precious ancestor stones the guides would probably put him to the question, perhaps even his son. Those were consequences he didn't dare to face—even if the



night had made him a murderer. The image of Yarrow Illian's boy standing over his father's corpse made Vicar's stomach curl and shoulders sag. He had to get out of there. Even the smoke-filled air of the city streets would be better than spending one more moment in that place.

The stone was warm to his touch now. Nothing like the icy chill it had held before he'd set it to use. With a careful hand he wrapped the felt back around the stone and returned it to his satchel, then he shouldered open the door.

Glaws waited for him outside. The Questioner sat on a stool, picking his teeth clean with the sharpened end of a chicken bone. When he noticed Vicar, the bone disappeared into his sleeve.

"Yarrow Illian is dead," Vicar mumbled. He couldn't refrain from adding, "I killed an innocent man."

Glaws's eyes narrowed until only the blue dots of his pupils stared out from the slits of his eyelids. "How can you be certain?"

Struggling with the disorientation of being in a clumsy human body again, words were harder to grasp than vapors. He wanted to find the right ones. A way he could convince the Questioner he'd made an incalculable error. Instead, all Vicar could manage was, "I just am."

"A pity, then." The Questioner wrapped a hand around his mouth and turned to contemplation.

"It's more than a pity. It's tragic. An innocent man died for nothing." *Not just a man. A father.*

The words broke through Glaws's concentration. "You mistake me, Caster. It's a pity Yarrow was an incorrect target. That means the alchemist who forged these eggs remains free. We will redouble our efforts and call upon you again when another name surfaces."

"That's it? You'll keep picking the minds of anyone who might have an answer and we'll keep killing until the sun and stars align and the right Proderi dies? You and your ilk make these decisions like that . . ." Vicar snapped his fingers. ". . . And lives end. What gives you the right?" He knew he'd gone too far as soon as he spoke the words, but the casting had left him sapped in mind and body. The only thing he had left were the glowing embers of red-hot anger. Much of the disdain that tinged his words he held in equal proportion for himself. Glaws might give the orders, but he'd followed them. *It's not your place to question.*

Glaws stood and wrapped his robed arms behind his back. The passion within Vicar's voice didn't rattle him in the slightest. Instead, he looked on with those piercing eyes as if he was scouring the very contents of Vicar's soul. "You sound like one of them. Have you forgotten the number of lives the Ancestor Spirits have saved? How many plots against the Golden City have been foiled without risking a single soldier's life?" A stony frown bridged Glaws's lips. "And what of the lives of the Proderi children? Souls who won't be thrown away by selfish leaders in

endless war? The methods we employ may seem barbaric, but our results are undeniable—yours and mine."

Try as he might, Vicar couldn't meet the challenge in the Questioner's gaze. Ashamed, he looked to his feet and wondered how he could stand before his son as the coward he'd shown himself to be. Glaws's hand tightening around his shoulder startled him. He wanted to shake off the Questioner's grip, but he endured the touch like a barbed hook threaded through his flesh. Pulling it free would cause worse damage.

"Return to your sanctuary and rest," Glaws said. "It's been a difficult day for all of us. Perhaps your belief in the irrefutable justice of our cause will return by morning." He released his grasp on Vicar's shoulder.

Vicar bobbed his head. He refused to look up from his feet and meet Glaws's gaze. If he did, he was certain that the Questioner would see through him—would notice cracks running through the foundation of his faith in their purpose. He fled the Questioner's Hall as fast as he could without looking like he was running away. As soon as he escaped into the night air, he sped toward Caster's Sanctuary.

He passed damage caused by the Proderi's attack. Homes burned to the ground, entire city blocks missing. Work crews sifted through the rubble to extract the charred flesh of their dead. They, too, had been families like his. The wastefulness of it was staggering. Excavators who noted his passage turned and saluted, fists to their chests. Soot stained their hard faces and collected in the wrinkles of their skin. One shouted at him, "Kill the Proderi bastards, Caster! I hope they die screaming!"

He couldn't meet their eyes any more than Glaws's. There was a time when their faith in his talents would make his chest swell with pride. Today, it made bile rise to the back of his throat and burn the roof of his mouth before he choked it down. He walked faster until he was practically running. Where did this end?

Out of breath by the time he reached Caster's Sanctuary, Vicar staggered up the steps and past the sentries, and slipped through the doors into the foyer. Only when the huge doors boomed behind him in the cold, dank sanctuary did he allow himself take a deep breath.

None of the armed guards protecting the chamber reacted to his arrival. They were among the best soldiers in the Golden City, wardens whose singular purpose was to guard their city's greatest treasures—the artifacts that kept them safe from any enemy within or abroad.

He departed the foyer and took the long stair down, deeper to the reliquary where he would return his stone. The home of their order was quiet tonight, and the peace within dulled the

screaming in his mind to a distant roar. As he stepped into the antechamber of the reliquary, a woman's voice called from an adjacent cloister.

"How was it, Vicar? What did the Questioner want?" Achon asked.

He turned his gaze upon the matronly woman, her glassy eyes distant. How could he tell her what he'd seen? Achon was one of the oldest Casters and one of his mentors in the craft. She'd gone blind many years ago, and could only see through a spirit when she spoke a name. "It was . . ." he began, and then fell silent.

She frowned. "The wrong name was given?"

He didn't need to reply. She'd divine the truth by what was unsaid. Achon had a sense about these things. Not the same sense the Questioners had, but a way of seeing what eyes couldn't.

He searched the antechamber but didn't find Naidem guarding the reliquary. It wasn't like him to abandon his post. "I need to return my stone. Where's Naidem?"

Achon's sigh trailed away like a whisper. "He was in the market when the first egg burst. He didn't make it."

"Shadows . . ." Vicar muttered. He'd seen Naidem just a day ago. The hulking warden had been a peerless warrior and as indomitable as the city walls. It was difficult to fathom that he was gone, but no talent with arms could keep you safe from phoenix fire. He whispered a prayer for the terse warden, before realizing he was unsure of how to proceed. After a casting he'd always returned the stone to the warden on duty. "It's been a trying day, and I'd like to get home to my son. Can I drop my stone off with you, or do I have to wait?"

Achon paused. "You've never been in the reliquary before, have you?"

"Of course not," Vicar replied.

She returned her attention to something she was knitting by touch alone. "I'm sure you can manage."

The response surprised him. Only an elder Caster or appointed warden was allowed to enter the chamber. He used to wonder what lay beyond, but events like tonight had incinerated his curiosity. He just wanted to be as far away from his stone as possible.

With a sigh of resignation, he turned away from Achon and pushed open the reliquary doors. A dark hallway lay beyond, gently sloping deeper beneath the city. The further he descended, the brighter a distant glow of green light became.

The tunnel bent and opened into a room lined with half a dozen wooden racks. Each rack was grooved so that fifty ancestor stones could rest upon their braces. Unlike the sparse flickering lights within his stone, many of these glowed with the solidity of the moon, and others

held hundreds of stars dancing within the glass. He tried not to think about what all those little lights gleaming in the darkness meant.

His satchel glowed and vibrated as if his stone rejoiced to be reunited with others in the chamber. A whole demented family of otherworldly spirits waiting to gobble up the lives offered to them. He moved toward an empty space on the rack and was about to replace his stone, when something caught his eye. Movement within one of the opaque stones. It wasn't one solid light after all. Hundreds of tiny lights clamored within. No, not hundreds, thousands. Thousands of souls choked a single stone until no more lives could be crammed within. How many of those were innocent like Yarrow Illian?

The cost of the Golden City lay bare before him.

His own stone fell from his numb fingertips and cracked on the floor. As it rolled, smoke and shadow escaped with a hiss. The fifteen lights within faded one after the next until the stone was as black and dead as the thing residing within.

Vicar's hands shook as he contemplated how much force it would take to bring all of the racks crashing down—to end this cycle. He'd become a Caster to save lives, and now, here, was a real opportunity. Glaws could say what he liked about this being a better way; this wasn't better, only easier.

Then he thought of his boy. Everyone would tell him that his father was a traitor who'd turned on the Golden City. They'd never leave him be as long as Vicar himself drew breath.

And he would never discover what his father sacrificed himself for—what he'd decided he could no longer live with. If only Vicar could make it look like an accident, or perhaps a Proderi plot.

An idea occurred to him, creeping slowly to the fore then gaining momentum. He selected one of the brightest spheres and wrapped it in felt, cradling the orb in the crook of his arm.

As if its kin could read the direction of his thoughts, the lights in the other spheres churned. They slammed into the walls of the confines of their glassy prisons, rebounding in a dizzying display.

Vicar took in a deep breath. Before his courage failed him, he pulled on the first rack with all his might. It leaned on two legs for a long, pregnant moment. Then it fell.

Perhaps it was only Vicar's overactive imagination, but through the shattering of glass he thought he heard a faint and distant wail. A cloud of smoke filled the chamber, souls fleeing their eternal jailers like embers thrown by a campfire.

Through the smoke he went, on to the next, allowing the soullights to draw him in like a beacon. That rack fell easier than the first. Then the next. And the next.

Again and again until there was nothing but darkness once more. Some of the tension sagged out of him. But there was still one stone left to break.

He pulled the sphere from the crook of his arm and peeled away the felt wrapping. Its insides roiled. As soon as his naked flesh touched the stone's frigid exterior it fed on him, as if it could chew through the offending hot meat before its home was ruined. It would never have the chance. Vicar would destroy it, but first he had one last name to feed the stone. The only one that could protect his boy.

"Vicar the Caster!" he snarled before driving the living weapon into the floor.

But Vicar's own consciousness didn't end, at least not the way he expected. Instead, the impossibility of sight returned to him within the darkness, and he found himself towering over the pale husk of a man, one fully drained of life. The cold, dead form below wore a Caster's robe and shards of glass were embedded in the palm of his hand.

Vicar looked down at his own . . . hands, only to find dark, spindly fingers jutting out. In the back of his mind a voice whispered—one that was not his own.

*"Now we are free."*



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**Jason Hine** is a former practitioner of cognitive therapy and professor of cognitive psychology. He left his practice for an exciting career in butchery. Don't worry, he's not as Hannibal Lecter-ish as that may sound, though the next person who asks him for a "grass-fed, Kobe chicken" might find otherwise. He resides in the Pacific Northwest and writes tales of epic and urban fantasy. He wants everyone to know that he owes the thin strands of his remaining sanity to the Paper Cuts Writers guild.

# The Memory of Huckleberries

Rebecca Birch

**O**LD WOMAN SITS OUTSIDE A CEDAR PLANK HOUSE watching the ghosts of her nephews dig out the center of a new war canoe. It sits near the high tide line, balanced in the damp sand. The sun hangs low on the horizon, its soft light shimmering through their transparent bodies.

She leans back, her fingers clenched around a clump of russet fur. The wall is cool against her fevered skin. Children's voices echo from inside the house. She should get up and check on them, but her body is sapped and although she has tried, she cannot even lift a handful of clean water from the bentwood box at her side. Besides, she thinks she saw their bodies buried a few days ago, back when there were others still alive.

A tear seeps from the corner of her eye.

"Why do you cry?" rumbles a voice out of the mist of memory.

With an effort, she turns her head. Bear stands at the corner of the house. He is half-hidden in shadows, but she knows him. She tries to speak, but her parched throat can only squawk.

He wears nothing but a breechcloth and supple deer-hide leggings. His bare feet make no sound as he comes to squat in front of her. Time has not dulled his beauty. Sleek black hair hangs over his shoulder in a long braid. No wrinkles mar his skin. The taut leggings cling to his muscular thighs as the setting sun limns his broad frame.

A seagull perches on the roof, shrieks, and flies out to sea. Bear brings a handful of water from the bentwood box to her lips and coaxes her to drink. The cool liquid soothes her parched throat, and his soft touch kindles shivers across her skin.

When the water is gone, she licks her lips. "It's been too long."

"Not so very long."

Old Woman manages a sad smile. "Long enough. Our child is grown and married. She has a son of her own now."

Bear rocks back on his heels. "What happened here? Why are you alone?"

Old Woman inhales the sea air. Its salty tang comforts her. "A strange boy washed up on the shore half-drowned-a pale boy, silent and small. The shamans tended him with herbs and prayers. When he grew stronger, he walked among us. He never spoke, only watched us with ice-eyes." She shakes her head, remembering. "Three days later, the fever came."



A boy-ghost runs through the doorway, shouting and waving a carved, painted stick. He barrels into Bear, fading then reappearing on the other side. Bear's black eyes never leave Old Woman's face. "Are there any others left?"

"I don't know. The ice-eyed boy was the last soul I saw." She glances down at the bentwood box. "He left me water, then walked into the sea. I saw him pass the breakers before he vanished."

Bear rises, eyes flashing. He ducks as he enters the plank house. Old Woman waits, her breathing shallow, and wonders if she is dreaming fever-dreams and whether it matters if she is.

Although she has lost many memories, the day she came upon Bear in the forest while she harvested huckleberries remains clear as rain—his low voice whispering endearments, fingers grazing her own as she plucked the smooth, salmon-red fruits.

So many years she prayed for a child, her heart growing numb as Tall Man's seed failed to take root. When Bear wrapped her close—kissing her with eager lips, musky scent enveloping her until she thrummed with desire and begged him to come within her—she let herself believe this was the answer to her prayers.

After, when she returned to her husband's quiet, comfortable caresses, she never spoke of what had passed that day. When Bear's child quickened in her womb, she let Tall Man crow, even though she knew the child was not his.

Through all the years that followed, she never saw Bear again, but she thought he watched them when he could. She found his prints in the forest and one morning, when she woke, she found a handful of his fur clutched tight in her daughter's chubby baby-fist. She'd kept the fur in a talisman pouch over her heart, until she was left alone among the dead and she pulled it into her hand, her last tangible memory.

All of them are gone now. Tall Man, years ago in a hunting accident, her daughter, Huckleberry, given in marriage to the chief of the tribe across the strait, and so many others lost to the fever, their ghosts roaming the village as if they had never passed over.

Bear crashes through the door in a bristling rush of russet fur, claws gouging the earth. Old Woman's eyes follow him as he runs to the neighboring plank house, then the next, until there are no more.

The great bear lumbers down the beach until the waves lap his wide paws, then rears up on cedar-strong hind limbs. He roars toward the setting sun. Old Woman's nephew-ghosts pause in their labors to stare as Bear rages at the sky.

After so many years, even Bear's anger is welcome. Old Woman struggles to stay awake, but she drifts into a troubled slumber.



"Where is the ice-eyed boy?" says a voice Old Woman doesn't know.

Warm softness pillows her head. "She saw him go into the sea." Bear's voice rumbles through her failing body. "I searched the shore, but he has not washed up again."

Old Woman opens her eyes. The changed light tells her it is morning. Shivers race through her, raising gooseflesh on her skin. A stranger stands before her, smaller than Bear, wiry, with quick, obsidian eyes that flash as he glances from side to side.

"Not dead yet, Old Woman?"

Bear growls.

"Oh, relax, Large One. I'm not offering to do it for her."

Her gaze slides along the beach. Halfway to the tideline, a circle of ghost-women sit cross-legged, throwing wooden dice and laughing. Old Woman's sister-in-law, Fern, is among them, rocking left and right, singing a song to welcome the sunrise in her rich, low voice. They look happy. Old Woman licks her parched lips.

The stranger cocks his head. "Or maybe she wishes it? Do you, Old Woman?"

Bear shifts his form until the dense pelt on which she rests becomes soft skin. His chest rises and falls under her head while he cradles her with strong arms. "I didn't call you here for your mercy, Raven. I called you for your healing."

Raven blinks. "I can't heal what I don't know. Who was this ice-eye? An evil spirit, come to kill for pleasure? Or is he like us, Bear? Was it the appointed time for this village?"

Old Woman croaks, "Water." Bear dips one hand into the bentwood box and brings it to her lips. She gulps it down. "Another."

This handful she sips. The water rouses her. "I don't know who he was or where he came from. When we found him, he wore nothing but a strange amulet. The shamans took it to study. It may still be here."

"Well, that's better than nothing. Come, Bear. If you want my help, you'd best search with me."

Reluctantly, Bear settles Old Woman against the doorframe. She leans back, panting, and watches Bear and Raven walk toward the sacred place.

Fern's song comes to a close and she rises, waving farewell to the circle of women. Old Woman watches as Fern makes her way toward their family house. Her long hair hangs loose,

swaying as she moves. Dawn's soft light filters through her. One hand rests on her protruding belly and a sad smile plays over her lips. Deep inside is another spark, Fern's unborn child, as much a ghost as the others.

Longing strikes Old Woman with a sharp pang. Her own daughter has been gone for years now. Word came by trading canoe four years back that she'd borne a son with fat cheeks and a strong cry. Old Woman wanted to make the trip to welcome the young one into the world, but the strain of the journey to bring Huckleberry to her new husband had been too much for her, leaving her too weakened to travel so far again. She aches to see Huckleberry one last time, aches to meet her grandson.

Fern draws near and Old Woman waits for her to pass by, unseeing, as all the ghosts do. "Greetings, Elder Sister," Fern says.

Old Woman blinks, startled. "Greetings, Fern."

"I've missed you. Where have you been?"

Old Woman doesn't know what to say; does Fern know she is dead? "I went to the forest for huckleberries?"

A broad smile creases Fern's face. "Huckleberries, you sly woman. I've seen you haunt the woods. You hunt memories there."

"I have to hunt them somewhere," Old Woman replies, tart as berries. "So many have run away in my old age, I must track them down and trap them."

Fern throws her head back and laughs. "Keep your secrets then."

Then she is gone and Old Woman closes her eyes again.



"Wake up, Old Woman."

She lifts one eyelid. Raven squats in front of her.

"What is it?"

"I found the amulet." He holds it up. Shaped like two flattened, crossed sticks, it gleams gold in the early morning light. "I'll need to study it."

Bear lumbers up behind Raven, shakes out of his pelt and into his human skin. "Do it, then." He lays a hand on her brow. "This fever burns hot."

"I wish . . ." Old Woman whispers.

"What do you wish?" Bear brushes his lips against her brow.

"To see Huckleberry again, and meet our grandchild."

Bear pauses. "I can bring them to you. Orca will take me across the strait. I'll find them and bring them back to you. Just promise you'll be here when I return."

A smile tugs at the corner of Old Woman's lips. "How can I promise that? Do I have the power of life and death?"

"Raven?"

Raven glances up from the amulet, his gaze distant and distracted. "I can keep her alive long enough for you to bring them, Fuzzy One. If you hurry."

Bear surges to his feet. "I'll return with our child and grandson. Wait for me."

He drops to all fours, shifting with the motion. Long claws dig into the sand as he lumbers to the east. Old Woman watches him go, the sun's glow on his pelt fading into the distance.

Raven wanders through the center of the ring of ghost-women playing their dice game, his bright eyes shut, running his hands over the amulet and muttering under his breath. The women ignore him, even as they reach through his legs to pick up the wooden dice.

Old Woman lets their ghostly laughter lull her back into rest.



"Do you want to play?"

Old Woman startles awake, blinking. The ghost-boy stands before her, digging a toe into the ground, the carved stick tucked in a fist behind his back. "What?" she croaks.

"Play with me?"

She tries to shake her head, but the effort is too much. "I can't," she says. "I'm sorry."

The boy presses his lips together and his chin trembles. His features are blurry. "No one will play with me."

She watches him walk away, the soft evening breeze drifting through his long hair. He stoops to pick up a rock and throws it toward the trees.

"It's a pity," says Raven. "He's lonely."

Old Woman manages to turn her head. Raven is perched on a driftwood log, the amulet clutched under his talons.

"Water?" whispers Old Woman.

Raven blinks and fans out his feathers. "Don't you want to know what I've learned from the amulet?"

She wants water, Huckleberry's smiling face, Bear's warm sturdy presence. She wants the world to stop spinning. She nods. "Tell me."

"I can keep you alive long enough for Bear to bring your kin," Raven says, "but if I do, you'll curse me for it."

Old Woman runs her tongue over her upper lip. The sweat beads are salty, teasing her with their false promise of moisture. She swallows. "I don't have time for riddles."

He stretches his wings, fingers sliding from the tips, and grows until he stands upright in his man-skin. "The fever-taint burns in your breath. If your kin come while you still live, it will claim them. If they return across the strait, it will claim their village, maybe more."

Old Woman turns away and looks toward the ghost-boy, now digging in the sand with his stick, shoulders hunched up to his ears. Her breath comes in shallow pants. She thinks of Fern and the light of her unborn child.

She thinks of Huckleberry's face, faded and soft around the edges. Passing years have dimmed the memory. Only Huckleberry's smile remains bright, and the memory of her clear laughter. It blends with voices from the beach. Her nephews have finished their work on the war canoe and are making their way toward the houses.

She licks her lips again. "I promised."

Raven laughs, a harsh, cackling sound. "As it happens, you didn't. Old Fuzzy didn't wait for it."

She doesn't reply. The wind fans her fevered skin. As her nephews draw near, she frowns. They are fading, some nothing more than shimmering clusters, vaguely man-shaped.

Could ghosts die? Or were they there at all? What about Raven? What about Bear? It is so hard to think.

Her gaze turns to the ghost-boy. The beach's contours are visible through his small body: rounded stones, an upturned crab, little bubbling holes in the sand where clams hide, ripe for harvesting.

"They're coming," Raven says. "Bear races across the waters on Orca's back. Huckleberry's canoe follows behind."

"My Huckleberry . . ."

"Will live, if you are gone when she reaches here."

The ghost-boy pauses in his digging and hugs his knees. He rocks back and forth, shoulders shaking.

A tear trembles down Old Woman's cheek. "I wanted to meet my grandson."

"He'd be about the same age as that little one over there." Raven gestures, his hand tipped with jet-black feathers.

"I should play with him."

Raven's face hovers a breath away from her own. His beak is so close she can feel the soft rush of air from his nares. "You can," he whispers. "All you have to do is ask."

She looks deep into one bright black eye as large as the moon. Finger by finger, she releases her grip on the handful of Bear's fur. It falls to the sand, blowing away on the breeze.

"Please."



Bear's roar startles Old Woman's eyes open. For the first time in days, she is cool. Cold, even. She should fetch a blanket.

Cautiously, she rises, propping herself against the wall for balance. Her legs do not buckle. Her back does not creak.

Bear roars again, very close. Old Woman looks down and blinks. Her body lies at her feet, unmoving, a gentle smile on its lips. Heavy fog the shade of damp moss presses close. It smells of loam and hearthfires. Beckoning voices dance within its shadows.

She kneels beside her corpse. The body clenches a raven feather in its crabbed hands. Bear nuzzles its shoulder with his heavy head.

Old Woman reaches out a hand to comfort him, but it slides through his dense pelt and muscled shoulder as if passing through air. She shakes her head. "I'm sorry."

"There's a canoe coming," says a small voice. The ghost-boy beside her, still clutching the stick in one hand. Raven peers up at her from the stick's carved surface with one painted-black eye.

The ghost-boy takes Old Woman's hand and leads her down the beach. The women are gone. Only one nephew stirs down by the war canoe. He greets her with a raised hand.

The lapping waves make no sound rushing over the sand, nor do the gulls circling overhead, but the fog whispers against her eardrums, coaxing and cool.

"Where is your mother?" Old Woman asks.

"She went into the fog. They all do."

The swirling moss-mist obscures Old Woman's vision as she stares over the strait toward the incoming canoe. It rushes over the calm waters, trailing a glinting wake.

"Look how far I can throw!" The ghost-boy launches a rock toward the sea. It arcs through the mist, sending eddies swirling, the splashes soundless. Ripples spread over the water, until they reach a floating kelp bed and slip away into nothingness. "Can we play now?"

"Soon. I need to see the people in the canoe first."

"They won't see you."

Three figures sit silhouetted in the dugout, the one in the center so small she can see little more than the outline of his head. "I know. It will be enough."

But the fog swallows the canoe in its enveloping embrace. The whispering shadow-voices rise, singing a welcome song. Fern's rich alto is among them. They pull like the tide, trying to drag Old Woman's feet back up the shore.

Old Woman steps into the waves, fighting against the call. She can't give up now. She's too close to laying eyes on her grandson.

"May I borrow your stick?" she asks, remembering how the rock had churned the mist.

The ghost-boy presses the carving into her free hand. She raises it to her lips and breathes out her longing over its painted surface, wrapped in a single word. "Please."

With all of her renewed strength, she hurls the stick toward where she last saw the canoe. It flies end-over-end, cutting a thin strip through the fog. Not enough. Old Woman's nails dig into her palm.

Then the stick shrieks. Raven's carved wings stretch wide and catch the clouds beneath his jet-black feathers. He circles once, then flaps twice and soars out to sea.

In his wake, the fog parts. Morning sunshine sparkles on the strait. The canoe dances over the waves. Huckleberry sits in the prow, paddling hard. Perspiration shines on her forehead. Her husband kneels in the stern, intent on the shore.

And in the center of the dugout, clinging to the sides so hard his knuckles pale, sits her grandson. Bear's dark eyes shine in his little-boy face and the excitement of the journey has set huckleberry stains on his still-chubby cheeks.

A breeze blows his ebony hair across his face and swirls the scent of his cedar-fiber wrap toward her, stronger even than the earthy tinge of the fog.

Then the mossy miasma closes in and all that remains is the ghost-boy's hand clasped in her own and the rising chant of the shadow-voices.

Old Woman stares a bit longer toward the vanished canoe. Beneath her feet, the sand rushes away with the receding tide. She sighs. "It is enough."

"Come on! Let's play!"

Old Woman turns away and follows the ghost-boy into the fog.



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**Rebecca Birch** lives in Seattle, Washington, where it doesn't really rain every day. She's a classically trained soprano, holds a deputy black belt in Tae Kwon Do, and enjoys spending time in the company of trees. Her fiction has appeared in markets including *Nature*, *Cricket*, and *Fireside Magazine*. You can find her online at [www.wordsofbirch.com](http://www.wordsofbirch.com).



# My So-Called Life in Reruns

James Aquilone

I WAS ON THE COUCH WATCHING *STAR TREK*. It was the original pilot episode with Captain Pike getting trapped on a planet called Talos IV. I'd seen it so many times it no longer felt like watching television; it felt like remembering. And like all the reruns they allowed me to watch, the episode comforted me and reminded me of home. More so than this horrible apartment, which was an exact replica of my old place in New York, right down to the water stain in the shape of South America on the living room ceiling and the cat scratches on the front door. My cat wasn't here, though. He was gone, along with my real apartment and everyone and everything else on Earth.

Now Captain Pike gets snatched by a couple of Talosians with giant-scrotum-looking heads and they take him to their zoo. I laugh. If I didn't, I'd go insane. The TV helps me to focus, to block everything else out. When I'm watching *Star Trek* or *The Twilight Zone* or *The Outer Limits*, it's like I never left Earth and everything's okay.

I reminded myself, once again, that the apartment was fake, but the shows were real.

The wall to my left faded away. Class was in session.

I ignored the students—all of them looking like upright caterpillars—and instead watched Captain Pike argue with the big-headed aliens from inside his cage. I remembered watching this episode with my girlfriend, Karen. She loved the *Original Series*, though she would never admit to being a Trekkie. She turned me on to the show, actually, and we always watched it together. She left me months before the Hanlar destroyed the Earth.

My body stiffened as the Hanlar instructor began speaking.

"Behold Jason, the last being of the planet called Earth," it said in Hanish. "Notice the blank stare, the bloated and slumped body. Notice his lack of arms, the two of them remaining motionless and idle. Jason is addicted to entertainment, particularly in the form of television transmissions. He is the ultimate *nema'kemon*." That, I interpreted as "big, lazy loser." It's the worst thing you can call the Hanlar. The class booed and hissed.

"Greetings, Jason of Earth," the alien teacher said, enunciating each syllable as if it were a separate word, even though I knew Hanish fluently. "Can you tell my class what you find so appealing about mindless entertainment?"

I've learned not to engage with the aliens. They only want to hear what they want to hear. I focused on the television and Vina, the beautiful blonde the Talosians were trying to force on Pike.

The Hanlar despise entertainment, especially passive entertainment like television shows. It threatens *Arndnung*, which is the belief system upon which their society is based. *Arndnung* is all about being productive and maintaining order. The Hanlar have six arms and they are always moving, always building or fixing or creating. It's worked out pretty well for them. The Hanlar are the most advanced race in the universe.

Things were running pretty smoothly for them until they started receiving our TV signals, which had been leaking into space for decades. It took them a while to figure out what they were seeing, but by then it was too late. The entertainment-starved Hanlar loved Earth TV. They couldn't get enough of it. They binge-watched, they named their offspring after characters on *The Brady Bunch*, they even started to create TV shows of their own. This, of course, didn't sit well with the elders of Hanlar. Productivity was down. Hands were idle. Society was collapsing, or so they believed. Something needed to be done. So the Hanlar High Command decided to cancel the planet. Ha-ha. Except me. They saved the Earth's biggest couch potato to be the ultimate negative example. "Hey, kids, see that fat lump in the box? If you watch TV, you'll end up just like him."

The students barraged me with questions:

"Is it true that media consumption resulted in near-extinction decreases in your population levels? Do you still have procreative desires?"

"Have you noticed an impairment in your rational thought?"

"Is your morbid obesity a result of your excessive viewing habits?"

"Are you no longer able to tell the difference between reality and fantasy?"

"Is it true media consumption lowered the aggregate IQ on Earth by an average of two points a year?"

"Did *The A-Team* desensitize earthlings to violence, accounting for the increase of war in the twenty-first century?"

"Is it true that the entertainment producer Joss Whedon caused more harm than Krydax the Obliterator of the Seven Worlds?"

Anger boiled up inside me. I used to tell them that none of that was true. Their ideas about entertainment were ridiculous and unsubstantiated. Once I said, "You hate TV, but you blew up my planet. Killed billions! What influenced you to do that?" That got me a month with their mind disruptor.

"Jason of Earth," the teacher said, "please explain to my class the meaning of the term 'boob tube'?"

I jumped up and flung my remote control at the teacher. It disintegrated as soon as it hit the force barrier.

And with that, the apartment wall returned and the TV went out. It wasn't because of the remote control. That doesn't control anything. It's just a prop. The Hanlar control the TV.

The television flickered and George Clooney appeared on the screen. "Jason," he said, but sounded nothing like George Clooney. He sounded like the heartless Hanlar. "You have been found in violation of Code 477: Acting belligerent toward a schoolteacher; as well as Code 863: Refusing to answer a student's question."

I clenched my fists.

"A scan of your vitals determines that you are within appropriate health parameters, though your blood pressure is slightly higher than normal. Are you getting enough exercise, Jason?"

"I am following the required minimum physical fitness requirements."

"That is good to hear, Jason. We want you with us for a long time. We want you to be happy. Are your dietary needs sufficient? We can bring you a different kind of pizza. Perhaps chips and beer? Nachos?"

"No, no. The food is fine." It wasn't by a long shot. The pizza tasted like damp cardboard covered in Spackle. But it didn't matter. All the food sucked.

"Obviously, your excessive television viewing has caused you once again to lash out." I kept still, held my breath. "We must discipline you."

I could have picked up the TV, smashed it to pieces. But the reruns were all I had.

"It has been decided that your viewing privileges will be taken away. Instead we will loop an educational video."

My right hand trembled. "When will you bring back my shows?"

The camera zoomed tight on the alien George Clooney's face. His unblinking eyes were pools of darkness. He said, "You provide an important function."

The TV went black.

I slumped back onto the couch, depleted.

I stared at the blank screen. I could have been looking into outer space, into that dark emptiness where the Earth once was. I wanted to plunge into that void. Let the television take me away to oblivion, capture me for eternity and send me back across the cosmos at the speed of light.

The video started. An alien version of Jon Stewart went over the history of the Hanlar, the three pillars of *Arndnung* (productivity, order, tradition), and the devastating effect of mindless entertainment.

I closed my eyes and watched, from memory, as the Talosians let Pike and his crew go. When I was a kid I called it Mind TV. On long trips in the car I would close my eyes and "re-watch" cartoons in my head. When I wanted to see a different show I would hold a fist up to one of my eyes and pretend I was turning a channel selector. As usual, I took special notice of Pike's escape. The Talosians free him after realizing that humans would rather kill themselves than live in captivity. They had big heads but were pretty dumb. The Hanlar aren't dumb. I've tried killing myself. It never takes. As I said, *Arndnung* made the Hanlar incredibly advanced—especially in the biomedical sciences. By my calculations, I've been watching reruns for more than a hundred and fifty years. The Hanlar want me here for a long time. Maybe forever.

The Hanlar control the transmissions, but sometimes they honor my requests. I usually stick with the sci-fi programs. They're wrong, of course. Television isn't mindless or useless. TV characters have solved every problem imaginable. So I watch, study, and gather ideas, even when they take the boob tube away.

I raised a fist to my eye and switched over to an episode of *Lost in Space* called *A Day at the Zoo*.

TV got me into this predicament, it would get me out.



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**James Aquilone** is an editor and writer, for fun and for profit. James was raised on Saturday morning cartoons, comic books, sitcoms, and Cap'n Crunch. Amid the Cold War, he dreamed of being a jet fighter pilot but decided against the military life after realizing it would require him to wake up early. He had further illusions of being a stand-up comedian, until a traumatic experience on stage forced him to seek a college education. Brief stints as an alternative rock singer/guitarist and child model also proved unsuccessful. Today he battles a severe Tetris addiction while trying to write in the speculative fiction game. Demons, robots, dragons, superheroes . . . that sort of thing.

# Apprentice

James Van Pelt

**M**ASTER JEPTHE, ADEPT OF A THOUSAND GESTURES, kicked his apprentice in the back.

"The movements must be exact," he thundered. "Unless the spell's cadence and enunciation are perfect, you will be a fool waving his arms and speaking gibberish. Your body must know even when your mind does not. Do it again."

Wedge gritted his teeth, adjusted his posture so his shoulders aligned in the prescribed fashion, crooked his fingers just so, then moved his hands through the complicated weaving that shaped the space for the spell. At the same time, he chanted the incantation. An inflection on the second syllable stressed just right, a slurring of sibilants, the staccato rap of hard-ending consonants, and then the rising trill that culminated the chant. On the table before him, the squirrel lay in a crunched bundle.

Jepthe sat on the stool behind Wedge, arms crossed. The old man had only grown more brutal through time, which seemed like an irony. As Wedge improved, Jepthe pushed him harder, and looked unhappier. Wedge felt the scowl but began the spell. *His magic is all he has*, thought Wedge. *He must think of me as his legacy. Through me, they'll know Jepthe's achievements when he's gone.*

Wedge swayed to the spell's rhythm, then found the shape. It was like dropping his hands into an invisible groove, and power flowed through him. Spell-making had embarrassed him at first. He remembered how aroused he had become the first time, a simple casting that closed a door. His face had flushed and his breathing turned hard. When he had finished, a nap had sounded like the best idea, but he couldn't wait to try a spell again. For weeks, he opened and closed doors with a quiet word and a practiced wave.

Now, the power arced in his forearms. Sparks snapped from his elbows, at his ear tips, and language welled from an inner cauldron. Command crackled in the room. With a rush, the energy crested, overflowed, then released in a sensual flood. The squirrel twitched, jumped up, looked at Wedge, and dashed for the open window.

Wedge sagged on the stool, exhausted. Jepthe swung his hand through an evil motion and barked a jagged, thorn-filled word. The sprinting squirrel died in mid leap, hit the window sill, and dropped lifeless to the floor.

"Do it again," Jepthe said.

Fifteen years earlier, when a ten-year old Wedge began his apprenticeship, he asked Jepthe why the spell to kill was so short but the spell to resurrect was so long. Jepthe contemplated the boy for a moment. Wedge felt proud that he had asked a question that gave his new master such pause. Jepthe reached out with his bony finger and pushed a crock off the table. It shattered into dozens of pieces on the stone floor.

"Reassemble that so it is as good as new," the old wizard said.

Pieces had sprayed across the floor. Not a one was larger than Wedge's thumb. "But that will take hours," the young boy said.

"And so you have an answer."

Jepthe had been stern when Wedge began with him, but not cruel. Wedge wondered if Jepthe hated him now.



The afternoons had belonged to Wedge since he had nearly reached his magical majority. The wizard's apprentice became the master in his twenty-fifth year, and the old master joined the ranks of previous masters buried in Magus Field. Jepthe had prepared the internment slate years before, a black slab of stone the size of a small dinner table. Twenty-three slate stones lay in the wizard's cemetery, and even though the groundskeeper kept the stones clear, the oldest ones had sunk into the ground so that rain turned them into rectangular pools. It was said that the faces of the dead wizards could be seen in the water's reflection by lightning flash, but Wedge had never witnessed this. Jepthe showed him the death robe, made entirely from crow feathers, that he would wear on his last day, which would be Wedge's first day as master.

He wondered why wizards didn't die like ordinary men. The apprentice studied for fifteen years, and then at the end of that time, the master died, always. No extended deathbed for a wizard. Their candle blew out on schedule. Jepthe told him that when the day came, he would don the death robe and perform the ending spell. What was it like to know that your days were so numbered? Had Jepthe hated Wedge from the beginning because he saw in him his hourglass draining?



Wedge turned toward the athenaeum as soon as he passed through the city gates. His free time, what little he had, was spent there: not just because of the scrolls, parchments, and learned tomes, but because of Charlotte, an assistant bibliothecary.

She sat on a long bench in the research antechamber, a pile of slender leather-bound volumes beside her. He smiled as he approached, but Charlotte frowned.

"How many more times until you quit visiting me?" she said. She had gathered her hair into a braid that hung like a rope down her back. Silver embroidery on her maroon doublet caught the afternoon's light, which sliced through the room's high windows.

"When I am wizard, I will be free to come whenever I want." He tried to sound jovial. Of late, Charlotte had seemed progressively sadder.

"I don't think so." She picked up one of the books. "This is the miller's wife's personal journal from sixty years ago, when your master graduated from his apprenticeship. She confesses herself honestly in these pages."

Wedge sat beside her. The athenaeum's air felt cool after the long walk down dusty streets. Paper, ink, and aged leather scented the building. "Why do we care about a long dead miller's wife?"

Charlotte turned the book over in her hands. Wedge admired her long fingers, the strength in her wrists. "She tells about her daughter, who loved Jepthe when he was young. They were inseparable, and the miller's wife thought they would marry when he became master."

Wedge could not picture Jepthe as a young man, and certainly not as one in love. The idea felt foreign. Jepthe angered easily and hardly tolerated human company. "What happened to them?"

Charlotte put the book back onto the stack. "The day Jepthe became master, he slapped the girl down in the marketplace. He kicked her. It broke her heart. Her mother said that she never recovered. Jepthe destroyed her spirit."

That sounded more like Jepthe. "That's horrible, but Jepthe has always been loathsome. What does this have to do with us?"

In the main room beyond, a student sat at a table, diligently taking notes from a book that lay open before him. His quill scratches were the only sounds.

"The miller's wife wrote pages about Jepthe before he became the master. He courted her daughter for years. By her account and by others . . ." Charlotte picked up two more books.

"Jepthe was the kindest of men. Compassionate. A poet. A dancer. The day he . . . ascended, he turned into the man you know now."

Wedge took her hand. "That is not me. When I ascend, nothing will change between us. I am who I am."

Charlotte shook her head. "Writings go back eight hundred years. Journals. Daybooks. Reminiscence. Every apprentice who takes the wizard's robe turns cruel."

Nothing Wedge said could dissuade Charlotte or stir her from her misery. When he left and the city streets had grown dark, he kept his head down and kicked a small rock in front of him disconsolately. She was wrong. When he became wizard, he would be kind. He would still care for her.



"The king calls," said Jepthe. "Where were you?" When he was young, he must have been huge, but now he bent over while holding his staff, and his robes were too big.

Jepthe's voice was raspy, but he didn't sound as irritated as he sometimes did. This summer, his viciousness was occasionally muted. Perhaps this close to the end, he was coming to terms with death. Whatever anger drove him was running dry. Surprisingly, though, when he chanted spells, the old man's throat found volume he never attained for conversation. "Squiring the librarian again, I expect. I don't like her looks. Too skinny by half. You will have no interest in her when I am gone. If you travel into town, the least you could do is waste time fruitfully." By which Jepthe meant practicing invisibility; he sent Wedge to spy out plots. More than one merchant who had cheated the wizard, or town elder who had spoken against him, fell ill and died after Wedge reported what he had overheard.

The master's traveling bag rested by Conjury Hall's entrance. Wedge picked it up and slung it over his shoulder.

"The king's usual problem?" said Wedge.

Jepthe spat on the ground. "Of course. You'll do the spell, and you'd better get it right. The king needs magic to perform as a man, so we'll give him magic."

Wedge reviewed the chant and motions in his head as they trudged toward the king's chambers. "Why does the spell wear off? We should only have to do this once."

The wizard laughed, an evil sound when he made it. "It *would* be permanent, but the queen pays me for another spell after a couple days. A manly king disturbs her rest."



The king didn't want the spell Wedge had rehearsed. His Highness sat on the steps before his throne, the vast room lit only by torches above the door and beside the king. At his feet, an old dog stretched on a blanket barely raised its head when they entered.

"I have had many hounds," said the king. His eyes were rheumy and red. He petted the animal's ears. "I grow sentimental with age."

Jepthe handed his staff to Wedge, then gingerly sat beside the king. "There are no spells to reverse years. The old die as they always have."

"I have heard of another spell," said the king. "The body may die, but the essence can live elsewhere."

Wedge's attention perked up. He did not know of such a spell after spending fifteen years with the master. It occurred to him that there could be many spells the master had not shared with him that he would have to teach himself once Jepthe was gone. The old wizard's private library held numerous scrolls that he had never unrolled.

Jepthe nodded. "There is such a spell, but your long-time friend will not know his old tricks."

The king looked hopeful. "If he can be saved, we must do it."

Jepthe gave instructions, and the king called a page for the errand. After the boy left, they waited in the dark room while the torches hissed and sputtered, and the dying dog wheezed. Very soon, the boy returned with a young dog on a leash.

Wedge helped the wizard stand.

"Your dog will pass on. He will pass tonight, but I can move his life to this other animal. He will be your dog, and he will remember you, but he will not know what has happened to him. He is a dumb animal and will be afraid. He might even become mad, and then you'll put him down as you would any mad dog."

Jepthe dug into his bag. "It will be easier on him if we cover his eyes and bind his limbs."

Wedge took the ropes and cloth shroud, and approached the king's hound.

"Not him, you fool," said Jepthe. "The other dog."

Wedge's ears burned as he bound the dog and covered its head. Then Jepthe closed his eyes and chanted. His hands moved through a complicated pattern. Wedge concentrated on the movements. What an interesting and useful spell this one could be, if it existed. He suspected that Jepthe lied to the king, though. There could be no such spell to transfer a being into another. Jepthe would make magical sounds for a few minutes, and then sneak in the death spell, killing the old dog. He could claim the spell had worked when all he had done was put the old dog out of its misery.

Somehow, the quality of torch light changed. Wedge gasped. These were not meaningless words and arm motions. An ominous pressure built in the room. In the distance, dogs howled, and the young dog whimpered under the cloth. Jepthe's voice grew deeper and hollow. His hands and arms glowed, but the king cared only for his dog, and continued to pet him. Jepthe had never taken so long with a spell. Its complications were many. Wedge saw the wizard's movements, and the spell's motifs in his hands' dance. He read the gesture's grammar and heard the incantation's tonal complexities, and in the complexities, verses and bridges. Air swirled in the chamber, bending the flames. Then, the king's old dog sagged as if it had deflated. If Jepthe had slipped in the death spell, Wedge didn't hear it. The young dog whined and choked. Its legs quivered.

"Go to it," said Jepthe. "Your hound will respond to your voice. Your voice and touch will be all it recognizes of itself."

The king looked up, his hand on the dead dog's skull.

Jepthe said, "Do it now. Your animal suffers."

The king held the young dog in his lap until it stopped whining. When he removed the shroud, the dog nearly jerked out of his arms, but the king commanded it to be still, and it remembered its master's voice.

"This is really my favorite still?" said the king.

Jepthe nodded. "As it grows accustomed to the new body, it will show itself to you more and more. But it will not have memory in its muscles to do what it used to do. The dog will have to teach its body the old tricks. It will have a young dog's enthusiasms, so think of how your dog behaved when he first came into your house."

The king nodded. "You have given me a great gift."

Gathering the young dog in his arms, the page took him away.

"Now," said the king, "we can attend to that other matter."

Jepthe nudged Wedge. "My apprentice will fulfill the spell, sire. This is his fifteenth year as my student. He will be the master soon."

Wedge set himself up before the king. "Are you ready?"

As Wedge worked, though, sketching the spell's shape, he struggled with what he had seen. Had Jepthe done a kind act, putting the old dog out of its misery while convincing the king that the puppy was his long-time companion, or had the wizard given the king exactly what he wanted, which meant Wedge had killed the young dog? Not its body, of course, but its mind and soul? What a horrifying spell that would be.



Conjury Hall was the second oldest building in the kingdom, preceded only by the castle keep. The first wizard, whose magic guarded the people and whose wisdom guided the first king, designed Conjury Hall as a fortifiable structure, a site for large gatherings, and a repository of mystical literature. Butted against a cliff, the building didn't appear imposing on the outside. Plain crenellated walls jutted from the cliff, made of the same stone, not a hundred strides wide. The interior, though, burrowed into the cliff, above and below. Rooms high on the cliff wall with secret windows looked into the kingdom's valley, and hidden entrances on the mesa above the hall concealed the wizard's comings and goings. The first master had even constructed stables and weapon shops. In the fifteen years Wedge had lived there, he had not explored it all.

Lying in bed, his hands behind his head, he pictured Conjury Hall becoming his. He would invite committees from town to visit, both to find ways that his art could make their lives easier, but also for camaraderie and companionship. Jepthe might have liked the old building filled with creepy echoes and ghostly whispers, but Wedge imagined music and laughter. The wizard's treasure room overflowed with precious metals, jewels, and coins. Wedge would be charitable with it. The poor could look to him for help.

And there was Charlotte. He could see the day, soon, when he would lead her into the master's archives. Scrolls lined the walls. Maps filled drawers. Books of arcane matter stood side-by-side on stone shelves. She would be ecstatic. They could hold hands and read by candlelight. Jepthe may not have been romantic, but Wedge would not live a hermit's life.

Wedge's room overlooked Conjury Hall's courtyard. A full summer moon bathed the stone with its cool light. A square of it fell on Wedge's floor, dimly revealing his wardrobe and study table. Tomorrow, he would go to the archives and find the spell that Jepthe had used on the king's dog.

What a frightening magic it was. Sad if the young dog had died to save the old one. Wedge asked Jepthe as they walked home where the young dog had gone. If the spell was real, there must now be two dogs' minds in one skull, fighting for possession, or the minds had switched places. Jepthe laughed. His laugh always sounded sardonic and bitter. "We sacrificed the young dog, you cretin. It is gone. That is the price of such a spell."

All magics had a cost. Something traded, or altered, or destroyed. That was magic's first lesson. Wedge sighed. How many lessons would he have to learn on his own when Jepthe joined the dead in Magus Field? For a moment, in the dark of his moonlit room, he almost pitied the old man.

Later, when the moon square had traveled the floor's length and crawled part way up the wall, Wedge had still not fallen asleep. He kept seeing the moment when the king's old dog stopped breathing, and the young dog's shock at that second. In all the time Wedge had studied under Jepthe, the old wizard had never claimed a magic he could not do. For all his disagreeableness, he treated magic with respect.

Wedge did not feel sleepy at all, thinking about the king's dog and his own growing conviction that the spell had not been a way to trick the king into believing his hound lived on. Jepthe told the king that magic could not prevent aging. It could not turn back the clock. The old die. Magic could resurrect the dead from other causes, but not old age. Wedge had revived the squirrel that very day a half dozen times before Jepthe finally let the poor creature go. How frustrating to have the power to revive the dead, but no way to prevent your own, inevitable end.

These were the thoughts that kept him awake. Anticipation, questions, the insecurities of a young man, and the moment he kept returning to was Jepthe performing the complicated spell for the king. He truly was the master. The old dog's body died, as it would have soon on its own, but the dog himself lived on.

Wedge suddenly felt cold. He rose quietly from his bed. Jepthe's chamber was just a door away, and the wizard slept lightly.

Barely daring to breathe, Wedge gathered his clothes, opened his door with a wave and a muttered word, and crept down the passageway. He didn't relax until he was outside Conjury Hall, put on his cloak and boots, and sprinted toward the town.

Charlotte lived with her parents in a cottage near a stream. The full moon lit the fields, and a breeze rustled the dark trees. Wedge tapped on Charlotte's window until she opened it for him. He had crept to her window before, and they had whispered to each other until dawn, but tonight he didn't pay attention to her night clothes, and his heart pounded for other reasons.

An hour later, she unlocked the athenaeum. At first she had laughed when he had insisted they go right then, but his urgency swayed her. Soon, she had gathered the books she had shown him earlier. "We need every record you have of when the apprentice ascends to master at Conjury Hall."

They pored through journals and town records and letters and histories. By dawn, they had found mention of nineteen of Conjury Hall's twenty-three previous masters, and the pattern seemed clear.

"This is monstrous if it's true," said Charlotte.

"I don't think becoming master changes the apprentice's character," he said. "The power, of course, and the responsibility are heavy burdens, and surely they would make a young man more thoughtful, but he wouldn't become a different person."

Charlotte nodded. "Each new wizard behaved the same way. The apprentice doesn't become the master. The master never changes. Jepthe is eight hundred years old."

The enormity of this staggered Wedge. "No apprentice survives his fifteenth year with him."

"What will you do?" Charlotte asked.

"I can't kill him."

She grasped his hands, and he saw in her an intensity he had never seen. "Why not? He's going to kill you."

"He's too powerful. He has wards and protection spells all around. Knives turn to powder when turned against him. Archers catch fire and burn to death. Poisons only sweeten his drinks. Besides . . ." He held Charlotte's hand. "I think that killing him would make me become him, too. Not the same way, but surely if I murdered him I would taint myself, and I would lose you."

Charlotte looked away. "You must flee, then, where he will never find you."

"He would only choose someone else."

The antechamber echoed their words. Perhaps Wedge could defend himself magically from Jepthe's power. In his time with the master, Wedge had learned hundreds of spells, and he could find ones he didn't know in the archives. "I have to go back."

"You are giving yourself to him?" Charlotte looked stricken "What if he comes to me in your form? I could not bear to know that you are gone."

"I might have a plan," he said. "Besides, he thinks you are too skinny."

Charlotte didn't smile. "When will it happen?" She closed the book in her lap. "The wizard always dies in the summer. The leaves turn in weeks."

"I don't know, but I will be ready."



Jepthe's archives were not like the well-organized and neat stacks at the athenaeum, and the rooms had no skylights or windows, so Wedge dug into the scrolls armed with a candle lantern. He knew two spells that cast light, but one revealed ghosts, and the other attracted night gaunts like giant, leather-winged moths. Moreover, he didn't know what to look for. Was there a spell that removed a wizard's powers? Was there one that made one immune to the transfer spell? Was there a general spell immunity spell? Or how about one that made a wizard forget a spell?

The possibilities were uncountable, but if the spells were there, they had been buried in irrelevant arcana. Here was a history of well digging in the southern valley. Next, variations on a spell to tan rabbit skins. Then, a treatise on cosmetic uses for berries and fruits. Scrolls detailing harvests. A book naming hand movements for "oddity" spells: one that turned walnuts white, another to turn frogs into cottontails, one to trick bats into flying at noon. Why would a wizard want to turn leaf mulch to dead ants?

Wedge knew defense spells. Minor warlocks occasionally challenged Jepthe's supremacy. The last one, Jepthe had ordered Wedge to dispose of. How humiliating was it to be defeated by the apprentice? Wedge had long ago protected himself against conjured sleep, illness, blindness, deafness, and pain. He also warded himself against love spells, depression, madness, and confusion. Of course, so did Jepthe, who was practically invulnerable to attack. How else could he have survived for so long? In eight hundred years, the kingdom had suffered plague, fire, drought, famine, and disastrous weather—much less than the surrounding realms—all made easier, of course, by the presence of a powerful wizard. Despite Jepthe's distaste for anyone other than himself, the kingdom had surely benefitted from his presence. Wedge wondered if he should just yield. Could he defend the kingdom as well? Wasn't it horrifying arrogance on his part to believe he could do the job as competently as an eight hundred-year-old sorcerer?

He closed his eyes. When he walked to town in the afternoons, he loved how the late summer grain rippled in the breeze, how cattle grazed with contented calm, how the city gates opened for him when he spoke the spell. He loved when the seasons changed. Charlotte's face when he surprised her at her work made him smile. When her face rose to his and their breath met in the middle. This could be gone forever in the next few days. Jepthe's spell would end him.

The next parchment was written in a language Wedge didn't know, but it looked by the illustrations to be boat-building instructions. He dropped it to the shelf in despair, stirring dust and frightening a mouse.

That night he couldn't sleep. There was no bar he could put on his door that Jepthe couldn't shatter, and to do so would reveal his suspicions, but with the door unlocked, every creak sounded like its opening. Another night in the archives revealed little. Wedge fell asleep, his head resting on a five hundred-year-old tome. When he woke, the candle had burned out, and he found his way from the dark room by touch.

"You look unwell, boy," rasped Jepthe. "Have you discovered the joys of the taverns, or is it your scrawny town girl who distracts you?"

The only reason Wedge didn't run was that the transfer spell was a long one. He would have warning if Jepthe started it, and unless the old sorcerer had a secret way to bind him—and he

might—Wedge would have time to move out of range. He could bargain with Jepthe. Perhaps there was a way that didn't kill the apprentice or anyone else.

"I have been studying. There is so much I don't know yet to be master."

Maybe there was something frightened in Wedge's voice, or perhaps Jepthe knew him too well, but the old man looked at him with suspicion.

Jepthe came for him that night. Wedge went to bed as he normally did, planning on returning to the archives later, but the young man had stretched himself too thin and fell asleep. Jepthe had reminded him time and time again during his training to not rely solely on magic. Diplomacy could settle disputes without spells. Illness could be treated with medicines, too, and an arrow would stop a man (but not a wizard) as effectively as a deadly enchantment. So Wedge didn't use magic to warn himself; he leaned his staff against the door between his room and the master's. When it clattered to the stone, he woke.

Jepthe stood in his death robes, silhouetted by the torch in the sconce behind him. The crow feathers fluttered.

"You know, don't you, boy?" said Jepthe. "I didn't think you were so clever, but you're not the first." He raised his hands into a new position, not the beginning of the transfer spell, something else. Perhaps a spell to paralyze him. Wedge didn't wait to see what it was. He shouted a word and waved his hand. The door between the two rooms slammed in Jepthe's face, while Wedge leapt from his bed and into the hallway. The intervening door exploded. Splinters flew behind Wedge as he fled. Despite his thinking, he had no plan. He had pictured a dozen ways this encounter would go. In all of them he remained calm. He was, after all, a well-trained magician, but now he was running, as frightened as he had been the first day he had come to Conjury Hall when he was ten.

The wizard's home contained rooms and stairways and secret passages, but a spell of finding was the most elementary of tricks. Hiding would be impossible. Jepthe, though, was old and slow, while Wedge was young. As the apprentice ran up a flight of stairs, his heart shuddering and his breath like fire, he knew he would have to stop. Now, though, like a child, he ran in a panic. What could he say to save his life?

He skidded on the slick floor as he turned and dashed into one of the trophy rooms, a long chamber lined with art and armor and gifts from kings long dead. Jepthe stood in the doorway at the other end.

How could the old man have beaten him to this spot? Spent, Wedge stopped, his hands on his knees, gasping. Jepthe wasn't even breathing hard. He had said that Wedge was not the first to guess his fate. Had other apprentices, as young and fit as he, also fled into Conjury Hall? Who

would know the house's passages better than Jepthe? Perhaps, even, it was designed to confuse the panicked.

Jepthe raised his arms, the crow feathers dangling, his hands already glowing with the spell's energy.

Wedge sat, defeated. He couldn't run. He couldn't allow Jepthe to kill someone else in his place. He would join the unbroken line that was Jepthe's eight hundred-year-old life.

But Jepthe didn't start the motion that would hold Wedge still for the spell. Instead, he paused to smirk, an expression he wore often. He smirked and mocked and laughed at people. His superiority surfaced in every expression.

It was the smirk that provoked Wedge and the pause that saved him. If he was going to die, he didn't want Jepthe's smug face to be the last thing he saw, so Wedge spoke his first word of power, waved his hand in his most practiced gesture, and slammed the double doors on Jepthe.

Jepthe screamed. The door trapped his extended wrist, shattering it.



And so Wedge became master of Conjury Hall and the kingdom's twenty-fourth wizard. Many people wrote in their journals and letters about his kindness and charity. Charlotte became the first woman to occupy Conjury Hall in its history, learning magic of her own, teaching it to their children when they came.

The people wrote, too, about Jepthe, who had once been their wizard, but who didn't die when his apprentice ascended. He sometimes came to town. They saw him in the tavern, bitter to the end, crippled, unable to make an enchanting gesture, haunted by life as no old man they had ever seen.

When Wedge, adept of a thousand gestures, died after a full life, he left no apprentice, although his and Charlotte's children learned from their parents.

To a passing traveler, the kingdom looked much like the others, but it suffered fewer plagues and famines, less drought and disastrous weather, and enjoyed more fine seasons during which the grapes came rich, the cows were abundant, and marriages and births were plenty.

Happiness and misery were doled to them unequally, and after a long, long while, when the writings had crumbled to dust, the people told no stories of Jepthe the Cruel, or his apprentice, Wedge, but they lived in a place where magic was as common as singing birds and starlit nights, and doors opened easily for friends who were welcome within.





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James Van Pelt ???

# What Was Meant to Be Buried

Carla Dash

I DREAMED OF DISMANTLING HIM. HE WASN'T THE FIRST. I dreamed of dismantling others, too, before and after. But mostly him, for what he did to me when I was small and we were meant to be gorging on chocolate milk and graham crackers while we waited the half hour for my mother to get home.

She never did believe it, my mother. But then, she never believed any badness about me. Not that I could suffer it. Not that I could perpetrate it. *She doesn't mean to*, my mother would say. *She can't help herself*. And always, always she was apologizing.

I didn't dismember him right away when I was big enough and strong enough and vindictive enough. For one thing, his relationship with Mother had soured and we'd moved away. For another, I was still trying to please Mother then. Everyone knows the worst thing in the world is abnormality, and I provided that in spades. She always thought it was her fault, something she'd done, a punishment. So I stopped lopping the heads of my dolls and bringing her de-legged, desiccated insects. I took my meds.

And she rewarded me. With ice cream and coloring books. And later with lipstick and lacy, expensive bras. But also with her regard. Her hugs, her smiles, her confidence and trust. We were best friends. She told me everything. Because if I was golden, so was she. Blameless, faultless, perfect. For a while, that was enough.

Sometimes I would slip. My mother would catch me dreaming of it, taking him apart the way I used to shred live moths and even once, covertly, a shivering, winter-doomed mouse.

*What in the world can you be thinking of, wearing a face like that?* she would ask, aghast, fist pressed to her jiggling, silicon bosom.

I would flatten my lips and narrow my eyes. Erase the smirk and the shiny, wide-eyed mirth. And then I would make something up. Something not gory. She knew. She must have known. But she accepted the lies, whatever they were. No matter how weak or unlikely.

But then my mother was dead, gone off to join my never-known and never-missed father. The police never could figure it out. The randomness of her death. The brutality. After, there was no one to stop me.

I buried what was left of him beneath the thorny vines behind his house. Later, I came back for the house. I liked the view. I didn't even need to dip into mother's bequeathal. Despite the convenient location and excellent shower pressure, the realtor was having trouble selling it. The locals were suspicious and superstitious. They jibber-jabbered and I made out like a bandit.

In the spring, the vines blossomed. Heavy, star-shaped fruits bent the brambles near to the ground. I plucked one. The skin was golden like a Nilla wafer and lightly furred like a kiwi. In the kitchen, I sliced it into eights along the points of the star. The flesh inside was soft and pink and juicy. It was unlike anything I'd ever seen. Despite the unfamiliarity, I leaned against the counter and ate it. So smooth, so refreshing and sweet, was the taste that I licked the juice off my fingertips like a cat.

I spent the night feverish and delusional, coiled around the low-flow toilet, vomiting. I imagined I saw my mother, rubbing her temples.

*How many times must I tell you to mind what you stick in your mouth?* she asked. And indeed, this was a childhood problem of mine, one I sacrificed to keep her happy.

"I'm sorry," I said.

She shook her head. *Why do you do this to me?* Or perhaps she said "did," for she rotted before my eyes, dropping into a pile of flesh and bones on the floor.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Imsorryimsorryimsorry," I moaned into the porcelain.

I thought, too, that I saw him, the house's former owner, smirking in the corner, pleased with his revenge. Paltry revenge.

"You're dead!" I screamed, but he carried on chuckling and pointing and leering, nudging the shoulder of another man I couldn't properly see. He was a shadow, more the shape of a man than a man truly. He radiated a feeling of sadness. My father, perhaps?

It was this shadow man I most wanted to rend. For looking, for witnessing, for seeing what was meant to be buried.

In the morning, the fruit that had only yesterday been ripe and sweet lay rotting in the grass. I didn't bother to throw it away for every day new fruit grew, ripened, and rotted.

Despite the night I'd suffered, despite the evidence lying in the grass, not eating the fruit was a trial. Still it hung, ripe and exotic on the vine. Still I remembered the juice running down my fingers as I bit into it.

I clipped a piece of the vine and tried to grow a second plant. If I couldn't eat it, I wanted at least to look on more of the beautiful fruit. The clipping took and the vine grew rapidly, but no fruit bloomed from its branches. The stars, it seemed, required particular sustenance.

The first vine continued its accelerated life cycle, and its decay drew animals. Scavengers scaled the fence and picked amongst the filth. Raccoons, crows, beetles. Their strong stomachs seemed to abide the fruit, though the corpses of other creatures, tricked by the ripe, still-on-the-vine stars, littered the lawn. Eventually, I ceded the territory. I gazed out the kitchen window, but stopped attempting to set foot in the yard.

Humans, too, were drawn to the sight. Neighbors stared, transfixed. They slowed as they passed, lowering their voices to whispers, gossiping as they held their noses. They had suspicions about the animal corpses, but none ever approached me, nor I them. Until the stranger.

He had a lame leg, which he dragged as he walked. His flesh was covered in scarred-over burns, but also in bright, winding tattoos. It was hard to discern what was self-inflicted and what wasn't.

He followed his nose, limping around the perimeter of the house, and stood outside the fence, staring at my ripe and rotten fruit, my dead and living pets—for I had gotten careless about the back door and windows and now insects crawled in the sugar bowl and rodents curled on my rugs—not with revulsion, but with interest, as if he could look right through the blooms, inside the leaves, under the ground, and into the roots. He looked as though he could see, and was interested in knowing more. But no one was supposed to see.

He plucked a fruit and left. He did the same the next day and the next. He only ever took one fruit. He only ever took the tricky, luscious-looking fruit. I grew curious.

One day I stood by the vine and waited for him, at his usual time, around noon. He thumped and thumped until he was standing just across the fence from me. He really was quite disfigured. But inside the ruin of his face, his eyes were human, as were the tongue and teeth inside his mouth.

"Nice to see you up close and without a glass pane between us," he said. A hardhat was hooked to his belt. A house and a fire and a family twisted around his bicep. Everything about him was so on the surface. What kind of monster, I wondered, lay beneath?

One of the crows, the one I called Rook, landed on my shoulder and I drew my fingers down his spine. *Cam, cam*, he said.

"What," I asked, "do you do with the fruit?"

He picked a fruit off the vine and spun it by its stem. I noticed that there were many faces inked onto his skin. Names and dates hid amongst the elaborate designs that flanked the faces. *Sandra 4/18. Janae 9/29*. Mostly women, it seemed.

"Perhaps I like to eat them."

Rook picked through my hair, looking for grubs. I pushed his beak away from my scalp. *Cam*, he said.

"You must have a strong stomach. This fruit is poisonous."

"Worth it."

I thought of it, ripping him into little, inky, burned pieces. No better candidate. Mother would be so disappointed.

The man saw my lunatic expression, my sharp teeth and my big eyes, and he smiled with his twisted mouth. I noticed there was an empty, inkless space peeking out from the neckline of his T-shirt, above his heart.

"What is your name?" he asked.

And I told him, for I believe in fair play.



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**Carla E. Dash** lives in Quincy, MA, with her husband and two cats. She teaches ELL students, procrastinates via video games and anime, and occasionally buckles down and writes.

# Beyond the Turning Orrery

Deborah Walker

"**K**NOW THIS, IF THERE IS ONE LESSON TO TAKE FROM ME. Know that sin is worse than the unwinding." I remember Maestro Iron Bars ending each lesson with those words. As boys, in the safety of our dorm we would mock him: "Remember. Remember," we would say in onerous voices. But he was wise. I think even as children we knew it. That's why we tried to diminish the fearful meaning of his words with our jokes.

As I grew older, I began to understand. I have been a man concerned with sin. Sin corrodes. Sin obscures the savor of life. Sin shrinks the spirit and corrupts all that is good. I am now the monastery Maestro. I lead my brothers and the students through the pathway of faith. I counsel them to alleviate the sins that all men in our weakness commit.

I have made two sins worthy of note in my life. I am about to embark on the third. This is the story of my first sin.



That night we sneaked out of the dormitory. We made our way through the still corridors and into the chapel. We stepped onto the ever-moving spiral stairs, and entered the winding chambers where the newly made waited for the Makers' touch.

"Come quickly, Geoffrey," said Dominique, as I stared at the blank face of the newly made. "We don't want to be caught."

"Every sane person is quiescent," I said. That was where I should have been. But I followed him. Oh, how I followed him.

"Here," he said, pointing to an unremarkable part on the wall. "When I press this . . ." His hands touched the metal slats. The wall slid apart with a clattering noise, to show an unlit passageway.

"How did you find it?" I whispered.

"I looked. Come on." Dominique stepped into the tunnel and turned to me. I remember his eyes, lit like crystal blue stars.

We walked in silence (although the spring in my chest seemed to quiver at an unwholesome rate) until Dominique stopped and pointed to the wall. He said, "What do you think of this?"

In the gloom I saw an immense metal doorway, embossed with script that I didn't recognize, although I was a student of some note in the forgotten languages. "Is this the way outside the city?" I ran my fingers over the unreadable scripts, metal curls of an unknown tongue.

"No." His voice was quiet, reverential. "This is the vault."

The vault! The unopened vault. Only the Maestro was allowed to know its location.

"Shall we go inside, Geoffrey?"

"No," I said, startled at his suggestion.

He smiled. "I would like to go inside. And you would come with me, but I don't have the key. Let's move on."

The tunnels ended in a blank wall. "Watch carefully, Geoffrey." I nodded as he pressed the wall. The old metal slid apart. I breathed in the air of the outside for the first time in my life.

He held out his hand. "Don't be afraid."

"I'm not," I said. But I was—dreadfully afraid, and not for myself.



Outside the Tin City the cogs that move the world are close to the surface. Outside you can hear the very turning of the machine.

Dominique led me to a patch of soft wire grass. We lay on our backs for a time, watching the planets moving smoothly along their celestial wires. The unnamed clusters of small blue stars weaved along their spiral pathways. The Copper Mother was prominent that night, gleaming in the full crystal moon. I could almost make out with my naked eye the mysterious canals that ran along her surface. The ruby twins were coming into ascension on either side of the Copper Mother. And the Hag was, as always, a distant glimmer, moving on a wire, many times the length of the words.

I said nothing, waiting for him to speak.

Eventually he said, "Nonsense. It's all nonsense." He glared at the night sky as if he could change the dance of the heavens with the force of his will.

He'd been reprimanded by the Maestro that day. His initiate's thesis had been rejected. *In Search of an Alternate Astrological Model.*

Master Rilliams, the language tutor, had whispered to me, "I read it. It was near blasphemy. Stay away from that boy, Geoffrey."

"Dom should have been expelled," whispered the boys. "He would have been if he wasn't the son of the Master Clock Builder."

"Do you have to be so intense all the time?" I asked. I never understood his willingness to dismiss the beauty of the world. My head was throbbing with the constant click of the mainspring that wound the world, which was so loud on the outside. (Outside. We were outside!) I picked a copper cricket out of the grass and held it to my ears, listening to the small tick of its tiny internal springs.

"If we're wound, who winds us?" asked Dominique.

I touched his chest. "How can you deny that?" I thumped his chest a little harder. I was afraid for him, and that made me scared.

"I don't deny the fact, Geoffrey. I deny meanings. Who winds us?"

I sighed. "The Makers wind each creature, at the start of their life, determining their lifespan."

Dom stared at the sky. "Look at the Hag Star, Geoffrey. One day, perhaps within our lifetimes, she will be close, and then what will happen?"

What would happen was not in dispute. "The world will unwind, every creature will unwind. And the Makers will restart the world. As they have done many times before. This we know."

Dom frowned. "I have been thinking about Icantari, lately."

I laughed. My friend was a model for Icantari. He had the same pride, the same hubris, the same desire to reach beyond the boundaries the Makers set for us.

"Icantari flew beyond the lamp of the sky," said Dom.

This was an old legend, told to boys. It was not part of the Maestro's books. "Yes. Icantari met the Makers, and that was the start of the promise. That the Hag Star will come after a thousand years, and the world will unwind, but that the Makers will always rewind the world."

"Yes," said Dom.

"So?" I said. "It's a pretty story, that's all."

"But how did he get to beyond the stars?"

"In his magic ship. He left the Tin City and went to live with the wildings. He fell in love with the wilding king's daughter and she gave him the secrets of the flight. And then he left her to fly to the Makers. He never came back. She died, her mainspring snapped in two. Very romantic. Very sad." I shrugged. I was a monastery initiate and the concerns of women were not mine.

"Do you think there's any truth in the story?" asked Dominique.



"If it happened it's all in the long gone past. The world has unwound a hundred times since then."

"Why can't we go beyond the sky, Geoffrey? Beyond the orrery of the planets, past the lamp of the sun. Why is flight banned? I've dreamed of a machine that will take us to the Makers. That seems to me the ultimate expression of faith."

"Does it?" I asked, wondering if he could really believe that.

"I'm leaving."

There were so many things to say: Don't go; Don't leave me. The copper cricket fluttered within my hands. Life ticked on.

"You'd break your initiate's vows?" I asked. "You'll break your promise to the Makers?"

"You won't come with me, will you?"

I kissed him. It wasn't enough, but it was all I could think to do.



They didn't look for him very hard.

His father came to the school to listen to the explanations of Maestro Iron Bars. "It's good that I have other sons." I heard him say as he left.

Dominique became part of the boys' mythology, a story to be whispered at night to frighten your schoolmates. Dismantled by the wildings, who the boys earnestly believed roamed the outside, was the usual end to his tale.

My first sin was being party to Dominique's vow breaking. I should have reported him to the Maestro. They might have brought him back to the Tin City. He would have been safe, and he would have been with me. The words of Maestro Iron Bars began to shape in my mind. I should have run straight to the Maestro. But I loved my friend too much for that.



And the second sin was greater and it came to me late in my life, and this is how it occurred:

Years passed. My old masters wound down. Their bodies recycled into children and were placed in the chapel ready for the touch of the Masters. All my friends, too, until I found myself the eldest of my generation and was given the position of the Maestro. I always remembered

Dominique and tried to be sympathetic to the students, remembering what it was like to be young and foolish, and to be blind to the sight of the Makers' hand on the spring.



He came to me when I had been Maestro for ten years, when the Hag Star rode bright in the sky. He came at night, when I was sitting at my desk in quiescence. He crawled through my open window. He was unlike the beautiful boy I remembered. His body was almost a ruin, although the tick within his mainspring was still vigorous. Wherever he had been, there had been no chance for regular maintenance. But I knew him.

"Hello, Dominique," I said.

"Aren't you surprised to see me?"

"I've been expecting you all of my life." That was only partly true. My dreams in which he died equaled the dreams in which he lived. His eyes were still the same, still the crystal blue of the unnamed stars. "Where have you been, Dominique?"

"I've been building. On the outside there are others. Only a few, but they've helped me."

I grabbed the edge of the table. So the stories were true. The wildings lived outside the Tin City. I pitied them, living as they did outside the Masters' mercy. "You should have brought them to the city," I said.

"No. That would not have served them well. There are more things in the world than you know, Geoffrey. There are stories outside your philosophies."

Blasphemy!

"Do you remember the story of Icantari, Geoffrey?"

"I do."

"Well then," he said with a smile, "you see him before you. I have built my flying machine. Shall I take you to see it?"

"No."

"It's extraordinary, Geoffrey. I believe that it will fly through the night sky to the Makers."

"No."

He grinned. "I thought that you'd say that. Do you regret not coming with me, Geoffrey?"

His words took me back. I, who had been faithful to the Makers, had taken no companion, never raised a new child. I, who had spent my unwindings in service, was transported back to the raw boy lying in the grass. "What use are regrets?"

"I have something for you," he said, placing a metal box on the table.

"What is it?"

"The key to the vault."

The vault? As Maestro I had visited that locked place many times.

"Shall we read the secrets together, Geoffrey?"

"No," I said.

Despite his shabby appearance, I felt drawn to him. There was something about him. In all my life, there has only ever been Dominique who has tempted me from my vows to the Makers. Even now, in old age, I trembled in his presence. How can that be? It seemed a holy thing. That intense longing for another was surely something from the Makers. I shuddered as if the Dismantler was at my shoulder, tempting me. Dominique wasn't for me, and he never was.

"You don't want to go inside the vault, Geoffrey? Then I'll take my findings to the people of the Tin City. I'll parade my flying machine in the streets. Let the people decide. The Hag grows bright in the sky. The world's unwinding is at hand. I think you will find that not all go willingly."

"I won't let you do that."

"No?" He opened the metal box and took out the key. "You won't be able to stop me."

He thought he knew me so well, but he only knew the boy I had been. The authority of my lifetime asserted itself, and although I knew that I loved him, I also knew that he was dangerous.

I called for the guards. They took him away. On my orders they dismantled him the next day.

But he left me the key. He left me the key. I kept it, as memory to the boy I had been, who I could have been. It was a reproach, something I could hardly understand, still I kept it.

Maestro Iron Bars was right. Sin robs life of every joy, every contentment. The time of the Hag was at hand and I should have served the Makers. I should have helped my brothers. For Dominique was right, not everyone faces the End of Days willingly. But I was silent. Sin wrapped me in its heavy cloak.



Some time passed, until the night when I rested in quiescence when my reverie was shattered. For a moment I didn't understand.

"The main spring of the world has stopped." I heard the frightened voices of men and boys.

The cogs that turned the world became still, and a hush permeated the city. A monstrous silence.

I took the key and unlocked the vault. I read the stories in the forgotten languages. It confirmed the promise made to Icantari. The world that was unwound would always be renewed.

It was not enough.

Why should the world unwind?

As if the world was a switch. Switch on, switch off. Tick, tock.

This was the way of things. This was the way of the Makers.

Except . . . I knew a boy who had dreamed, and he had spent a lifetime making his dream. I walked, for the second time of my life, to the outside, and found Dominique's ship waiting for me.

I was like a copper cricket, staring, uncomprehending, at the immense sky. I listened to the quiet tick of my life, so quiet, winding down, all the time. It would soon stop at the whim of the Makers. Then all would be silence.

Except . . . that wasn't how it had to be. I walked over to the flying machine, and slowly, oh so slowly, began to wind its spring.

I climbed inside, and strapped myself into the seat. There were three keys in front of me. I turned the first one and heard the hum of turning springs. I would fly this machine, past the Hag, past the crystal stars, past the Copper Mother, past the Twins, and toward the lamp of the sun. Would I find the Makers waiting for me? Was this what they wanted me to do? I turned the second key, and the machine turned, pointing toward the static sky. I wished so much that Dominique was with me.

This is my final sin. The sin of pride and hubris. I reject my place in this world, to break the barriers of the world and to fly to the Makers just as Icantari did. I wonder if the wildings will see me fly. I will speak to the Makers and demand that they alter the course of the world. Demand that a thousand years be extended into an infinity.

I turned the final key, and the machine burst like a flame into the night sky.



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**Deborah Walker** grew up in the most English town in the country, but she soon high-tailed it down to London, where she now lives with her partner, Chris, and her two young children. Her stories have appeared in *Fantastic Stories of the Imagination*, *Nature's Futures*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet* and *The Year's Best SF* and have been translated into over a dozen languages.

# Boo Daddy's

Anna Yeatts

Clyde regretted not buying a ticket to ride approximately three seconds before the conductor tossed him off the locomotive and into a stand of prickly pears.

His intestines knocked up inside his ears. His nether bits prickled with cactus needles. And a decidedly slimy object, smelling like viscera with a strong dollop of ipecac syrup, was wedged between Clyde's cheek and the desert sand. He rolled onto his belly, his forehead flush against the mysterious sliminess, and burrowed his way out.

Rubbing the sand from his eyes, he squinted beneath the cactus. Beetles scuttled over a shapeless roll of flesh striped with bluish sinews and globs of fat.

Clyde heaved into a mesquite bush until there was nothing left to upchuck but his own innards.

The best Clyde could tell, the body was human. It had fingers and the globe of a head with two milky eyes. But whoever he was, he wasn't wearing any skin.

Clyde went a bit woozy. He wiped the sides of his mouth with a stained handkerchief and scrubbed his face until his skin burned. Fortunately, the majority of his skin stayed intact—more than he could say for the fellow who'd cushioned his post-locomotive skid.

The least he could do was find the local sheriff and point him toward the poor son-of-a-gun's final resting place.

And claim the reward the grateful family was surely offering.

A handful of buildings broke the flat desert. As Clyde hiked into Snake Canyon, he reckoned it was hardly big enough to merit a name. Hitching posts lined the road, but the only horses he saw were in front of a garish red brothel.

The mercantile was open, so Clyde stepped in. The air smelled of day-old bread, licorice, and paper-wrapped packages. When no clerk put in an appearance, Clyde grinned.

A full shelf was devoted to gunny sacks labeled as salt. Clyde hung a right and hopped the counter.

A glass container of horehound lozenges was looking mighty tempting when a distinct chock-chock sound made him pause. The only things Clyde knew of that went chock-chock were a rare species of Brazilian bullfrog and a twelve-gauge solid frame pump-action shotgun.

Since Brazil was a long way away, Clyde turned around real slow with his hands in the air and a guileless grin on his face. The tiniest woman he'd ever seen, no more than knee high to a knickerbocker, stood in the rear doorway with a shotgun braced against her hip.

"You stealing my candies?" Her voice was as deep as she was itty bitty.

"No?" Clyde said.

She walked around the end of the counter and aimed the gun at Clyde's trousers.

"Yes?" he said.

"Put'em back. Lest you licked 'em."

Clyde thought about shoving the handful into his mouth. His hand twitched.

The woman readjusted her stance.

Clyde put the lozenges back. He sucked on his sticky palm.

"Leave," she barked.

The woman wasn't much older than he was, but she looked tired, peaked around the eyes, like she hadn't known a good night's sleep since she left the cradle.

Clyde took off his hat. "I'm mighty hungry, ma'am. Perhaps I—"

"Be more wrong with you than a griping belly if you don't get." Her eyes flickered toward the brothel.

"Mind telling me how far the next parish is?"

"Twenty miles."

"Therein lies my predicament," Clyde said. "Down on my luck as I am, walking through the desert would be the death of me."

"Staying in Snake Canyon'll be the death of you."

Clyde stalled. "I need to tell your sheriff where to find a non-breathing and rather nauseating discovery."

"What?"

"A corpse." He dropped his voice. "Skinned. Alive."

He didn't know about the alive part, but it sounded good. Perhaps good enough to merit a stick or two of jerky. "Yes'm. I would love to tell you the more salacious details over an ice cold glass of—"

"Get out." The shotgun poked him in the belly.

Hands up, Clyde scooted around the counter. He cast a longing glance at a tub of pickles. The shotgun nosed him in the chest.

"See that red building?" she asked. "Boo Daddy's. Nothing but evil."

Sounding like Clyde's kind of establishment, he brightened.

The shotgun jabbed his nether bits.

Clyde took his cue. He walked out, thinking about a quaff of cold ale. But he felt her eyes pecking at his backside, telling him to hang a left and walk off into the sunset. He'd roast in the desert like a baked potato left too long in the coals. His stomach growled. Maybe Boo Daddy's had victuals. Perhaps Boo Daddy had a Boo Mama he could negotiate with?

After a meander down the street, Boo Daddy's was even more gauche. Three stories of shiny red clapboard were broken by crenellated woodwork painted black as tar. Each paned window looked like a giant mouth surrounded by rotted teeth.

Not the most inviting building in the world. The little shopkeeper had been adamant against the place. Maybe she just didn't like red. Having no particular partiality against the hue, Clyde stepped onto the porch. Two men stumbled out the saloon door, reeking of whiskey and women. Clyde's nose perked up.

The saloon doors swung inward. Clyde sucked in a lungful of tobacco-scented air, closed his eyes, and savored the mouth-watering aroma of pork ribs and baked beans. Heaven.

"You new, sugar?" A satin-gloved hand cupped his cheek.

Clyde opened his eyes. A head taller than him, she was a brunette, black eyed, full bosomed, and laced into the tightest red corset this side of the Mississippi.

Clyde's heart did a little soft shoe routine inside his chest.

"I'm whatever you want, my dear lady." Clyde kissed her gloved hand.

"Course you are." She took Clyde's hand. Her hips swished as she led him inside.

Clyde noticed she wasn't wearing a bustle.

"I'm Suzette. Welcome to Boo Daddy's. We make your dreams our own."

Suzette deposited Clyde on a red brocade settee still warm from its last occupant—currently staggering up the stairs in the wake of a slim blonde.

Floorboards creaked behind Clyde.

"Daddy," Suzette said.

Clyde was all for playing along but a voice colder than a block of ice answered.

"You owe me two tonight," the man said.

Clyde craned his neck to see over the settee's enameled back. His view was eclipsed by a broad shoulder and beefy arm straining against a white poplin shirt.

Suzette started to speak. The man cut her off. "One hour."

"Yes, Boo Daddy."

Suzette grabbed Clyde by the collar, her mouth set in a grim line. "You ready, muffin?"

She dragged him toward the staircase and he flinched. He tried to get his feet under himself, but resisting Suzette was like swimming against the tide. "Perhaps we should discuss price?" he asked.

She stopped on the bottom stair, her décolletage at eye-level. Clyde cursed himself for not merely running up the stairs. He remembered the hard muscle of the man's chest and the bulging arm. Negotiating an IOU in this establishment wouldn't be wise.

"I'm short on government regulated currency at the moment." He thought she looked offended. Perhaps he had underestimated his own inimitable charms.

"Aw, sugar, I'm not that kinda woman."

Happiness sweet as chicken gravy swelled in his chest. "You sure? I musta died and gone to heaven."

Suzette resumed her march up the stairs, her grip tight. "Perhaps. That is, if I like you enough."

Clyde clutched the polished banister. "At least you'll die," the little shopkeeper would have said.

But Suzette had her arms around his waist and her perfume in his nose and her soft curves pushing him into a dimly-lit room. Clyde shoved the little shopkeeper out of his mind faster than he could say sweet potato pudding.



The next thing Clyde realized was waking up.

The second thing Clyde realized was that he hated waking up.

Pinprick stars shone through the room's solitary window. And the bed was far softer than a prickly pear cactus. Clyde hadn't slept in a real bed since his long con in Topeka fell through. Seven years and never more than a night in the same place was hard on a man.

Exhausted, Clyde pulled the bedsheets over his head. He wondered at his state of full dress, even his shoes. Funny thing was, he couldn't remember the particulars of what had left him so energetically depleted.

A harsh pinch to his rump made him grunt. The sheets were yanked back. Suzette dragged him out of bed. She hoisted him under the armpits and tossed him to the floor easy as a sack of cabbages. "Up and at 'em, sugar."



From this angle, Suzette's chin jutted out, perfection, save for a small cut at the juncture of throat and jaw. A flap of skin dangled from a red triangle of flesh. It made Clyde a bit queasy.

Clyde climbed to his feet. He brushed the wrinkles from his trousers and joined a line of weary men in the hallway.

The man in front of Clyde yawned. A chorus of groans ran through the men. Clyde got an uneasy feeling in his knees. Each man was fully dressed. Trousers fastened. Buttons done up. Shoes on. Clyde scratched his head. Either this was the tidiest bawdy house in the history of mankind or none of these men had gotten what they'd paid for. Except Clyde hadn't paid—so he reckoned he couldn't complain.

The line of men spilled through the saloon before being spit back out onto the dusty street.

Weak as a second day teabag, Clyde dragged his sorry hide over to the mercantile. He wedged his shoulder against the wood and pushed, but all he managed to do was slip-slide his shoe leathers against the sidewalk. He leaned his face against the doorjamb, slid to the ground, and decided he was about as comfortable as a body could be.



A shotgun barrel beneath his chin had never been Clyde's idea of a good morning salute. And it still wasn't.

The teeniest pair of button boots he'd ever seen filled his sight. If he chewed on the leather long enough, the teeny boots might be digestible. Clyde groaned and rolled over onto his back.

The little shopkeeper glared down at him. "Get," she said.

"Can't."

"You got two legs."

"Without nourishment, I have no choice but to loiter or wait for masticatory pleasures."

Clyde's stomach growled.

She lowered the shotgun. "You went."

Clyde tried to look remorseful. Which he was—if it would win sympathy.

A skinny, sunken-faced man wearing a tin star on his shirtfront and clutching a gunny sack in one hand stood next to the shopkeeper.

"Tell him." She kicked Clyde's foot.

"That's the sheriff?" Fellow looked like he couldn't say boo to a goose much less wrangle a posse.

"Is now," the shopkeeper said.

The sheriff scrubbed his face and gave her a pointed look. "Mrs. Hudgins, who d'you think this one was? Miss Shively? Or the last Miller sister?"

"Shively's a bit old. Miller was sixteen, but she was good sized. You heard from either their folks?"

"Both."

Mrs. Hudgins tutted.

Clyde asked, "Might the grateful family have offered a reward?"

"Fella," the sheriff said, "if I had a nickel for every skinned body, I'd be a rich man."

"The hags work all night, stealing the men's breath and giving it to their Daddy. About picked Snake Canyon clean of womenfolk," said Mrs. Hudgins.

"Hags are big old things," the sheriff said. "Can't squeeze themselves into our little Mrs. Hudgins."

Clyde's skin prickled all over with gooseflesh. He thought of that long line of men shuffling down the red staircase, out the red door, into the dark. "Why me?"

She sniffed. "You've only been here a night. Rest of these poor devils been ridden to lunacy."

"What about him?" Clyde pointed to the sheriff.

The sheriff grinned. Mrs. Hudgins spoke up. "Won't let him in."

"Ah," said Clyde. "Big guns and all."

The sheriff turned red as Boo Daddy's paint.

Mrs. Hudgins huffed. "He don't like women."

Clyde nodded. "An excellent evolutionary advantage."

The sheriff rubbed his nose with his shirtsleeve, looking as confused as frog legs in a soufflé.

Mrs. Hudgins shoved the sheriff's gunny sack into Clyde's arms. "Salt. Put it in the hags' skins tonight."

The idea of Suzette's skin sliding off made Clyde's upper lip sweat. "What about Boo Daddy?"

"Without his hags, he'll starve," the sheriff said.

A locomotive would come along eventually, and Clyde had plenty of practice running for a boxcar. He wrapped the gunny sack tight and tucked it in the back of his trousers. Best let these two think he was on their side long enough to skip town.

"Until tonight." He tipped his hat.

He needed a shady place to lay low, stay cool, until locomotive exhaust curled up along the horizon.

On the far side of the jail, Suzette paced. She carried a black-fringed parasol. Her skirts swished up dust storms in her wake. Bluish smudges marred beneath her eyes and the tip of her nose was pink from broken vessels.

"Of all the people to run into." She sashayed over and took Clyde's arm.

The dry wind ruffled the tassels on Suzette's parasol. A flicker of movement beneath her jaw caught Clyde's attention. His innards twisted tighter than pretzels.

The flap of skin was the size of an apricot, only not as fragrant.

"Like what you see?" Suzette asked.

Clyde's cheeks went hot; his spine went cold. "Of course." He scrambled for an exit strategy. "Beg pardon, but I must perambulate elsewhere."

"I don't think so, sweet-cakes." Her gloved hand clutched his elbow with preternatural strength. "It's not polite to keep a lady from her breakfast."

The streets were empty save for Clyde and Suzette. Panic rose with each wave of her skin flap. Clyde *was* a handsome fellow. What if she wanted his skin? Especially if the town was running out of women. And there was the sheriff to lure.

Clyde scrambled to release her grip. Skin pulled loose within the confines of her glove. The odd sensation made him clammy all over.

Suzette hissed. He dug his nails into her arm. She snarled and dragged Clyde the last few yards.

Boo Daddy's reared up like a gaping throat, red and meaty. Clyde dug in his heels, leaving deep furrows of sand in his wake, as Suzette towed him onto the porch.

"You don't want me." Clyde tried to sound brave. "I'm stringy. My breath smells dreadful. Poor molar hygiene. Nothing worth sucking." His bowler slid down over his eyes. "I'm wanted in six states. People are looking for me."

Suzette flounced Clyde through the door and across the lobby. He dropped to his knees, begging, but she hefted him up like a sack of potatoes. Clyde squawked. Suzette lifted her foot for the bottom stair. Clyde wrapped his hands around her ankle and hung on. His awkward weight toppled her backwards. They both smashed to the floor.

Suzette was heavier than she looked, knocking the breath out of Clyde. She struggled to roll off him. Clyde held tight. Suzette hissed, her heels rat-a-tatting on the floorboards. With a wet, sucking sound, swaths of skin peeled off in Clyde's hands. He tossed them aside, shuddered, and grabbed more.

"Daddy!" she screeched.

Footsteps pounded. A blow to the crown of his head was the last thing Clyde remembered.



Clyde's eyelids were heavy as hogs. Fully dressed, he curled on the floor next to Suzette's empty bed. The fading sun made the room glow a sickly carnation red. The gunny sack of salt bulged against his spine.

Clyde ripped the sack open and filled his pockets, the cuffs of his pants, his tissue-thin socks. Anywhere he could fit a pinch of salt, Clyde poured it in. The rest of the bag he rolled tight and shoved in his skivvies.

The rustle of taffeta and the click of heeled boots meant Boo Daddy's was open for business. Clyde tried the window. The red paint locked it tighter than glue.

Enthusiastic work boots clomped up the stairs. Doors closed. Clyde felt an unfamiliar flush of anger. Had he really been such a dupe to blindly follow the siren into her lair? Yes, he had. And should Suzette catch him now, he'd be man-breath-a-la-mode.

No way was he going out of this world on an empty, aching belly.

Clyde curled back up on the floor and played dead-to-the-world asleep. He didn't have to wait long. All tantalizing whispers and breathy laughs, Suzette pulled a stubby man in worn dungarees through the door. She tossed him down on the bed. The man sighed. The bedsprings groaned. The man yelped then went quiet save the wet rasp of heavy breathing.

A quiet slurping sound curled Clyde's hair tighter than a pig's tail.

Suzette climbed off the bed next to Clyde, her feet slapping next to his face. He kept his eyes squeezed tight until he heard the door shut.

He scurried to his feet, ignoring the passed out fellow on the bed. He peeked out the keyhole. The slim blonde he'd seen before left her bedroom and re-entered the hallway. She passed Clyde. He heard a second door open. A curvy brunette passed, followed by the others.

When the coast was clear, Clyde cracked the door.

The empty stairwell beckoned him. He could almost smell his ticket to freedom coming closer with the locomotive's surefire advance.

At the far end of the hall, the chatter of voices couldn't hide the slippery noises followed by wet thuds. The hags were slipping their skins.

Clyde retched.

He knew he was many things: a connoisseur, a gambler, a conman, a lover . . . a coward.

But skinning perfectly good women in the desert and impersonating a bawdy house was not to be tolerated.

Clyde licked his numb lips. On tiptoe, he found a small linen closet and watched through the cracked door.

As the hags returned to their victims, skinless legs and buttocks traipsed past his hiding spot. Long, flat tendons down the side of their thighs shone silver. Perfused with blood, their muscles gleamed, strong and unnatural.

Clyde promised himself to never eat rare roast beef again, so long as he lived.

The hags disappeared into their rooms. Clyde counted to ten. The iron tang of fresh meat filled the air. For once, his stomach didn't growl.

He eased down the hall until he reached the room with the hags' skins. If an anatomist ever needed dermatological specimens, Clyde could've sold those flawless skins for a pretty penny, paid off every debt he owed between here and Pensacola.

A dozen piles, each the size of a plump goose, lined the walls. Corsets and satin skirts hung on hooks above each skin. Clyde poked the first skin, a sun-kissed brown, with his toe. The limp tube of an arm flopped across his foot and it took every ounce of intestinal fortitude for Clyde not to screech.

Using his boot, he tried to open the skin. The unnatural heat left in the skin by its owner was palpable through the thin sole of his boot.

Think of it as nothing more than salting fatback, he told himself. Pork rinds. Hoghead cheese. A side of bacon.

His stomach came back to life. Curing meat, he could handle.

Crouching, he gingerly moved the skin until he found a long seam running from the left armpit to the right hip. He scooped in his pocket for salt, and still thinking of fatback, he rubbed down the inside of that skin until the pink underbelly glistened with salt.

One after another, Clyde worked his way around the room. The last skin was Suzette's. He'd recognize that smooth expanse of creamy décolletage anywhere—especially with all the chunks missing.

He shook out his shirt sleeves then his trouser cuffs to salt Suzette's. His fingers burned, palms red as the paint.

Wiping his hands on the empty gunny sack, he shoved it back in his trousers, ready to make his escape. Watching the hags burn in their saline treated hides was not an image Clyde wanted in his mind's eye.

He tiptoed to the hall and tried to block out the muffled sounds from behind the closed doors.

Suzette's door cracked open.

"Sugar?" she called.

Clyde ducked back into the skin room. Moist slapping sounds marked her footsteps.

"Oh, sweet'ums, come on out."

Clyde's rump brushed a hanging dress. Taffeta rustled to the floor. Suzette laughed. She peeked into the skin room.

"Boo." She wagged her skinless forehead, meaty mouth bared around sharp white teeth.

Clyde needed to void his bladder. And cry like a baby.

He wedged his hand into his skivvies and pulled out the gunny sack. It was nearly empty.

"Aw, sugar."

She crossed the room. Her warm, moist hand cupped his face. He quivered like eggs in aspic. Her mouth descended toward his, the wide muscles of her shoulders blocking his escape, her sticky belly pressed to his.

Clyde squeaked. He shoved the wide mouth of the gunny sack against her chest. The salt shifted under his palms as he ground the residue into her flesh.

Suzette screamed. She flung him against the wall. Clyde slid to the floor. Suzette slapped at her belly, face contorted into a horrid mask as she tried to wipe the salt away.

"Daddy!" she cried.

She snatched up her skin, unfurled the length of creamy flesh and jammed her legs inside.

Clyde froze. Trapped.

The other hags piled into the room. Like Suzette, each snatched up her own skin and pulled it on.

The stink of burning flesh overpowered him.

"You can't hide, sugar." Tears ran down Suzette's cheeks, her face contorted in a rictus. "I'll eat you alive for this."

Clyde sniffed delicately. The room smelled strongly of corned beef. His mouth watered.

Boo Daddy charged into the circle of hags, each writhing and reaching for him. Their lovely faces twisted into piteous snarls as the hags burned from the inside out. Soft skin bubbled into raw red blisters.

Clyde scrambled under a pile of frilled petticoats. He peeked out, waiting for a chance to bolt.

Boo Daddy tried to peel the skins off his hags. He dug his hands into their flesh and yanked away big hanks of boiling skin, leaving behind oozing sores that only made the hags cry out louder. And still the hags clung to him. Begged him.

The hags collapsed to the floor, writhing into charred shells of themselves. Boo Daddy himself started to look worse for wear. His suit jacket drooped over his shoulders. His trousers sagged from his waist.

Suzette wrapped herself around Boo Daddy, her face nothing but an angry red sore. Blackened stumps of teeth showed in her peeled-back mouth.

Boo Daddy tried to hold her up. He gave it a go before the big hag was too much and they both toppled to the ground. Suzette curled into a burned ball of hag-bacon around Boo Daddy's ankles. His hags gone, Boo Daddy didn't have any more breath to hold him up. His face disappeared into an old, old man's look, wrinkles etching their way across his skin.

Clyde crawled out of his hidey hole, careful not to touch what was left of the hags.

Boo Daddy stared at his stick-thin hands, greasy with ash. His shrunk body was so frail Clyde feared even his breath would break Boo Daddy into a thousand pieces.

Groggy voices called from the hags' rooms.

The moon was out over Snake Canyon. The broken man's face was a stark contrast—sharp cheekbones standing out like cleaver blades against the sunken cheeks.

Clyde had had a lady friend in Biloxi who aired her dresses out every day. Swore by it. He hoped the hags had been fond of a little fresh air. He picked a window and tried the latch. It opened. He almost sang a hallelujah hymn.

Clyde shoved the window sash up. The night air was sweet and cool, washing his face clean of salty death. Boo Daddy's dark gaze was fixed on Suzette. His reed-thin body shook, his lips pressed tight.

The piles of ash swirled into smoky clouds, Suzanne disappearing into her sisters, until Boo Daddy was wrapped tight in choking, black dust.

Clyde took off his shoe and threw it into the maelstrom for good measure.

Boo Daddy shattered into dust.

The desert wind reached in through the opened window and swept Snake Canyon clean of Boo Daddy and his hags. Clyde closed the window.

Mrs. Hudgins swept into the room followed by the sheriff. Her mouth pinched, she took in carnage. The sheriff looked pleased.

Clyde's stomach growled. The air was quite redolent of salted beef. And his very fragrant sock in need of washing. He gave the little shopkeeper his best ingratiating smile, "Might I bother you for a cold glass of—"

"Yes," she said.

Clyde's stomach burbled.

He gave the now vacant premises a careful once over, chewing on a thought. Perhaps if certain debts were paid, he could stay here. "I have found my calling in life," Clyde said.

The sheriff wiped his nose with his sleeve.

Clyde rocked back on his heels, envisioning the racks of ribs, the crispy pork belly, the succulent pommes frites he'd serve.

"Yes, Clyde Daddy's has a certain ring to it," he said. "Perfect for a restaurateur."



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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*, *Mslexia*, and *Spark: A Creative Anthology*, among others. Anna is the publisher of *Flash Fiction Online*. Anna attended Uncle Orson's Literary Boot Camp in 2011. She is a member of Codex and the Horror Writers of America. Her inner geek girl is addicted to all things wondrous, offbeat, quirky, and odd, and is usually found reading in a corner somewhere. When not writing, Anna teaches Zumba, obsesses over baked goods, collects high heels, and wrangles a small menagerie of two cats, two dogs, two children, and one incredibly patient husband.



# Skies of Sand and Steel

Jeremy Szal

**T**HE FLOATING CHROME CITY IS ALWAYS HOT, BUT TODAY IT WAS SCORCHING. Wrapped in roasting heat, the sun cooked the bleached boardwalk to a crisp. Giant hydraulic fans mounted to cafés, restaurants, and shops spun frantically to fight off the ceaseless heatwave, drawing customers with the promise of ice-cold drinks.

I strolled over to the railing and let the breeze wipe sweat from my face with cool fingers. The wasteland stretched out below, a shifting blanket of golden sand with razorback ridges of black rock and abandoned ruins, sculpted into rough shapes by dust storms. If it was sweltering hundreds of meters above ground, I didn't even want to *know* what it was like down there.

I'd turned fourteen today, and was permitted to travel outside of Chrome City. Uncle had business over in Atrium City, and he'd timed it so I could come with him. His airship was probably at the docks now, being prepped for the long flight. He dealt in chemical fuels and gases, mined from the core. It was the source of energy for the cities, powering the quantum particles that kept The Free Cities levitating above the desert.

I trooped down a flight of coiling stairs, passing the fairgrounds set up along the esplanade. Squinting in the distance I could see my uncle's hulking airship. It was a monster of a machine, all sleek engines, razor sharp air fins and chugging propellers, all finely honed and polished to perfection.

It dwarfed the rest of the dirigibles, made them look pitiful and frail. Robert Keeran was never one to hold back. No doubt he had to make himself look good for the Chieftains of Atrium City. They could get cheaper fuels from other buyers if they wanted.

I halted at the edge of the dock, waiting for the pathway to be cleared of shipments. A loud hiss sounded in the dark alleyway. The teeth-grinding scrape of metal against stone. I inched along, the weathered brick cool against my back. Two men were rolling a metal cylinder along and sweating from the effort. Dappled light caught their faces and I recognized Kage and Saul, Uncle's most recent employees. No doubt this cylinder was pumped full of gases and fuel for the trip. I was about to speak up but I stopped. They swung open a side door, rolling out an identical cylinder. They heaved the original cylinder inside and shut the door up again.

Kage spat in the gravel. "How many more of these?" he panted.

"'Bout half a dozen more," Saul wheezed, lungs probably rotted from years of smoking.

The back of my neck turned cold. What was this? Why were they replacing the cylinders?

This *really* didn't seem like the place to be. I stepped backwards and knocked into a stack of rickety boxes, sending them crashing to the ground. I tried to get away but tripped and they were on me like vultures.

"Who the hell is this?" Kage shoved me against the wall, face twisted in a snarl.

"Isn't that Ruben?" Saul croaked. "Robert's nephew?"

Kage squinted, the back of my skull grinding against brick. "By God, yes he is. How did—"

"Hey! You there!" We all turned toward the alleyway. A man in a crisp suit stood there, like some saintly guardian angel. "Whatever are you doing?"

"Stay out of it old man!" Kage spat. I squirmed in his iron grip, using my elbow to crack him across the face. His hold loosened and I wrenched free, tried to speak, but a wet *pfft* cut me off. The man blinked. Red blossomed on his shirt. Smoke coiled from the silenced revolver in Saul's hand. I stood anchored to the spot. Unable to move, unable to breathe. The man rolled on his back, a glistening lake pooling around him.

"This could have been *so* simple." Saul almost sounded disappointed. "He's not going to be happy." Taking no care to be gentle he gripped my head in his hands and slammed it against the wall.



I was aware of a deep, rumbling sensation that inched up my spine, rattling my bones. My mouth was coated with sawdust, throat parched. My head stung and throbbed, probing white-hot spikes into my brain. With an effort I peeled my eyes open.

I found myself umped in a seat. The broad straps of a shoulder harness secured me down, restraints around my wrists and ankles. I shifted and they only tightened against me as a reflex, crushing me into the seat. I could not move an inch.

Another jolt shook my frame. My molars squeezed together. I gazed around, my eyes adjusting to the gloom. Judging by the interior and the roaring engine, it seemed to be some sort of vehicle. Were we *flying*? In a ship? I realized hours must have passed. Uncle must have departed already! I struggled again but it was like being set in concrete.

"Ah. The runt's came too." There's nothing like decades of cigarettes blasting into your face to get you alert. Up close, Saul's face looked like it had been carved with a hatchet. A blunt one. Rheumy eyes gazed back. "You're one hell of a pest. You know that?"

They'd killed a man as easily as lighting one of those cigarettes. I tried not to sound terrified. I didn't succeed. "Where are you taking me?"

Kage's voice floated down. "Something's flashing red. I need you back here." Saul grunted and moved out of my field of vision.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't scared. Cold panic started to crawl through my guts and I had to stamp it back down. This wouldn't help. I could only try and gain the upper hand and I'd start by finding out where we were headed.

There wasn't much to go on in here. The interior was filthy, identical seats with seatbelts dangling like guts stapled to rust-brown walls. Strobe lights flickered and spluttered above me. Thick, discolored cables spilled out of the hatch like worms. Judging by the interior we had to be on some sort of ship.

The air began to heat up. A river of sweat ran down my chest and back, the air thick as soup. We were approaching the surface. Waves of fear and excitement washed over me. I was finally going down there. But what were they going to do to me? If they wanted to kill me they'd have done it already.

We flew for hours before the engine seemed to wind down, the ship circling around for a slow descent. The landing shook the ship like dice in a cup, bouncing my head against the back wall. Warm blood seeped into my mouth. They stalked over my way, bickering as usual. Saul pocketed what I presumed to be the engine keycard and stabbed a button on the side. My restraints popped free. I tried to make a break for it but Saul hooked meaty fingers around my throat. "Run and I'll break your neck. Your choice."

The fight slipped out of me.

He hustled me forward. The rusty gears screamed as the hatch clanked open. Harsh light flooded in. Three figures stood on the golden sand, swaddled in tattered cowls that snapped like sails in the hot wind. They wore harnesses, the broad leather straps crisscrossing their chest with a wide buckle in the middle. But it was the oiled carbines clasped in their hands that truly worried me.

On closer inspection I saw that two of the figures had skin that was almost a dark green, leathery like crocodiles. I'd heard about this sort of thing—people dabbling in body modification, pumping foreign DNA into their bloodstream. I thought it was just a rumor. I was wrong.

The leader tugged his cowl down to reveal a wrinkled face tortured to a dark tan throughout the years. His watery gray eyes were chips of slate. "This is him?" His voice was deep and rich without an accent.

"Indeed it is," said Kage.

His eyes narrowed. He leaned forward like he was doing a uniform inspection. "He's just a boy." His voice had turned brittle. "You never mentioned his age."

"You agreed on forty thousand credits." Kage spat. "You said—"

"I never agreed to pay for *this*," he replied, low and quiet. I shivered despite the blazing heat. I'd done the math. It was clear what was going on.

I was being sold.

"This is the deal we made. This—"

It happened so fast. The carbines cracked, deafening in the cramped interior. Saul and Kage lay dead, red dribbled on the sand around them. The two figures lowered their carbines, gazing at me with dead eyes.

The leader just shook his head. "I'm sorry, boy. This is the way it must be."

It was then that I knew I was well and truly screwed.

They led me out of the ship and out onto the desert. It was a rolling stretch of gold, speckled with dry shrubs and red tufts of grass. Mammoth cliffs of ebony stone loomed above, threatening to topple over and crush us. The sand boiled beneath my feet, the air thick and muggy.

It was so tempting to run. To just get the hell of out here. But it was pointless. There was nowhere to go and I'd never survive out there.

A large cart with peeling paint was parked next to a waterhole. Makeshift chairs were welded at the front and back, a metal rail in the middle. A harness was draped over the rail, identical to the ones they wore. They prodded me to put it on. As I did I noticed the number stitched into the broad shoulder strap. I would have asked them what it was for, but I doubted I'd get an answer.

They restrained me again, hands bound to the sides, then huddled in the front, the vehicle revving up with a splutter of charcoal smoke. The cart kicked forward, spraying sand as it swerved around a hulking rock and rolled down to the open desert.

Then I saw it.

Chrome City—a giant metropolis floating in the sky. Gleaming towers of all colors yawned upwards, spires cloaked in shreds of clouds. Elevators scooted up and down mile-tall buildings. Planes, ships and dirigibles flanked the docks in orbit, giant rotor blades spinning as they sought out a landing spot.

My home. I'd waited all my life to leave it. Now I knew I have to get back there or die trying.



The cart bounced over rocks, splashed through muddy steams and climbed over scrapheaps, metal crunching underneath. My wrists were chafed raw from the rope and my back hounded me with aches and pains. By the time the cart had skidded to a halt it was dusk, the sun a blood-orange globe sliced in half by the horizon. We arrived at some sort of camp made up of makeshift houses, sheds, and tents. The thick veil of darkness hid the finer details. They unstrapped me from the cart and led me to the nearest of these sheds. They kept the carbine focused on me at all times—as if there was anywhere I could go.

One of them punched the code on a door and flung it open to reveal gaping darkness inside. They shoved me in, sprawling in the dust. The door closed and encased me inside like a tomb.

Alone.

"Well, well," said a voice. "They've found a new one."

I probably should have been afraid but I'd lost the ability to feel surprised today. A lamp spurted to life, the buttery glow peeling away the blackness. A young woman's hand was on the switch, the light shining on her ebony skin. She had to be around seventeen or so. Maybe sixteen, maybe younger. Her smug expression wilted away as she pinned me with dark eyes.

"What in the hell?" she whispered. "They brought a kid!"

She wasn't the only one in the room—there were at least four other people there, all keeping to themselves in the corners. One of them spat into the sand. The man next to him just stared.

"Don't mind Burk," she said. "He hates everyone." She nodded toward the silent one. "You can talk to this guy, but he's not going to say much. The Sandies cut out his tongue for trying to escape."

"Sandies?" I asked.

"That's what we call them."

My insides turned sour and my vision blurred at the edges. "Where are we?"

A man with pale skin gave a low chuckle, turning toward me with eyes drained of hope.

"We're in hell, boy."

The girl rolled her eyes. "Always the pessimist, eh, Kaidan?" She turned back. "It's late. Get some rest. You're gonna need it."

*For what?* The words swelled and died on my tongue. She flipped the switch and I breathed in the pure, sweltering darkness. I lay down, and roots and pebbles dug into my spine as I tried to get some sleep.



The night lumbered away between blinks. The door scraped open and cruel light poured in, stabbing me in the eyes. Everyone scrabbled to their feet as the men from yesterday strolled in.

Sprawled across the hills were half a dozen identical sheds, two partially chewed away by rust. Dikes towered toward the left, offering glimpses of shade. A winding path led down to some sort of courtyard, filled with people. Numerous elongated poles stretched out, studded with metal rings. I had it on good authority we'd be spending the day there. And I was right. We were hustled forward, shackled by fetters around our wrists.

I was sandwiched between Burk and the mysterious girl, standing there like an idiot. Already I felt the heat, the chemicals and humidity coiling around my throat and tightening. Making friends would probably be a good idea. Burk was almost *daring* me to try and talk to him, so I turned to the girl. I realized I didn't know her name. I told her mine and asked for hers, only half expecting an answer.

"Ashby," she said, tossing black hair away from her face. She shook her shackled wrists. "Don't ask me to shake hands, though."

At least one of us maintained a sense of humor. "What's happening?" I asked as more people were led from the sheds and cuffed to the poles. Others were strolling through, staring at us with a nasty sort of curiosity. "What do they want with us?"

A slanted smile curved on her lips. "Haven't figured it out yet? They're buying us to work in their quarry mines."

Quarry mines? That wasn't possible. That was Uncle's region of work, and he didn't ever use labor, certainly not *forced* labor. I'd seen the network of gigantic pipes and thousands of drones that farmed minerals and chemical. He had competitors, sure. But using people? It was unheard of.

I looked down at the number stitched into my harness. Now it made sense. I wasn't a person anymore. A number. A figure. Ready to be traded and sold.

Something inside my head clicked into position and it all make sense. That chemical cylinder Saul and Kage had been swapping around, trying to disguise it as part of Uncle's stock. There could only be one reason why they were doing that: they were planning to sabotage his business. No doubt he was already on his way to Atrium City, ready to hand over the barrels.

For the first time, I stopped worrying about myself and about what exactly was in that cylinder.

I had to get out of there.

But there was nothing I could do now but stand there in chains and bake under the sun. Buyers drew near to inspect us with callous scrutiny. A gust of wind spiraled across the courtyard, spraying grit that scratched at my eyes.

A buyer seemed to be in an argument with one of the Sandies. The man was jabbing at Ashby while the Sandie listened slowly and replied. The buyer twisted his lips and stalked away.

"What was that about?" I asked.

Ashby grinned. "I'm hard to get rid of. I've had a bad reputation since the last owner returned me."

This would be interesting. "And why was that?"

"Might be because I bit his finger off, but I can't be certain."

A stupid grin curved on my face. I was starting to like her. Having her on my side could only be a good idea.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

"Alloy City," she muttered. "It was late and I was drunk. Got cornered in an alley. The bastards conked me on the head and I woke up down here. What's your sob story?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but a Sandie silenced me off with a *shut the hell up* look. Best not to piss them off. Close to midday the man without a tongue was purchased, leaving the four of us still standing. I'd expected there to be many more buyers here, but they obviously had to keep it quiet. It was crazy, having all this activity down here in the desert, right under the public's nose. Did anyone actually know about this place, and had their silence bought?

The thought terrified me.

Lunch was peppery soup with bread and suspicious chunks of fatty meat. I told Ashby my story in low whispers: how I'd been ready to depart for Atrium City with my Uncle. What I'd seen. How I'd been kidnapped and handed over to the Sandies.

"And you're Robert Keeran's *son*?" she whispered.

"Nephew," I corrected.

She wore a sly half-smile. "It's your uncle who keeps The Free Cities afloat. And now you're down here."

"Indeed." I snuck a glimpse at the Sandies. "I think I should tell them who I am . . ."

All traces of humor melted from Ashby's face. "Don't even think about it. They'll sell you to a competitor who'll use you against your uncle. Or hold you for ransom and send a finger along for proof."

"I'm not staying here."

"No." Ashby turned silent, gritty wind rustling her hair. "We'll talk afterwards. Can't risk it now."

The rest of the day dragged by. Sandies prodded around, repairing broken machinery and shifting crates of equipment. We were led back to the shed, bowls of soup pressed in our hands. I was already getting sick of the stuff, but I wasn't in any position to complain. I looked at Ashby, but she shook her head, nodding slightly toward the rest of the group. *Wait until they sleep.*

Soon the slits of light trickling through the shed's holes grew dimmer, blackness swallowing up the room. Ashby lay down next to me. "Don't speak," she whispered in my ear, her breath cool on my neck. "Just listen. There's a way out of here, but it couldn't be done. At least not until you came along." I resisted the urge to ask questions and just listened. "The foundations for these sheds are built on solid rock. But in the left corner near your head is a small dip filled with sand. I've been digging away at it for months. But it's too small for me to get through. But maybe you can."

"Then what?" I asked as quietly as I could manage it.

"There's an access code for the shed. I've memorized it. Punch it in and we'll go. Then—"

"You'll *what?*" A knot of tension twisted in my gut as the switch flipped in a burst of light. Kaidan stood there, eyes pinning us down. "You're days away from any of the Cities. That's if you even know where to go."

Ashby tensed up next to me. "What do you care?"

He chuckled again. "You think I *like* it down here? I have a wife and three daughters in Atrium City." His gaze swerved over to me. "I know who you are. You're Keeran's nephew, aren't you?"

Well, this was getting interesting. "How—"

"I've travelled." He squatted down to our level. "I used to work for someone called Jake Chakvar. He took your uncle's success as a personal insult. He planned to sabotage his stock, stripping your uncle of his title and stepping up with his own supplies to sell to The Free Cities."

Of course. Saul's words loomed in my head. *He's not going to be happy.* It all made sense now. "You knew how he mined his chemicals." It wasn't a question.

"I suspected," muttered Kaidan. "I kept asking and it put him on edge. Then he asked me to take sabotaged cylinders and disguise them as your uncle's. My refusal landed me here." This time his chuckle was devoid of humor. "Rather fitting, no?"

"If you've got a plan, I'd like to know about it," I said.

"That I do. Get me out of here and I can take you where you need to go. Before I worked for Chakvar I was a scouter, finding the quickest routes across the desert."



"Then what's the best route?"

"We're closest to Titanium City. But unless you know how to get across a chasm we ain't going that way. Atrium City is the next best bet."

"That's close to a week away!" Ashby tutted.

"Not if we fly." The words shot out of my mouth. "They brought me here in an air vehicle. If we can get to that, it's a straight flight."

Kaidan chewed his cracked lips. "And where is this ship of yours?"

I thought for a moment. "Near a giant cliff of black rock."

Kaidan nodded. "I know it. We'll need to head back in Chrome City's direction."

Ashby seemed to be seizing him up. "Are you sure this'll work?"

Kaidan scoffed. "You're welcome to stay here if you like."

"Try and make me."

Gray light started to poke through the shed. Was it daylight already?

There was a shuffling in the corner. Burk came forward, the light tracing his scars. I'd forgotten all about him. "I'm coming too," he rasped in a voice like quiet thunder. It wasn't a suggestion.



The day seemed to stretch out with every painstaking second. The sun threw scalding heat down, enjoying every moment it had in the sky. We thought we'd gotten in the clear, but then a man with tousled blond hair bought Burk at the last moment. It was the end of the day and the Sandies were happy to make a bargain. There was nothing I could do as Burk was tugged away, off to his life of slavery. The last broken look on his face made something inside me crack.

For how long had people been doing this? How many hundreds of people had been lost down here?

The three of us were led back to the shed. "Wait for a few hours," Ashby cautioned. "Then we move."

This wait was probably even worse than the one outside. I lay motionless on the sand with Ashby next to me, hardly daring to breathe. After what seemed like a few hours, she nudged me. It was time to go. I almost wanted to stay here beside her, but that was out of the question.

"Don't turn on the light," Ashby warned. "They'll see it." She started clawing in the sand, grit spraying in our hair and revealing a crevice between the rock and the rim of the shed, moonlight lapping over the edge.

"How'd you manage to dig that with us in here?" Kaidan murmured.

"You're heavy sleepers." She tugged at my arm. "It's your turn now."

The size of the opening made my gut twist. I had no idea it would be *this* small. But it was too late. I pressed myself on the ground as low as I dared. Still not enough. Stone and metal grinded against my flesh, sandwiched between both sides. I clamped my teeth together and wriggled forward. My head popped clear. Then my shoulders. Something warm and wet snaked down my ribs. Blood, it had to be.

*Keep going. Keep going.* I kept inching forward, stomping down on the pain, even when I felt several layers of skin peeled from my back. I twisted my head to the side and my heart gave a cold jolt. A Sandie was stalking uphill. A few more seconds and he'd see me.

I clawed forward, bottled a scream and kept going, kept pushing. I tucked my legs out and rolled away, hugging the rock for cover, heart in my mouth.

If he'd catch me now it would be all over.

He strolled past. I let out a lungful of air as he turned the corner. Blood snaked down my legs, but there was no time to worry about that now.

I punched in the code for the shed door and it abruptly swung open, leaving me facing Ashby. She sliced past, eyes wide. I spun to see a Sandie standing there, knife in hand and gaping. He opened his mouth but Ashby reached him first, tearing the knife away and clamping her hand around his mouth. There was a wet, red gurgle as she opened his throat.

As we dragged him into the shed, Kaidan fumbled around in his clothes and drew out a sawn-off shotgun, loaded with a single shell. "This should be useful," he muttered, tucking it away.

"Let's go," I urged, shaking from a toxic combination of fear and adrenaline that was gushing through my bloodstream. "We've been here too long already."

"What about the others?" Kaidan asked.

"Can't risk it. Let's help them by reaching help."

I didn't like it, but she was right. We stole down the dunes, out onto the open desert: a sea of sand and rocks. "You're the expert," she said to Kaidan. "Where to?"

The man didn't even blink. "Follow me."

We ran into the night without looking back.



We continued running through the night, the unwrapped sky of blue velvet and countless stars staring down on us. Running out here was a nightmare, the ground studded with withered thorny grass, jagged red rocks and other nasties. It was like treading on broken glass. I'd have given anything for a pair of shoes. The heat was somehow worse out there, coating our skin with slick sweat that served as glue for the sand.

We came to a tiny well with some water remaining at the bottom. It was lukewarm and I only got a mouthful of the stale stuff, but right then it tasted like the sweetest honey.

The dust storm was the worst of it, countless sand shards taking small bites from our flesh. We took shelter overnight in a small cave, huddling together. If they were looking for us out there, it brought a smile to my face to know they'd likely been caught in the storm as well.

"How much further?" I asked Kaidan the next day as we trekked along the edge of a cliff, dust devils swirling in the distance.

"Not long," Kaidan said, panting. He pointed over the horizon. "You see that?" I squinted, shielding my eyes from the sun. Over in the distance was a thick chunk of black stone, a dark mass sparkling under the sun. It's just over that. It's—"

"Wait." Twin plumes of dust and smoke were streaking across the plane. This couldn't be good. It didn't take long to pick them out as two carts, each with two Sandies.

Oh hell.

We took off, scrambling through a bed of jagged rocks. I hoped they wouldn't follow us for fear of puncturing a wheel, but we had no such luck. I ignored the stabbing pain of millions of spikes being driven into my soles, hobbling along as fast as I could. Still, not fast enough. It was the silver glint in the corner of my eye that saved me. I pitched myself to the side as the polished blade sliced over me with a whistle, nearly shearing my head from my neck. But in their momentum they lost control of the cart, the useless wheels fumbling for a grip as they skidded toward the cliff. The vehicle flipped over like a toy, tumbling over the edge in a spray of sand. Two screams echoed in the valley and they were gone.

I caught up with the others. The second cart was making wide loopy circles around us, plotting their move. They weren't going to fall for the same trick again. The tortured engine screamed and they came charging down.

Kaidan unhooked his gun, got into a crouching position. "Don't move."

"Are you *sure* this is a good idea?" I said, but I stayed rooted to the spot. We had zero chance on the open road.

Silence. Kaidan readied the gun, finger poised above the trigger. "Wait for it," he murmured. The Sandies were so close now I could see the sweat on their brows. "Wait for it . . ."

The gun coughed, a devastating crack that almost blew my ear drums out. The Sandies jerked, the car maintaining its speed and bowling Kaidan into the dust. The cart continued across the plane, slowing to a crawl and finally halting.

I tried not to look at Kaidan, his body crushed under the weight of the wheels. We approached the cart, cautious. The Sandies were dead, chests speckled with buckshot. We pushed them out and Ashby started the engine. "You coming or not?"

I took one last look at the man I barely knew, the man who'd given his life for mine, before hopping in the car.



The aircraft was exactly where it should have been. It had only been a few days since I was last here and already it felt like a lifetime ago. The bodies of Saul and Kage had turned a repulsive brown, withered like overripe fruit. I've smelt some awful stuff in my time, but this didn't even compare.

"Where are the keys?" Ashby demanded from the cockpit. I blinked, trying to remember. Saul had slid them into his pocket . . .

*Oh.*

No turning back now. I did my best to pinch my nostrils together, but it wasn't enough to block out the stench of festering flesh. I dug through his pockets, my fingers brushed against metal. I tugged the card out and breathed a sigh of relief. It was here.

The dashboard sucked up the card and booted up, the engine groaning in complaint.

"Have you flown one of these before?" I asked.

She smiled. "No. But I'm sure there's someone else around here who has."

"Fair point."



The desert was deceptively peaceful from up here in the cockpit, like a carpet of golden silk. No wonder people were ignorant of the horrors that went on below, the hundreds of lost souls damned to a life of slavery.

"I never got to thank you," Ashby shouted. I turned to her, surprised at the sudden conversation. "You saved us both. I'll never forget that."

I nodded and smiled, content to remain silent.

We swerved towards Atrium City. It was similar in shape to Chrome City, only *much* bigger. And grander. With proud, gleaming buildings, polished docks, and bustling airspace, it was like a jewel hanging high above the desert. No doubt we'd be conspicuous, half naked and smeared in grime, but it was too late now.

The radio crackled. "You are approaching Atrium City. Please provide your ship number, name, and business before proceeding to landing."

I tried to reply but Ashby beat me to it. "Listen here buddy, I've got Robert Keeran's nephew on board. If he finds out you've turned him away he'll have your arse on a silver platter."

I half cringed, half smiled. A long pause stretched out. "Is Ruben really on board?"

"Yes," I replied, making no effort to hide my relief. "It's me."

"Where have you been? Your uncle has been looking for you." Another pause, longer this time. "You're cleared for landing in dock D8. Your uncle is up on the pavilion overlooking the deck."

"Thank you." Ashby guided the aircraft to the corresponding dock, setting it down with a jolt that rattled my teeth. She shrugged by way of an apology and undid the hatch. We burst out, startling the cluster of people gathered on the dock. I ignored their horrified gasps, feet slapping against hot marble steps that spiraled up to the pavilion. I flung the ornate doors open with a crash. A dozen angry faces twisted toward me. A man with thinning hair stamped forward, fists clenched.

"How *dare*—"

"Ruben?" Dressed in a dark suit, my uncle came rushing toward me, embracing me in a crushing hold. "Where have you been?"

"It's a long story," I said, watching the pale man carefully. All of a sudden he looked very worried. Time for a shot in the dark. "Something to do with Chakvar here."

He paled. *Bullseye*. He stepped in, wringing his hands. "This is absurd. This—"

"Hold your tongue." My uncle's voice was iron. "I'll hear what my nephew has to say." He looked behind me toward Ashby. "And who is this?"

By now Chakvar had gone white as milk. "You! *You!*"

Ashby's face twisted into a sly grin. "Surprised, you son of a bitch?"

My uncle motioned to his men, standing silently in the corner. "Escort Mr. Chakvar into the next room. I'd have words with my nephew." He glanced at the other formally dressed patrons, all standing there in bewilderment. I guessed they were the buyers. "You too, please."

The look on Chakvar's face was priceless. He knew the nails had been well and truly buried in his coffin.

But I couldn't resist adding one final nail in as he was led away.

"Kaidan sends his regards."



Hours later, scrubbed of filth and reclining on overstuffed pillows, I could finally relax. I had a good view of the desert, the sun slowly sinking down beyond the horizon. Uncle had men searching frantically for me, both on Chrome and Atrium City. But none of them thought to look down in the desert. Uncle went pale when I told him what was going on down there, immediately sending out his men to investigate the camp and search out the quarry mines. But for me, it was all over.

Ashby was lounging next to me, her black hair flowing down in silky strands as she sipped a tall glass of iced tea. I wanted to speak, but I couldn't find the words. Suddenly I found her hand in mine. "Thank you," she said quietly. "Thank you."

I shook my head. "You're the one who did the saving."

She laughed, flashing teeth white as bone. "I suppose we saved each other, then."

I smiled and squeezed her hand all the tighter. "I—"

Suddenly the doors flew open. Uncle strode in, brow shiny with sweat. He sat down and let out a lungful of air. "We found the slave camps," he said. "The Sandies were quick to point the finger at Chakvar. It won't be long before we get hold of the quarries. The cylinders they planted contained toxic gas. We were minutes away from making the exchange. Would have placed dozens of dead people at my feet if you hadn't come along." He sighed deeply, wiping his brow. "I wish it hadn't had to happen this way. I wish you hadn't needed to go through this, Ruben. I'm so, so sorry."

I folded my pale fingers between Ashby's rich dark ones and smiled. Uncle seemed to notice us for the first time. "Some good came out of it," I said.



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**Jeremy Szal** is a Writers of the Future finalist and the author of more than forty publications. His fiction has appeared (or is forthcoming) in venues such as *Nature*, *Abyss & Apex*, *Perihelion Magazine*, and his nonfiction has appeared multiple times in *Strange Horizons*, *Grimdark Magazine*, and *Fantasy Scroll*. He is also the assistant editor of Hugo award winning podcast StarShipSofa. When he's not writing he's watching films, playing video games, or reading. He's written multiple novels and is currently on the hunt for a literary agent. He lives in Sydney, Australia.

# Graphic Story: Shamrock #7 - Shadows

Josh Brown & Alberto Hernandez

## Shamrock, part 7 SHADOWS

Josh Brown  
Story

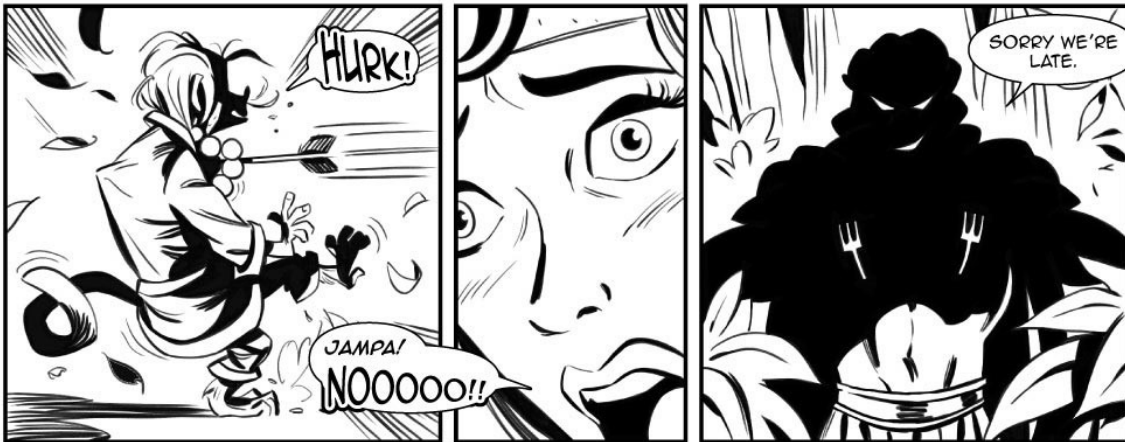
Alberto Hernandez  
Art

















# Interview with Author Angela Slatter

Amber Neko Meador

Specializing in dark fantasy and horror, Angela Slatter is the author of *The Girl with No Hands and Other Tales*, *Sourdough and Other Stories*, *The Bitterwood Bible and Other Recountings*, and *Black-Winged Angels*, as well as *Midnight and Moonshine* and *The Female Factory* (both with Lisa L. Hannett). She has won a World Fantasy Award, five Aurealis Awards, and a British Fantasy Award. Her short stories have appeared in Australian, UK and US Best Of anthologies, and her tale *Of Sorrow and Such* was one of the first releases from Tor.com's new novella imprint. Angela has an MA and a PhD in Creative Writing, is a graduate of Clarion South 2009 and the Tin House Summer Writers Workshop 2006, and in 2013 she was awarded one of the inaugural Queensland Writers Fellowships.

*Vigil* is Angela's debut novel (based on the short story "*Brisneyland by Night*"), and will be followed by the sequels, *Corpselight* and *Restoration* in 2017 and 2018 respectively, published by Jo Fletcher Books in the UK, Hachette in Australia, and Quercus in the US.

**Website:** <http://www.angelaslatter.com/>

**Blog:** <http://www.angelaslatter.com/blog/>

**Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/angelaslatterauthor>

**Twitter:** @AngelaSlatter

**Goodreads:** [https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/2847546.Angela\\_Slatter](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/2847546.Angela_Slatter)

**Amber:** Thank you for taking a little time with me today. It's always appreciated. Let's start where most of these do. Who are you? Where did you grow up? What would you like inquiring readers to know about Angela Slatter that isn't necessarily about your writing?

**Angela:** Oh, wow. Not about writing? That's kind of a shock since I'm a full-time writer so that's all I think about really! I grew up in a few different places because we moved around with my Dad's job (he was a cop for 38 years), so I've lived in Brisbane, Ipswich, Cairns, and Longreach—none of which means much to anyone except another Australian! I've worked as an administrator in several universities, as an article clerk, as a print project manager, a membership services coordinator, and freelance editor among other things. I occasionally teach creative writing and do mentoring . . . there you go, back to writing. I have no cat, does that mean I'm not a real writer?? I like cats, my sister has many cats (possibly even my share of them), but at the moment there's no special cat in my life. I have a husband, though, I'm very fond of him. I love reading, writing, watching movies, walking, and not having to cook my own dinner, so very fond of eating out. I cannot knit, although I can crochet. My mother taught me never to darn socks, to

just buy new ones. I love caramel fudge. I drink my coffee black. I have accepted all of my writing awards while wearing evening gowns and no shoes.

**Amber:** Your writing intrigues me, and as with most writers that intrigue me, I'm always curious as to what it was that made you start writing? Was it teachers, mentors, friends, family, an important event, or was it simply a passion you decided to pursue on your own?

**Angela:** Thank you! My mum tells the story of how, when I was in primary school they'd changed how they taught English and my spelling was atrocious—so she gave me books. And she kept giving me books, and I never stopped reading. It was also how I learned spelling and grammar. I just loved stories (especially fairy tales) and even when I was little I'd make up alternative endings in my head to books I'd read or shows I'd watched.

So, I always scribbled, but I didn't really decide to be a writer until about twelve years ago. I was really unhappy with life and thought "I don't want to get to forty and not have tried this! I don't want to die and think 'I wish I'd tried writing!'" So I threw in a highly paid job and went back to university to do a writing course. It kind of started there; I began publishing what I was writing for university in 2006 and just kept going.

**Amber:** I do find some of your writing to be a little on the dark side, even for someone who is known for writing such. And I'm wondering what the inspiration was for that darkness. Was it movies, books, television, another writer, or something else entirely? Where did your unique take on fiction come from?

**Angela:** My mum would read me fairy tales and if you read them yourself you realize how dark the original ones are—I did my MA research on them! I remember Mum reading me "The Little Match Girl" for the very first time, and bursting into tears when she finished, because it was so awful and cruel. My first experience that life wasn't fair—a small child died because no one would care for her, and she'd done nothing wrong! So, I've always been aware that there's a lot of darkness in the first tales we're told, which are often the tales we remember most because we hear them repeated in childhood so they get kind of embedded in the subconscious.

Apart from that, I was always fascinated by crime and horror as well. My dad was a policeman for 38 years, he was a homicide detective who spent his days finding murderers and digging up bodies, then coming home to his family. I used to read a lot of historical true crime, like Jack the Ripper books—imagine what I was like when the Yorkshire Ripper popped up in the 80s! I'm fascinated by what makes one person dehumanize another to the point where they can murder them; also what such a person gets out of that activity. Given that women and children are the victims of crime, I'm quite fascinated by the innate horror in that.

**Amber:** Let's talk about your novelette *Finnegan's Field* for a few moments. First, I loved this. My question is about how you came up with the story. Was it based on actual folklore, or a legend? What was the inspiration for such a dark piece about a child who has gone missing, and comes back as something else? I'm certain this story would give my mother nightmares.

**Angela:** It would give my mother nightmares too! It gave my sister nightmares, she couldn't sleep for ages after she read it and she texted me to tell me I was insane plus brilliant. It came from . . . I'd been thinking about but not writing anything down about ideas we have about the fairies in folklore, and how they've been changed in pop culture, how people somehow think it's great to be taken away by the fairies. And I'd read a Sheridan Le Fanu story called "The Child That Went With The Fairies" as the basis of a tale for a tribute anthology . . . I wrote a story called "Let the Words Take You" that flirted with ideas about children being taken away. I guess I hadn't finished with it, though, because I kept thinking 'What happens if the kid comes back and what if it's not the kid? What happens to all the grief and joy the parents feel . . . What if only the mother knows something's wrong, and what if she has to deal with the problem?' I wanted to walk the story very close to the edge without pushing it over into something especially gruesome . . . although there are gruesome bits I didn't want the story to rely on that for the horror, I wanted the human tragedy to have the greatest impact.

**Amber:** Also, the scene where we first see the child 'transform' is very visceral, but you somehow manage to convey it in a very lean way on the page. Most authors tend to use a lot more words to accomplish the same. What's your secret?

**Angela:** I'd say that's my short story training! I'm always really aware that I need to be economical with my words so I must choose the best description possible for maximum impact. Also, I love a good vocabulary; it pays to spend time with your thesaurus and learn how to use it judiciously to enrich and texture your writing. As I said above about not having the gruesome stuff overwhelm the human tragedy, that's very much down to being careful and mindful with your words, knowing what they mean and weighing which word or phrase you go with. For example, do you go with 'sad' or 'dolorous', 'creepy' or 'macabre', 'happy' or 'ecstatic'. Whatever you choose will feed into tone and the reading experience, so it's not just about getting the words on the page, hitting your word count, or telling the story—it's about how you relate the story, the weight and meaning of your words.

**Amber:** I want to poke at *Of Sorrow and Such* for a moment. Not only did I think it was made of this beautiful dark magic substance that you seem to produce, but it continued a previous tale, and gave us some more info from characters and story lines that we'd read before. This isn't something I see very often in short fiction, but I love it. I suppose this is a two part question. What made you want to go back and explore more from some of the shorts you wrote in



***Sourdough and Other Stories? And what was it about Patience that made you want to give us more of her?***

**Angela:** With *Sourdough and Other Stories* (and also *The Bitterwood Bible*) I created this mosaic of short stories that intersected at some points, and some characters reappeared throughout the books. With Patience, she first appeared as the sixteen-year-old viewpoint character in "Gallowberries", and then again as a secondary character as an old woman in "Sister, Sister", and I always wondered what had happened in the middle! But *Sourdough* wasn't the place to write that story. When I was finishing of *The Bitterwood Bible* collection, I'd started thinking about Patience again, what she was like in her middle years, and about other characters who appeared in *Sourdough*, like Selke and Balthazar Cotton; I was thinking about how the sins of our past can appear at any moment, how we often try to do good acts as penance but if we try to hide the original thing we're feeling guilty about it will often raise its ugly head. *Bitterwood* wasn't the place to revisit Patience as it's a prequel, but Lee Harris at Tor.com invited me to submit to their new novella line . . . and there was Patience. And all these other ideas that I'd carried around for thirty or forty years, gleaned from reading folk tales, and all these other threads from *Sourdough* that were just waiting to be woven in.

As for why Patience . . . I just find her really interesting, she's practical and ruthless, kind and generous, but she knows where the line is and heaven help you if you cross it or her. She's very clear-sighted and I love watching how she jumps, the choices she makes. I love having been able to visit her in the three phases of her life, maiden, mother, and crone. She can always surprise me . . . I never want to write her death scene, I must tell you, I just prefer the idea of her as a kind of Old Woman of the Woods, outsmarting everyone who tries to injure her.

**Amber:** Everything I've read of yours is all short story or novella format. Is there a particular love that you have for the short form? Plus, is there any chance we'll ever see anything novel length from you?

**Angela:** I started out with short stories and that's how I honed my writing craft. I really love the skill that goes into a short story, how it's just this really intense slice of a bigger picture that you hint at but don't show. But my work's been getting longer and longer over the years, which is a good thing as I scored a three-book deal with Jo Fletcher Books last year! My debut novel, *Vigil*, will be out in July this year, so at the moment I'm going through the final rounds of proofing, getting cover quotes, making lists of reviewers, etc. *Vigil* is different from the *Sourdough* universe stories, it's urban fantasy set in modern day Brisbane. I'm working on finishing the sequel *Corpselight* right now, and when I turn that in I'll have to start the third and final book in the trilogy, *Restoration*.

**Amber:** You've released several collections. At this point, which one would you recommend a new Angela Slatter reader start with?

**Angela:** Gosh, I think probably *Sourdough and Other Stories* (Tartarus Press) if you're going to dive into the world I've created. Other works in that world are the novella *Of Sorrow and Such* (from the Tor.com novella series), and *The Bitterwood Bible and Other Recountings* (Tartarus Press) . . . and I've got a third collection called *The Tallow-Wife and Other Tales*, which finishes off that *Sourdough* cycle (for the moment), but I'm still editing that one. If you're looking for a more of a sampler collection, then try *The Girl with No Hands and Other Tales* from Ticonderoga Publications.

**Amber:** You've been writing fairly steadily for years now, and you've got a fan for life with me. But, I have to ask, what can we look forward to next? And will we see more returning characters in the future?

**Angela:** Thank you! As I said above, there will be the Verity Fassbinder series coming out this year, starting with *Vigil*. I've got a mostly reprint collection coming from Prime Books in the US in October this year, *A Feast of Sorrows: Stories*, which has two brand new novellas in it (including "The Tallow-Wife" novella from the *Sourdough* world). I've also got a novella called *The Briar Book of the Dead*, which needs editing, and several commissioned short stories for various editors that I need to write. There are several other tales I'd like to pursue in the *Sourdough* world, ones that follow up several mysteries from *The Bitterwood Bible and Other Recountings*, but they all have to stand in line until I get these novels out of the way. As for what comes next . . . it will depend entirely on how well the trilogy does and whether I get another novel contract!

**Amber:** I want to thank you again for your time today. But, before we go I'd like to ask if you have any advice for the future writers of the world?

**Angela:**

- Keep writing.
- Learn your craft and never, ever think you know it all.
- Develop a thick skin, but realize that story criticism is aimed at making the story better, not at making you feel bad about yourself. Find people whose opinions you respect and trust.
- Remember: it's always better to have someone find problems with a story before you send it out into the world.
- Networking is about building mutually beneficial relationships with other writers and publishers, not just about you getting what you can.



# Interview with Author Brian Staveley

Amber Neko Meador

After teaching literature, philosophy, history, and religion for more than a decade, Brian began writing epic fantasy. His first book, *The Emperor's Blades*, the start of his series, *Chronicle of the Unbewn Throne*, won the David Gemmell Morningstar Award, the Reddit Stabby for best debut, and scored semi-finalist spots in the Goodreads Choice Awards in two categories: epic fantasy and debut. The second book in the trilogy, *The Providence of Fire*, was also a Goodreads Choice semi-finalist. The concluding volume of the trilogy, *The Last Mortal Bond*, is available for preorder now.

Brian lives on a steep dirt road in the mountains of southern Vermont, where he divides his time between fathering, writing, husbanding, splitting wood, skiing, and adventuring, not necessarily in that order.

**Twitter:** <https://twitter.com/BrianStaveley>

**Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/bstaveley>

**Google+:** <https://plus.google.com/113586375304554201439>

**Blog:** [\*On the Writing of Epic Fantasy\*](#)

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**Amber:** Thanks for taking the time to talk with both myself and our readers today. Let's start with a simple one. What do you think makes a good story? What separates the standard from the standout?

**Brian:** Much discussion around fantasy novels seems to center on questions of world-building, monsters, magic systems. While I love that material as much as anyone—I'd hardly be writing in this genre if I didn't—at the end of the day I think every story comes down to character. The baddest-assed of all magical swords can't save a story if you don't give a damn about the character wielding it. As for what makes a good character—a person who wants something, but is blocked from achieving the object of her desire, at least in part, by something fundamental about herself.

**Amber:** You started writing with poetry, and then transitioned to writing full-length fiction. Multiple book spanning stories as well. What was the catalyst for that? How did you go from poetry to larger, more diverse, driven worlds?

**Brian:** I still read quite a bit of poetry; I just finished, for instance, going through Larkin's complete poems for the umpteenth time. I love the technical challenges of writing poetry, the

demands of working inside established forms, in particular. Genre fiction might seem removed from such concerns, but I've found quite the opposite. The large fantasy epic has its formal strictures just as well as the sonnet. The history of the genre and the reader's expectations require technical responses from the author. Take the hoary trope of the "master swordsman". Readers have come to expect it, just as they do the turn of a sonnet—the trick is to find a way to at once satisfy and upend those expectations.

**Amber:** Who, or what, would you say are your biggest influences as a writer? Was there someone or something that got you on that path?

**Brian:** The question of influences is always a tricky one; I certainly don't feel as though I can trace every influence back to its source. The sources of most creative tributaries remain obscure, even to the writer. In those cases where you *can* identify an influence, it's easy to end up sounding like an asshole. I think a lot of Homer's (and Dante's) use of simile, for instance, particularly the way in which both will use simile to suspend the action of the scene, to create a sort of literary slow-motion. That doesn't mean I think I write like Homer or Dante.

**Amber:** Recently I read a short of yours called 'The Log Goblin', and I liked it a lot more than I thought I would. What made you want to do a story about a simple goblin stealing logs? Normally fantasy is about something more. . . epic.

**Brian:** In that case, I was writing a story for a reading. There was a long roster of authors, and so I needed something really short. Again, it was in part this technical challenge that appealed to me. The story is interesting to me in that it's one of the few cases in which I can track the creative process, almost from start to finish. It started with the title. I was looking out the window at a pile of logs bucked for firewood, and the word "goblin" popped into my head, almost undoubtedly because of the assonance with the vowel sound of "logs". This is what you get for writing poetry for so many years. After that, the creative question became practical: what does a log goblin do? Well, goblins are mischievous, so they probably steal. So we've got a mystery story. That informed the basic structure. Then it was just a matter of figuring out what the goblin was doing with the logs . . .

**Amber:** Speaking of 'epic' fantasy stories, you're no stranger there. The third book in your series *Chronicle of the Unhewn Throne* is due out this year. Congrats on that. What, to you, is the best part of writing such a large, and diverse group of characters over consecutive releases?

**Brian:** If "The Log Goblin" was a little minuet, the *Unhewn Throne* books are a symphony. The range available, over three quarters of a million words, is at once terrifying and enthralling. There's room, in all that space, for multiple types of story: murder mystery, romance, quest, picaresque, extended training montage—and there's room for all sorts of characters. The

challenge, of course, is bringing all of these elements into unified, harmonious relation to one another. I'm often surprised, even now, by how often I think in terms of musical metaphor when writing. Sometimes a certain scene needs more beats, sometimes it needs a change of key, sometimes the tempo is wrong for the action, sometimes the polyphony obscures the vocal line. The list goes on. It's thrilling trying to govern all these elements, to yoke them together.

**Amber:** Staying with the *Unhewn Throne* series, you've built a fairly big world for those characters to live in. How did you go about creating that world, and deciding what parts would end up where?

**Brian:** I started with mythology. Before I wrote a word of the first novel, I had scores of pages detailing the history of the world's gods, the genesis of the world itself, the evolution and development of that world, its metaphysics and rules. This was all a part of the fun. I'd spent years teaching comparative religion and philosophy, and these books gave me a chance to explore some of the ideas I'd been reading and teaching for so long. It took months to get all that in place, but the time was well spent. Writing the story at hand was much easier, given that I had a solid foundation to build on.

**Amber:** Sticking with the *Chronicle of the Unhewn Throne*, after finishing the first book, *The Emperor's Blades*, one might wonder what happened to some of the characters. You answered one of those questions with the 'The Last Abbot of Ashk'lan'. It's true that we readers always want more, but what prompted you to write that follow up short story?

**Brian:** I honestly can't remember. I always liked the character of Akiil, and so it seemed natural to go back to him, to explore the tumultuous events concluding the first book from his perspective. All of these characters have their own histories, ideas, hopes, terrors, aspirations. In the best of all possible worlds, I'd give every one of them full billing—a story, a novella, even a novel. It's like life—the main characters are only the main characters from a certain point of view.

**Amber:** You've been at this for a little while, and I can't imagine what we'll see next from you. Is there anything you can share with us about your future works? Will there be more in your current series, or are you switching gears to something else? Will we get more shorts to give readers more story and info on secondary characters in your works as well?

**Brian:** I'm thrilled to have signed on with Tor (in both the US and UK) for four more books. At least some of these will be stand-alone novels following characters that have grown to be favorites with readers. The book I'm working on now, for instance, is a single-POV, first-person novel told in the voice of one of the secondary characters in the *Unhewn Throne* trilogy. There are dozens of stories I'd like to tell in this world, hundreds, but I'm also keen to try my hand at something entirely new.

**Amber:** I want to thank you again for your time today. I'm really enjoying what you've written so far. But, before we go I'd like to ask if you have any advice for the future writers of the world?

**Brian:** Temperament is more important than technique. If you can hear criticism, improve, and just not quit, the technique will come. If you can't do those things, the technique won't matter.



# Book Review: God of Clay (Ryan Campbell)

Travis Kane

## God of Clay

by Ryan Campbell

Sofawolf Press (September, 2013)

What a gem I have found. *God of Clay*, a book full of great imagery, great dialogue, and exciting adventure follows three main characters: Doto, an anthropomorphic leopard deity, son of Kwaee, the leopard god of the forest, and Clay and Laughing Dog, who are two young princes to the king of a small tribe out in the savannah. Each character has their own internal struggles that they must face.

For Doto, he must please his harsh and sometimes cruel father by bringing one of the fire-bearers (humans) to him. Doto has a grudge against humans because of his father's feelings against them. According to Kwaee, the Fire-bearers serve Ogya, the god of fire, who burned a huge part of Kwaee's domain, which created the Savannah.

In the human tribe, Clay and Laughing Dog do not see eye to eye. Clay believes the gods should be worshiped and respected, while Laughing Dog believes that their culture's stories are false fables meant to keep everyone away from the forest, to cower in fear, and to obey in ignorance, limiting their potential.

When Doto kidnaps Clay, the two of them embark on a journey of self-discovery, while Laughing Dog, who is banished by his father for defying their culture and their gods, wanders the savannah attempting to claim mastery over Ogya himself.

First of all, the book is very well written. The sentences are not over the top prosy, but they do have a lusciousness to them. The imagery is descriptive, like biting into a rich papaya fruit. The story has a good pace without sacrificing dialogue or description to move the plot forward. More importantly, the story takes place in an African setting, which means the characters look different than what you would expect from a fantasy novel. Rare is there such an occurrence in fantasy literature where the characters lack the Northern European skin color. Also there is a moment of male-male bonding near the end as the character development comes full circle, which is also extremely rare in fantasy.

Each of the characters changes throughout the tale. Doto grows the most in the story, for he starts off much like his father as harsh and cruel towards Clay, but as they journey to his father's temple, Doto changes his outlook on humans and performs a compassionate act.

Laughing Dog changes only in that he becomes even more convinced that what he believes is true. Clay changes near the very end when he learns to stand up for himself and defies a god.

The dialogue has a great flow and feels believable. There were a couple of times, however, when the dialogue sounded a little odd, but that may have been due to the story's mythic prose style, which inherently sounds somewhat different and peculiar, and takes a little while to get used to.

The novel plays with the story within a story motif, bending mythological archetypes to its will. Part of the conflict arises in the story when we, the readers, learn that there are two different accounts of a particular mythic story, which naturally raises more questions on who did what to whom. The story also brings in the idea of story as religion and whether gods answer prayers or not. The story has a strong spiritual feel, and Campbell plays it up again with rich descriptions and scenes.

This book is not a Dostoyevsky or an Ursula K. Le Guin book. But it is a gem hiding in the earth-mounds of books. I loved this book and related to Clay the most. I still feel his emotions, his pain, his love, and his compassion. Even Doto was relatable, and it was fun to watch and experience him grow.

Here in fantasy we can push away our differences and go on a thrill ride. This book is no fast paced action thriller, but it is an adventure that is well-paced and well written. This book can also leave one pondering about spirituality. Who ever said a book had to be overly complicated and complex? If a book can get you to think or feel, it matters not how much intellectualness is in it. It's worth reading. My only sorrow was that it ended all too soon. This book is a trilogy with the second book, *Forest Gods*, already out. I look forward to adventuring onwards with Clay and Doto in their long journey to find truth.



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# Movie Review: 10 Cloverfield Lane (Dan Trachtenberg)

Mark R. Leeper

**C**APSULE: Michelle is leading a normal life until she's in a car accident and wakes up in an underground cell that, as she is told, was why she survived the end of the world outside. She does not know if she should elude her captor or cooperate with the man who saved her life. This is a taut film that flips reality and tears up your expectations of where the film is going. Rating: low +2 (-4 to +4) or 7/10 The first thing that film buffs will notice about 10 CLOVERFIELD LANE is the title. Does the film have something to do with producer JJ Abrams' CLOVERFIELD? That was a found-footage film with something big attacking Manhattan. Well this film's plot may not have anything to do with the other film. Then again, any conclusions you draw from what you see on the screen are likely to be wrong. This is not a found-footage film and does have one or two stars. But the viewer is cautioned. Abrams likes to toy with his audience. Whatever you think is going on, in five minutes things may seem entirely different and you will likely have new theories as to what is going on. Abrams keeps shaking the viewer's understanding around like a cat with a field mouse.

So what do we know about what is going on? Well, Michelle (played by Mary Elizabeth Winstead of the most recent THE THING and currently of "Mercy Street") is leaving her husband to strike out on her own. Driving down a dark country road suddenly her car is hit by a pickup truck and is badly rolled end over end. When she wakes up she has good news and bad news. The good news is that she is not badly hurt. She will have to spend some time on crutches. That may be a little difficult since she is chained to a wall. Not a very nice wall either. She is in some sort of a cell with cinder block walls. That is the bad news. But then Howard (John Goodman) visits the cell. It seems this is not so much a little cell as a large room in some sort of underground shelter or bunker. Howard has brought her there as a mercy. How is it a mercy? It seems that while she was unconscious the world as we know it has come to an end.

Apparently there was some sort of an attack and maybe by chemical means, maybe by nuclear means, everybody is dead. She can probably leave, but as soon as she steps outside whatever killed off most of the human race would probably kill her. Now what kind of a ridiculous story is that? Well, maybe Howard has a wildly active imagination or maybe most of the human race is gone. And evidence keeps building on either side of the argument. John Gallagher, Jr., plays Emmett, who shares the underground bunker and has seen enough evidence to know that Howard is absolutely right. Or are they both crazy?

John Goodman is best known as a comic actor. This is one of only a few films in which he can be frightening and is imposing as a possible dangerous psychotic. If he were just unambiguously shown early on to be psychotic that would be one thing, but with director Dan Trachtenberg and writers Josh Campbell, Matthew Stuecken and Damien Chazelle toying with the viewer the viewer finds him/herself straining to look at him for clues to the central question of understanding him. Winstead is quite good in a role that is not particularly new or cutting edge. She is the main character, but could have been a little more complex. JJ Abrams has found a film that would keep the budget down much as he did (differently) in CLOVERFIELD. This is a smallish film with a limited cast. Most of the film takes place in a bunker. But the film does seem to be pleasing audiences in a time when so many films are overstuffed based on comic books. I would rate 10 CLOVERFIELD LANE a low +2 on the -4 to +4 scale or 7/10.



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