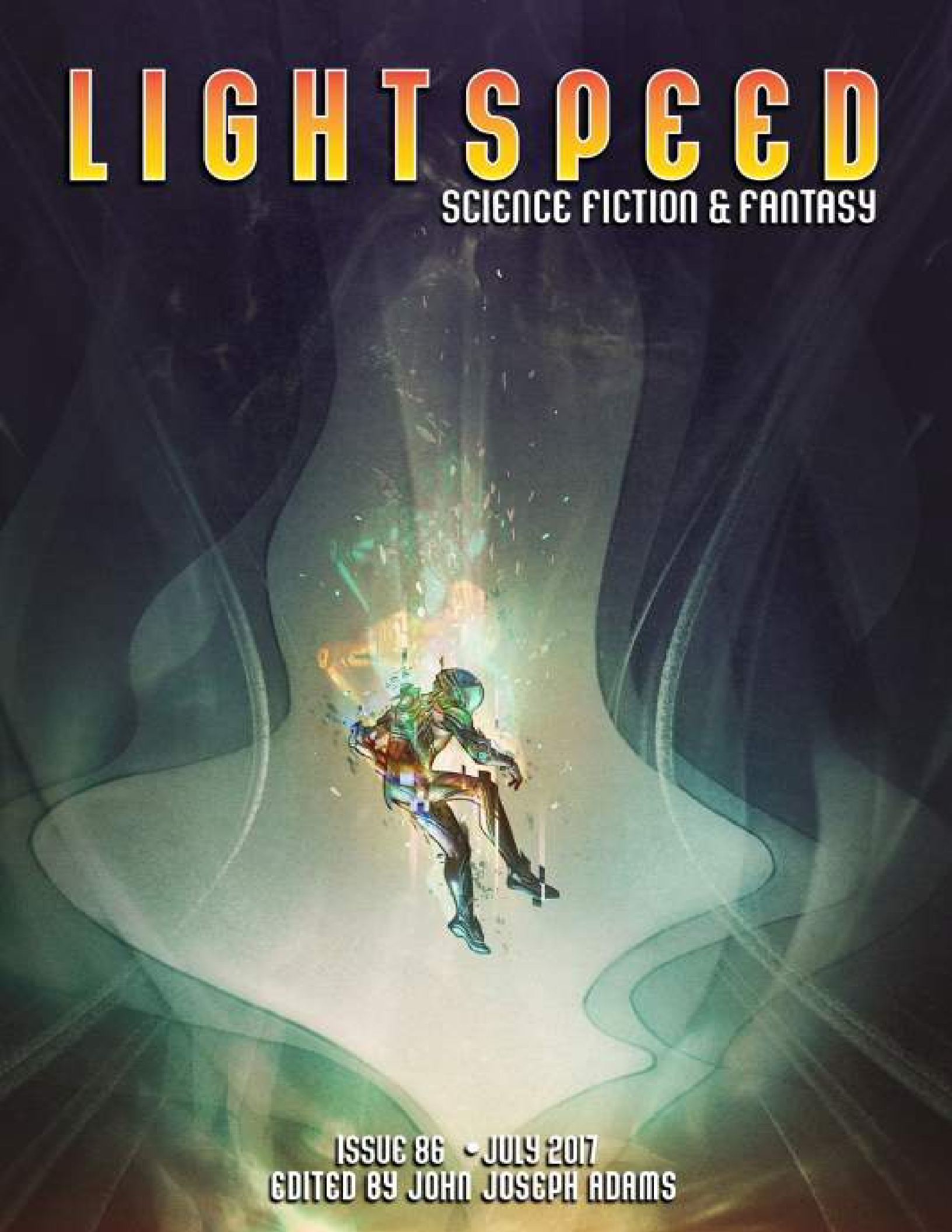
LIGHTSPEED

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY



ISSUE 86 • JULY 2017

EDITED BY JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS

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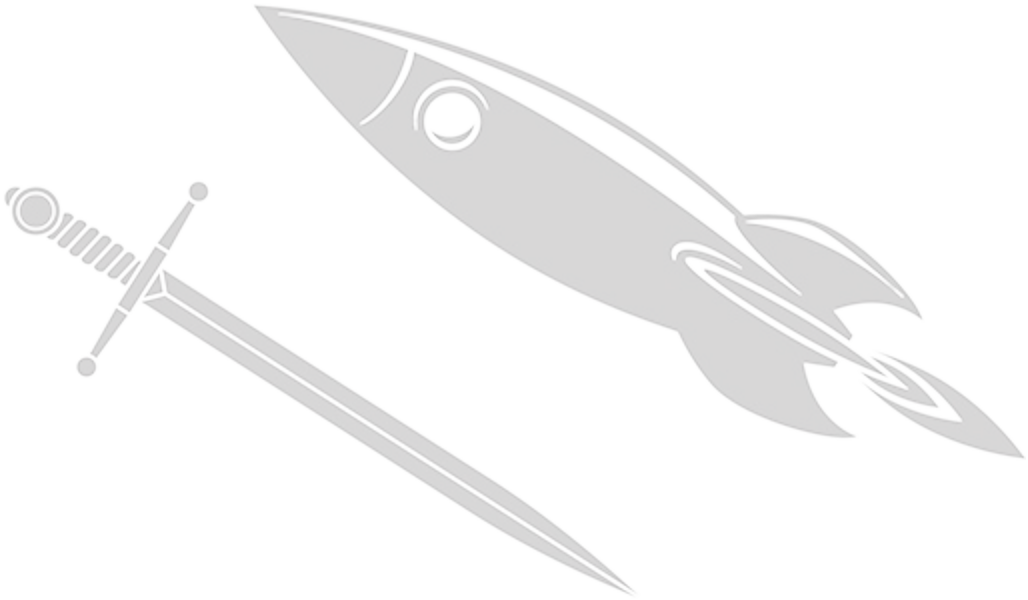

LIGHTSPEED
SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

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Cover by Reiko Murakami
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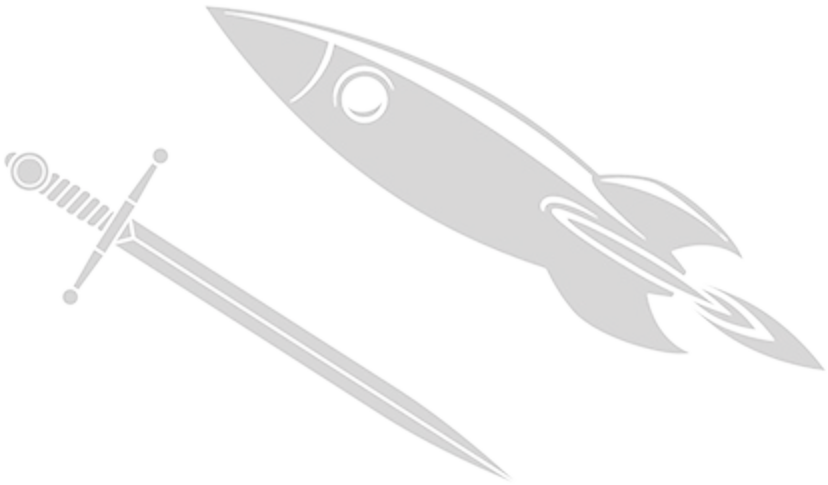


Editorial, July 2017

John Joseph Adams | 1007 words

Welcome to issue eighty-six of *Lightspeed!*

This month, our cover art is by Reiko Murakami, illustrating a new science fiction story by John Grant ("The Law of Conservation of Data"). We also have a new story from E. Catherine Tobler ("Mix Tapes from Dead Boys"), along with SF reprints by Chris Beckett ("Marcher") and James Tiptree, Jr. ("The Last Flight of Doctor Ain").

Plus, we have original fantasy by Alvaro Zinos-Amaro & Adam-Troy Castro ("A Touch of Heart") and Debbie Urbanski ("How to Find a Portal"), and fantasy reprints by A.G. Howard ("Stitches") and Will Ludwigsen ("Acres of Perhaps").

Our nonfiction department is serving up our monthly book review column, as well as Carrie Vaughn's assessment of the new *Wonder Woman* movie. Speaking of Carrie, we're also giving our readers a chance to really get to know her, as she's the subject of this month's feature interview—and if you're an ebook reader, you can get a little taste of her new novel, *Bannerless,* out this month from John Joseph Adams Books. Our ebook edition also has a reprint of the novella "From Whence You Came," by Laura Anne Gilman. You'll also get a bonus excerpt from *An Oath of Dogs,* by our own Wendy N. Wagner.

ICYMI: *Cosmic Powers*

My latest anthology, *Cosmic Powers,* is now available from Saga Press. It's a collection of epic-scale science fiction, inspired by movies like *Guardians of the Galaxy* and *Star Wars,* featuring brand-new stories from Dan Abnett, Jack Campbell, Linda Nagata, Seanan McGuire, Alan Dean Foster, Charlie Jane Anders, Kameron Hurley, and many others.

Here's what some reviewers have been saying about it:

- "Astonishingly good [. . .] Rich in great stories." —*Rocket Stack Rank*
- "This collection will prove to be great reading for fans of the space cowboy antics of *Guardians of the Galaxy.*" —*RT Book Reviews*
- "Highly recommended for anyone looking for a variety of engaging sf experiences." —*Booklist*
- "One kickass good anthology [. . .] Highly recommended." —*File 770*
- "The first great anthology of the year, jam-packed with smart,

entertaining sci-fi adventure stories that bring a nicely modern sensibility to old ideas and tropes." —*SF Bluestocking*

Visit johnjosephadams.com/cosmic to buy the book, read selected stories from the anthology, or just learn more.

John Joseph Adams Books News: 2017 Cover Reveal

No new deals to report for John Joseph Adams Books, but we did just do a cover reveal for all of our 2017 titles. If you'd like to check that out, visit johnjosephadams.com/2017-covers.

Otherwise, here's a quick rundown what to expect from John Joseph Adams Books in the coming months:

On July 11, we're publishing Carrie Vaughn's novel, *Bannerless*—a post-apocalyptic mystery in which an investigator must discover the truth behind a mysterious death in a world where small communities struggle to maintain a ravaged civilization decades after environmental and economic collapse. Here's what some of the early reviews have been saying about it:

- "Skillfully portrays a vastly altered future America. [The] focus on sustainability and responsibility is unusual, thought-provoking, and very welcome." —*Publishers Weekly*
- "An intimate post-apocalyptic mystery [. . .] well-crafted and heartfelt." —*Kirkus*
- "A compelling, deft post-apocalyptic tale." —*Library Journal*
- "Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* mixed with a modern procedural mystery […] Wonderfully intriguing." —Thomas Wilkerson, BookPeople
- "Totally fascinating as a thought experiment and compulsively readable." —Jenny Craig, Seattle Public Library

Also in July, we're publishing *Sand* by Hugh Howey, a reissue of his acclaimed indie-published novel:

- "Magnificent […] After reading *Wool,* his other post-apocalyptic series, I didn't think he could repeat the creation of a great world setting filled with characters you instantly care about. But he did." —*SFF World*

- *"Sand* immerses you in its grubby post-apocalyptic world. […] Howey conjures a credible, brutal future." —*Financial Times*

In September, we'll be publishing *Retrograde* by Peter Cawdron, a hard SF novel about an international colony of astronauts on Mars, who have been prepared for every eventuality of living on another planet except one: What happens when disaster strikes *Earth?*

In October, we'll be publishing *Machine Learning: New and Collected Stories* by Hugh Howey, a short story collection including three stories set in the world of Hugh's mega-hit *Wool* and two never-before-published tales, plus fifteen additional stories collected together for the first time.

In November, we'll be publishing Molly Tanzer's *Creatures of Will and Temper*—a Victorian-era urban fantasy inspired by *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* in which an épée-fencing enthusiast and her younger sister are drawn into a secret and dangerous London underworld of pleasure-seeking demons and bloodthirsty diabolists, with only her skill with a blade standing between them and certain death.

A bit further out, in Spring 2018, we'll have *The City of Lost Fortunes* by Bryan Camp, about a magician with a talent for finding lost things who is forced into playing a high-stakes game with the gods of New Orleans for the heart and soul of the city. And then in late 2018, we'll have *Upon a Burning Throne* by Ashok K. Banker, an epic fantasy about a group of siblings battling for control of a vast empire while a powerful demonlord pits them against each other.

That's all the JJA Books news to report for now. More soon!

• • • •

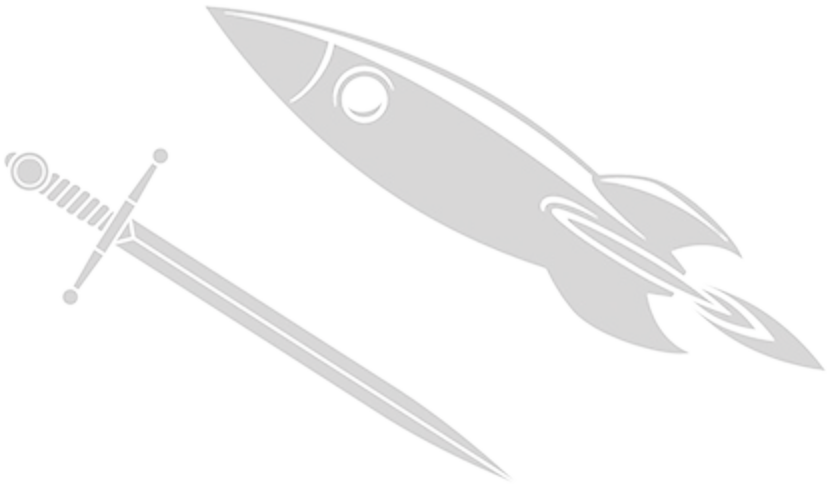
Well, that's all there is to report this month. Thanks for reading!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Joseph Adams, in addition to serving as publisher and editor-in-chief of *Lightspeed,* is the editor of John Joseph Adams Books, a new SF/Fantasy imprint from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. He is also the series editor of *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy,* as well as the *USA Today* bestselling editor of many other anthologies, including *The Mad Scientist's Guide to World Domination, Robot Uprisings, Dead Man's Hand, Armored, Brave New Worlds, Wastelands,* and *The Living Dead.* Recent projects include: *Cosmic Powers*, *What the #@&% Is That?, Operation Arcana, Loosed Upon the World, Wastelands 2, Press Start to*

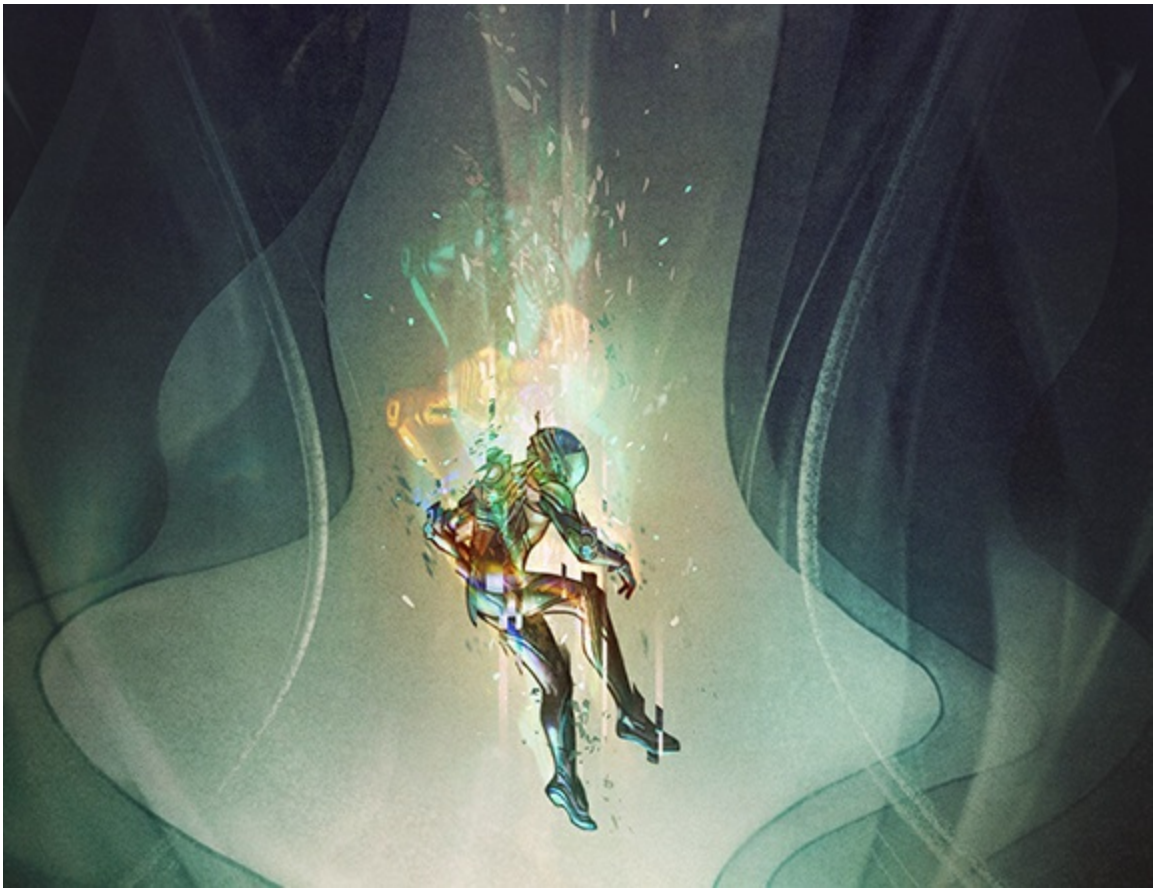
Play, and The Apocalypse Triptych: *The End is Nigh, The End is Now,* and *The End Has Come.* Called "the reigning king of the anthology world" by Barnes & Noble, John is a two-time winner of the Hugo Award (for which he has been a finalist eleven times) and is a seven-time World Fantasy Award finalist. John is also the editor and publisher of *Nightmare Magazine* and is a producer for Wired.com's *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast. Find him on Twitter @johnjosephadams.

SCIENCE FICTION



The Law of Conservation of Data

John Grant | 9870 words



"Slots Palace," says Suze.

You all stare at her. Staring at her is worth doing. She's moved into a new bod since coming here, and the change has been a big improvement. There wasn't exactly anything *wrong* with the one she initially adopted for the pentagon's pre-consensuality union, but she became dissatisfied with it and the dissatisfaction affected the rest of you—especially Kagura, who said it reminded him in all the wrong ways of a past consensual of his who turned out badly. Now, with her alluring ancillary limbs and her skin that's never the same color any two times you look at it, Suze cuts a striking figure as she stands against the backdrop of the open window and the bright Seventh Heaven sunlight.

"Slots Palace," she repeats. "I've never been there. Any of you?"

You shake your head, as do the others. You think Mana may not even have heard of the place before.

The five of you are trying to settle where your pentagon should go for the honeytime.

The Probation Hotel here on Seventh Heaven is exactly what its name implies:

a place where prospective consensualities can gather to spend that always slightly anxious experimental period before the final thumbings of the contracts between them. In the instance of your own pentagon, you've agreed to make an exception for Arnie, who's present in blance only, his true self being currently somewhere in the Magellanics and thus inconveniently distant for direct access to a bod here. Blance-bound, he's of course restricted to secsensing, which is a pity for all of you, but most especially for him.

The four of you who're here in physical reality have taken one of the largest suites the Probation Hotel offers and then zeroed the walls so you can test your pentagon (well, eighty percent of it) to the max of intimacy. So far there've been no frictions—rephrase this: So far there've been no *squabbles,* the only dissent of any note being the one over Suze's bod, soon settled.

It isn't much of a surprise that none of you have ever been to Slots Palace, bearing in mind the difficulties of getting there—and the even greater difficulties of *being* there, come to that. You'd be startled if more than a few hundred people have gone closer than watching it from a distance.

That would be, of course, merely a second best. No one in your pentagon is much of an aficionado of second-bests.

"It's only as blances we can go there," observes Kagura. He gestures around at your four scattered bods, adding a wave to acknowledge the in absentia Arnie. Kagura doesn't have to say anything more. The pleasures these bods have been giving you all these past few days are going to be hard to abandon.

Arnie laughs. It won't make any difference to *him* if the rest of you have to blancify. Blances have their limitations, but they have the considerable advantage —being massless—of not really being *there,* wherever *there* might happen to be.

"We don't need to go right away," says Suze, gliding from the window to one of the loungers, where she sits herself down beside Mana. Mana's hair today is straight and the silver-gray of dried-out ashes and it stretches all the way to the floor. Mana, more than any of you, even Kagura, maintains a constant awareness as to how she looks. "And we don't have to stay forever. And while we're there we'll still be able to secsense, which is better than nothing."

Arnie laughs again. He knows that. He's a galaxy and a half away and a couple of hundred thousand years in the past, but sometimes he seems right there beside you.

You push yourself up from the floor, where you've been sprawling with Kagura, and walk across to the window, standing where Suze was. Suze is the strongest-willed of the five of you, the tacitly acknowledged leader of the new

grouping. By moving to the position she has just vacated you feel as if you're taking over a podium from her.

"It would be . . . different," you say of the prospect of visiting Slots Palace. Outside the window you can see part of Threeberry, the nearest thing there is to an actual city on Seventh Heaven. It's a long time since you've been on a planet. A hurla is struggling through the golden air from one brown scartree to the next, looking the whole while as if it's going to flop down onto the ground like a great rubber sheet. Ugly creature. The sunlight pierces like the tines of a climbing-fork. It always does on Seventh Heaven, ever since the planet's rotation was reconfigured by the people of some earlier, forgotten wave of human expansion. Once upon a time, you muse, you'd have been thirsty for the strangeness of Seventh Heaven. Now, when you seem to have seen so much of the galaxy and most of it more times than once, your palate is jaded and Seventh Heaven seems to be just another world: an old acquaintance, not a fresh consensual. "We could learn something from the experience."

"But not yet, Rehan," says Mana, looking you up and down as you turn back toward the room.

Soon, though, you think, and you can see in Suze's eyes that she is thinking the same. You've all drowned yourselves in the pleasures of the flesh a billion times before. Not so in the Palace. This will redefine sensual experience for you.

• • • •

Following the dissolution of your longstanding triangle, you decided to solo it for a time.

Eventually, though, you found, as always, there was loneliness in an endless diversity of partners, so you hauled your synapses along to the interexchange in quest of others who might want to establish a consensuality contract with you. There was the usual string of negotiation processes, but after a number of minutes you retreated from the interface securely implanted within a newly formed quad. There are always difficulties with even numbers in consensualities, for some reason, so on reflection you nominated the incorporation of Arnie, a consensual of yours from several contracts ago who happened to be solo right then and of whom you often nostalgically dreamed—ah, the wiles of love. Suze and Mana were reluctant briefly, having decided they liked the prospect of a two:two female:male ratio within the consensuality, but Kagura and you sold them on the benefits of a third male and soon they conceded.

So there you were, a neat and conventional pentagon.

The five of you had a trace of formality in your collective personality. You determined to meet for a probation before digitally thumbing the final contracts. Arnie, as noted, could be there only in blance: unorthodox, of course, but there was an attraction in unorthodoxy, too. The rest of you converged by agreement on the Probation Hotel on Seventh Heaven, a planet practically in the hinterland of The World—fewer than forty parsecs from it, in fact, and consequently hellishly expensive, but, what the heck, you're old beings and knew you could afford it.

Old you might be, but you were in young bods, specially brewed for the occasion. The probationary meeting, scheduled for a tenday, has already lasted twice that long and has involved the plethora of fucking typical of potential contractees. For your own bod you've cross-dressed, a wry jest that almost backfired when you discovered Mana had done the same. Arnie, confined within the narrow bandwidth of sensation typical of secsensing, keeps saying he's content to admire you all and your skills.

Days ago, less than halfway through the meeting, you gathered the five thumbings. Everything looked to be set for an extended pentagonship.

Except that now, as venue for the honeytime, your pentagon has settled on Slots Palace.

• • • •

Not a lot is known about the early history of the human species, or even where it came from. Most people think it sprang from The World, which is still at the center of things, but the evidence is clear that The World was a secondary beachhead and not the original home, which humans must have left untold eons before; for one thing, the hour used as a standard by humanity all over the galaxy doesn't divide neatly into The World's rotational period, and will not for another hundred million years or so. The identity of the homeworld of humanity, or at least of the ancestral species from which humanity descends, is a datum that was lost during the collapse of humanity's first galactic culture. This collapse was triggered by the establishment of a culture-wide regime, the Great Autarchy, in which the choice of ruler and ruled was divinely ordained and therefore irrevocable. Doctrinal differences among different power factions eventually brought everything tumbling down, including, alas, human culture as a whole.

The factions agreed on more than they disputed. One tenet common to all was that sin had to be expunged from the galaxy. There was disagreement as to

precisely *which* human activities were sins and which weren't, but the Great Autarchy placed near the top of its list the sin of gambling. (Another high-ranker, bizarrely, was fucking in public.) What the ancients did when they gambled was give a whole stack of credit to someone else contingent upon the outcome of something unpredictable. Sounds nuts, but then you're pretty convinced that just about all human beings have been nuts—still are, come to that. Back in the day they had machines called slots for producing events people couldn't predict and thus could gamble with—random-number generators, usually. The name "slots" derived from a time when the devices used were machines with spinning wheels, fueled by metal disks.

The rulers of the Great Autarchy disapproved of this gambling hobby not because it was boring, not because it was pointless, not because it was stupid—after all, when you want to give stuff away, it's much easier just to do it without all the preamble—but because they decreed the element of *chance* involved was sinful: How could there be such a thing as chance in a universe whose deity determined everything right down to the properties and location of the loneliest quark? They tried to stamp it out in the usual ways of their age, like torture and massacre (remember, people died easier then), and, when they found they couldn't eliminate gambling by these means, they confined it to a single world, an airless asteroid which soon came to be called Slots Palace.

So, okay, if you were strange enough to want to find difficult ways of giving away your possessions, you had to go to this asteroid-wide casino, which was inconvenient but not *that* inconvenient.

Then a new Autarch came to power and instituted a more rigorous scourge against sin than any that had preceded it. It wasn't enough for him—of course it was a him, because the Autarchy regarded all females and intersexed as distanced from their creator boogey, another him—that gambling should be pent up on a single remote asteroid. The gamblers themselves were, each and every one of them, accursed in the eyes of the deity, and must be consigned to eternal perdition. He condemned them to what he thought was not just death but complete annihilation from the known universe.

The Autarch sent a fleet of his heavy military fittlers. They seized Slots Palace in their tractor fields and dragged it a few hundred parsecs, no great distance at fittle speeds, to where a black hole lurked, orbiting in tandem with the star that the hole, Old Throat, was casually stripping of its essence.

The forces of the Great Autarchy hurled the asteroid, with all its thousands of inhabitants still alive in their heated, pressurized habitat, toward the event horizon

of the black hole.

It could have been worse. There were plenty of other unspeakable atrocities perpetrated by the Autarchy in the name of virtue and morality and sweet heavenly forgiveness. The gamblers could consider themselves lucky just to be thrown into a black hole. Imagine how much more cruelly they'd have been treated had they been al fresco fornicators.

Farewell, Slots Palace.

Thus was sin banished from the universe.

But it wasn't, of course.

• • • •

What with the known dangers of ground-based streamers, the portal on Seventh Heaven is only a small affair, the streamer itself having just sufficient bandwidth to take your party of four up to an orbiter, where the main terminal is housed. You decide to save a little money by leaving your current bods at the portal and join Arnie as blances at the orbiter. Mana says you should make a game of choosing blances that match as closely as possible your original forms, but none of the rest of you can remember what those original forms looked like, and after a while Mana confesses in a cascade of millennia-old giggles that she herself can't even recall what sex she started out as.

You have to spend a few hours in the orbiter before the next available vacancy for a stream to the vicinity of Slots Palace—and not the very *close* vicinity, you discover: You're going to have to make a supplemental jump, maybe two, at the other end.

Eventually the moment comes for you to dissolve your blances so you can be streamed as raw data two-thirds of the way across the galaxy.

Things don't look much changed by the time you reach your destination, though inevitably there must have been a few supernovae here and there; it doesn't do to think too much, after streaming, about the passage of time.

Where you find yourselves is aboard a holiday cruiser that's heading from somewhere to somewhere else at sublight in an approximation of real time, bearing a cargo of a few million humans in physical bods who get a thrill out of experiencing spaceflight "like it was supposed to be"—in other words, in a comprehensively artificial environment composed entirely of facilities designed to help pass the time. Well, each to their own, you suppose; it still seems crazy to you.

Being in the latest set of blances you've slipped into, you and your consensuals feel out of things among all these determinedly corporeal folk, so you don't explore much. Maybe the place has hidden depths, who knows?

And who cares? You don't go that deep.

It's only a couple of days, anyway, before you're on your way again, this time a short hop to an orbiter that's maintaining a respectful six-parsec distance from Old Throat. This vessel, the *Ten Percent Extra Free,* is supposed to be a sort of observation platform for thrill-seekers and students alike, so they can study (a) the death throes of the hole's enormously depleted companion star, but, more popularly, (b) the frozen data that were once an asteroid called Slots Palace, and all of the fervent gamblers and their gambling machines who were there at the time the Autarch enacted his condemnation of the whole caboodle. What the Autarch didn't realize—thanks to the Great Autarchy's suppression of any knowledge it didn't like and/or understand—was that the hole's grav field, while it might swallow the physical constituents of the Devil's One True Spawn (or whatever), would retain the data frozen forever at the event horizon.

The fourth law of thermodynamics is the law of conservation of data. While a fraction of the stuff in the universe follows the timelike dimension familiar to human beings, which is the timelike dimension associated with universal expansion and gravitational attraction, the remaining three-quarters obeys the universe's *other* timelike dimension, the "flow of time" whose arrow points in the opposite direction, the one associated with contraction and gravitational repulsion. Hence the phenomena once ascribed to the presence of hypothetical entities like dark matter and dark energy.

It's because of there being two timelike dimensions that data must always be conserved. Everything that lies in the past of one of the dimensions lies in the future of the other. Data cannot simply dissipate, so to speak, once no longer in use, because the truth is that those data have also *yet to be used.* They're frozen in place so long as the universe shall subsist.

It's for analogous reasons, operating on the fringes of the localized universe that is Old Throat, that the information once manifested in four-dimensional form as Slots Palace is still frozen three-dimensionally all across the hole's event horizon, eternally there for tourists like yourselves to gawp at, even if it seems at first to be merely a nebula swirling just beyond the edges of vision.

Your consensuality is intent on doing more than just gawp, of course.

The five of you want to mingle with the conserved data . . . for a while.

• • • •

Suze and yourself are the ones deputed to take charge of the negotiations.

You've all—except Arnie, of course—chosen to be in bods for the duration of your stay on the orbiter. Part of the motive is to pack in as much genuine sensation as you can before your confinement to blances as you visit the information that is the erstwhile Slots Palace. But a much bigger part of the motive is perhaps a searching for security: You're sure there'll be no difficulty departing Slots Palace once you bore of being there (would that its original occupants were so lucky!), but at the same time you're going to be—at least your blances are—right on the observable rim of something capable of crushing you out of existence, extinguishing you entirely except for a data detritus that might never be properly reconstituted, at least along your own timelike axis.

Suze has yet again chosen an inventive bod for herself, this time one that's about four meters tall and proportionately wide, but averages only about a centimeter thick, front to back: the bod looks like someone has rolled over it with an immensely heavy weight. (What's especially alarming to you is that the bod possesses a weird sexual allure, even though—perhaps because—fucking is, as you've discovered to your frustration, distinctly problematic.) Suze ripples rather than walks to get from one place to another; if she wanted, she could plaster herself to a wall or a ceiling and alter her skin colors to blend in with the decor—excellent camouflage, if ever there might be a purpose for it.

She's rippling in this wise ahead of you as you scoot along gangways to where you've been told the logistics center of the orbiter is. You reflect that this expedition to see the boss would have been easier if you and your consensuals had opted for blances instead. And Arnie wouldn't finally be starting to grumble about the way he gets left out of things . . .

"You know the way?" you say for the hundredth time. The directions the aide in the main arrival bay gave you were a long string you lost track of before it was halfway done.

"I remember it," says Suze over her wafer-thin shoulder, "even if you can't."

The risk of disaster occurring through her own overconfidence has never been something to trouble Suze much. It does you.

This time she's right, though.

The orbiter boss's name is Sikhanyiso, and he makes his base in a walled room done out in some historical style you're not able to identify. There are all kinds of complicated devices lying around that seem to be made of real metal;

they're even authentically massy, as you discover when you casually try to lift one of them up.

"Feel free," says Sikhanyiso, smiling at you from behind a broad, brown, grained desk. Wood. At least a couple of square meters, polished until you could probably see your face in it. Running an observational orbiter is obviously a lucrative business. "It's a compass, Rehan," he adds.

"What's it for?"

"On a planet, it tells you the direction of the planet's magnetic field."

"Useful," you say cautiously.

"Out here it's use*less,* of course. It's just a collectible, if you're into antique instruments, that sort of thing. I had to jam the needle. Enough of the ee-em flux from Old Throat gets through the hull to drive the gadget berserk."

"Ah."

Suze begins to explain what your consensuality wants to do. Sikhanyiso's expression darkens.

"I'm not sure I can allow that."

"Why?" Whatever her bod looks like, Suze has wheedling down to a fine art.

"It's dangerous."

"We wouldn't be the first."

"The others were serious scientific researchers."

"So are we."

"Yeah, right."

"We need to know. It's important to us." She's sitting on his desk by now. The light glinting off her back makes her look as if she's constructed of ice.

"Why do you need to know so much about what things are like down there?"

Suze glances across at you, passing over the tag of your tag-team.

"We're researching into the properties of countermatter," you say as if you hadn't just thought of this on the spur of the moment.

Sikhanyiso makes a pantomime of choking on the fizzy he's been drinking. "'Countermatter'?"

"The matter of the counter-universe."

"I know what countermatter is." He makes a show of looking around the room at his antique instruments. Once he can see you've got the message he adds: "But what's it got to do with Slots Palace?"

"We think the face of a black hole is somewhere that orthomatter and countermatter co-exist."

You can see he wants to be convinced, that he wants to let the five of you go

ahead and do this stupid thing. It couldn't be any clearer that you're lying, and that Suze is lying, yet he nods his head slowly and somberly as if mulling over the pros and cons. Really, all he's doing is working out how to cover his own ass. If your consciousnesses—which is all that blances really are, when you think about it right—if your consciousnesses never come back from Old Throat's event horizon, which is eminently possible, he wants to make sure some future investigation won't blame him. It wouldn't be until half a millennium or more down the pipeline, of course—that long because things move slow in any bureaucracy and the universe is a very big bureaucracy—but it pays to be cautious. In reality, the chances of an investigation *ever* coming about are infinitesimal—with humanity being so numerous and so far-spread, who the fuck cares about a few casualties here and there?—but they're not zero.

"We have complete insurance," says Suze.

The man's face becomes suddenly more cheerful.

"Really?"

"Really," she says. You try not to stare at her. It's the first you've heard of any insurance.

"In that case," says Sikhanyiso, making a palaver about moving things around on his desk that don't need to be moved, "and assuming you're aware of the small processing fee involved, perhaps I could see my way to permitting . . ."

By the time you leave him, you've discovered how the bosses of observation orbiters can afford wooden desktops.

• • • •

Returned from Sikhanyiso's quarters, you eventually find Mana and Kagura preening themselves and each other among the throngs on the *Ten Percent Extra Free's* observation deck. The "observation deck" is an elaborate conceit, because its various viewer terminals could just as well be mounted in the passengers' individual cabins. There are screens up on the wall for people who're content with a lower-resolution view. Perhaps the idea was to build a sense of community. More likely, doing it this way is merely a matter of theater. All the real research on Old Throat and Slots Palace is being done elsewhere, anyway, far out of sight of the sensation-seekers, somewhere that isn't a tourist haven like the *Ten Percent Extra Free.* Most of the people here aren't even paying attention to the screens, just chattering or getting high on stim; a triple is rather amateurishly having sex in the middle of the deck space, but no one's paying attention to that, either.

“Arnie wants out of the consensual,” says Mana as you approach.

“No great loss,” says Suze brusquely.

“He didn’t think of blancing to tell us himself?” you say, bristling. It was you who engineered Arnie’s recruitment. You feel a fool in front of the others—that effort, for nothing.

“Where you were with the boss man,” says Kagura, another who’s clearly not upset to see the disappearance of Arnie, “there’s a block in place.”

So Sikhanyiso values his privacy. That seems consonant with his love of obsolete technology, somehow.

Well, there’ll be other consensuals, other times. And maybe your course will interweave with Arnie’s in the future. Though who cares one way or the other? The universe is full of Arnies. Besides, you find Mana’s current bod decidedly fascinating—almost ancestral in its solidity, although you’re fairly sure human ancestors were never blue with shimmers of turquoise—and, while you’re gazing at it, it’s difficult to focus too clearly on anything else.

Just then, one of the *Ten Percent Extra Free’s* aides approaches. On his forehead is stamped the name Kevin, plus a serial number. He clearly recognizes Mana and Kagura, and addresses himself to Suze and yourself.

“Have you used these viewers before?”

“Viewers like them, obviously,” you say, “but not these precise ones, no.”

“They’re a little different,” says Kagura. “Kevin explained them to us earlier, but we thought we’d wait for you.”

The little entity bustles to the nearest terminal, pulls from it a couple of viewers, and tosses them one each to Suze and yourself. You turn the thing over in your hands, this way and that. It looks just like an ordinary viewer: a flat, featureless, transparent flexible sheet that’s big enough to fit over the head and tuck under the chin and around the back of the neck. You crumple it in your fist and you can immediately feel the difference. This viewer’s a bit stiffer than you’d expect. Usually this is a sign of a lesser quality of manufacture, but you suspect that isn’t the case here.

Kevin answers the unspoken question. “We have to trade a little flexibility for all the extra technology that’s in there. You won’t notice the difference once you’re wearing the viewer. Hardly at all,” he amends.

You get the impression it’s an often-rehearsed speech, the little afterthought being introduced in order to give Kevin a trace of the personality he does not in fact have.

“As you’ll know,” the aide continues, “all the data of Slots Palace are frozen at

Old Throat's event horizon. The trouble is that Slots Palace is just one of the more recent things to have fallen into Old Throat over the past couple billion years. There's who knows how much other data preserved there as well. All of it jumbled. The additional technology in your viewer is designed to sort that data, enabling you to see the reality buried beneath the surface of the chaos. It's a complex task. The results aren't entirely perfect"—Kevin gives what's supposed to be a nervous little laugh but sounds more like a recycler malfunction—"but we think you'll find that most of the time they're fairly satisfactory."

You look at the viewer you're holding with new respect. Kevin isn't exaggerating when he says the task involved is complex.

Before this, you haven't really thought ahead about how the blances of you and your consensuals are going to be able to interpret the data they find themselves among when they eventually make the descent onto Old Throat. Now that Kevin has brought it to your notice, though, you realize that whatever Sikhanyiso has lined up for you must incorporate some similar cybernetics. Otherwise all the data you'd see would be more or less entirely random.

Which is to say, you wouldn't see anything at all.

"Impressive," you say.

Kevin flashes an unsettling grin. "The owners and operators of the *Ten Percent Extra Free* are proud of the service they offer to their visitors. Thank you."

He turns away and scurries off in search of other unenlightened people to instruct.

"That's all there is?" you say to Mana.

"The viewers are pre-calibrated," she responds. "That's what he told us, anyway. You just pop them on and . . ."

She brings the viewer up to her face and presses it against the blue flesh. Kagura is mirroring her actions, and Suze and yourself hurry to follow suit. The smart material at once starts wrapping itself around the rest of your head, molding itself against the contours. Once it's convinced that it's properly positioned, you know you have thirty seconds to find yourself somewhere comfortable to sit or lie down before the material opaques. The four of you link hands to form a circle, and sit down on the floor where you are.

As the light dims toward blackness, so too does the sound of the busy deck around you, the babbling voices of the other tourists, the loud, near-hysterical laughter of someone who's over-stimmed themselves. Although you can feel Mana's hand in your own left and Suze's wafer-thin one in your own right, you feel as if suddenly you've been plunged into solitude.

There's a long moment when there's only the darkness, and then

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the illusion is that you're hovering over a landscape not unlike a planetary one except that the land curves gently upward in every direction away from you. It's as if you were inside Old Throat, not outside it (if there's ever truly a place that's outside a black hole). Although you can still feel the hands of your consensuals, you can see no sign of them; viewing can be disconcerting this way, no matter how much you believe you've grown accustomed to it. You're having difficulty working out which of your senses is experiencing this panorama: It's a cacophony of motion, a bitter taste of blazing colors. You've never known vertigo before, but you recognize that you're feeling it now.

And then it's as if someone had gripped the world you're witnessing to hold it steady. Everything comes into focus. The software inside your viewer has done a little bit of final tuning, an imposition of a more accurate ordering upon the chaotic data preserved here.

You're aware of the fact that there are immense destructive forces raging all around you, horrific torrents of radiation as matter's torn asunder by the hole's gravity. Somewhere nearby—nearby in cosmic terms, at least—a star's being ripped apart as it succumbs to that same inexorable gravitational field. Yet, now that the vista has been clarified by the clever technology, this new environment seems oddly peaceful, placid. The motions you can see in the terrain spread out around you are as frenetic as before, but at the same time they give the impression of purpose: They're performing a wild dance, for sure, but it's a dance done according to a prescribed choreography.

You're moving now yourself, floating slowly across and down toward this bowl-shaped world.

As you anticipated, the particular set of data that the viewer has pulled out of the background chaos is the one pertaining to Slots Palace. You must already have passed through the data that represented the hermetic dome that once kept the revelers secure from the vacuum surrounding the original asteroid. You're now within shouting distance of the ground, except, obviously, that you can't shout to the people you see down there because you're not really here: you're just viewing. For the same reason, no one who looks up can see you. The people here are ghosts, of course, but you're a ghost too.

It's unnerving to see so many people in ancestral form gathered all in the same

place. You're accustomed to seeing people in all different shapes and sizes, but here everyone's roughly the same size and there's really very little diversity of shape. There are a few different skin colors, but only a few, and the ones that there are seem desperately dull.

By contrast, whoever designed Slots Palace believed in assaulting the senses with color. Everywhere you look there are cavalcades of clashing hues, flashing lights so raucous in their brightness you think you can hear them. Greens, yellows, oranges, reds, a particular glaring shade of purple. Some of the signs have marks on them that you're pretty sure are writing but you can't read it.

And now you seem to be skimming just above the heads of the Slots Palace people. There are walls segregating off different areas of what seems like an infinite casino, forming rooms. The rooms, you think, must have been open to the sky, or at least to the pressure dome, back in the old, asteroid-bound days; more likely, you soon conclude, the viewer's software hasn't bothered to reintegrate the data that formed the palace's upper stories and roof. Some of the spaces are still filled with machines that you guess must be the random-number generators at the root of the addiction that brought the palace into existence in the first place, and a few of the crowded people there are attending them in a desultory way.

Most of the rooms, though, are dwelling spaces, either private or public. Some are filled with tables, mostly untenanted. As you speed across the concave terrain, you see people eating, drinking, defecating, making love, partying, fighting, singing, cavorting . . . all of it in a blur of human animation that soon seems to you to become just a single human activity: the business of living.

There's litter everywhere: discarded stuff. Hard to get rid of anything when the data that comprise it are permanent.

It's all so *messy.*

Perhaps the viewer's smart programs interpret your shudder of revulsion as a sign of distress—who knows?—but the next thing you know they've hauled you back to the reality of the *Ten Percent Extra Free's* observation deck, where you find yourself, once the viewer has cleared, sitting in a ring with your consensuals.

You're disoriented enough that you have to consciously remind yourself of their names: Mana, Suze, Kagura.

Mana has obviously returned some little while ago: Her viewer lies on the floor in front of her, and she blinks at you in welcome. The other two are still journeying: sitting bolt upright, the muscles of their necks twitching.

You shake your head and the viewer obediently unwraps itself and slides

down your front to join Mana's.

"That was a gateway to hell," Mana whispers.

You don't know whether you agree with her or not.

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The next tenday or so is a bit of a burden for you. Once Suze and Kagura returned from viewing the face of Old Throat, Mana announced that she'd changed her mind about blancing down there—had changed her mind about the consensuality as a whole, in fact, and wanted to back out from it. This was a shock to the rest of you, who'd been unaware she was restless; even more of a shock was Kagura's decision to leave with her. You'd always known he felt something special for her—they're alike in so many ways—but it's etiquette to value consensual bonds above individual ones. Even so, it was perfectly within the entitlement of Mana and Kagura to dissolve their fractions of the contract. A day of shared intimacy in your cabin was enough as a fond farewell to the quad, and then Suze and yourself watched your erstwhile consensuals stream away to wherever they were going.

It's a strange experience, being in a contracted pair, and Suze isn't a person you'd ordinarily have chosen to be in a pair *with*—as part of a pentagon, fine, but as a single partner? Yet the two of you are determined to make the best of it, and in fact it's working out fine, so far—especially since you both invested in fresh bods, this time ones that are closer to the ancestral in form. This is something Sikhanyiso and his aides have insisted upon: The blances you'll be using on your trip to Slots Palace—on what feels like a return rather than a first journey—will have that general form, in order to blend in among the reconstituted people there, so it's essential you become accustomed to that now.

Suze has her own way of getting accustomed to her new bod, and you're an enthusiastic accomplice.

There's a lot more training and modification to be done. There's no way to smarten a blance, it being immaterial, so the smartening has to be done to the individual from whom the blance emanates—from whom it derives its motivation, reasoning powers and such muted senses as are feasible. This is something you've never really thought about before, because your brain was smartened for the purpose millennia ago and since then the mods have become just another part of the organism that's you, like your language app. Among the data ocean of Old Throat's event horizon, however, your mind's going to have to

perform all the analysis and ordering of the data that the viewer did. That's something you've never demanded of your brain before.

You lose an hour while the *Ten Percent Extra Free* aides perform the operation—almost as long as for a resurrection process. Afterwards, although of course there's no pain, there's a sense of *intrusion.* You imagine a discomfort that isn't really there. Suze reports the same.

It takes a whole day for this effect to wear off. By then the pair of you are using your new bods as if you'd been born to them.

You're both itching to get back to Old Throat. You told Suze about Mana's remark—"That was a gateway to hell"—and you've discussed it. You can understand why the experience horrified Mana so, and why to an extent you shared that feeling. Yet for you and Suze the fear was just a small part of it all and if anything an enhancement.

The viewing was not so much a gateway to hell as a gateway to a reality you haven't known for far too long.

A reality you're both now eager to bathe in.

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When you were viewing, they were just bright colors, all the greens and the yellows, the oranges and the reds and the purple that stabbed your vision. Now that your blance is down here, though, mixing among the trapped data, the flashing lights have taken on a life of their own, almost a personality. They're flares of hope and desire—cold glances, hot flames, glimpses that aren't entirely of this dimension . . . whatever the dimension you're now in actually *is.* Some are pulsing slowly, others strobing so rapidly they seem almost continuous. Your mind reels at the thought of the impact they'd have on you if you weren't secsensing. They're part of the ecosystem—an ecosystem that's full of sounds and smells and incident.

And people.

People everywhere, of every age, from infants in arms to wizened grandparents. You've never seen old people before—well, you've seen people who were old, obviously, but you've never seen people who were *old.*

You must stop thinking of these people as data. In a very real way, you're now just a collection of data yourself—or at least your blance is.

Glancing upward, you see a ceiling with slowly turning mirrored globes hanging from it: a reference to distant history that the builders of Slots Palace

must have thought would give the place a touch of, you know, *class.* You were right about the viewer being selective in deciding what parts of the structure to extrapolate from the data.

Suze's blance arrived in the casino beside yours but she's wandered off somewhere. You peer around, trying to catch a sight of her, but there are people in the way; you and Suze would ordinarily tower above everyone else here, but you don't when you're in your ancestral-form blances.

"You lost?"

You turn to see a short, stubby woman looking at you; not that everyone else isn't short and stubby, but she's shorter and stubbier than most. It seems very odd to see so many people who aren't beautiful, all of them gathered together. Everyone you know is beautiful, because why shouldn't they be?

The facial expressions of ancestrals are hard to interpret, but the woman seems friendly. A small boy leans against her leg: a child or a grandchild.

"I'm looking for a friend."

"You new around here?"

"It's that obvious?"

"Yes."

She doesn't elaborate, but she doesn't have to. There are tens of thousands of people here in Slots Palace, but they've been here long enough that they must all recognize each other—or, at least, know when they *don't* recognize someone.

"How did you get here?" she says.

Where to begin? She was born of a time before there were blances, a time when humans were restricted by so many constraints you no longer know.

"I'm just passing through," you say, as if that were an answer.

"You're a visitor."

"That's right."

"We've had visitors before." She glances down toward the child clinging at her side. "At first we thought Laddie here was one of them, didn't we, Laddie?"

Wide-eyed, thumb in mouth, the child nods. He's staring at you with over-wise eyes.

It must be centuries since you last met a child, and you're not sure how to go about this.

"Laddie," you say. "That's a nice name."

"It's not really a name at all," says the woman. "He just sort of wandered in—fifty, sixty years ago. No memory, no idea how he'd got here. We called him Laddie. By the time his memory started coming back and he was able to tell us he

was really called Mokwugo, it was too late. Everyone knew him as Laddie, and that's what he stayed."

"And did he eventually remember how he'd got here?"

"A colony ship, fleeing from the Autarchy. But the Autarchy was onto them. That's what Laddie remembers, anyway. You can guess the rest. The colonists realized recapture was inevitable, so they committed mass suicide and programmed their ship to try to lead the chasing war vessels into Old Throat. Here, in other words. Good thing they didn't succeed because, if they had, the place'd have been crawling with Autarchy warriors. Laddie here, his mother couldn't bear to kill him so she hid him away. That's Laddie's excuse for being here. What's yours?"

"I came here to see what it was like," you say lamely.

"You planning on staying?"

"Not for long, no," you admit.

She sniffs, as if coming to a judgment about something.

Laddie pulls his thumb out of his mouth. "You're not really here at all, are you?" he says.

Like his gaze, his voice seems older than he is. You wonder what it must be like to be a child here, never ageing—you can't change fundamentally from the data you arrived as. On the other hand, that should surely apply mentally as well as physically, shouldn't it? Maybe it's not that his mind has grown older, just that it's had far more experiences than it would have had anywhere else.

"No," you tell him. "I'm not really here."

Of course, time here obviously obeys different rules. The stubby woman talks of Mokwugo arriving a few decades ago, but there hasn't been an Autarchy for a gazillion years or more. True, ships that are fittling can cause havoc with the ordering of events, but it's improbable that both pursued and pursuers would find themselves displaced from their own era to exactly the same degree.

"You're like the other guys," the boy says.

"What other guys?"

"That was what I was about to tell you," says the woman, folding her arms beneath an ample bosom. "The other blances."

"You know about blances?"

There's no need for her to answer the question. "I'm Ella." She sticks a hand out. You stare at it for a moment, then realize she wants you to touch it. Secsensing allows you to feel her skin hardly at all, just enough to detect its coarseness. People don't have skin like that any longer.

“Rehan.” You offer your hand to Laddie, and he puts his own small hand into it for a moment.

“Those other blances, are they still here?”

“Yes. Some of them. Come with me and I’ll introduce you.”

You follow Ella as, with the boy tagging along beside her, she makes her way across the big salon. Even though it’s quite crowded in places, people seem to melt away in front of her, and briefly you wonder if she has some high rank in this society. But then you notice that the others are behaving in the same way toward each other, too. Personal space clearly matters a lot. You suppose that, if a few tens or hundreds of thousands of humans are destined to live alongside each other in a relatively confined space for effectively an eternity, it’s only natural they should be concerned to keep what distance they can between themselves. Or maybe the reason’s more pragmatic. Although you’ve learned already to think of them as people, the Slots Palace occupants are also really data clusters. Could they compromise each other’s integrity?

You wonder how much of a gesture it was for Ella and Laddie to touch your hand.

It’s been a long time since you’ve had to confront so many unanswered questions. It’s been a long time since you’ve *enjoyed* doing it.

You noticed before that there are doors peppered all around the walls of the salon. These doors don’t open of their own accord as you approach them, or at least the one Ella has selected doesn’t. She pushes it open manually, then stands back to usher you through. Laddie runs on ahead.

You’re in a lit corridor. The illumination’s quite bright, but it seems almost gloomy here after all the glare and flashing of the public chamber you’ve just left.

“Where are we going?” you say.

“Not far,” Ella replies with a smile. “The others like you, they mix among us often enough but they tend to keep themselves to themselves. They have a set of rooms we set aside for them. I think sometimes they take trips back to wherever they’re based and they don’t like us to see them leaving or arriving—as if we’d envy them their freedom to come and go.”

She says those last few words as if it were perfectly obvious why none of the people here would envy the blances.

“There’s a whole universe out there, you know,” you say timidly. “A trillion places you can be. A trillion things you can do.”

She raises an eyebrow. “What’s the point, if you don’t know how to experience any of them?”

You imagine she's referring to her status as a collection of data rather than a living, breathing creature. Only later will you begin to conceive that she might have been saying something else entirely.

For now, you don't answer her.

In less than a minute, you find yourself being shown into a medium-sized cabin. There are two female blances sitting at a table in the middle, with a male blance between them. Standing, looking as if she's being held against her will, is Suze.

She gives a start as you appear. "Hey, Rehan."

"Suze."

You're aware that behind you Ella is quietly leaving the room, shutting the door. Laddie doesn't follow her.

One of the women looks up at you, her mouth beginning to twist in what you almost immediately recognize as contempt. "Another bloody tourist."

"They're rude bastards, these three," says Suze. You were thinking much the same yourself but you wouldn't have said it out loud. Typical Suze: jumps in with both feet.

You try to bluff it out, just as you did with Sikhanyiso. "We're hoping to learn something about countermatter."

The blance who greeted you snorts.

Her male companion puts a calming hand over one of hers. "Hush, Anya."

"I tell you, Darien, I can't stand these people," says Anya, shaking his hand off. "They're gruesome. They come here to pick over the flesh and bones of a massacre. All they're looking for is cheap thrills. Hey, tourist, does it give you a jolly to look around you and see all the dead folk?"

"It's not that at all," you say. But it has more truth in it than what you just said about countermatter.

"The woman's a bitch," says Suze. "She needs to get laid, like, yesterday."

Suze tries to carry off a look of easy superiority, but even you, her supposedly loyal consensual, have to admit she's being unsuccessful. The trouble is that the two of you *are* just tourists, and your motives, now that you hold them up and examine them for the first time, *are* pretty morbid. You're here to see a bizarrery, nothing more.

Ignoring Suze, you say, "And what brought you three here?" to the woman called Anya.

She's obviously startled by the question. "Science," she says. "Research."

You smile. "Not research into countermatter?"

"No." She turns away, lips pursing as if she's preparing to spit on the floor.

"Anya's a mathematician," says the man. "She specializes in probability. I'm a psychologist." He sees you don't recognize the word. "That means I study the way the human mind works. I'm also interested in integrative neuroscience." This time he doesn't bother to explain the piece of jargon.

You turn toward the other female expectantly, but she just stares back at you.

Darien explains that Syor's specialty is to recognize statistical patterns that are invisible to most observers and draw deductions from them—in other words, he adds, that she intuits. "There could hardly be a better talent to bring to a casino, you're thinking"—you weren't—"but that's not why she's here."

He reaches a hand across the table to you, and you touch it.

"This is a waste of time," says Suze.

Darien ignores the interruption as, you sense, he ignored quite a few interruptions from Suze before you got here. "Come sit down with us," he says to you.

There are two more chairs at the table than you noticed earlier. Obediently you sit down in one while Laddie, whom you almost forgot was here, hauls himself up into the other. As the child settles himself in place, you're struck once more by the earnestness in his eyes, and now also by the respect the three blances seem to have for him.

"You've still not really told me what brought the three of you here," you say.

Syor speaks for the first time. "We're hoping to solve the puzzle of this place." Unlike Anya, she seems disposed, after a brief initial reservation, to be friendly.

"The puzzle?"

"Why the people here perceive it as stable."

And at once you realize what's been troubling you ever since you arrived, an irritating doubt scratching at your mind.

"If you're like us," Syor is saying, "you had to go through a major augmentation regime before you got here. The data that used to be Slots Palace and its occupants are all here, but without integration software they'd just be random noise. Not quite random. Data can never become totally random, otherwise they'd stop being data. But, lacking the integration facilities built into you, you'd be hard-pressed to tell the difference."

"But the people who were already here, the locals—they don't have any augmentations," you say.

"Exactly."

"Where's this all going?" demands Suze.

"Have you spoken to any of them?" you say, looking up at her. You sense that she'd regard sitting down like the rest of the people in the room as a surrender. "The locals, I mean."

"Yeah. There was the guy that brought me here."

"Did you talk about much?"

"Not much. No." Any minute now Suze is going to lose her temper. Not for any particular reason but just because that's the way she's made. Everything in the universe moves too slowly for Suze. Reality refuses to cooperate with her every whim. She wants everything to be transient, experienced one moment and forgotten the next, but too many things decline simply to go away when she's no longer interested in them.

"Did he talk about life in Slots Palace?"

"I guess."

"Ella—the woman who was here a few minutes ago—as far as she's concerned, Slots Palace is somewhere she's been living for hundreds of thousands of years, maybe longer than that. She wasn't just pulled out of the data cloud by our arrival—or Syor's, or Anya's, or Darien's. This, this"—you wave your hand at the bleak walls—"this *environment* is permanent and stable, at least so far as the people who live here are concerned. They don't need something like an integration app to drag coherence out of the maelstrom. Ella doesn't even realize it, so I assume everyone else is the same, but the people of Slots Palace are somehow pulling order from the chaos. And *that's*—at least I guess so—what our new friends are here to investigate."

"Bravo," says Darien softly, mimicking the clapping of hands.

"So what?" says Suze.

Syor looks bewildered at Suze's obtuseness. "You don't find it interesting? You don't find the puzzle challenging?"

"Not really," Suze replies. "I came here for the honeytime, not for a science education."

"Stupid bloody tourist," says Anya savagely.

This time Suze goes for her, lunging across the table. There's not a huge amount of damage one blance can do to another, seeing as how neither of them's really there, but, even through secsenses, pain can become pretty severe. Even if your eyeball is just a psychographic projection, you know all about it if someone tries to gouge it out.

You pull Suze back; Darien and Syor do the same for Anya.

All this time, Laddie has been just watching the proceedings. It's quite a

surprise when he suddenly speaks.

"You're acting like children."

Anya lets out one last enraged grunt, then stops struggling and sinks back onto her chair.

As Laddie's words hang in the air, you remember where he came from. He and his family were putting up resistance to the will of the Autarchy. When it came to a choice between abandoning their principles or dying, they elected to die rather than concede to tyranny. Their convictions gripped them more tightly than the need to breathe.

No one would make that bargain any more. There's never any need to. Humans can do virtually whatever they want on a stage that's as near as dammit infinite.

That's good. It was what the species was meant to become, if it was meant to become anything at all. But humanity paid a price for it.

"Intelligence is data, too," you murmur.

Syor, watching your face, nods in agreement. "That's the line of research we've been pursuing."

"Emotions. Memories. Determination. Willpower. They're all of them not just data but ways of interpreting data. These people feel things more strongly than we could ever dream."

"Yes. It's something to do with that, we think, this integrative power of theirs. But we can't work out the details. We're tantalizingly close but . . . we just don't *know*."

"There's a way of finding out," you say, carrying a thought to its conclusion.

"Yes," Syor agrees, reading your mind. "But none of us has dared try it."

"This is futile," concludes Suze as she begins to go into the routine that will recall her blance to the *Ten Percent Extra Free*.

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You've been in short-lived consensualities before but never, so far as you can recall, one that's been shorter-lived than this one.

You remain in Slots Palace for another tenday or so, getting to know the other three blances better, not to mention Laddie and Ella and dozens of the locals. Even Anya eventually admits grudgingly that you may be redeemable. You grow accustomed to the clamoring light displays in the main salons—well, as accustomed to them as you'll ever be. You form friendships; you're amazed by

how readily people are willing to be friends with you. Laddie has taken to following you around and you're amazed, too, by how good that makes you feel.

By the time you return to the *Ten Percent Extra Free,* Suze has long gone. You wish you could find it within yourself to care, but, to be honest, you hardly think about it. You're a man on a mission.

For the first time in your long life, you're *driven.* It's as if the Slots Palace people infected you with their way of being. You need to *understand* your surroundings, and your place in them. Most of all, you need to solve the puzzle of the conservation of the subtler data that once formed Slots Palace: the emotions, the aesthetics, the patterns of thought.

For a couple of days after your return to the *Ten Percent Extra Free,* you experience a new sensation that you have great difficulty in identifying. Finally you recognize it as the awareness of the blood flowing in your veins.

There's something else, too. In the same way that you felt so good when Laddie adopted you and started treating you like a trusted friend, the thought of the green-gazed Syor fills you with warmth. The two of you became close during the final days before your return, especially after you both decided to take the next obvious step in unraveling the puzzle the organized data present. If the experiment's successful, maybe you'll become closer still. You're not sure if you're comfortable with the thought. The uncertainty's exciting.

It takes a lot of hard, forceful argument—and a goodly percentage of your accrued wealth, wealth you're no longer going to have a use for—to persuade Sikhanyiso to go along with what you're demanding of him. He sets out a million bureaucratic hoops for you to jump through just in case he ever gets the blame for what he regards as being inevitably an act of willful suicide. Which in a way it is.

Finally everything's ready. Sikhanyiso makes one last effort to dissuade you, and then two of his aides code the portal to stream you to Old Throat's event horizon. Your consciousness will arrive there as a package of disorganized data.

You're relying on the data that's already there to reintegrate you.

Even if it doesn't work out like that, even if the essence of you will just be snuffed out of existence, one more tiny particle of degraded information swept into the singularity, you're prepared for it. You're alive at last; the biggest part of the puzzle has been solved.

"Send me there," you say to the aides.

And so they shrug, as they've been programmed to do, and they send you there.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Grant has written over 70 books. His fiction includes *The World* (1992), *The Far-Enough Window* (2002), *The Dragons of Manhattan* (2008) and *Leaving Fortusa* (2008), plus numerous short stories, some collected as *Take No Prisoners* (2004) and *Tell No Lies* (2014). With artist Bob Eggleton he created the two "illustrated fictions" *Dragonhenge* (2002) and *The Stardragons* (2005); the former brought a Hugo nomination.

His nonfiction includes *The Encyclopedia of Walt Disney's Animated Characters* (three editions (1987, 1993, 1998), *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997, with John Clute), *The Chesley Awards* (2003, with Elizabeth Humphrey and Pamela D. Scoville) and a series of books on the misuse/misunderstanding of science: *Discarded Science* (2006), *Corrupted Science* (2007), *Bogus Science* (2009) and *Denying Science* (2011), plus the YA books *Debunk It!* (2014) and *Eureka!* (2016). His *A Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Film Noir* (2013) is the largest film noir encyclopedia in the English language. He has won two Hugo awards, a World Fantasy Award, and others.

To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight

Marcher

Chris Beckett | 6310 words

"So . . . um . . . What do you do for a living?" the young woman asked.

(Well, it is difficult to think of original questions to ask people at parties.)

The young man braced himself.

"I am an immigration officer."

"Oh, I . . ."

He laughed a little bitterly.

"Be honest. Not what you expect to meet at a party of leftish twenty- and thirty-somethings!"

"No, I suppose . . ."

"You thought a teacher perhaps, or maybe a software engineer, not someone who chucks out illegal immigrants and shoves weeping asylum seekers back onto planes."

The man checked himself. (His name incidentally was Huw.)

"Sorry," he said. "That must have sounded a bit aggressive. The truth is I like to see myself as a leftish twenty-something and I sometimes feel like some kind of pariah among my peers."

"I can imagine. In fact . . ."

She was going to say that she sympathised, that her own job also often attracted negative comment. But she decided to ask another question instead. He was an interesting young man: well dressed in a nicely understated way, quite poised, attractively reserved.

"So, why did you become an immigration officer? Did the pariah status appeal in some way? Or . . ."

"It seemed to me that it was too easy to disparage jobs of that kind. Mickey over there, for example . . ." (Huw pointed to a university lecturer with tousled hair), "or Susan there. They are always having a go at me about the iniquities of forcing people to go home when they want to stay here. 'No-one leaves their own country except for a very good reason,' Mickey always says. But what I always ask him is this: Is he saying that there should be no immigration controls at all? Is he saying people should come into this country entirely as they please, even if that meant taking in a million people a year? He will never answer my question. He waffles about how a million wouldn't come and so on, but he never answers my question."

"I can imagine," said the young woman, who knew Mickey slightly.

"A country does need a boundary of some sort," Huw went on. "An entity of any kind needs a boundary. And if a country has a boundary, it inevitably means that some people who want to come in will be turned away, by force if persuasion doesn't work. It seems to me that people like Mickey don't really offer any kind of alternative. So really what their position amounts to is: Let someone else do the dirty work, so I can keep my hands clean."

He smiled.

"Right. Now I'll shut up."

"No, please don't. I'm interested. And you haven't answered *my* question. Why did you become an immigration officer?"

"For the reasons I've just explained! Because keeping boundaries is necessary and somebody has to do it. People like Mickey and Sue say the service is full of racists and reactionaries. Well, unless liberal-minded people are prepared to join, it *would* be, wouldn't it?"

The young woman laughed.

"Yes, but that still doesn't explain why *you* joined. The world needs liberal-minded doctors, too, no doubt, and teachers and . . . police officers . . . all sorts of things. So why this in particular? Why this for you?"

"I . . . um . . ."

Huw was genuinely bewildered. He could dimly perceive that this was indeed a different kind of question, but it wasn't one he'd ever asked himself. It was like a glimpse through a door into what might be another room, or might more disturbingly be another entire world. He found himself noticing the young woman, not in a sexual way particularly, as far as he could tell, but just *noticing* her. She had made a connection.

"I don't really know," said Huw. "Why do *you* think?"

She laughed and for some reason blushed, which made him blush, too.

"Well, I don't know you!" she exclaimed. "How could I say?"

"I just thought you sounded as if you might have a theory."

She looked away, a movement that he found graceful and sweet (so now he *was* aware of sex). Then she shrugged and turned back to him.

"Well, I don't know you. But since you ask, my guess would be that there must be a reason within yourself that you are preoccupied with defending boundaries. Perhaps there is something inside that disturbs you and that you are trying to keep in, or something outside that frightens you. Perhaps you are afraid that if you get too close to anyone, they will invade you and gobble you up."

She saw the discomfort in Huw's face.

"Sorry," she said, "that came out rather . . ."

"Not at all. I did ask. A bit deep for me, I'm afraid, though."

"I've upset you," she said, "and I really didn't mean to."

"Don't be silly," he said.

But he changed the subject abruptly, jaggedly, uttering some banalities about turning thirty (this was Susan's thirtieth) and how (help!) the next big leap after that would be forty. There was no connection between them now. The conversation petered out. She said she was going to try some of that delicious-looking food and it was nice to meet him. He hurried for another glass of wine.

"Damn," he thought. "Why did I let that shake me? Why did I let her *see* it shook me?"

Later, he thought, "I'm so self-absorbed. I didn't ask her name or what she did or anything."

He went to look for her, but it seemed she had eaten her food and left.

• • • •

Back at his flat after the party, Huw needed somehow to collect himself before he could rest. As he sometimes did at times like this, he took a notebook out of a drawer and tried to write something down. He tried to define himself in some way.

"Marcher," he wrote at the top of the page.

Sometimes old words help. "Marcher" had more of a ring to it than "immigration officer."

"Let us put on armour, (he wrote)
Let us wear breastplates of polished bronze
And cover our faces with ferocious masks.
Let us be pure. Let us accept the cold.
Let us foreswear the search for love.
Let us ride in the bare places where the ground is clinker
And the towers are steel . . ."

And so on. He was rather pleased with it. (But then, it *was* late at night and he had taken a fair quantity of wine). Feeling he had somehow redeemed himself, he undressed, went to bed and was soon asleep.

• • • •

The phone rang at seven o'clock in the morning. It was Huw's boss, Roger, to tell him a new case had surfaced in a Special Category estate to the south of town. Everyone else in the Section was tied up with other cases. Could he go straight there and make a start on the investigation?

At half past eight, slightly the worse for last night's wine, Huw was waiting in his car to go through the estate checkpoint. There were two vehicles ahead of him. In front of the checkpoint was a large sign:

Department for Special Category Administration
Worcester District
Welcome to Perry Meadows

This is a Special Category estate within the meaning of the
Welfare Administration Act
You may be required to produce identification

DeSCA
Let's tackle this together!

The other cars passed through and Huw handed up his ID to the DeSCA Constabulary officer. This was the border between the wider world and the world of the welfare claimants, the "dreggies," as they were known.

The officer swiped Huw's card in front of a reader.

"Immigration Service, eh?" he observed with a knowing grin. "Nothing to do with these rumours about appearances and disappearances, by any chance?"

Huw reluctantly returned the smile. He disliked this sort of game.

"Sorry, mate. No comment."

"Of course," said the officer, "quite correct. Welcome to Perry Meadows."

Huw had visited a fair few such places. Not that his agency had anything to do with the administration of Special Category estates, but the kinds of cases that he dealt with often cropped up in them (as well as in prisons, mental hospitals, and private boarding schools).

Some estates were old concrete jungles, former "council estates" from the sixties and seventies of the last century. But Perry Meadows was an estate of the new kind. It had trees and shrubs and artificial hills to screen off homes from the

sight and sound of traffic. It had well-equipped playgrounds and shining community centres. It had attractive houses in at least ten quite different designs, with playful features like round windows and the occasional clock tower or weather vane, all brightly painted in cheerful nursery colours.

"These are not 'sink estates,'" the Secretary of State for Special Category Administration had recently declared, "and they are not 'dreg' estates. They are *decent dwelling places* for human beings: fellow-citizens in our society who find themselves, for whatever reason, *outside of* the economy and who require the special, focussed, concentrated help that my department can offer, to find their way back inside it . . ."

But for all the clock towers and weather vanes, Perry Meadows seemed to Huw to be a kind of modern zoo, providing its inhabitants with living conditions that resembled the natural habitat of their species, yet denying them somehow the opportunity to really *be* themselves.

He was slightly discomforted by these thoughts, but his attention was elsewhere. He was keeping a lookout for certain telltale signs.

And sure enough, there they were. On one wall a slogan sprayed in day-glo pink. **"Endless Worlds,"** it read. On another, in silver, the symbol of a many-branched tree.

Yes, and here again, look, on a high brick wall at one end of a low-rise block of flats: an enormous tangled tree-form in luminous yellow with a single word splattered over it in red:

Igga!

Inside the entrance of the DeSCA office there was a kind of carpeted airlock arrangement where Huw was required to show his card to a reader again and wait for clearance. A recorded message played while his details were being checked.

"Welcome to Perry Meadows Administration," said a sonorous male voice. "May we remind you that DeSCA and its partner agencies are committed to combating racism, sexism, homophobia, and discrimination in all its forms and our staff will challenge offensive or discriminatory language."

The inner door slid open and he was admitted to the Visitor Reception Area. (There was a separate reception area for Estate Residents.)

"Good morning, Mr. Davis," said the receptionist. "Ms. Rogers is on her way down to meet you. Can I get you a cup of coffee or anything?"

Ms. Rogers was the Executive Director of the Perry Meadows estate. She was

brisk and expensively dressed, with elegant short grey hair. Huw had met her kind before. They were mini-prime ministers of their own little kingdoms, with their own little governments of agency managers (police, social services, health, education, benefits, housing . . .) But in exchange for their empires, they had made a kind of Faustian bargain. They had to keep the lid on things. If an estate child was battered to death by a parent, or there was a riot of some sort, or if too much drugs and crime seeped out from the estate into the normal world outside, then Ms. Rogers' head would be on the block. Unless she could find someone else to blame, she would be the sacrificial victim when the world bayed "Something must be done!"

So today she was anxious. She would not normally have had much time for this young immigration officer, junior to herself both in age and in status, but now she badly needed his help. Huw savoured the situation.

"Mr. Davis, I'm Janet Rogers, *so* good of you to have come here so quickly," she enthused as she ushered him into a spacious office fitted with pale, polished furniture. "As you'll have gathered, this chap was picked up last night who sounds like one of your sort of cases. And a young girl disappeared a couple of days ago in a way that now looks as though it might be connected."

"Ms. Rogers . . ."

"Oh, call me Janet, please . . ."

"Janet, I'd be pleased to talk later, but my first priority has got to be to interview this man you've got in detention. These people have a way of disappearing."

"Yes, of course, I'll take you down to the police wing myself. Ah, here's your coffee. Did you want to drink it first? It would perhaps be an opportunity very briefly to . . ."

She was torn between her desire that Huw should deal with the matter quickly and her desire to hear his assessment of the situation.

"I'll take it with me, if you don't mind."

"Yes, of course."

She led him along a corridor and into a lift.

"We've never had any sign of this sort of thing before," she said. "It's completely out of the blue."

"Actually," said Huw (they were emerging from the lift and heading along another corridor), "for future reference, the signs were there to be seen. The graffiti. Have you not noticed that big yellow tree? Igga? You can see it from the car park of this building."

“The tree? Yes. I suppose I felt that a lot of young people have cottoned onto that tree thing. A sort of cult. Not necessarily an indication of actual . . . um . . .”

“Actually, the appearance of tree graffiti is thought to be a pretty reliable predictor of appearances or disappearances,” Huw said. “As you’ll have no doubt read in the recent Home Office circular,” he added innocently.

Janet Rogers pursed her lips slightly and said nothing. They had entered another airlock-like security door that led to the DeSCA Constabulary wing and were waiting for a policeman to come and let them through.

“Igga,” said Ms. Rogers. “Remind me, what is it supposed to be?”

“It’s a representation of the multiverse. It’s thought the word comes from Yggdrasil, the tree which contained the various worlds in Norse mythology. One theory is that there is a universe out there where the old Norse polytheistic religion never got supplanted by Christianity and continued into modern times, rather like Hinduism . . .”

But here the custody sergeant opened the door.

• • • •

The prisoner had been picked up as the result of a drunken brawl. He was a thickset man with close-shaven red hair, about thirty years old. He possessed an ID card of sorts, with a photograph of himself and giving his name as Wayne Furnish. But, though the card purported to have been issued in the last six months, it was quite different in design from the cards used either by special category citizens or by the population at large. The address it gave was local but non-existent, as was The Central Population Register, which (according to the card) was the issuing agency. And Wayne’s fingerprints did not correspond to any in the national databank.

Yet he spoke English not only fluently but also with the characteristic slightly rustic version of a Brummie accent that was spoken in the Worcester dreg estates. This was no foreigner.

“Ah!” he said, as Wayne was introduced to him. “The Ickies, eh? I thought you boys would be showing up soon.”

Ickies! Huw could have clapped his hands with professional pleasure. This was classic stuff: a local accent but a word or a phrase that locals never used.

He settled down into the chair opposite Wayne Furnish. The officer who had shown him in waited by the door.

“Ickies? You’ll have to explain that to me, Wayne.”

"Ickies! Incomer Control. That's what you are, yeah?"

"Incomer Control? No, the Immigration Service we call it."

"Ah. Well, I don't come from round here."

"You don't come from Worcester?"

Wayne narrowed his eyes and regarded Huw for a moment.

"Not from *this* Worcester. You know I don't, mate, or you wouldn't be here, would you?"

"So how did you get here?"

"Shifter pills, of course. *Seeds,* as we call them."

"These, yes?"

Huw held out a small plastic bag which the police had confiscated from Wayne when they arrested him. It contained two dull-red capsules.

"Yup. I ain't bothered, mate. I swallowed one when the old bill knocked on the door. I've got a seed in my blood."

"Do you mind telling me a bit more about where you come from?"

The shifter shrugged.

"The place I come from is shit. This place is just as bad. But it don't matter. Know what I mean? A couple of hours and I won't be here any more, mate. This'll be an empty room and I'll be somewhere where you won't never find me."

Huw nodded. He took out the standard checklist and started to go through it. What was the Prime Minister's name where Wayne came from? Was there a Perry Meadows there? (No, but there was an estate on the same site called Daisyfields.) What was currently in the news there? Who were the top football teams? . . . and so on. The idea was to accumulate a sort of map of the different worlds, the gradients of difference, the routes along which the shifters moved.

"None of this matters to me," Wayne said, after a few minutes. "Know what I mean? I'm a warrior of Dunner, I am. That's why I got this hammer on my arm. No one can shut me up in dreg estates no more. I'm a warrior of Dunner and my home is the Big Tree."

He grunted.

"And if you want me to answer any more questions, mate, I need a cup of tea and packet of cigs."

• • • •

Janet Rogers seemed to have been hovering over her phone for the three hours

that Huw spent with the shifter. As soon as he emerged, she was there to meet him and take him back to her office, where members of her management team were also waiting (C.I. Thomas, "my police chief," Dave Ricketts, "my senior registration manager," Val Hollowby, "my head of welfare" . . .)

"How did you get on?" they all wanted to know, as they plied Huw eagerly with coffee and sandwiches. "Has he been here long? Do you think this is an isolated case?"

"He's been here a month or so," Huw said. "Living in hiding, trading on the glamour of coming from another world. There are others, I would guess, though Wayne wouldn't say so. The ones who follow Dunner like to shift in groups, we've noticed as a rule."

"But if it's a drug which they each take separately, how could they all end up in the same place?" asked Mr. Ricketts.

Huw smiled, concealing his irritation. He could tell that these people had been stewing here all morning, rationalising, minimising, trying to persuade themselves that there wasn't a reason to panic. There was a fug of fear in the room. And what was it they were afraid of? The universe itself had sprung a leak in their backyard —the *universe!*—but that wasn't what bothered them. No, what they were worried about was being told off for not noticing it quickly enough.

"People often ask how they cross over together," he said to Mr. Ricketts. "The other question people ask is how can a drug bring over the clothes they wear and the things they have in their pockets? Well, the truth is we still have absolutely no idea how the 'seeds' work. But the scientists reckon that we're all still asking the wrong questions. Trying to understand the seeds by comparing them to other drugs is like trying to understand a magnet by weighing it or testing its hardness. There is some force involved which is fundamentally different from the ones we know about and feel we understand."

"You say he's a follower of Dunner?" asked C.I. Thomas, "Dunner is a pagan god, yes?"

"That's right," said Huw, "the thunder god: Donner, Dunar, Thor . . ." He repeated a piece of doggerel that another shifter had once taught him:

Wotty wiv 'is one eye
Dunner wiv 'is cock
Frija wiv 'er big tits
And two-faced Lok.

The assembled managers laughed uncomfortably.

"Does that mean he comes from a society which is still pagan?" asked Janet Rogers.

"No, he doesn't. He comes from a society very much like this, with a few minor differences (what we call the DeSCA is known as the DoSCA there, for example). The pagan cult must originate in a world that diverged much longer ago. But it seems to have spread very rapidly across many worlds with the shifters, just as the shifter pills themselves—the seeds—have done."

He finished his sandwiches.

"Now I need to look into this disappearance. This young girl . . ."

Val Hollowby, the gaunt-looking Head of Welfare, told him the story.

"Yes, this was a girl called Tammy Blows, fifteen years old. She's got a lot of problems. Physical abuse. Sexual abuse. Been in the care system for four years. Lots of problems there. Placements breaking down. Absconding. Drugs. For the last two months, she's been living in our Residential Assessment Unit. She's been talking a lot recently, so I now gather, about shifters, and seeds and Dunner and all that. I suppose we should have taken more notice."

Suddenly she leaned forward, looking into Huw's face with cavernous, urgent eyes:

"But, you know, Mr. Davis, they *all do.* It's easy enough with hindsight to say we could have seen the signs!"

Huw nodded, noncommittally.

"Who was the last person to see her?"

"Her social worker, Jazamine Bright. Two days ago. Took her out to talk to her about some of her recent problems. Tammy felt got at. When Jaz dropped her off at the unit, she announced that she was going to disappear and Jaz would never see her again. It seems she never actually went inside after Jaz drove off. We assumed she'd just absconded, something she's done many times before. But of course when Janet told me about this shifter chap showing up, I realised there might be a connection. Too late, of course, as will doubtless be said at the enquiry."

Ms. Hollowby gave a bitter little snort. "Though even if we *had* made the connection, I can't see there's much we could have done."

Huw made no comment on this.

"Well, my next job is to interview Jazamine Bright," he said.

"She's standing by," cried Janet Rogers. "We've booked an interview room for you. Would you like any more coffee? Or perhaps a cup of tea?"

• • • •

"Hello!" Jazamine exclaimed as Huw stood up to greet her. "I know you. The frontiersman! But you said you were an immigration officer, putting weeping refugees back on planes!"

She was the young woman from Susan's party. The one who had unsettled him by asking him why he did his job.

"Well, I *am* an immigration officer. It's just that I've moved on from dealing with the national boundary, to . . ."

". . . to guarding the universe itself," she interrupted. "Wow!"

She had seen right through him. Huw found himself reddening not just with embarrassment but with real shame. He remembered the poem he'd written last night.

"I'll tear it up and burn it as soon as I get home!" he vowed to himself.

But out loud he stubbornly defended his ground.

"It's important," he said. "Imagine if everyone could escape at will from the consequences of their actions. Imagine what it would do to the idea of responsibility and accountability and right and wrong!"

No one seemed to *get* it, the real enormity of it! No one! Not even the other members of his own Section.

"Tammy Blows wasn't escaping from the consequences of her actions," protested Jazamine Bright. "She was trying to escape from a world in which she was of no consequence at all. In fact, it must be hard for Tammy to believe that she ought to be here at all. For a start, she was conceived in a rape. Her father went to prison as a result."

"God!" breathed Huw. "Imagine that. Your very existence the result of a terrible transgression."

"'*Transgression,*'" observed Jazamine. "That's an interesting choice of word."

She smiled.

"But you're right," she went on, "there is something terribly contradictory about it: existing only because of a crime against your mother. And, now I think about it that way, Tammy's whole life is full of contradictions. She craves for love, but she always rejects affection and support; she's a tenacious fighter, but she always anticipates defeat; she's clever, but she's barely literate . . ."

Jazamine considered for a moment.

"Yes," she added, "and Tammy's very pretty, but she loathes her own body so much that she attacks it with knives and razor blades."

She told Huw that Tammy had talked on and off about Dunner and Igga and "seeds" for some weeks and had several times before talked of disappearing "into the Tree." But in the past, the disappearances that had followed such talk had gone no further than empty garages and paper recycling dumps, where Tammy and various friends had holed up for a few nights before being picked up by the police.

Yesterday morning, Jazamine had been up to the Residential Assessment Centre to go through Tammy's things and look for clues to her whereabouts. There had been a diary with several mentions of someone called Wayne who was going to "sort things" for her (for what price, it wasn't clear).

"Anyway, these are Tammy's files," Jazamine said, pushing a large pile of manila folders across the desk. "Val tells me you may need to see them. Here's a photo of Tammy in this one, look. A really beautiful girl, I always think."

She was. But Huw was noticing Jazamine. He was appreciating the fact that she showed none of the fear that had so irritated him in the estate management team. In her work with Tammy, Jazamine had certainly failed to notice things which in hindsight were significant. But "Well, these things happen" seemed to be her attitude.

"Thanks," said Huw, "I'll have a quick look at them. Then I'll go and have a word with the staff at the residential centre. Nice to meet you again."

Jazamine stood up.

"Yes, listen, I was rude about your job just now. I'm sorry. I was just nervous, that's all—and upset for Tammy. Please don't be offended. You seem very nice. I like the way you're passionate about what you do."

He smiled. "Well, thank you. I found it interesting what you asked me at the party. About why do I do this. I've never stopped to think about it like that before."

"Oh, well, good." She hesitated. "You don't fancy meeting up sometime, socially, I mean, for a drink or something?"

"Well, I'd like to, but I'm not really supposed to . . ."

". . . to socialise with people who are involved in your investigations? I see. Another boundary, eh?"

"Boundaries are important," Huw insisted.

"So they are," she replied, "but they aren't the *only* important thing."

He laughed.

"No. You're right. And I'd like to have a drink with you. How about at the weekend?"

• • • •

So then there was Huw alone looking at the file and feeling—what?—slightly *dazed* in a not unpleasant kind of way. How sweet that Jazamine had taken a liking to him. How strange.

He turned his attention to the files. Yes, she was a pretty girl, this Tammy Blows, a pretty, blonde little waif looking out from a blurry photo taken on some institutional outing to Barry Island. Poor child. Where was she now? Young shifters were very vulnerable in a new world, because they had to depend on adults to hide them from the authorities. Underage prostitutes picked up by the police, for example, had more than once turned out to be shifters from other worlds.

Well, may Dunner protect you, Tammy, Huw thought.

It was odd. He had never met this girl. He was twice her age. He came from a completely different kind of background. Yet as he looked at the photo, he felt strangely close to her. As if they shared something in common.

And then he thought: Yes, that's it! It's like poachers and gamekeepers. It's set a thief to catch a thief. I am in this work because I feel like a shifter myself—a shifter or a refugee. *That's* why I chose to patrol the border. So I could look over at the other side.

He became suddenly very aware of the two "seeds" that the police had handed over, now in his briefcase right in front of him.

"Don't be ridiculous!" he said aloud, shaking himself.

There was a knock at the door. It was a police officer from the custody suite.

"Sorry to disturb you, Mr. Davis. I've been asked to let you know. That Wayne Furnish has disappeared. Vanished from a locked cell. Could you spare a moment to come down and talk to the officers on duty?"

• • • •

Back in the police wing, the duty sergeant and another officer were waiting. They showed Huw the empty cell and watched him while he went in. The smell in there was unmistakable: a burnt, electrical, ozone tang.

"Yes, he's done a shift, all right," Huw said. "Don't worry. There was absolutely nothing you or anyone could have done."

He looked at the stunned faces of the sergeant and the two young officers.

"A bit disturbing for you, yes?"

"Nothing like this has ever happened to any of us," said the sergeant. "We're a bit spooked by it, to be honest with you."

Huw turned back into the room and sniffed the hot, burnt smell.

"It *is* uncomfortable, I know. One of them disappeared right in front of me once. Just a kind of popping sound as the air rushed into the vacuum where he had been. Then nothing. There's something violent about it, isn't there? Something violent and shocking."

"Violent I can cope with," the sergeant said, "shocking I can cope with. But this . . ."

Huw nodded.

"Listen. There's one thing I should warn you about. We don't really know how the seeds work, but it's something more like a force field than a drug. You can get some side effects if you've been near a shifter, especially if you've been near him when he crosses over: strange dreams, vivid images, unfamiliar impulses . . ."

The three policemen waited expectantly. They wanted something more from him. They wanted him to take the nightmare away. He was the expert. It was his job. Again he felt angry, though he would have found difficult to say exactly why. But he managed a reassuring tone.

"Don't worry. These things do pass. But you may not sleep very well tonight."

• • • •

Huw interviewed all the staff and residents at the Assessment Unit, as well as two young men picked up by the police at the same time as Wayne Furnish. When he got back to his flat at just before 10 p.m., he phoned his supervisor, Roger, to report back.

"No leads to other shifters at all, I'm afraid. It's possible that Wayne really was the only one here. Anyway, you'll have my written report in the morning."

Roger told him that it had been a busy day for the whole Section. A group of three shifters had been picked up in a Shropshire public school, and as many as eight missing persons were now thought to be linked to their arrival.

"That's why I couldn't give you any back-up. It's getting silly. Whitehall's going to have to get its head out of the sand and give us some real support with this or we may as well throw in the towel."

"The police took two seeds off this Furnish man. I should have brought them back to the office for safekeeping, but I didn't get round to it. Sorry. They're locked in my briefcase. I'll bring them in first thing."

“That’s fine. And there you are, look, Huw, we’ve achieved something. That’s two less new shifters!”

Huw said nothing.

“Huw? Are you still there?”

“Yes, sorry. Attention wandered. Tired I suppose. Two less shifters, you said? I don’t quite . . .”

“A good day’s work, Huw. Now forget all about it and get some sleep.”

Roger had only recently transferred from general immigration work at Heathrow, and was not personally familiar with the effects of dealing with shifters. Otherwise he might have realised that wishing Huw a good night’s sleep was a little unkind.

Huw put down the phone. He felt vertiginous and slightly nauseous. It was the same each time. It didn’t diminish with experience.

He made himself heat a small meal in the microwave. Then he poured himself a drink and sat down to draft the report of the day’s investigations.

It was after one in the morning when he finished work—and then the sudden absence of a task left him feeling disturbingly empty, as if busyness had been a kind of screen. He remembered the insight that had come to him as he looked at the picture of Tammy Blows.

“I am a shifter, too,” he thought, “or worse that that: I am the shifter equivalent of a voyeur. I like to watch. At least Tammy and Wayne have the guts to really do it.”

And again he felt that alarmingly powerful urge to take the seeds from his briefcase and swallow one himself. It would be like suicide, as a shifter had once said to him, “like suicide, but without the drawbacks.”

“Come on,” he tried to tell himself. “Don’t be silly. This is just . . .”

But he was too tired. He exhausted himself daily trying to defend a frontier which lay wide open all around him and which nobody else seemed to really see. It was too much to keep on fighting now when it had opened up inside his own head.

“I will go to bed and wait until morning,” he said out loud. “And if I feel the same way then, I will do it.”

He was amazed to hear what had emerged from his own mouth.

• • • •

All night, his mind divided in the darkness, fecund as Igga, like bacteria

multiplying in a Petri dish.

He walked along dim corridors with many doors; he climbed enormous flights of stairs with missing steps and broken banisters. He teetered on the top of a precarious pinnacle above an ocean that seethed with fish and whales. He glimpsed Wayne Furnish on a headland in the distance, brandishing Dunner's hammer. He saw Janet Rogers and all her management team round a table in the middle of the sea. Many times he felt himself falling. Once Jazamine appeared and whispered to him, so clearly that he was jolted awake by the shock.

"I could love you," she whispered.

Another time she held out a seed to him.

Towards dawn, with extraordinary clarity, he had a vision of Tammy Blows, alone in one of the neat, grassy spaces of Perry Meadows. She was standing still, but the houses were dancing around her, appearing and disappearing again, changing in shape and size as the worlds passed her by. Once a block of flats six storeys high appeared right in front of Tammy's face. A few seconds later, a lorry honked and swerved as she appeared, fleetingly, in the middle of a road. Tammy was green with nausea.

A mean little shopping precinct appeared around her. Startled faces turned in her direction, then vanished. For just a moment, she was standing in the pouring rain. There was another shopping precinct, then another. Some sort of grey civic sculpture began to skip and jump around her, changing shape from a man to a bird to a cube of welded girders . . . Then it vanished. The buildings vanished too. The dance had reached an end.

It was a sunny day. She was in a wide meadow full of buttercups. A lark sang high above her. A mild breeze blew in her face. Tammy dropped to her knees and was violently sick.

In the distance was a wire perimeter fence with cranes and bulldozers parked alongside it. It was the same in every direction. The wide meadow was a building site. They were about to build a new estate.

• • • •

As Huw's alarm bleeped, the universe split into three.

In one universe, he jumped out of bed and swallowed the seeds in his briefcase, following Tammy Blows before he had time to consider the warning in his dream.

In another, he renounced not only the shifter pills, but also Jazamine Bright.

"I will phone her from the office today and cancel the drink," he decided, foreswearing love and friendship for his lonely and thankless calling.

And in a third universe, he made a different choice again.

"No. No seeds," he told his reflection in the shaving mirror "But I *will* see Jazamine. Boundaries are important, but they're not the *only* important thing."

He smiled. He had a pleasant smile, when he took off his marcher's helmet and laid down his marcher's shield.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Beckett has published dozens of short stories, five novels, and two short story collections. In addition to writing science fiction, he works part time as a social worker and has written several textbooks on that subject. His latest novel is *Daughter of Eden,* the third book in the Dark Eden series. *America City,* his next novel, is forthcoming from Corvus in late 2017. Corvus will also be publishing *Spring Tide,* a collection of all-new short fiction, in 2018.

Mix Tapes From Dead Boys

E. Catherine Tobler | 4980 words

1: Retrograde, "Starry Messenger"

The derelict hangs in Neptune's blue orbit, a chip of shadowy flint from a distance. Up close, it's old and rusting, myriad old systems cobbled together, and Hadley swallows her nervous and exhilarated heart a dozen times as she latches the pod to its belly, makes a hard seal at the airlock, and geckos her team inside. The exterior of their spatulae suits—hands and knees and hips—permits them freedom of movement even in zero gee. Especially in zero gee. She glances back at their pod once, all golden warm waiting light, then allows the dark derelict interior to swallow her. Even her camlight seems small in this darkness, a pinprick in the surrounding black. Shaw and Newt are already far ahead in the corridors, pale lights bouncing off dark walls.

Hadley's comms crackle with static as she geckos into a corridor filled with unspooled cable and debris. Blue and green environmental cables, red mechanical, yellow waste systems, purple gravitational. It's all been undone. Hadley can't stop studying the tangle of cables, the way they plait together and apart, control sliding into confusion. The cables coil around her as she moves through their mass, snake down the length of her body, between her legs. One thumps against her helmet, reminding her they do have weight, presence, but their touch is fleeting as she pushes herself into an adjoining corridor, the portal like the lens of a great eye, black until her camlight pierces it. The air feels strangely warm, a current of piss in a swimming pool, but Hadley knows that's not possible. The ship is cold and frost glitters up its bulkheads.

"Hadley, report."

There's nothing *to* report and her camlight breaks the distant dark, revealing nothing more than another portal at the corridor's end. The walls are marked here, directing crew aft and fore, reminding one where cockpit and head are. Hadley pushes toward the cockpit, the corridors spreading like lifeless arteries around the cold ship's core. The core, three levels tall, once thrummed with life and would have filled corridors with waves of clear, pulsing light like a heartbeat, but now it sits in its own shadow, a rigid corpse. Hadley sees no damage to its exterior, but the smooth panels of transparent aluminum also don't reveal any residual fuel. The ship is dry.

"Hadley. Report."

"There's nothing," she comms back to the station, to impatient Ferro.

She swims over to a window, looking high above where Urbain Station floats in Neptune's light. The station resembles nothing more than a handful of scattered toothpicks set at odd angles and Hadley can't stomach the sight of it. From this distance, it's so small and she feels impossibly big. She pushes away from the window, scrambles up the wall, and deeper into the derelict. She snaps her camlight off and Ferro chirps in her ear.

"Your feed's gone dark."

Hadley turns the comms down and floats toward the cockpit in the silent dark. They don't know how long the ship has been here; Hadley has never seen the derelict's shadow against Neptune's blue. But now here it is, caught in Neptune's orbit with the station like the ship knew what it was doing. Shaw spotted it five days before, tried to raise it on comms. The ship, branded *Gateway* along its flanks, had no reply.

Hadley runs her hand over the wall and the ship *moves* beneath her touch. She is reminded of a cat arching under a stroke and is repulsed. Her throat closes and she pushes herself into the final hatch, the cockpit spreading beyond her. The space is small, windows giving view to Neptune, and somewhere beyond, the distant prick of the burning sun. She touches the panels and controls, each in turn, but none respond.

She turns Ferro's volume back up, to find him in mid-summons. "—adley?"

"Ferro, there's nothing."

She touches the control panel again and it ripples beneath her gloved fingers. Beneath her touch, the startling face of a ghost assembles itself in the bright spectrogram of a glitch, the same glitches Hadley's tracked for six months.

2: Rephlex Brothers, "Submerged"

Hadley hears her own voice whisper: *"The interface is warm . . . the portal is cold . . . the interface is warm . . . the portal is—"*

Her hands part the gelatin, only it feels like sun-warm flesh, like wet muscle against her fingertips as she pushes her arms and body through. She doesn't know where she is—her world and another? One layered over the other, muscle moving bone. The muscle doesn't part so much as it allows her inside, granting momentary access before it seals behind her.

She lifts her chin, the damp muscle threatening to overwhelm as it enfolds

bare shoulders and clenched jaw. Moving arms and legs is like swimming, but there's no water, only strongly corded flesh that ripples and swallows. There's no suit to secure her against the environment, and no air, but she breathes, and beyond the walls striated with ribbons of glistening, pearly fat, sees shadow forms moving in concert.

They are not bodies, nor are they plants; she cannot place a name to them. They move as if they are fucking—it's not lovemaking, it's not anything gentle or tender. It is one form violating another. One form consuming, the other consumed. She thinks about rain, about how droplets of water are so small and harmless on their own, yet as they gather and spread, they consume a thing, transform a thing. The shadow forms do this, spreading where once no shadow fell, devouring all she can see.

The walls once consumed by shadow ripple and slide her farther down, further on. She cannot hook her fingers into the warm walls to stop herself, so everything slides past her—or she past everything. The walls are slick, some of them pebbled with what seems gooseflesh. The scent of burning nutmeg and cheese mold envelop her, and she tastes the mouth of the first boy she ever kissed in a serious way. It wasn't the right mouth, but it wasn't for a lack of trying.

She tries now to press a foot against the walls that waffle beneath her weight, that expand and contract. She tries to press her mouth against their changing forms, but the walls spit her out, whole, drenched, unconscious.

3: Collapsed Young, "Floating Bodies"

Methane-blue Neptune, threaded with Monet clouds.

Hadley's been on Urbain Station for thirteen years and sometimes still thinks she's underwater, the current Great Dark Spot floating outside her windows like a cloud of tangled algae. She presses her bare hand against the window, against the edge of the distant spot, allowing dabbed clouds to spin through her splayed fingers. It's only morning come again, she tells herself, and not underwater at all, but the sensation remains and she skims her hands over her arms, expecting water to pearl off. The distant fleck of the derelict comes into view, an eyelash scattered against Neptune's cheek unless you knew otherwise. Hadley thinks about the way the ship moved beneath her hands, the way it fell dark when the crew left.

The way the ship offered her the thing she'd been looking for all this while. The ghosts she calls glitches.

Her comm crackles with Ferro's voice, thunder and static. "Hadley, the

interface is—”

—warm.

“—acting up again, can you come?”

Hadley thinks about coming and her eyes slide shut, goosebumps running where she thought water had been a moment before. She remembers goosebumped walls beneath her hands and she thumbs the comm, savoring the cool round metal button under her finger, unseen. “Yes.”

Command deck smells like rain, always has. Something to do with the metal of the walls having inhabited vacuum so long, or so Ferro theorizes. Inside, the walls occasionally weep water and oil, and Hadley imagines every droplet flung wide when the station at last collapses, perfect spheres drifting forever in the black of space, unseen until they splat flat against something large, hulking. Hadley drags her fingers through any wetness as she glides toward Ferro’s station. She is surprised when the wall doesn’t move under her touch; it’s solid, her fingers smudged with black when she withdraws.

Ferro’s interface

—the interface is warm—

is cold beneath her fingers. It doesn’t take Hadley long to find the problem: a hiccup between channels, a kink when it comes to getting information from here to there. Hadley removes the obstacle, an endless, cycling glitch. It is much like the glitch the derelict gave up to her, full of static and hiss. The glitches are always old, degrading and decades out of sync. She sends the glitch to her private screen and locks it under code and key.

Hadley sees a distant spark of light in the station’s upper solar array, fire circling down and down, and she says nothing about it, does nothing, because she’s out here to study spikes in temperature, to figure out why blue Neptune’s thermosphere is so damn hot. She lingers in Ferro’s chair, thinking about fire and heat, thinking about the way the interface feels beneath her fingers—how it sometimes fragments with goosebumps—but then she’s gone and Ferro calls a thank you that she only partially hears. Her mind is on to the glitch, which she pulls up the second her chamber door seals.

The glitch’s spectrogram is cold blue, as blue as stormy Neptune out her window, running in streams and spiking into mountains of dialogue. The audio is static, as it so often is, and Hadley shunts it to the side. She inverts the display and there she finds the face, the image of a boy bathed in a blue, a boy beneath the waves, a boy whose eyes become pools, portals, passkeys into a stranger place. He is beautiful, wrought in hair-thin lines before the lines splice into the endless

smaller channels she's been hunting.

Hadley adds the glitch to the host of others, projecting the spectrograms onto her chamber walls. Her room is shrouded in blue and violet lines that resolve into faces, into hands, into screaming mouths cascading from glitch to glitch and back again. Where do they come from? What do they mean?

They are never the same boy; they are never quite the same image. Hadley stretches in her rack and counts them as they slide across the ceiling, the windows. There are ten and then thirty and then fifty-seven, including the one the derelict gave her.

4: Saint Lo, "Fundamental Ephemeris"

This hexagon of oil.

Hadley's body is three times its size as it expands in every direction all at once. The oil was beneath her, but it also hangs above. She cannot precisely say where her eyes are, because she can see to the horizon in every direction without turning her burgeoning head. The distant sun sets and Neptune's orbiting moons rise and Hadley cannot tell the light from the darkness or the heat from the cold. Blue looks gray and tastes like strawberries. (She hasn't eaten a strawberry in thirteen years, but remembers the gooseflesh red skins against her tongue.)

She thinks it's cold—*the portal is cold.* That's what the oil is, the portal she used, the portal that opened for her like a flower. She tells herself this over and over in an effort to keep herself oriented; she repeats the steps as if it were a test. The portal opened and she— She . . . went? Yes, stepped inside.

The liquid black paints her body as it swallows her, up her toes and over her knees until she is black as the heavens and expanding. Pushing outward, farther from that constant center, every direction, all at once. She expands so quickly, crosses those vast distances in a blink, that stellar winds chap her cheeks, skimming like fingers over skull and down spine. She feels the wind within every vertebrae. Hadley believes she will rip to pieces, that bits of her will drift between the stars for eternity, but she doesn't. She keeps going, keeps reaching, while a low keening pours from her distending mouth.

Her mouth births fat, particolored planets like bubbles. Before and behind her, they fall into their orbits, a dance she can predict. She knows how each will move, how each moves with the others; she knows that in one point three million years, this system will collapse into the violent nova of its sun; this system that lingers sulfuric on her nursing tongue will have come and gone and none will be

the wiser. Hadley tells herself she will know, she will remember what these worlds tasted like in the back of her throat; beneath her collarbone; behind her heart.

Hadley stretches past them in every direction, until they are a single prick of blurred light against the dark. She angles herself up and down, until she sees the spiral arm in which these worlds reside. She is small then and falling, an arrow, a comet, shrieking into galactic clusters, into planetary bodies, past worlds that have been declassified as planets at all. Past everything, and into a cool blue hexagon of oil.

5: Quiet Cantina, "Help Not Wanted"

The interior of the derelict smells like rust and the cockpit's main console moves like an ocean beneath Hadley's body. Her gloves will not adhere to the console while it moves, so she's beholden to its motion; when it rocks up, she slides back. When it anchors down, she props up. When Shaw enters the cockpit, the motion ceases, a secret *Gateway* reveals only to Hadley. Hadley eases her glove from the still surface, dropping another glitch into her private files before she looks at Shaw.

"Ferro wonders if the engines—"

But Shaw doesn't get to finish. The derelict buckles, as if something has impacted it. Hadley moves from console to window; debris spirals past, past *Gateway* and toward the station itself. Hadley is captivated by the debris. The edges of the fragment glow as if it were newly cut from a larger body. Glowing, burning metal, streaking in great profusion toward Urbain Station. Toothpicks, Hadley thinks, and Shaw's already on the comms, yelling at Ferro.

It's not like the station can be moved. Hadley puts her hand to the window, gloved fingers eclipsing Urbain Station, but not the explosion that soon follows. Her fingers appear to bloom bright petals, orange pollen scattering after. Lilies, Hadley thinks, the damage seeming far distant to her.

Shaw hurries; Hadley sits on the console, considering. Debris was not unknown to the system, but was largely predictable and easy to track. This, this was unknown, and as she ponders what it might have been—Shaw relaying that they're to shelter in place on the derelict—a strange possibility overcomes Hadley.

"Hadley, are you even hearing me?"

And Hadley laughs soft.

The strange possibility is this: that the burning fragment looked like the curved

hull of the *Gateway,* shattered and burning and flung with great force, but *Gateway* stands whole around them, and so Hadley discards the idea. She knows she should not be able to see into the past or future, but time is weird here. Time hurts.

Pain draws her back to the glitch like addict to pill. The glitch the derelict gave her pulls up as static. Hadley, on her private tablet, cycles the sound into her helmet. The static spectrogram is a flat field of gray, sprinkled with salt and pepper. But a yellow speck blooms in this field, arcing up like a sundog as it is joined by another and another. This yellow speck becomes a line which describes the shape of a lip, the shape of *lips* parting, of lips speaking, and amid the static there is a low hum that Hadley can feel at the base of her own throat. She cannot press fingers to the spot, given her protective suit, but longs to.

Hadley hums with the glitch, and within its matrix, the low hum resolves itself into a voice. A male voice, a male mouth, a mouth spreading wide like a pool of oil, to spit a ship into the universe, a ship that should not be. Hadley stares—does not know if her eyes are open or shut—and the glitch voice that has resolved from the static hum says *pleh pleh pleh* in an endless heartbeat.

6: Tusi, "And Yet, It Moves"

Everything is backwards.

Hadley holds the heavy length of her leg within her own gloveless hands. She thinks the severed stump of it, cut so cleanly at the knee, should be pouring blood, but it's only the occasional droplet that drifts upward, smooth red spheres that fly forever. She would envision them caught in a planet's gravity, but it's the weight of her own leg that captivates her and takes every thought. Her bones are impossibly white and if she stares long enough, the individual cells and channels become apparent to her. Some parts of the bone are like a river, running with marrow, blood, and stem cells.

Her fingers tighten around her calf, leaving pale white marks. There should be more blood, she thinks, but then: There should be more pain. There's no pain whatsoever. She stands on her whole leg and grips the other, and thinks she should be shaking, unconscious, bleeding out, but there is an absence of everything.

Until everything that was lacking pours over her like scalding oil. As if a switch is flipped, Hadley feels *everything*—the cut of the blade that severs her knee, the wrenching fibrous twist as it is forcibly removed and placed within her

cold hands.

The portal is—

Shut up shut the fu—

Hadley cannot breathe, cannot *think,* and her lungs catch fire, begging her to take a breath. She does and breath becomes blood, filling her lungs to overflowing. She bucks under the flood, held within restraints she cannot see. She strains against the hold, wrenching shoulders and hips, and in this she drops her leg. A shriek rips from her bloodied mouth, and against the vault of sky above her, a face is framed within Neptune's blue. The spot is an eye, narrowing as it surveys her. Hadley cannot breathe, but it no longer matters.

The foot of her severed leg brushes against her cheek and she presses into it, wrapping her arms around the limb in a clumsy hug. Leg as anchor now, to keep herself from falling into that dark Neptune eye. She stares at the severed limb, uncertain what it means, what the face of Neptune wants from her. She cannot stop shaking; cannot separate herself from the pain that engulfs her. She is shrieking and whimpering in the same instant, until the Great Dark Spot blinks and all goes mercifully numb. Hadley sags against the restraints, clutching her severed leg.

"Wh—"

She tries to speak, but her bloodied mouth cannot form words. Everything is so far away: the station, the faces, the derelict.

At the thought of the ship, Hadley's body bucks with a fresh wave of pain. They don't want her to think about it. They? Who? Hadley sees no one. She pushes the idea of the ship away, until she no longer feels anything, until it is as though she's been wrapped in cotton. The predatory blue orb of Neptune is erased from her sight, and she sinks though blissful layers of nothing, watching the toes on her severed leg wriggle.

7: Violet Mondays, "Breathless, Here I Lay"

"Hadley."

The span of a minute.

"Hadley."

"The interface is warm . . . the portal is c-cold."

Shaw's face is overrun with the spectrograms spiraling over Hadley's walls. Shaw looks like every boy Hadley has pulled from the glitches until she hefts Hadley from the floor and smooths her back into bed. There, Shaw's face is her

own once more, softly lined, her eyes portals that—

The portal is cold.

Hadley reaches for her own leg, but Shaw's hand intercepts hers; Shaw straps Hadley down and seals the blankets and Hadley finally feels the weight of her attached legs. She wriggles her toes beneath the blanket and—

"Doc is coming to take a look," Shaw whispers, and the spectrograms snap off, leaving them in a stunningly plain sleeping cell.

"Don't go," Hadley says.

Shaw doesn't leave, but that's not what Hadley means. The derelict, Hadley thinks, and beyond the cell's windows, she sees it, hanging like an eyelash against blue Neptune.

"Gateway," she whispers, and Shaw shushes her.

Gateway to what?

Hadley takes a deep breath, marveling at the way her lungs don't fill and overrun with blood. She closes her eyes and revels in the lack of pain. But the longing is still there, the longing to float inside *Gateway* and go. The spectrograms snap back on, as if Hadley called them. Maybe she did.

"Hadley, what are these things?"

Shaw's warmth moves off Hadley's rack; she floats among the swirling spectrograms and Hadley loses herself in the ballet, Shaw consumed by the light. The faces of the boys ripple over her, rest between her shoulders, laugh against her calves.

"Ghosts," Hadley says, and reaches for her legs. She can only touch the top of her knee, but it's like fire when she does. Soft, gelatinous fire. She jerks her hand back, but her hand misses the weight of her detached leg, and a sob escapes her.

"Ghosts don't exist," Shaw says.

She dives toward Hadley's workstation, anchoring herself there, and Hadley tries to open her mouth, tries to speak, but nothing comes out. Shaw pulls up the files—all the glitches spread before her, low and pulsing under her fingers. Hadley tries to tell her *no, they aren't meant for you,* but the glitches say no first.

Shaw is pulled into the spectrograms and they slice through her as if they are not light, but wire. Hadley makes a choked sound, but cannot move—can barely breathe—and Shaw . . . Shaw floats in countless pieces around the room, droplets of blood moving unobstructed through the strange blue light. Hadley bucks against the straps that hold her down, but she cannot get free, her legs somehow liquid beneath the blankets. She embraces the feeling, melting out of her skin to run off the edge of the bed, spreading across the floor, which is impossible—she

knows she would float, just as what remains of Shaw floats, splatting flat against the walls when the motion of one intersects with the other.

8: Burned for Knowledge, "It's Just Science"

Hadley fills the derelict. She is blood and heat and fury. Is she on the station? She tells herself she is not, pushing herself deeper into the derelict's haunted corridors, screaming. *You want to cut us apart, come for me, come for me!*

The image of light cutting Shaw into pieces will not leave her; the blue ghost boys run Shaw through over and over, so Hadley embraces the image, nodding every time it starts anew, ripping the anger she feels from it, transforming it into fuel. She finds she can ride the waves of their violence, pushing deeper into the derelict than any went before. She finds the boys in the bowels—where else, she thinks, where else. Stinking, black with rot, dead but sobbing.

"Hadley, what are these things?"

Shaw is dead, Hadley is certain, but the woman floats at her side, studying the dead boys before them in the world that layers over their own. The boys hang in decaying cocoons, as if they've been preserved, as if someone tried to save them but then forgot about them. The boys are networked through cocoons and other fibrous cords she doesn't want to think overly long about. Hadley floats closer, her fury sending a scalding light over the nearest boy, and she can see: He's been cut, he's been disassembled and reconstructed, like a small toy. His hair should have rotted away, but Hadley finds she can take a fistful of it and lift his head. His eyes should have disintegrated, but the boy looks at her across a hundred years.

"It's just science," he says, and Hadley startles so badly she drops his head. It sags limp, chin touching chest.

Hadley paddles away, but comes too close to another dead boy, whose arms encircle her. He pulls her back against his bony body, and she grows impossibly warm, his skeletal hands spanning her belly.

"They'll take you apart, too," he says.

Another boy across the ragged circle of cocoons lifts his dead head. "If they haven't started already."

Hadley elbows the skeletal boy straight in his ribs, which crack and shatter to dust. There are ten boys on the derelict, and they tell her of twenty others, and twenty-seven more, including the one the derelict gave her. His name was Galle, they tell her, and the last thing he ever saw of this life was Neptune hanging clear in the night sky, so clear and blue he believed he was underwater. Believed it so

much that even as they tore him apart, he reached out to brush the dotted water from his forearms.

"They?" Hadley has no breath, floating in bright fury before the dead boys. But if they can answer her now, they do not.

Fifty-seven glitches—fifty-seven *lives.*

Fifty-seven messages cycling beyond their graves, into Hadley's consciousness. A hidden track that unexpectedly floods the reaching silence. A cry. A warning. A—

9. Galilei Sea, "Mover of the Earth, Stopper of the Sun"

The interface is warm . . . the portal is cold . . . the interface is warm . . . the portal is—

Her hands part the gelatin, only it feels like sun-warm flesh, like wet muscle against her fingertips as she pushes her arms and body through. The muscle doesn't part so much as it allows her inside, granting momentary access before it seals behind her.

She lifts her chin—by this time she knows what to expect, the damp muscle threatening to overwhelm as it enfolds bare shoulders and clenched jaw. She tries to break free, but the strongly corded flesh ripples and swallows hers. There's no suit to secure her against the environment, and no air, but she breathes and beyond the walls striated with ribbons of glistening, pearly fat, sees shadow forms moving in concert.

They, she thinks.

Some of her fire has died, especially as the forms now turn toward her, as they stare and approach. There are no eyes, but Hadley feels their regard nonetheless; they have a presence, they have a weight, and this settles against her, pinning her where she floats within the corded muscle. The shadows close, closer now, and Hadley cannot breathe, but she suspects she never has in this half-dreaming place, this place they have brought her.

"You all struggle," the voice says. "You all resist. Down through the ages, this remains true. No matter what we may do—you resist. Some start willing—so beautifully curious—and then resistance."

Hadley doesn't like to think of it, all they may have done. All those bodies, some old and some young, some human and others not; some dressed in uniforms and others draped in only the rotting cocoons. Hadley doesn't like to think of it, but cannot help it, because the glitches haven't let her go for six

months. Maybe longer? She doesn't know. Cannot count in this space with these forms pressing closer to her, their hands not quite moving over her, but inside her nonetheless. When one strays up her throat, she bites until she tastes its blood and it is bright against her tongue, bright like Neptune in the sky.

She spits, blue blood streaking bright against the pearls of fat in the muscle walls. "It's just science, is that what you told them? Is that what they believed?"

The glitches run behind her eyes, all those faces, all those silent pleas. The spectrogram faces flood the chamber, so bright Hadley cannot see anything else. But she can hear—and in the endless heartbeat of the glitch voice, *pleh pleh pleh,* in the static that she's shunted to the side, she hears it, and she knows. It was never a silent plea. It was always right there, wanting what every communication wants—to be heard. But those boys . . . those bodies . . .

Hadley fills the chamber the way she filled the derelict, fury overflowing her until it cannot be contained, until it is brighter than the distant sun. She is fire and rage, and the forms withdraw but do not entirely retreat. They, like humanity, are curious, and cannot help but watch. Hadley doesn't know what she can do, but she knows what she intends. She reaches for all those dead boys, human and alien and others beyond, reaches for the network they have made of themselves, until she is inside every part of them. Until they know they've been heard, until they can hear her reply.

But more than that.

Hadley fills the derelict, flooding every dark corridor until the ship burns, until its dead engine kicks with fresh and furious life. *Gateway* thrums and it's then Hadley knows—it's a gateway for *them,* a lens, a door. With the engine throbbing, they see their chance, the door opening wide again, taking them places they might otherwise never reach. The shadows writhe and reach. And Hadley—

Hadley fills *Gateway* to overflowing.

10: Mazzoleni, "Arcsecond"

"—adley, *report!"*

"Ferro—get *down.*"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

E. Catherine Tobler is in possession of two mix tapes from dead boys and she treasures them. Her short fiction has appeared in *Clarkesworld, Beneath Ceaseless Skies,* and on the Sturgeon Award ballot. The fourth book in her Folley & Mallory series is out in the summer of 2017. Follow her @ECthetwit.

To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight

The Last Flight of Doctor Ain

James Tiptree, Jr. | 2730 words

Dr. Ain was recognized on the Omaha-Chicago flight. A biologist colleague from Pasadena came out of the toilet and saw Ain in an aisle seat. Five years before, this man had been jealous of Ain's huge grants. Now he nodded coldly and was surprised at the intensity of Ain's response. He almost turned back to speak, but he felt too tired; like nearly everyone, he was fighting the flu.

The stewardess handing out coats after they landed remembered Ain, too: a tall, thin, nondescript man with rusty hair. He held up the line staring at her; since he already had his raincoat with him, she decided it was some kooky kind of pass and waved him on.

She saw Ain shamble off into the airport smog, apparently alone. Despite the big Civil Defense signs, O'Hare was late getting underground. No one noticed the woman.

The wounded, dying woman.

Ain was not identified en route to New York, but a 2:40 jet carried an "Ames" on the checklist, which was thought to be a misspelling of Ain. It was. The plane had circled for an hour while Ain watched the smoky seaboard monotonously tilt, straighten, and tilt again.

The woman was weaker now. She coughed, picking weakly at the scabs on her face half-hidden behind her long hair. Her hair, Ain saw, that great mane which had been so splendid, was drabbed and thinning now. He looked to seaward, willing himself to think of cold, clean breakers. On the horizon he saw a vast black rug: Somewhere, a tanker had opened its vents. The woman coughed again. Ain closed his eyes. Smog shrouded the plane.

He was picked up next while checking in for the BOAC flight to Glasgow. Kennedy Underground was a boiling stew of people, the air system unequal to the hot September afternoon. The check-in line swayed and sweated, staring dully at the newscast. SAVE THE LAST GREEN MANSIONS—a conservation group was protesting the defoliation and drainage of the Amazon basin. Several people recalled the beautifully colored shots of the new clean bomb. The line squeezed together to let a band of uniformed men go by. They were wearing buttons inscribed: WHO'S AFRAID?

That was when a woman noticed Ain. He was holding a newssheet, and she heard it rattling in his hand. Her family hadn't caught the flu, so she looked at him

sharply. Sure enough, his forehead was sweaty. She herded her kids to the side away from Ain.

He was using Instac throat spray, she remembered. She didn't think much of Instac; her family used Kleer. While she was looking at him, Ain suddenly turned his head and stared into her face, with the spray still floating down. Such inconsiderateness! She turned her back. She didn't recall his talking to any woman, but she perked up her ears when the clerk read off Ain's destination. Moscow!

The clerk recalled that, too, with disapproval. Ain checked in alone, he reported. No woman had been ticketed for Moscow, but it would have been easy enough to split up her tickets. (By that time they were sure she was with him.)

Ain's flight went via Iceland with an hour's delay at Keflavik. Ain walked over to the airport park, gratefully breathing the sea-filled air. Every few breaths, he shuddered. Under the whine of bulldozers, the sea could be heard running its huge paws up and down the keyboard of the land. The little park had a grove of yellowed birches, and a flock of wheatears foraged by the path. Next month they would be in North Africa, Ain thought. Two thousand miles of tiny wing-beats. He threw them some crumbs from a packet in his pocket.

The woman seemed stronger here. She was panting in the sea wind, her large eyes fixed on Ain. Above her, the birches were as gold as those where he had first seen her, the day his life began. . . . Squatting under a stump to watch a shrewmouse he had been, when he caught a falling ripple of green and recognized the shocking girl-flesh, creamy, pink-tipped—coming toward him among the golden bracken! Young Ain held his breath, his nose in the sweet moss and his heart going *crash-crash.* And then he was staring at the outrageous fall of that hair down her narrow back, watching it dance around her heart-shaped buttocks, while the shrewmouse ran over his paralyzed hand. The lake was utterly still, dusty silver under the misty sky, and she made no more than a muskrat's ripple to rock the floating golden leaves. The silence closed back, the trees burning like torches where the naked girl had walked the wild wood, reflected in Ain's shining eyes. For a time he believed he had seen an oread.

Ain was last on board for the Glasgow leg. The stewardess recalled dimly that he seemed restless. She could not identify the woman. There were a lot of women on board, and babies. Her passenger list had had several errors.

At Glasgow airport, a waiter remembered that a man like Ain had called for Scottish oatmeal, and eaten two bowls, although of course it wasn't really oatmeal. A young mother with a pram saw him tossing crumbs to the birds.

When he checked in at the BOAC desk, he was hailed by a Glasgow professor who was going to the same conference at Moscow. This man had been one of Ain's teachers. (It was now known that Ain had done his postgraduate work in Europe.) They chatted all the way across the North Sea.

"I wondered about that," the professor said later. "Why have you come round about? I asked him. He told me the direct flights were booked up." (This was found to be untrue: Ain had apparently avoided the Moscow jet to escape attention.)

The professor spoke with relish of Ain's work.

"Brilliant? Oh, aye. And stubborn, too; very, very stubborn. It was as though a concept—often the simplest relation, mind you—would stop him in his tracks, and fascinate him. He would hunt all round it instead of going on to the next thing as a more docile mind would. Truthfully, I wondered at first if he could be just a bit thick. But you recall who it was said that the capacity for wonder at matters of common acceptance occurs in the superior mind? And, of course, so it proved when he shook us all up over that enzyme conversion business. A pity your government took him away from his line, there. No, he said nothing of this, I say it to you, young man. We spoke in fact largely of my work. I was surprised to find he'd kept up. He asked me what my *sentiments* about it were, which surprised me again. Now, understand, I'd not seen the man for five years, but he seemed—well, perhaps just tired, as who is not? I'm sure he was glad to have a change; he jumped out for a legstretch wherever we came down. At Oslo, even Bonn. Oh, yes, he did feed the birds, but that was nothing new for Ain. His social life when I knew him? Radical causes? Young man, I've said what I've said because of who it was that introduced you, but I'll have you know it is an impertinence in you to think ill of Charles Ain, or that he could do a harmful deed. Good evening."

The professor said nothing of the woman in Ain's life.

Nor could he have, although Ain had been intimately with her in the university time. He had let no one see how he was obsessed with her, with the miracle, the wealth of her body, her inexhaustibility. They met at his every spare moment; sometimes in public pretending to be casual strangers under his friends' noses, pointing out a pleasing view to each other with grave formality. And later in their privacies—what doubled intensity of love! He reveled in her, possessed her, allowed her no secrets. His dreams were of her sweet springs and shadowed places and her white rounded glory in the moonlight, finding always more, always new dimensions of his joy.

The danger of her frailty was far off then in the rush of birdsong and the springing leverets of the meadow. On dark days, she might cough a bit, but so did he. . . . In those years, he had had no thought to the urgent study of disease.

At the Moscow conference, nearly everyone noticed Ain at some point or another, which was to be expected in view of his professional stature. It was a small, high-caliber meeting. Ain was late in; a day's reports were over, and his was to be on the third and last.

Many people spoke with Ain, and several sat with him at meals. No one was surprised that he spoke little; he was a retiring man except on a few memorable occasions of argument. He did strike some of his friends as a bit tired and jerky.

An Indian molecular engineer who saw him with the throat spray kidded him about bringing over Asian flu. A Swedish colleague recalled that Ain had been called away to the transatlantic phone at lunch; and when he returned, Ain volunteered the information that something had turned up missing in his home lab. There was another joke, and Ain said cheerfully, "Oh, yes, quite active."

At that point one of the Chicom biologists swung into his daily propaganda chores about bacteriological warfare and accused Ain of manufacturing biotic weapons. Ain took the wind out of his sails by saying: "You're perfectly right." By tacit consent, there was very little talk about military applications, industrial dusting, or subjects of that type. And nobody recalled seeing Ain with any woman other than old Madame Vialche, who could scarcely have subverted anyone from her wheelchair.

Ain's one speech was bad, even for him. He always had a poor public voice, but his ideas were usually expressed with the lucidity so typical of the first-rate mind. This time he seemed muddled, with little new to say. His audience excused this as the muffling effects of security. Ain then got into a tangled point about the course of evolution in which he seemed to be trying to show that something was very wrong indeed. When he wound up with a reference to Hudson's bellbird "singing for a later race," several listeners wondered if he could be drunk.

The big security break came right at the end, when he suddenly began to describe the methods he had used to mutate and redesign a leukemia virus. He explained the procedure with admirable clarity in four sentences and paused. Then gave a terse description of the effects of the mutated strain, which were maximal only in the higher primates. Recovery rate among the lower mammals and other orders was close to ninety percent. As to vectors, he went on, any warm-blooded animal served. In addition, the virus retained its viability in most environmental media and performed very well airborne. Contagion rate was

extremely high. Almost offhand, Ain added that no test primate or accidentally exposed human had survived beyond the twenty-second day.

These words fell into a silence broken only by the running feet of the Egyptian delegate making for the door. Then a gilt chair went over as an American bolted after him.

Ain seemed unaware that his audience was in a state of unbelieving paralysis. It had all come so fast: A man who had been blowing his nose was staring pop-eyed around his handkerchief. Another who had been lighting a pipe grunted as his fingers singed. Two men chatting by the door missed his words entirely, and their laughter chimed into a dead silence in which echoed Ain's words: "—really no point in attempting."

Later they found he had been explaining that the virus utilized the body's own immunomechanisms, and so defense was by definition hopeless.

That was all. Ain looked around vaguely for questions and then started down the aisle. By the time he got to the door, people were swarming after him. He wheeled about and said rather crossly, "Yes, of course it is very wrong. I told you that. We are all wrong. Now it's over."

An hour later they found he had gone, having apparently reserved a Sinair flight to Karachi.

The security men caught up with him at Hong Kong. By then he seemed really very ill, and went with them peacefully. They started back to the States via Hawaii.

His captors were civilized types; they saw he was gentle and treated him accordingly. He had no weapons or drugs on him. They took him out handcuffed for a stroll at Osaka, let him feed his crumbs to the birds, and they listened with interest to his account of the migration routes of the common brown sandpiper. He was very hoarse. At that point, he was wanted only for the security thing. There was no question of a woman at all.

He dozed most of the way to the islands, but when they came in sight he pressed to the window and began to mutter. The security man behind him got the first inkling that there was a woman in it, and turned on his recorder.

". . . Blue, blue and green until you see the wounds. O my girl, O beautiful, you won't die. I won't let you die. I tell you girl, it's over. . . . Lustrous eyes, look at me, let me see you now alive! Great queen, my sweet body, my girl, have I saved you? . . . O terrible to know, and noble, Chaos's child green-robed in blue and golden light . . . the thrown and spinning ball of life alone in space. . . . Have I saved you?"

On the last leg, he was obviously feverish.

"She may have tricked me, you know," he said confidentially to the government man. "You have to be prepared for that, of course. I know her!" He chuckled confidentially. "She's no small thing. But wring your heart out—"

Coming over San Francisco, he was merry. "Don't you know the otters will go back in there? I'm certain of it. That fill won't last; there'll be a bay there again."

They got him on a stretcher at Hamilton Air Base, and he went unconscious shortly after takeoff. Before he collapsed, he'd insisted on throwing the last of his birdseed on the field.

"Birds are, you know, warm-blooded," he confided to the agent who was handcuffing him to the stretcher. Then Ain smiled gently and lapsed into inertness. He stayed that way almost all the remaining ten days of his life. By then, of course, no one really cared. Both the government men had died quite early, after they finished analyzing the birdseed and throat spray. The woman at Kennedy had just started feeling sick.

The tape recorder they put by his bed functioned right on through, but if anybody had been around to replay it they would have found little but babbling. "Gaea Gloriatrix," he crooned, "Gaea girl, queen . . ." At times, he was grandiose and tormented. "Our life, your death!" he yelled. "Our death would have been your death, too, no need for that, no need."

At other times, he was accusing. "What did you do about the dinosaurs?" he demanded. "Did they annoy you? How did you fix *them?* Cold. Queen, you're too cold! You came close to it this time, my girl," he raved. And then he wept and caressed the bedclothes and was maudlin.

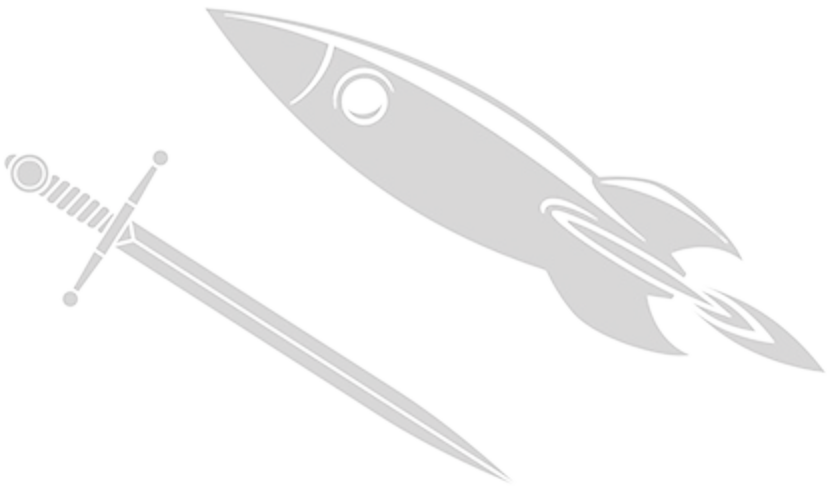
Only at the end, lying in his filth and thirst, still chained where they had forgotten him, he was suddenly coherent. In the light clear voice of a lover planning a summer picnic, he asked the recorder happily:

"Have you ever thought about bears? They have so much . . . funny they never came along further. By any chance were you saving them, girl?" And he chuckled in his ruined throat, and later, died.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Tiptree, Jr., was the pseudonym of Alice B. Sheldon (1915-1987), who before turning to writing had been an artist, a newspaper art critic, a World War II photo-intelligence officer, a chicken farmer, a CIA agent, and a research psychologist. After earning her PhD in psychology in 1967, she started writing science fiction short stories—using a pseudonym to protect her new academic career, and a male name to fit in better at the magazines. As Tiptree she published two novels and eight collections of short stories. She won two Hugo Awards, three Nebula Awards (one as Raccoona Sheldon, an occasional second nom de plume) and one World Fantasy Award. An award for gender-based science fiction was named after Tiptree in 1991, and a biography by Julie Phillips, James Tiptree, Jr.: *The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon,* was published in 2006.

FANTASY



Stitches

A.G. Howard | 8170 words

Prologue

The first time the wrens sang at night was three years ago, when I used a rusty saw to cut off Pa's left foot. The birds drowned out his screams.

Wrens don't normally sing after sunset, but I wasn't surprised by it.

Birds are known as spirit carriers in mountain lore. When someone dies, birds of all kinds carry them back and forth between this world and the afterlife, so folk can keep watch over their living loved ones, even after they're gone. I figured these wrens heard how loud Pa was wailing, and gathered in expectation of a fresh delivery.

At least fifty of them sat under the eaves of the slanted garden shed—my makeshift operating room. Dark skies folded around our mountain like a boy's hand covering an anthill. Regular folk would assume that the storm had driven the birds to seek shelter, but there'd never been anything "regular" about me or mine.

My identical twin sister, Clover, and little brother, Oakley, weren't allowed to watch Pa's dismemberment. Even at age thirteen and a half, Clover was too squeamish, and Oakley, being seven years younger, was too tender. I'd left Clover in charge of things in our tiny cottage some ten yards away. Upon my last look, they hunched in the farthest corner, a quilt wrapped tight around their heads as they shivered at the thunder in the distance.

Pa didn't scream long before he passed out. He was strong that way. A rock, Ma used to say; a rock that needed his edges filed. She was the only one who could tame his temper. When she disappeared on my and Clover's thirteenth birthday, and Pa's drunken rampages spiraled out of control, it fell on me to file him down.

By the time I turned sixteen, my surgical instruments and abilities had improved. I'd taken Pa's other foot and his eyes. His tongue and ears, too.

I soon came to realize that rain always accompanied dismembering days, as did the wrens. I suspected they were tied somehow to The Collector, the boy who claimed the parts and gave us our cash. Seemed like both the weather and the birds knew when he was gonna pay a visit. Or maybe it was the other way around, and *they* told *him* when it was time. Whatever the case, at the scent of

rain and the rustle of feathers, I made the first cut, because I knew he was on his way.

1: Hollow Bones

We first met The Collector when I was thirteen and a half, the day after Pa drank two bottles of tequila and popped Clover so hard, her front teeth fell into the chicken soup. When she fainted from shock and pain, I took over supper duty. I added some sage, the herb of my namesake, and boiled the broth on the stovetop without even fishing out Clover's incisors, letting the aroma of comfort and blood fill the air. There was a part of me that hoped those teeth might come to life in Pa's belly and eat him from the inside out. Oakley hadn't grown big enough to merit any beatings yet, but by the next year, he'd be the age Clover and I were when we first encountered Pa's wrath. So, while Pa guzzled a steaming bowlful, I imagined those incisors going to work on his innards.

Pa ate every bit of dinner, leaving us nothing. He always ate like he was starving, but couldn't gain a pound. He'd never been a very stout man, and had become even thinner over the months since Ma's absence, frail and hollow-boned like a bird. But he was still as mean as a feral bobcat when he drank.

He cussed at me till I handed off the keys. From the picture window, I watched him swerve down the dirt road in his Chevy truck, kicking up weeds and grass as the tires spun this way and that. Just before following the curve through the magnolia trees and vanishing from sight, he dipped his head out the window and spewed up his supper.

I remember thinking what a waste of food that was, and that my high hopes for Clover's teeth had been for nothing.

The sun set over the trees, bringing shadows to life. Pa was to be gone all night.

My sister did her best to entertain us, despite the gray bruise that swelled her mouth and chin until it looked like a rotten plum. She insisted on making treats and having a slumber party.

The inside of our cupboard and fridge had more cobwebs than food, but we always made do. Before our ma disappeared a few months earlier, she taught us how to make gingerbread without eggs, and homemade cocoa using chocolate bars and water.

I used to watch her hands as she stirred and folded and whipped, bending ingredients to her will. Those same hands that were rough from hours spent

tending the garden, yet still had a soft touch when someone was hurt or sad. She always took off her bird-shaped wedding ring when she baked because she feared she'd get it dirty with the batter. I loved seeing the white imprint that her ring had rubbed onto her skin . . . like a dove tattooed above her knuckle.

I tried not to think of how I missed Ma as Clover heated the cocoa and I stirred gingerbread batter, then shaped it into perfect boys and girls to be baked. It was mid-summer, and the old black stove heated the cottage till the stench of our sweaty bodies overpowered any discomfort we felt at being home alone.

I forced down the gritty, spiced cookies and scalded my throat on overly sweet chocolate water without complaint. I figured by letting Clover ease our hurt, it could take the bite out of her throbbing lip and gums. With full bellies, we undressed to our skivvies and opened the windows to let in the cool evening scent of pines and mountain air.

When it came time to sleep, Clover and I stripped the beds, tossed quilts and pillows on the floor beneath the picture window, and snuggled Oakley atop the pile to tell him stories.

I started with Frankenstein. I'd always liked the idea of people giving up their parts to make a new person who could outshine them. Maybe I was too graphic about the blood and chopped limbs and cracking bones, because Clover got as green as the plant she's named after, and Oakley as stiff as a tree.

Me? I was ready for dreamland.

A shame my story scared Oakley so much. He moaned for more cocoa and a happy fairy tale before he would calm enough to count stars and go to sleep.

Clover—with the added charm of her fat-lipped lisp—told of a young princess who'd once been struck by lightning. She had auburn hair with a white-blond streak and blue eyes. This princess met a prince who swept her off her glass-slippered feet with a diamond ring shaped like a bird, and promises of a happy ever after. He rescued her from slaving in a bakery in a town infested with pastry-craving dragons, and carried her to the mountains, where they lived in a cottage-shaped castle. Together, they raised parakeets and fuzzy pot-bellied pigs to sell to pet stores.

Since Oakley was only six when Ma disappeared, I don't know if he picked up on the similarities, but the cotton-candy lies Clover wrapped around the truth made my mouth dry and my teeth ache as if I had cavities. In the fairy tale, the prince and princess lived forever without any woes. In the real version, the *prince* had tended to our animals while he was drunk out of his mind. He forgot to latch the chicken coops. Later that night—while he slept off his liquor—high winds

rattled the coops till the gates fell open and all the hens escaped into the yard. An electrical storm scorched the sky and caught fire to the hog house. The hogs ran out in flames and trampled the chickens until they were singed, hollowed-bone corpses.

When the princess ran out to open the gate so the hogs could escape the spreading fire, she was struck by lightning, giving her another streak in her auburn hair and breaking something in her mind. She came into the cottage, screamed at the prince in some indecipherable tongue that failed to wake him, then disappeared into the night. The heavens opened up a flood of rain that doused the fire, but it must've swallowed Ma, too. For she was never to be seen again.

Hollow bones. They make a blood-curdling crunch when you step on them. Drops the soul right out of you, unless you like that sort of thing. And roasted pork doesn't smell nearly so appetizing when mixed with the funk of scorched feathers and beaks. Still, I dragged what was left of our hogs out of the bone pile and we ate them anyway. With Ma gone the next morning and Pa vanishing to look for her without coming home for two days thereafter, we couldn't turn our noses up at free ham and bacon, no matter what was used to spice it.

In Clover's fairy tale, the prince wouldn't have spiraled into even deeper rages after losing his princess and their one means of income. He would've found another way to make cash instead of taking odd jobs in town, then spending every penny on whiskey, tequila, and the occasional carton of eggs when a carton of cigarettes was too steep.

I fell asleep after the storytelling ended that night, listening as a snore whistled through Clover's empty tooth sockets, wishing the prince of her fairy tale could somehow, someday, be our pa.

In the years that followed, I came to understand why they say to be careful what you wish for.

2: The Collector

Pa showed up the morning after he punched Clover, as apologetic and humble as a dog caught in the act of peeing on his owner's rug. I'd like to think it was the sight of her bruised and swollen mouth that did him in. But why would it bother him any more than the busted cheeks and black eyes he'd given me and Clover in our past?

Whatever it was, I chose to be grateful, because something broke him good. I

could've sworn I heard the sickening crunch of hollow bones as he knelt in the yard and begged us to forgive him. I wished *he* was cracking beneath my feet, like the skeletal corpses on the morning we found Ma disappeared. But those chicken bones were three years gone.

After Pa's apology, I didn't remember much of the conversation. Only that he said he'd found an answer—to our finances and his soul sickness. He had made arrangements for us to meet our savior. Pa called him The Collector, and he was to arrive that afternoon.

When the sun was midway over the mountain, beaming in hot yellow streams, Clover and I took the dirt road to the forest and climbed some magnolia trees to watch for our mysterious guest. Barefoot in cut-offs and sleeveless shirts, we swung upside down from our perches.

In the months since Ma's disappearance, my favorite tree had become the one with a white split in the bark starting at the lowest branches and running all the way to the ground. That breach in the wood showed up the day after Ma left. The color of the split reminded me of the streaks in Ma's hair. I was convinced the same lightning storm that struck her also struck the tree, which somehow made them connected. This tree was still alive, so she had to be, too. And one day, she'd come back to us.

As I swung in and out of the shade, beads of sweat crept through the top of my scalp like creepy-crawling ants. I braided my wavy, red hair without turning upright, tying off the end in a knot before dropping it so it hung like a noose from the network of branches. It shimmered in the sunlight, favoring a giant piece of cherry licorice that would be sweet and stick to my teeth. I grabbed my braid by the end and nibbled the dusty, brittle strands, almost surprised when it didn't taste of cherries at all.

"Sage," Clover hollered from another tree a few feet over. "Look . . . a motorbike."

There he was, as promised, coming up the dirt road wearing a modern suit, dress shirt, and tie that looked out of place atop the old-timey sidecar motorcycle. Not a stitch of skin showed under his grown-up clothes. He even wore mittens . . . the woolly, winter kind that only had space for your thumb and then a place where the other four fingers sat snug and cozy, like baby chicks under their ma's wing.

But even with all that, I could tell he wasn't much older than us . . . skinny and just starting to get his muscles. Dappled with sunshine and shade, he took on a funny green tint as his bike rumbled beneath our canopy of leaves. He roared past

the trunks, looking up once, then down again before I could catch the reflection of my cherry licorice hair in his shiny black helmet.

A flock of wrens followed in his wake, blackening the sky. They drove me and Clover from the branches in their haste to find perches. By the time we scrambled down and followed the boy's tire tracks up the winding road, he was already parked next to Ma's dried-up vegetable garden and banging on the front door with a black, fisted mitten. He held the handle of a red-and-white ice chest in the other covered hand.

Pa opened the screen with a swing of creaking hinges, inviting The Collector across the threshold. Clover and I stepped in behind. The boy was taller than I originally thought, and leaner. We strode to the kitchen behind him, where Oakley sat with a plate of leftover gingerbread from the night before. A small electric fan blew crumbs and stagnant air around the room, its head revolving as if taking us all in.

Our visitor tugged his helmet free and laid it on the table. My tummy did a flip, fascinated and repelled by what I saw. Mainly because I couldn't see *anything*.

He wore a mask made from a soft tan cloth . . . like the Shammy Pa used to dry his truck after a wash. The edges were gathered at the boy's neck under his shirt collar and secured with the tie. Two holes were cut, big enough to show soulful brown eyes and dark lashes. There were slits for his nostrils, which was the only way he could breathe, since there wasn't a hole for his mouth.

The Collector stared at Oakley, who had a half-eaten gingerbread boy's leg drooping from his lower lip. My brother's freckled face twitched, on the verge of either tears or hysterical laughter. When the gingerbread plopped into his cup of raspberry Kool-Aid and spattered the white-and-ivory-checked tablecloth with red droplets, Pa sent him out to play.

Oakley obliged, but not without grabbing the binoculars he'd made of empty toilet paper rolls, tape, and plastic wrap. He perched on a stump outside the kitchen window and stared in through the fake lenses.

Me, Clover, and Pa settled at the table. Ma's chair was left empty as always. None of us touched it anymore out of respect, or superstition.

The Collector sat where Oakley had been, his mittened thumb tracing one of the perfect gingerbread people on the plate, as if mesmerized by the shape. The cookie caught on the wool and he had to shake himself free.

Afterwards, he pulled a piece of paper from his jacket pocket and pushed it into Pa's hands. I realized then, why our guest didn't need a hole for his mouth. It appeared he wasn't much of one for words.

Pa didn't like to read aloud, so he slipped the paper to Clover, since she was the one who always volunteered when Ma used to teach us our lessons.

Clover cleared her throat and read, trying to conceal the lisp from her missing teeth: "In Matthew 5:29–30, it says: 'If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be damned.'" Her hand shook, but she continued. "'If the foot leads you astray, remove temptation; see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.' Feet, eyes, ears, tongue, and hands. That will be the order of dismemberment. Payment to the amputee is ten thousand dollars per piece."

Clover's blue eyes fluttered and she looked up with a flushed face into Pa's watery gray gaze. "Amputee? It has your signature."

I could see the wooziness overtaking. I helped her into the faded petal-pink bedroom we shared, guiding her onto the bottom bunk.

When I returned to the kitchen, Pa told me everything. How he'd been arrested for drunk and disorderly behavior the night before. How The Collector—under the employ of a wealthy doctor who was rumored to have found religion and moved here from a big city to study folk medicine and its ties to the Bible—had brought a note that offered Pa bail. The condition was, Pa agreed to help the doctor prove his new theory: that godly qualities were transferable through skin and bones.

Supposedly, the doc could make Pa a better man by switching out a specified map of body parts with a "good person's" cadaver pieces. In keeping with the Bible verses Clover had read, there were five bodily sectors most inclined to sin. And if Pa were to trade out his offensive parts for better ones, he could be the kind of parent he wanted to be—a substitute for Ma and her productive, gentle ways. The only catch was the doc was a recluse, and refused to come out of his house to chop off any parts or stitch on cadaver pieces. No one was welcome to visit him, either. So that duty had to fall on someone else.

Pa had signed the contract in jail just to get back home to us. It was as good as done.

I bounced a glare from him to the masked visitor, who was preoccupied with Oakley's plate of gingerbread again. "So, you're going to do the amputations, then?"

Instead of answering me, The Collector lifted his dark brown eyes and held up

his hands in the mittens, working them like lobster claws as he shook his head. Something told me it wasn't just his tongue that didn't work right, and I wondered how many other parts of him were broken.

I studied the contract again, staring at the dollar signs. Ten thousand per piece. I'd never seen that much money in my life. Lord knew we could use it.

"There's no guarantee," Pa said, his voice wavering. "I could die. But either way, we get paid. And you're the only one strong enough to help fulfill the donations, Sage."

I thought again of the pile of chicken bones out in the yard after the storm six months ago. How I wished Pa had been the one to run out into the lightning to save our livestock. Then maybe Ma would still be with us. Not a day went by when I didn't fantasize about how much better life would be without his drunken rampages. Without *him*.

That's all it took for me to nod and force my tongue to work. "I'll do it."

As if coming out of a trance, The Collector reached into his pocket and handed off a business card to me: *Cut clean through the bone and cauterize the raw edges.*

I frowned and looked up at him. His gaze stayed on mine for an instant and I thought I saw pity there. Or maybe regret.

Then he handed off another card, of which he seemed to have an endless supply. This one had post-surgical instructions, and a promise to return when the deed was done. It said we wouldn't need to contact him. He had ways of knowing.

The Collector stood, and without our offering them, carefully wrapped the gingerbread people in a napkin and dropped them into his jacket pocket. Then he put on his helmet and left.

3: Gingerbread Man

Pa and I decided there was no better time than the present to earn our first payment. He grabbed the bottle of sedatives The Collector provided, along with a canning jar filled with moonshine. Clover and Oakley stayed in the house due to the storm clouds rolling in.

Pa and I walked together out to the shed. He even chose the saw.

It felt so strange, him handing me a weapon, after being one himself for so many years. It was like an offering. A penance. And I was ready and willing to take the payment.

I didn't have the proper tools. I didn't have the proper experience. What I did have was the ability to imagine myself in another time and place. Ma used to call me her fanciful girl, because I could pretend so intensely I would lose myself and forget everything around me. It came in especially handy when she had to stitch something up . . . like the gash I got in my forehead when I was eight and Pa pushed me into the barbed-wire fence that surrounded the garden. My fault, for not doing the weeding right.

"You're just my little gingerbread girl," Ma chanted softly as I cried, then explained how the stitches were little scallops of white icing that would hold me together so I'd be in one piece and pretty.

After Pa drank half the moonshine to wash down two pills, I helped him climb onto his cleared-off workbench. He rolled up his pants leg, fingers slow and awkward from drowsiness, until his left ankle was exposed. Then I tied down his hands and feet, to keep him still . . . for his own good.

Saw in hand, I was no longer Sage Adams, looming over the prone form of my wretched, troubled pa. I was a French baker in Paris, slicing up a gingerbread man. The spurt of blood that slicked my fingers as the saw ground back and forth, the curling of flesh, and the cracking of bones became raspberry filling, marzipan coating, and cookie dough burned too crisp around the edges.

Once Pa passed out, and with only the swell of the wrens' songs and the storm brewing outside, nothing could distract me from my imaginary bakery. Not the sweat drizzling along my brow, not the coppery tang of fresh blood, not the ache in my hand, biceps, and forearm from sawing so long to get through the bone.

Only when his foot plopped onto the pillow of newspaper I'd arranged to catch it did I drag myself back to reality. My stomach turned. I bent over and threw up, but was careful to aim away from the ten-thousand-dollar foot.

During the hot and cold sweats that followed, I cauterized his mutilated stump as the card had instructed. I used the hot iron . . . the one Clover pressed our clothes with and made her hair straight with so Oakley and Pa could tell us apart. The sizzle and stench of burned skin made me nauseous again. I chewed the lovage root The Collector had supplied. It eased my stomach before I spit the soggy clump from my mouth and packed it around the wound to prevent scar tissue from forming.

The room spun as I wrapped the amputated foot in a heavy plastic bag and placed it in the ice chest.

Wiping my bloody hands on a dust rag, I escaped, leaving Pa to sleep off the sedatives in the garden shed and returned to the cottage carrying an ice chest

worth more money than I'd ever seen, all for two hours' worth of labor. That is, unless you counted the lifetime it took for Pa to grow it.

At the sink, I washed my hands till the water no longer ran red, and gurgled salt water to rinse the taste of vomit and lovage root from my mouth. Clover and Oakley had fallen asleep. Thunder rumbled in the distance and the wrens had silenced.

Not many people realize the truth about wrens. They may be smaller than a kitten's head, but they're brave. Stare down their mortal enemy, beak to fangs, if their home or hatchlings are threatened.

Maybe Pa had been watching those birds since Ma had been gone. Because he'd finally stared down his enemy in a way most men would never have had brass enough to try.

That night, I dropped into bed and dreamed of life-sized gingerbread houses made of human legs and arms, held together by stitches of red licorice that were actually blood veins. Instead of gumdrops and jellied candies decorating the windows, there were organs: hearts, lungs, kidneys, all dripping and fresh from their corpses. The sidewalk leading to the house was made of hollow bones that rolled beneath my feet with a teeth-jarring crunch.

The Collector showed up the next day to pay us and trade the red-and-white ice chest for a blue one containing Pa's new piece. He also handed me a small tub of regenerative ointment. The handwritten label listed ground salamander hearts as the main ingredient, and claimed that by slathering it on the cadaver part's raw edges, it would regenerate Pa's skin and bones to the donor foot once it was stitched into place with the hemp thread provided.

I found that the stitching went easier than the cutting off. I only had to pretend I was piecing a broken cookie together with icing.

It took Pa three months to heal enough to use the foot, so we decided everything would have to come off one at a time. One foot, then the next after the replacement healed. One ear, then the other. One eyeball, one hand, and so on. There was also some adjusting, since his cadaver donor was two sizes smaller than Pa. But we accepted each new and improved body part along with the money without flinching, because the transplants were going to make him a better man. Like Ma had always said, beggars can't be choosers. And we would never be beggars again.

Over the next three years, The Collector's drop-offs and pick-ups became as ordinary an occurrence as doing laundry or mopping the floor.

The experiment was working. The donor's blue eyeballs that replaced Pa's

gray ones helped him see without his reading glasses. With his new tongue, he spoke softer, kinder. And he never cursed. After the ear exchange, Pa listened closer to everything we'd say. Who cared if his ears were smaller? He never ignored us or forgot the important things. That's all that mattered.

That, and the money.

Pa had always loved Ma's cooking. I'd taken over kitchen duties, and in time, as Pa started changing, I started wanting to use her recipes. Maybe because it made him smile, and I'd forgotten what he looked like when he was happy.

Now that we had a steady income, I didn't lack for fresh ingredients. Once Clover and I were of driving age, we took the truck to town and did the shopping.

Pa rarely left the house. He was too self-conscious about the scars. There was no reason for him to leave anyway. We'd fixed up the house real pretty and had a proper stove. We'd even bought Oakley a swing set and fort for playing Cowboys and Indians.

Over time, I started to notice that, quiet as he was, The Collector had a kind heart. He always stopped to play with Oakley in his fort when he came by. He also gave us gifts. Not the kinds that were expensive, but the kinds that meant something. He gave Oakley a real set of binoculars and showed him how to use them to scope out giant hawks from the roof of his fort. He gave Clover new eyeteeth on a dental fixture connected to a retainer. And me? I got an endless supply of cherry licorice. Anytime I ran out, he'd bring more.

I started to make a habit of baking fresh gingerbread men on the days he was expected, because I'd grown fond of how his dark eyes shone bright each time I wrapped some up careful and insisted he take them home. I found myself talking to him a lot, even though he never talked back. Until finally, one day, he pulled out a memo pad and pen from his jacket, and began to respond through notes written awkwardly with his clawed mitten. It was almost like hearing his voice, reading that messy script.

My favorite thing to do was to tell him jokes. He'd always snort through his nostril holes, then write: "You have me in stitches."

Later, I would come to see the irony in that statement.

4: Cadaver

Clover and I were sixteen and a half, and The Collector had become a man. He looked to be eighteen or nineteen, though I could only guess by the way his suits

hung different on broader shoulders and thicker arms and legs. He still showed up each time in the mask that never revealed his face, and mittens that covered his hands.

Pa's final dismembering had been a success, bringing us to our last meeting with our strange friend and business partner.

I'd just laid out a batch of gingerbread men to cool so I could decorate them while we waited for his arrival. A brisk breeze blew through the half-opened picture window and the early sun slathered the room in an apricot haze. It was only Pa and me that day. Clover had taken Oakley out to bird-watch in the forest.

"Did you substitute brown sugar for the molasses in this batch?" Pa asked after taking a bite. As a side effect of his tongue transplant, he could pick out spices and flavorings in the things I baked and he'd lost the taste for liquor completely. Hadn't touched a drop in over a year.

"I used both," I answered. "Just wanted to try something new."

Pa nodded. I could tell by the crimp between his eyebrows he was troubled. Today we would get his final puzzle piece. Blots of red dotted the bandage that covered his left wrist and fresh stump. The blood looked like birds flying across a horizon to some unexplored destination. Maybe to carry some dead soul between the real world and the afterlife.

Pa lifted his right hand to take another bite of the cookie. He had started favoring his right even before we removed the left. Apparently, his cadaver donor wasn't a southpaw like him.

His frown deepened as he chewed on the gingerbread man's head.

I pressed gumdrop buttons into the other cookies while I waited for him to say what was on his mind. Maybe he was going to miss The Collector as much as I was. Or maybe he was scared to see the money stop coming in.

There was no reason to worry. We'd managed to live off only a small percentage of the one hundred thousand dollars, and the rest was in savings. Clover had found a job in town at a local grocer, and Pa and Oakley had revived Ma's vegetable garden, providing us plenty of food with enough left over to sell to Clover's boss. I planned to get a job, too, once Pa was finally put together for good. Although I wasn't sure what sort of job I was qualified for . . . other than baking things, or chopping parts off of people and sewing them back on pretty. I'd become good at making perfect stitches. Pa had been my guinea pig.

"There's something I need to give you," Pa said at last after swallowing a swig of milk. He reached under the table and dug in his pocket, pulling out a small box and offering it to me.

I opened the lid. Ma's bird-shaped diamond ring glittered from inside a nest of tissue paper.

My throat swelled up. "Where did you find this?" I asked. She'd had it on when she ran out the door into the storm that night. I saw it reflect the lightning in the darkness. Something inside me started to uncoil . . . something teetering between numb and potent, like a snake that had been dormant.

"This has to do with that magnolia tree you're so fond of," Pa answered, his gaze turned down. "The one with the gash in its side. Sage, it wasn't lightning that caused the wood to split. Something crashed into it. I had suspected that all along after seeing it the day after Ma went missing. The tree knows. It—" Pa couldn't finish. He started coughing, as if something had caught in his throat. He guzzled his glass of milk and studied me over the rim.

The sadness in his blue eyes scored me deep. There was more to this story, but it was as if his new tongue refused to work . . . as if it physically hurt him to recount it.

At last I understood. All those months after Ma left, he looked for her. That was why he refused to get a job. Why he'd go into town and stay away until he was skunk drunk. Because he could never find the answers he was seeking, and it was killing him not knowing. And he held it all inside himself.

But that changed the night he met The Collector.

Pa laid his right palm on the table and stretched his long, delicate fingers. "These replacements have given me peace. The doctor helped me find your ma again. And I finally did right by you kids."

His words were cryptic and smoky, as if secrets singed the edges of each one.

He took out the ring and dropped it in my palm, wrapping my fingers around it with his soft hand. "You keep this part of her. She'd want you to have it. You're the strongest of all of us. Remember that today, when you get the last cadaver piece."

I slid the ring on, wondering if one day I'd have a bird indention in the skin above my knuckle like hers. My chest twisted up tight. I'd always figured she'd come back. And now, the reality of that never happening felt like a knife sawing my heart, back and forth, until it snapped clean through.

I squeezed Pa's palm for the first time since he'd had the new hand. It felt so familiar, like when Ma would wrap her fingers through mine. Like when I first learned to walk. When I broke my elbow. When I had scarlet fever.

The flutter of wrens outside the window startled me. I pulled away.

The Collector's motorbike roared into our front yard and Pa looked at me as if

in a daze, then stood and left the kitchen to let our guest in.

I put the finishing touches on the gingerbread men, drawing hair, faces, and tailored vests with icing. My hands trembled and Ma's ring sparkled on my finger in the soft light. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was missing something. Something I'd been missing all along.

Something Pa's new tongue just couldn't tell me.

The screen door opened and closed and I waited for The Collector to come in. But it was only Pa, holding the ice chest.

"He left," Pa said, handing me a note. "But this is for you."

I unfolded the paper and silently read the words: *Your family is together now. I hope at last we can all have the pieces we deserve.*

Pieces. In place of *peace.* I'd read enough of The Collector's notes to know he had perfect spelling. The pun was intentional.

"I'm going to sleep now," Pa said, taking the sedatives with him. "Wake me when it's over." He started out the door for the shed but paused. "Don't judge the doctor or the boy. They tried to do right by us."

I stared at Pa's retreating shadow, then back at the note. My whole body quaked as I opened the ice chest's lid and carefully lifted the cadaver hand to the light. There, on the left ring finger was the dove imprint worn into the skin.

I gasped and dropped the hand.

I clamped my jaw shut, swallowing the bile that climbed my throat.

The doctor helped me find your ma again, Pa had said.

Looking into his blue eyes, listening to that gentle tongue, it was as obvious as the scars upon his wrist, ankles, and ears. Both of my parents were inside the patchwork quilt of skin that had sat in the kitchen with me minutes ago, eating gingerbread.

The donor cadaver's identity was a mystery no more. And it was time to pay the reclusive doctor a visit.

5: Burying the Hatchet

That night, I stitched on Pa's final piece, but there was no pretending. I couldn't block out or forget that it was Ma's hand, but I also could never let Clover or Oakley know where it came from, either. I understood on some level that Pa was innocent. He only wanted to give us back our ma and give us a better life. He'd done that. He deserved to be complete and to never have any regrets. He also deserved to be perfect, all but one left ring finger, amputated just below the

knuckle.

As he slept off the sedative, and Clover and Oakley dreamed the simple dreams I would never have again, I tossed an ax into the back of Pa's Chevy and headed for town. When I passed Ma's tree, I could finally see why Pa thought something violent happened there. The split no longer looked to me like a streak of white in auburn hair like it once did. It looked like a gash—an infected pus-filled wound.

The town looked different, too. Lonely and looming. All the stores and cafés that usually pulsed with life stared back with dark windows, reflecting the truck's headlights. I took the same side road where I'd once caught sight of The Collector's motorbike turning and wove my way toward the outskirts of town where the doctor was rumored to live.

I hadn't let myself stop to think how The Collector was involved in all this. Somewhere in my heart, I couldn't imagine he'd been behind Ma's death. But if he was . . . he would warrant the same ending as his employer.

The three-story house, large and dark, looked like a black gaping maw in the moonlight. I parked the truck and wove my way through the hundreds of wrens pecking the ground. They didn't seem to notice or care that I was there. They just moved aside, busy with their routines. There were even more, some singing soft and haunting from the house's roof and eaves, high above, and others flapping their wings in the oak trees that surrounded the estate.

Spirit carriers.

My fingers tightened on the ax's handle. They'd be happy tonight. Soon they would have someone new to whisk away.

My climb up the creaky steps seemed to take forever, stretched out even longer by my realization that the windows were boarded up. The hair on my arms bristled as the wrens grew quiet and still, as if watching when I came to the front door. It had been left ajar and a flutter of yellow candlelight seeped out. I gulped hard and cinched my hand around the ax, prepared to swing without question, then I pushed it open.

The scent of cinnamon, vanilla, and something stale wafted over me. As my eyes focused on the flickering room, the air drained from my lungs. I was alone, but dioramas stretched from wall to wall on multi-tiered shelves. Little boxes with miniature, three-dimensional scenes numbered and played out in still life. Instead of clothespin dolls to represent the people, as one might expect, there were gingerbread men, boys, and girls. All the ones I'd given The Collector over the years. Their bodies were stiff and shellacked, tilted in place to play out strange,

unsettling events.

Gripping my ax, I walked closer to the diorama marked number one, where a gingerbread girl stood on the roof of a building in a big city. Flames made of tissue paper spewed out from the windows. Diorama number two showed her in a pile of icing and crumbs on the sidewalk next to the burnt-out building, where she'd jumped to escape the inferno. In the next, a man in a doctor's coat with a Bible in hand, and a young boy in a modern grown-up's suit, stood at a grave. The one after showed the boy with his shirt off, as the doctor pressed feathers into his skin. Miniature dead birds speckled the floor. In scene five, the man drove a black car up a familiar twisty mountain road, with the boy in the passenger side. A storm and lighting streaked the painted sky. Next, the car tilted on two tires, as if losing control. Scene seven: The car crushed up against a tree. Sandwiched between the bumper and tree trunk was a gingerbread girl with two white streaks in her reddish hair. Her top half tilted off kilter. She'd been split in half at the waist.

Wooziness filled my head, but I couldn't stop staring. I stumbled along, my gaze trailing each diorama. The one where the doc had a gash in his head from the wreck as the boy drove him and the broken gingerbread girl back down the trail. The next, where the boy put my ma's dead body into the freezer, and tried to stitch up the doctor, who I now understood was his pa. When I came to the one where the boy sat across from a prisoner in jail and offered him a box, I knew. The night The Collector visited Pa, he gave him her ring and explained what happened. That's what broke Pa.

That's what changed him.

As if to verify this, next to the diorama was another contract, where The Collector offered Pa a way to fix our family . . . to save his hell-bent spirit, and at the same time save his own pa from going to prison. My pa had been so drunk and heartbroken, he waived his rights to take legal action for the doctor's involvement in the accident.

My throat burned, as if it had been hornet-stung from the inside. I didn't even have to see the next diorama, where The Collector was breaking off Ma's left foot. Because every other scene that remained, I'd lived it as we stitched my ma's pieces onto Pa.

In the final diorama, the gingerbread boy in the suit sat in a chair by a bed where the doctor lay, hooked up to an IV and other machines. The painted background showed it was a room on the top floor of the very house I stood in. The Collector had been putting these scenes together since the day he first came to

our house, in preparation for me to come tonight.

He wanted me here. Now. To find out why.

The ax's handle was slick in my palm as I squeezed it on my walk up the stairs. The unsettling flutter of wrens gathering in the eaves outside scattered my nerves. They were waiting. And I wondered if it might be my spirit they'd be escorting away tonight.

There were five rooms on the top floor, but only one was open at the end of the long hall. Candlelight streamed out, painting dancing shadows on the wooden floor and walls. When I stepped inside, The Collector was right where I expected, seated next to his pa's bedside.

My ears barely caught the sound of the beeping machines and the pumps filling the doctor with oxygen. I was too intent on his face. He looked younger than I'd have thought. A handsome man, in spite of the fact he'd been in a coma for three years. There was stubble on his chin and jaw, as if his son had tried to keep him shaved but given up recently.

"Was it your ma who died?" I asked The Collector, my pulse drumming below my jawline like a sledgehammer.

He nodded under his mask.

"And your pa, he heard about the bird folklore. He was trying to fix you so you could be a bird and fly to your ma. Be with her without dying." I looked at the doctor's arm where it was arranged atop the cover. "If it worked for you, he was going to fix himself too. Am I right?"

The Collector looked down, flinching in the mask's eyeholes.

"But I don't understand. There are birds everywhere on your lawn. You have enough feathers already. Why were you on my mountain that night?"

He slipped off his mask. Candlelight flickered across him, his face a tragic mishmash of stitches and feathers. He didn't have any lips. They'd been removed, and the skin sewn shut. I realized then what the extra IV in the room was for. It was how he'd been surviving.

I couldn't move, so stunned by the scarred, twisted image. His pa must've gone to the mountain in search of a bird with a bigger beak, like the hawks Oakley watched through his binoculars. A bird with a beak big enough to sew on The Collector's face in the place of a mouth.

I took a shaky breath and forced myself not to look away from the young man who'd been so kind to my family. Forced myself to see past the ugly, vile things that had been done to him through no fault of his own.

"You tried to give me my ma back," I said. "In the only way you knew how.

And you fixed my pa."

He nodded.

"What *your* pa did to you. It was wrong. Do you understand that?"

He nodded again.

"So I'm gonna kill him now. It's the only way to make things right."

The moment I said it, The Collector stood and worked off his mittens. All his fingers were stitched together except his thumbs, as if to form a wing tip. Gray and black feathers sprouted where there should have been only skin.

Slowly, he drew a knife from his jacket lapel.

I tensed and raised the ax in self-defense, but he backed up and turned his mutilated hand over, laying the knife in his downy palm—a peace offering.

It looked similar to a paring knife. The kind you use to peel skin from fruit while leaving it intact to make pretty embellishments for special desserts.

Then I understood.

He'd been keeping his pa alive, just for this purpose. So he could become human again using his skin and limbs.

Even if The Collector's hands hadn't been damaged, he would've needed me. Not everyone has the ability to imagine themselves away. I'd had years of practice being Ma's fanciful girl, and had perfected it through Pa's reformation.

I set aside my ax and took the knife, squeezing The Collector's feathery hand for comfort. "I'll fix you good as new," I promised.

With a somber nod, he left the room.

In the flickering light, I took the doctor off his IV and the machines keeping him alive. Then, the moment his heart stopped, I slid the knife beneath the flesh at his ear, carefully cutting away his stubbled face while leaving it intact.

I was no longer Sage Adams, quiet country girl with tears streaming her face, thinking of the jar of formaldehyde hidden in the garden shed with a finger afloat inside, worn with the dove-shaped imprint of a ring. Instead, I was a chef in a renowned restaurant, peeling the skin off a kiwi for a gourmet fruit sorbet.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A.G. Howard is the #1 New York Times & International Bestselling author of several young

adult retellings and spinoff novels, including her gothic Alice in Wonderland Splintered Series, and *RoseBlood,* a Phantom of the Opera inspired adaptation.

When writing, A.G. is most at home weaving the melancholy, magical, and macabre into her settings and scenes. In her downtime, she enjoys rollerblading, gardening, and visiting 18th century graveyards or abandoned buildings to appease her muse's darker side.

A Touch of Heart

Alvaro Zinos-Amaro and Adam-Troy Castro | 4740 words

My desolate autumn firefly
Is eclipsed by goblins;
My insatiable speck of dust
Is mocked by trolls.

—Pu Songling, Preface to *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*

Many years ago, in Shangdong Province, there lived an unfortunate farmer by the name of Dou Zhuo. Like most of us who walk this teeming Earth, he was trapped in the circumstances that fortune had provided him. He owned a patch of land that supported crops only after backbreaking effort, and then with results that betrayed its resentment of the demands he put on it. His cucumbers were bitter, his cowpeas difficult to boil, his leeks over-pungent, his pak choi stiff, and his edible amaranth hardly deserving of its name. Dou burned inside at the unfairness of it all; he saw the universe as a hammer, and himself as an anvil.

He might have lived his entire natural span as just a glowering malcontent, raging at fates over which he had no control, but for the success of his neighbor, Gan Shihuangdi. Gan's watermelons, grapes, squash, coriander, pumpkins, and hyacinth beans sprang effortlessly to life, tender and delicious, making Gan prosperous and corpulent, while Dou's land afforded him only frustration and want.

One evening, in the cooling sunset, Dou was particularly struck by the rich colors of Gan's produce—a glistening rainbow of vibrant hues—and he pictured the rich bounty he could bring to the annual crop festival if he could somehow annex Gan's land with his own. What riches he would reap, and how much less sweat his brow would have to exude!

As it happened, Dou had inherited some baubles of modest value from his grandmother, a woman of means, but his family had lost most of them to famine and mismanagement. The few jewels that remained had long occupied a dusty chest beneath his floorboards, never adorning the flesh of a woman. He'd never seen any point in having them, but had not until now been moved to sell them, either. The next day, driven by a sudden upswell of hope, he went to a merchant he knew of, and sold the baubles for the best price he could haggle, which was

not much, because he had never possessed the charm of a haggling man. But neither was it nothing. His grandmother's bequest may not have brought him a fortune capable of supporting him in wealth forever, but it did provide him with a sum that in his mind at least should have been enough to compensate the undeserving Gan for the value of his land.

So he visited Gan and made an offer, only half of what the merchant had given him, because negotiations would certainly raise the price by what remained. Gan smiled in deference, saying he was honored by the offer, but he was polite in his refusal. Dou offered more. Gan refused again. Dou grimaced and agitated and made it clear that just to make the next offer was to open a vein and spill his life's blood, and offered all he had secretly been prepared to pay from the start. Gan still refused, and this time made it clear that his land was not for sale—at any price. Dou wheedled and cajoled and almost begged, but in the end saw that he had failed. He was forced to retreat, a cold and hollow sensation hardening in his chest.

The following day, intoxicated with the anger that had burned in his breast throughout a long night of fuming at his ceiling, he returned before dawn, pounding on Gan's door until his hated rival rose from the rest known only to the content. When the door opened, Dou cried, "There is such a thing as too much fu. Look at you! Look at the way you live! Look at the possessions you flaunt, the good fortune you wear while others break their backs for nothing!"

Gan said, "Is this what bothers you? Very well; I am aware that my comfort might be taken as mockery of those who are not quite as fortunate. Forgive me. I am sorry if the yellow walls of my house have given you offense. I will paint them white and leave them unadorned. If my bedstead is too opulent, I will tear it down and remake it in a simpler fashion. Once a week I will eat nothing but congee to remind myself that not everyone is as lucky as I am."

Dou's throat tightened. "Once a week? I eat that gruel every day."

"Then I will do the same," Gan said at once, "saving the best for when my neighbor visits and can dine with me, on the same I am now fortunate enough to enjoy."

Dou stormed off and again marched back to his land with leaden steps. That night the spit in his mouth turned to dust, and the cavern in his chest became dark and dank. He sat on his uneven chair with the bad leg, and to save on his gruel that day ate nothing but a bolus, a large pill with herbs. In bed, he experienced cold sweats almost as profuse as those of his daytime toils. Exhaustion overtook him and he slept. His soul traveled an enormous distance, all the way to

Shouguang, many miles west of Weifang, and there it alighted on the most marvelous display of vegetables and crops he had ever seen. When he woke his lips were moist and his eyes brimmed with tears.

One day, weeks later, breaking his plow on a fresh stone that had somehow managed to survive years of prior attempts to clear the soil for farming, he was overwhelmed by hopelessness. Life, he knew, would never be any better. He threw down his farming implements and left his lands behind, not knowing his destination, knowing only that he needed to be somewhere else.

He wandered far to the north, where after a time he realized he was lost, but he did not let that stop him. Nor did he return, at once, to the crops that needed him. It was as if his legs knew his destination, even if he did not.

In early afternoon, he spotted a magnificent palanquin moving down a barely discernable dirt path, toward gray mountains in the far distance. It was so inset with jewels that in the blazing daylight it glimmered like fire. The soft notes of a seven-stringed quin drifted in the air as it passed by, and bewitched him into following. He would not have been surprised to find that it was carrying the dead to the land where the dead go, but he trudged until his legs ached, and many hours later found himself before a narrow metal gate tucked into an imposing granite wall. The palanquin had disappeared behind the wall, and the gate was now shut.

A gatekeeper's voice called out, "Where is your master's visiting card?"

Dou had seen one of these cards many years before, when his wife was still alive. They were strips of red paper, seven inches long and three and a quarter inches broad, and bore a visitor's name. Servants carried them as credentials. He said, "I have no card. I am my own master."

"Then you are your own servant as well."

Dou got the impression the man had stood too long in the sun with nothing to do. "I wish to speak to *your* master."

"He asks for a visiting card."

"I live far from here. It will take me all night to return to my crumbling farmhouse. I will then need to go to market and waste money to buy such a card, and spend another whole day making my way back here."

"Then I will expect to see you when you return," said the gatekeeper.

Dou's shoulders slumped with resignation and he set upon his journey home, his path illuminated only by faint starlight.

Three days later, he arrived back at the same place, but the metal gate was not there. After running his hands across the large granite blocks that made up the

stone wall, he eventually traced a path to the tight gate, which seemed to have moved. He shook off his journey's dust, stood squarely, and presented his humble visiting card.

The gatekeeper accepted it grudgingly and disappeared. When he returned his expression was grim. "My master does not recognize your name."

"I am one of his southerly neighbors."

"In the south he knows only Gan Shihuangdi, a prosperous farmer renowned for his honorable conduct."

Dou stared at his bare feet, bloodied from the trek. "I am the neighbor to Gan's south, and make up in perseverance what I lack in luck."

"My master is reclusive," the gatekeeper said. "There is nothing I can do to change that."

"But not so reclusive that he ignores visiting cards," Dou said. "So perhaps he will reconsider. I will make it worth his while."

The gatekeeper left his post. A long time later, he returned, a curious rictus on his face, and without a word opened the gate.

"Su Feiyan will see you now," he announced with absurd formality, and closed his eyes as Dou entered the splendid grounds.

Dou heard the soothing tones of a piba-mandolin, and he followed them to a pagoda that seemed to grow, mushroom-like, directly out of the mountainside. It was a scented place, surrounded by a garden greener and cooler than the land that surrounded it, so peaceful in its way that even Dou's raging blood calmed, if only a little. He drew close, not knowing whether he should enter without invitation. Then an ancient man emerged from the pagoda, wearing a silk mandarin cap the likes of which Dou had never seen.

The man performed the form of salute known as the bow with clasped hands, or gongshou, and then seemed to look without effort into Dou's innermost being.

"You have traveled a long way," Su Feiyan said.

Dou removed the knapsack from his back, where its leather straps had long left callouses on his skin. "Your estate is secluded," he noted.

"I have lived a life disturbed with blood and turmoil. I seek quiet isolation, to calm my spirit while life remains in me. But I see that you mean no harm to me, and so I bid you welcome."

"Blood and turmoil?"

"I am retired from the Black Touch."

"Ah." Dou had not understood the impulse that had led him to seek out an audience with this man, but now a certain excitement flared within him, and he

found himself unable to hide a responding smile, except by stroking the unkempt, stringy white hairs that passed for his beard. “I heard of your order once, when I was a child. They were said to be the most divine assassins in the county—in the prefecture—or perhaps the province—or quite possibly the whole land.”

“Divinity is not to men,” Su said. “It is true that those in the order can perform tasks that you might consider miracles, but only in the service of reducing the labor required by our various commissions. We have always believed that in those cases where one can solve a problem by crooking a finger, it disturbs the world less to do so than by making it a labor for oxen.”

“But you are a talented assassin, are you not?”

Without explanation, Su bent forward and picked up a stone. He held it up to the sunlight, as though to examine its finer features, and then promptly put it into his mouth and ate it. “Assassination is the most blunt of our methods. We know six Modes of Transmigration, and seventeen ways to manipulate the vital energy qi that flows through the tripartite mid-region of the human body. We can puppeteer the mind, waltz through walls, reel in time, transform colors into sounds and words into daggers. We can also submerge secrets in the vortices of the twin rivers of space and time, where only we can retrieve them. Next to these arts, the ability to end a human being is mere sleight-of-hand. But yes; I have killed, in the service of restoring life’s balance, or solving those problems that could not be resolved in any other way. Please do not tell me that it is what you want.”

“It is. I offer my life’s savings in exchange for the death of my neighbor Gan Shihuangdi.”

Su nodded, then seemed to disappear in a flash of sudden movement that left him speaking to Dou’s back. “It is said that Neighborly Piety and Respect are the root of Benevolence.”

Dou whirled on hearing Su’s voice from such an unexpected direction. “Benevolence without bread is like sky without air,” he said.

Su reappeared in front of him.

“And how would Gan’s death restore life’s balance?”

“My lands are dry and rocky, while Gan’s are fertile and lush. If I can annex them, I will be able to make a decent living and bring great crops and vegetables to the market, as well as giving freely to the poor. Gan works very little, performing no acts of charity, while I kill myself in the fields. His death would equalize this pressure, and alleviate the burden I face each day to survive. My future generosity will atone for his present selfishness.”

"Could not an equal argument be made in favor of *your* death? Would that not also lead to the restoration of balance?"

"I am straight and he is bent. More importantly, I am the one before you offering payment, not Gan. The transference of my life's savings, meager as they are, to you; *that* would improve the world, since your prosperity is synonymous with the world's well-being."

Su considered this. "If I accept your offer," he said, at last, "you would pay me only after my completion of the task, once you are satisfied."

"I have no objection."

"There are two more conditions. I must ask you to witness my exercises this afternoon, as a demonstration of my abilities. If you are pleased with what you see, I must ask that you wait until the next crop festival, where you will point out your wealthy neighbor to me in person."

Dou did not relish the idea of waiting two more months until the festival, but that was little compared to what he had already endured. "I accept."

"Then let us begin."

The master assassin set about his exercises. He tiptoed up the side of the mountain and leapt down to the ground, landing softly like a bird. He disappeared into his estate's large water fountain and emerged above the surface, walking on the water, each footstep a ripple echoing like the chime of a soft bell. He caught the evening mist with his toes. He seized several ounces of sunset inside a snuff bottle made of tortoiseshell, where they would remain pristine until the end of the world. He stretched the hour of the rooster into an entire day.

Then Su came before him, like any other white-haired old man. "Do you still wish to engage my services?"

"I . . . yes. More than anything."

"Then leave me. We will meet again at the appointed time."

Dou fled. There was no other word for it; though his legs still ached from the journey here, he ran with a fleetness of foot that he would have imagined years behind him, and did not stop until his own sad estate appeared, pathetic but welcome, in the near distance. Only then did he fall to his knees, gasping, feeling nothing but relief at his successful escape from powers beyond his ken; and it was only after a long time spent shaking that a smile tugged at the corners of his lips, for he knew that there was no way the hated Gan could possibly survive the attentions of one so powerful, so gifted.

• • • •

Over the next two months, Dou's life changed little. It remained an exercise in struggling to summon life from earth that had little interest in obliging, earth that instead seemed intent on presenting him with one frustration after another. He slept poorly, woke exhausted, and drove himself to worse exhaustion battling the pests that seemed to mock his sweat while holding Gan's sacrosanct. At night he lay awake, desperately holding on to the memories of his visit to the assassin, while fearing those delusions brought on by hunger.

Then came the morning of the festival. Dou had fasted the night before to keep his mind and body focused, but he was so full of anticipation that he experienced neither hunger nor thirst, only a certain weakness that was hard to distinguish from his usual tiredness. Before dawn, he loaded his wobbly cart with as fine a sampling of his land's issue as he could muster, though it all seemed poor and sickly by comparison to what Gan usually offered. Then he took the handles and trudged to town, thinking dark thoughts of promises broken, and burdens that would always be his.

Arrival at the festival did not lighten his mood. It had already begun and he was, in fact, a late arrival. Many of the merchants from the great cities to the north, resplendent in the gowns of their class, were already strolling among the displayed bounty, judging its quality while their obsequious retainers took notes of their every pronouncement. Not every farmer had wares more impressive than Dou's. There were some almost as poor as his own, but not many, and along the center aisle where the village had erected tents with amusements for visiting children, where the region's most prosperous farmers all displayed the products of their past year's labor, were many whose yields were almost as impressive as Gan's. There were in truth a few worse off than Dou and a few better off than Gan, but they still occupied opposing sides of the spectrum; and while even the most successful irked him, none brought out his inner rage as much as the man whose land abutted his, whose property line seemed to mark the border between Dou's hostile earth and a more generous one. The mere sight of Gan, traipsing between the stalls, bowing to all he met, was enough to fill Dou's mouth with the taste of copper.

It was past noon when Su appeared near Dou's table at the market, to all eyes but Dou's just another doddering landowner inspecting the wares of others for lack of any useful work of his own to do. "Greetings to you," the assassin said. "I presume that you have not had second thoughts, that you do still desire my services."

Dou made a contemptuous gesture at his own meager goods. "Of course."

“Then I ask you to identify this troublesome neighbor, Gan.”

Dou scanned the crowd and found his much-hated competitor, in casual conversation with other prominent citizens from the village. “There.”

Su nodded and left him. His progress through the crowd was as deft as anything Dou had seen, a genuine miracle of threading himself through heavy foot traffic without ever finding himself blocked by other browsers in his path, or for that matter calling attention to himself; only Dou, watching from behind his cart, paid enough attention to him to be dazzled by the simplicity of every movement, and only Dou saw his fingers dance on the back of the hated Gan’s neck.

Then he returned, just as deftly, and reported: “I have caused your troublesome neighbor’s death. He is mortally wounded.”

Dou’s body seemed to become feather-light. Perhaps not eating had been unwise. “How long, exactly, will it take?”

“Almost precisely the rest of his natural life. Following my order’s ideal of the smallest effort possible, I have taken his very last heartbeat. He will live as he would have lived anyway, without ever being weakened by the injury, but in the end, just before natural death comes for him, the death you wished will claim him instead. But it is still murder, just as you requested.”

Dou felt the color drain from his face. He fought to keep his voice at a low growl. “That hardly counts.”

Su regarded him with placid wisdom. “Does it not? When you are breathing your last, will you not want to hold on to life for every precious second? I have stolen an entire world from the poor man.”

In that moment, several customers decided to sample Dou’s goods, and Su disappeared. When the customers moved along to the next table, without purchasing anything at Dou’s, the assassin returned, waiting for his response.

Dou struggled to keep his voice civil. “I don’t want my neighbor spared a second of pain when he’s old and dying and yearning for death. I wish him to die *now.* This was our arrangement. I withhold payment until such has been delivered.”

“Ah,” Su said. “You should have specified. I will try again.”

This time he wove his way through the crowds and reached Gan’s table. He moved like a scrap of silk caught in a high wind, weightless and beautiful, until he struck Gan on the neck with an open palm.

This time Gan went pale and fell to his knees, his eyes rolling back in his head like any other man whose body has betrayed him. A few nearby onlookers cried

out, certain that something had gone terribly wrong; but then he recovered and stood again, confused, as the strength returned to his limbs. He did not appear to be aware that he had been struck, and indeed he looked right through the assassin without seeing him at all, as Su nodded and returned, with equal grace, back to Dou's side.

Dou's skin crawled. He could not deny, now, that Su was as deadly as any venomous serpent, but across the way, Gan appeared to have shaken off his moment of weakness as though it had been nothing more than a fainting spell. Already, he was greeting an interested merchant with more of his infuriating charm.

Dou demanded to know. "What did you do?"

"You said that you wanted him dead at that moment. So again I used the least amount of effort necessary, and caused his heart to skip. For the span of the missed heartbeat, he was indeed dead. But the rest of his life's heartbeats were still available to him, and when the first of these arrived at its appointed moment, he lived anew, unaware that he had tasted mortality. He is none the wiser—and as you can see, none the weaker. Is that satisfactory?"

Dou felt a fury overcome him. Caring not for the dire skills of the man before him, he spat, "You really are worthless, aren't you?"

"I am a master assassin from a school of master assassins. I was taught the degrees of death. I can make people die for a moment, or forever. I can make them die in agony or in ecstasy. I can make their deaths glorious or demeaning. I can kill all of someone or just a part. It is not my fault that you failed to specify the result you wanted. Becoming angry with me solves nothing. Why don't you tell me what your real problem is?"

Dou stepped closer, until his face was only an inch from Su's. "My problem," Dou said, biting off each word, "is that I burn inside to see my neighbor gone from this life!"

"Oh," the assassin said. "That is easy to fix."

His index finger flashed, striking Dou's forehead twice.

Dou reeled under a moment of unimaginable pain. He fell back, arms flailing in the air, and slumped off his table. Then the spell passed, bringing with it a moment of profound calm. He took a deep breath, followed by several more, then blinked and stared at the assassin in disbelief.

"What have you done?" he whispered.

"What do you think I have done?"

"You have eliminated my desire for Gan's death. I no longer feel any hatred

toward him whatsoever. I feel no jealousy." Against his will, he grinned like a fool. "You have killed the part of me that wanted to kill."

Su nodded. "As per the dictates of my order, I expended the minimum amount of effort necessary. Your problem has been solved. There will be no charge."

He turned his back and walked away, melting into the crowd before he had progressed five steps. It was the last time Dou would ever see him, save in his dreams, which were always peaceful, and free of turmoil.

• • • •

That night, to celebrate his freedom, Dou brewed the Dragon Phoenix Cake tea that his wife had been so fond of, and he slept like a child.

Over the course of the following year he tackled the challenges of his land with newfound vigor. He was rewarded with succulent balsam pears, sweet onions, crisp, mild radishes, and bushels of tender water spinach. On one occasion he found himself in need of an additional kuan, or iron plowshare, and after only a slight hesitation asked his neighbor Gan. Gan at once lent it to him, and with it Dou planted long lines of cabbage seeds.

Some time later, after a particularly bountiful day, Dou invited Gan over for evening tea, and they exchanged a pleasant conversation. Dou had Gan sample his fruits and vegetables, and after tasting them, Gan's face seemed to glow with an inner light, particularly when he tried the cabbage.

The following week Gan returned the favor, and this time Dou sampled his neighbor's produce. They talked with an easy camaraderie about their lives, and Dou discovered that Gan had never married, for he had always been too devoted to his farm. Gan expressed his sympathies when Dou spoke fondly of his wife and the years they had shared together before a fever had taken her. The conversation grew thoughtful; night fell; bright stars bejeweled the tapestry of night, and a consoling zephyr blew through the cracks in Dou's door. "For a time I was worried that you thought ill of me," Gan confessed after a meditative silence. "I am very relieved that is not so."

Dou said, "I consider you an ally and a friend in the making. I am sorry for how I treated you in the past."

That spring they took their crops to the market together and displayed their wares on a single large table, splitting the proceeds.

During the winter, Gan helped repair the cracks in Dou's farmhouse, and in exchange Dou taught him ways to save on fertilizer. They made plans to build a

waterwheel that would feed from a nearby river and provide irrigation to both farms; within a year, had made those plans a reality, splitting the costs and more than doubling their crops.

By the summertime, the two men, middle-aged, agreed to get together for a game of xianqi once a week, and they kept this tradition alive for many years, not allowing even illness to interfere.

And so time passed.

Eventually, both of the men realized they were old enough to consider retiring from the farming business. They got to talking about their youths, and the old days, and the legend of the Black Touch, that ancient organization of divine assassins famed and feared for its mastery of life and death; death-mongers so talented that they did not even need to kill. The conversation inspired Dou to hug his neighbor. He was glad he did, too, for some weeks later Gan lay in bed feeling the special fatigue that is death's own visiting card.

As the sun rose and fell, as the clouds heaved and shifted, Dou stayed by Gan's side and watched his friend grow weaker and increasingly divorced from this reality. "You have been a dear friend to me," Dou said, even though he was no longer sure Gan could hear him. But Gan smiled.

Cicadas sang their evening song; a light, humid rain fell; Dou shed a silent tear. When the end finally came for Gan, Dou squeezed his hand and stared into his dissolving gaze with a beseeching intensity.

Silently he mourned that his neighbor's life couldn't have lasted one more heartbeat.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Adam-Troy Castro made his first non-fiction sale to *SPY* magazine in 1987. His 26 books to date include four Spider-Man novels, 3 novels about his profoundly damaged far-future murder investigator Andrea Cort, and 6 middle-grade novels about the dimension-spanning adventures of young Gustav Gloom. The penultimate installment in the series, *Gustav Gloom and the Inn of Shadows* (Grosset and Dunlap) came out in August 2015. The finale appeared in August 2016. Adam's darker short fiction for grownups is highlighted by his most recent collection, *Her Husband's Hands And Other Stories* (Prime Books). Adam's works have won the Philip K. Dick Award and the Seiun (Japan), and have been nominated for eight Nebulas, three Stokers, two Hugos, and, internationally, the Ignotus (Spain), the Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire (France),

and the Kurd-Laßwitz Preis (Germany). He lives in Florida with his wife Judi and either three or four cats, depending on what day you're counting and whether Gilbert's escaped this week.

Alvaro is co-author, with Robert Silverberg, of *Traveler of Worlds: Conversations with Robert Silverberg* and *When The Blue Shift Comes*.

Alvaro's more than thirty stories have appeared in magazines like *Analog, Nature, Galaxy's Edge, Lackington's, Mothership Zeta,* and *Farrago's Wainscot,* as well as anthologies such as *The Mammoth Book of the Adventures of Moriarty, The Mammoth Book of Jack the Ripper Tales, The Year's Best Science Fiction & Fantasy 2016, Cyber World, This Way to the End Times, Humanity 2.0,* and *An Alphabet of Embers*.

Alvaro's nonfiction has appeared in *The Los Angeles Review of Books,* Tor.com, *The First Line, Asimov's, Strange Horizons, Clarkesworld, Foundation, The New York Review of Science Fiction,* and *Intergalactic Medicine Show;* he also edits the roundtable blog for *Locus*.

Alvaro may be found at his website, Twitter, and elsewhere online.

To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight

Acres of Perhaps

Will Ludwigsen | 12070 words

If you were a certain kind of person with a certain kind of schedule in the early sixties, you probably saw a show that some friends of mine and I worked on called *Acres of Perhaps.* By "certain kind of person," I mean insomniac or alcoholic; by "certain kind of schedule," I mean awake at 11:30 at night with only your flickering gray-eyed television for company.

With any luck, it left you feeling that however weird your life was, it could always be weirder. Or at least more ironic. We would have settled for that in those earnest days.

They have conventions these days about our show where I bloviate on stage about what the aliens represented or how hard it was to work with Claude Akins or what we used to build the Martian spaceships. Graduate students write papers with titles like "Riding the Late Night Fantastic: *Acres of Perhaps* and the Post-War American Para-Consciousness." I'm now an ambassador for the show and for my friends, and I'm the worst possible choice.

I wasn't the one with the drive to create big things like our producer Hugh Kline, and I damned well wasn't the one with the vision and the awe like David Findley. I was just Barry Weyrich, the guy who wrote about spacemen in glass bubble helmets, who put commas in everyone's scripts, who never had writer's block, who grimaced whenever they talked about "magic."

And if there's anyone to blame for the shriveling death of that show's magic, it's me.

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Jesus, I don't write anything for years and when Tony dies, bam, I'm sitting at his old computer typing about David Findley. David Fucking Findley, who wasn't even really David Fucking Findley.

• • • •

Not that we felt magical making *Acres of Perhaps.* The question for every episode wasn't whether it was good but whether it was Monday: that's when we had to have the cans shipped off to the network for broadcast. The money men at the studio had no idea whether what we did was good or not, but they gave Hugh

a lot of freedom because they sure didn't want to run anything valuable at 11:30 at night. As long as medicated powders and furniture polish kept flying off the shelves, we could have shown a half hour of fireflies knocking around in a jar for all they cared.

We came close.

You might remember "Woodsy," an episode David not only wrote but shot himself. That's the one where the camera stays fixed on a dark patch of woods at night for the whole half hour, and after five minutes you see tiny faces watching you through the leaves grinning madly, first a couple and then many more. About ten minutes before the end, a half dozen of these little goblin people drag a man's body across the camera's field of vision, tugging it in bursts until the shoes disappear on the left side. Then something pushes the camera over. Roll credits.

Hugh almost burst a blood vessel in his neck when David came back with that one, but he'd borrowed the camera all weekend and there wasn't much else to do but send off the episode and see what happened. A whole big nothing, that's what: People watched it, wondered what the fuck was going on, and then went to bed. We got letters about it, but no more than we did for the episode about the Hitler robot.

David pulled shit like that all the time. He was the tortured genius, treated with delicacy, and he pissed me off. I was young and insecure with a cottage in Venice to pay for, and here was this guy living like Poe in a boardinghouse, writing unfilmable stories about finding dead satyrs in a Manhattan street. David never seemed to understand there was a time when the words had to hit the page and go out to a real world of people who just wanted to be entertained.

Remember the one with two Jewish teenagers learning to fly as they plunged from the Stairs of Death holding hands at Mauthausen? That was David's. There was one told from the point of view of an atomic bomb as it dropped, admiring landmarks and slowly revealing its target is Washington; that got us a visit from the FBI. We lost General Foods over the one where Abe Lincoln turns out to be the second coming of Jesus, but at least I talked them out of spreading his arms on the stage of Ford's Theater at the end.

Hugh was the big picture guy—the big exploding "gee-whiz" picture guy. He liked to hold up his hands, framing the world with his fingers and imagining it better. To him, the three-act structure of our stories was, "What the fuck? Holy shit! Oh, my God." Why anyone trusted him with money, I have no idea, but he was no help with David.

That made me the bad guy. And it wasn't like I didn't have an imagination,

either: I'd written for the pulps since the forties and knew my way around a graveyard or a ray gun. But I sure as hell wasn't writing scripts about two Scotsmen pulling in Nessie's corpse with hooks so the tourists would never know she was dead. It fell to me to point out what was too expensive to film (walking skyscrapers in a city of the future) or too skull-cracked crazy (octopus women driving walking skyscrapers in a city of the future). I had to make the characters sound like real people, too, not all breathlessly eloquent.

Hugh appreciated that, I guess—the balance between us. Maybe David did, too. Thinking back on it, I was the only one with the problem.

David was so much younger than I was, very young, and he carried around an old-fashioned carpet bag with clothes and a portable typewriter, ready to sleep or write anywhere. I had no idea where he got the little money he had—God knows it wasn't rolling in from Hugh—but he spent it cracking up a car at least once a year and buying girls drinks at the Brown Derby. Hugh and I once had to bail him out of jail because he woke up inside an empty water tower.

He was six years too early for the world, born for bell-bottoms and LSD. I was six years too late with my crew cut and horn-rimmed glasses. It's taken me a half-century to admit this, but yeah, he was everything I didn't know I wanted to be. We were friends the way television writers are, smiling like sharks at each other across a dinner table.

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I'm grateful to Hugh and David for at least one thing, sharks though they were: never seeming to care Tony and I were together. That meant a lot in the days when it was dangerous for two men to get a hotel room, when a neighbor peeved about too much noise could call the cops to report something worse.

Yes, they sometimes cracked jokes about where one applied to be a "confirmed bachelor," but they liked Tony. They liked the sandwiches he'd make on poker nights, not little triangles with the crusts cut off but giant heroes.

They didn't like that he was almost unbeatable at cards.

"Please," Hugh said once, "make an expression of any kind. Look down at your cards and then up at us."

Tony shook his head and then drew his hand down in front of his face like a curtain.

"Buddy,"—that was what Tony said in public instead of "honey"—"with guys like us, it's all poker face."

• • • •

We were midway through filming episodes for the second season when the Mullard family came looking for David at the studio. He didn't often show up even when the story was his, but when it wasn't, he was usually sleeping off a drunk or reading about ancient Egyptians in the library or doing some other goddamned thing.

We were working on the episode "The Dreams Come By Here Regular." I'm sure you remember it; it starred that child actress, what's-her-name, and she gets lost in the woods to be rescued by the ghosts of escaped slaves. It was all moralistic Hugh, right down to the fading strains of spirituals at the end—pretty gutsy for 1962, though, when people were getting their skulls split open for thinking those things in the South.

The stage was all set up as a forest at night where the action took place, and our guys were good at building forests. The trunks were huge and roughly coated, and the branches drooped with nets of fake Spanish moss. Hugh and I were looking over the script when a beam of glaring California light crawled our way across the stage.

"Close the goddamned door!" the cameraman shouted.

Figure after figure stepped in through the light, and they wove their way through our trees like pygmies coming for us in the jungle. If we'd turned the cameras on, we could have gotten an eerie scene, and I'm sure Hugh regretted it later.

A stern matron in a graying beehive came out first, clutching a patent-leather pocketbook with both hands. She examined our faces in the dim illumination behind the equipment, squinting at us each in turn.

"What can we do for you?" Hugh asked.

She didn't answer, only squaring off with him as though ready for an honest-to-God fistfight. A fistfight, by the way, that you could see she had no plans to lose.

Before it came to that, the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen came out from the fake woods behind her. She was a strawberry blonde, and she had all the grace and delicacy the old lady didn't—that most ladies didn't. Her calm eyes and strong brows, though, gave the impression that she'd learned the womanly art of making things happen with leverage from the sides of life.

But that's David talk.

"Hello, gentlemen," the woman said, surprisingly at us. "We're looking for

Leroy Dutton."

Hugh glanced around. "Any of you call yourself Leroy?"

The grips, the cable jockeys, the flannel-shirted union men who seemed to be paid to drink our coffee all froze, perhaps contemplating if it would be worth pretending to be Leroy for that pretty girl . . . and that awful woman. Nobody spoke up.

By then, the rest of the clan had come through—a father in a loose tie, a couple of strapping brothers in coveralls, and a kid sister with cat-eye glasses. They could have been the cast of a variety show a few stages over, something wholesome sponsored by a bread company with square dancing. All they needed were straw hats.

"No Leroy here, I'm afraid," Hugh said.

The older lady snapped open her pocketbook and handed him a photograph. "He might not be calling himself Leroy anymore."

I looked over Hugh's shoulder. It was a wedding portrait, and the beauty on our stage was the bride, gazing up at her groom and holding a bouquet of wildflowers between them. The groom, of course, was David.

"This was taken three years ago," she said. "Before Leroy up and left our Melody. Not much before, let me tell you. Weeks. Right after he came back from the woods."

"He's a writer," Melody explained, as though we wouldn't know.

"He *calls* himself a writer," the old lady corrected. "He's a husband and a son-in-law and an employee of the J.W. Mullard Feed Company is what he is."

A husband and a son and an employee—none were things I'd ever have linked to David Findley. I mean, everyone working on that show was unemployable. We'd been too blind or flatfooted or gay to go to Korea. Some of us had dabbled in college, but those days were cut short by a few bad creative writing classes and a lack of money. We worked as clerks, as janitors, as too-old newspaper boys. And we worked on our writing, of course, holding the few checks that came in just long enough to clear before taking everyone else out for booze. We had mortgages; David had a trunk full of paperbacks. He could jump into a borrowed convertible with a cocktail waitress and go racing in the desert at three in the morning.

Though apparently he couldn't after all.

Hugh was smooth. "Doesn't look familiar to me, and I know almost every writer in this town. What about you, Barry?"

I swallowed hard and looked at the picture. "I don't think I've seen him

before."

The old lady wasn't buying it, and I'm not sure Melody was either.

"Oh," Melody said, curling one side of her lips in thought. "Is there another show like this one? With little spacemen and ghosts and things?"

Hugh put his hands on his hips. "Is there another show like this one? Ma'am, this is the most inventive television program in the history of the medium. Is there __"

I cut him off before he dug himself any deeper. "What he means to say is that there are shows passingly similar to this one, and your husband could work for any of those. *General Mills Playhouse, The Witching Hour, Dr. Hyde's Nightly Ride* . . . maybe they're worth a try."

"They're not as good as we are," Hugh couldn't resist saying.

Melody considered this. "Well, he'd only work for the best. If he hasn't come here yet, he will. Can you tell him I'm looking for him?"

"Sure thing," I said.

"And that I love him?"

"Of course."

"And that I'll always know who he really is?"

Hugh thought a second before saying, "Okay."

The old lady pointed at Hugh. "You'd better be careful when you see him. He can take on any form."

"Believe me, lady, I know the type," Hugh said.

The family turned and headed back for the door one by one. The littlest Mullard sibling, the girl with the glasses, waited until last and handed us each something out of the pocket of her sweater: crosses fashioned from Popsicle sticks.

"In case he comes at night," she said. Then she followed her family out through our woods and into the sunshine.

Hugh shook his head and tossed his Popsicle cross to a grip. "Can we get some footage shot today?" he barked.

• • • •

Tony, by the way, was not particularly religious, which is one of about ten thousand things I liked about him. It would have been hard to be in those years, living like we were. The only place to feel and think differently than everyone else was on silly spaceman shows like *Acres of Perhaps* . . . shows you watched

with thousands of other people alone in the dark.

• • • •

We found David where we usually did when he wasn't at the studio: hunched in a booth at the Derby typing away on the portable with a glass of something clear and poisonous by his side. Hugh slid onto one seat and I slid onto the other right next to David.

"So, Leroy, tell us about Melody," I said.

He paused with his fingers above the keys but then plunged them down again almost in a chord to finish the sentence. He batted the carriage lever and sent it clunking to the far side.

"Melody," he said, "is the most beautiful and brilliant woman in the world, and I don't want to even think about your eyes on her."

"Well, everybody at the studio had eyes on her today," I said. "She came looking for you."

"Brought her whole clan," Hugh added.

"Probably spelled with a K," I said.

David tapped a Chesterfield from a pack and lit it. There was a shimmy in his hands. "That so?" he said.

"That's so," I said. I gave him time to take a drag and let out a whisper of smoke, maybe think of something to say next. When he said nothing, I did instead.

"So tell us how your marriage in a hick town crushed your artistic sensibilities until you had to break free, please. I'd like to hear it for the hundredth time, and I'll bet your version is the best."

"I didn't want to leave her. I had to."

I leaned back from the table. "Ohhhh. You had to."

He waved his cigarette near his face. "Look, I didn't want to end up here, for Christ's sake. I'm from Jenkins Notch, North Carolina, and I spent my first twenty years thinking I'd be right happy working in a farmer's store until I could afford a place of my own. I'm a hick, whatever you assholes think, and I'm not here because I want to be famous or rich. Shit, look at you guys."

The waitress was sliding a gin and tonic over to Hugh, who came here so often he didn't have to order it.

"Writing is your job. You talk about it, think about it, work out ways to do it better. I want to get rid of it."

I said, "Yes, it's a bitch to be a genius. We get it."

"No, you don't. I'd go home with Melody right now if she was here. If I could."

"Nothing's stopping you," I said. "Except maybe an aversion to decency."

"It wasn't like that," David said. "I liked living there. I loved living with her. We were like limbs of the same tree growing back together after a fire. Even her sweat smelled good, you know? I'd come home and she'd be flushed from walking back from the schoolhouse where she taught and she'd have this scent of . . . the whole earth, really. Like a creek smells in the summer, or firewood in the winter."

That was eerily and terrifyingly sweet for him to say. This was a man who'd written a script about how every Mercury rocket runs on mulched pixies for fuel, after all.

"I didn't used to drink when I lived back there." His twang had come back and he sounded possessed by himself. "But there was this family—probably still is—called the McDantrys and they made moonshine out in the woods. They sold it in town from their truck, and some idiot got some for Melody and me for a wedding present."

"Something borrowed, something blue, something toxic . . ." I started before trailing off.

"And one night she and I are in the new house and we're rough-housing and laughing and she gets it into her head to try the stuff. 'Nobody here but us chickens,' she says, taking the Mason jar off the top shelf of the pantry and twisting off the cap. The fumes distorted her face right before she took a big pull from it, and then she handed it to me."

"So what are you going to do? Let her unman you?" Hugh asked.

"Right. I woke up the next morning in a rocking chair with a fawn licking from the streak of vomit down the front of my shirt. All the windows of the house were broken. Inside, I hear this sobbing."

He lit another cigarette and exhaled from his mouth.

"I go in, and sure enough, there's Melody all beat up, her face puffy and bulging like a rotten plum. She's crying and I try to console her, but she hides behind the kitchen table and won't let me near her. I'm all looking down at my hands and I want to cut them off.

"But I'm still not thinking clearly enough, so I stagger off to the woods to find the McDantrys. They sold bad stuff, right? I could have fucking killed someone. And if I still had it in me, I might as well let them have a little."

By then in David's story, Hugh had gotten this look on his face that he wanted to write this down in case it got good. I'll admit I wasn't thinking much differently myself. Hell, we could use the forest set we'd already built.

But then the story got strange even by our standards.

"Out back of the Mullard property was a swamp of pines and cypress trees stretching for miles. The ground there is blackened mud and the canopy is all grown together. The McDantrys had put planks across the cypress knees so you'd walk on this tottering path zigging and zagging through the woods. Some were slick with mold so I had to be careful, but I followed them as far as they went—a long damned way.

"It got as dark as dusk back there, and it wouldn't have been hard to lose your sense of time. So it might have been an hour or even three until I came upon a big rotten cypress stump the folks around there called the Old Knot. When I say 'big,' I mean easily the size of a bus, hollowed in the middle like a bottomless well.

"There was a still there all right, camouflaged with broken branches. I was tempted to kick it off into the pit but, frankly, I'd have preferred to do that to the McDantrys.

"Of course, none were there. So I set about to wait. I walked around on the planks a bit, holding out my arms to keep my balance. I fiddled with the still to see how it worked. And then I leaned over and looked down into the stump."

"What did you see?" Hugh asked.

"I didn't see anything," David said. "It was dark. But I heard a hollow whistle, a little like the Knot was breathing—like it was the mouth of some wooden giant asleep under a blanket of mud. I reached my hand over the middle and the breeze was cool and rhythmic."

The waitress set a beer in front of me and I flinched.

"The weirdest thing was that when I shifted my weight on the board and it let out a squeal, the breeze stopped. Like something was holding its breath for me. And I wanted badly for it to start again—like when a friend jumps into a quarry pond and doesn't come up in what seems like forever?

"'Hey,' I shouted, but there was no answer.

"I got this idea I had to climb down there no matter how far it went, had to squeeze its heart with both my arms to start it again. That was crazy—for all I knew, it was a nest of rattlesnakes.

"But standing there thinking it over, I was okay with that. What else did anybody need me for? The least I could do was make Melody a happy widow instead of a miserable wife.

“So I leaned and leaned like a coward until gravity made the decision for me.”

“Jesus,” Hugh said.

“I fell for a long, long time—so long that I had dreams. The vibration of cold whispers on my ears. The tremble of fingers up and down my arms. Something with claws combing over my scalp. I smelled oceans from other places, imagined music played with water and leaves.”

Bullshit, I thought . . . but didn’t say.

“And then I hit the ground. Or so I figured—I woke up flat on my face in my own front yard. Melody came running out and kissed me and said we’d never talk about it again and it wasn’t my fault and she’d still love me forever.”

Here he paused.

“Well, a funny thing occurred to me that night, naked with our sweat soaked into the sheets and our scents on each other’s lips. What if this was the bottom of the Old Knot, with a different Melody and a different house and a different town? What if up there somewhere was a woman still scared of me? And why wasn’t this one?”

Leave it to David Findley, or Leroy Whatever, to have the world’s most sublime and esoteric drinking blackout.

“After, I had weird dreams of what was going on here or up there, and I noticed things didn’t always connect. I’d think I’d said something here but really I’d said it in a dream up top of the Old Knot, or I’d lose a day in one place or the other. Folks got nervous around me because I’d stare off somewhere and then write down what I could in a notebook I got from the dime store. When that wasn’t fast enough, I got the typewriter.”

“So why’d you leave?” Hugh asked.

“Melody wasn’t worried at first when I clattered away in the kitchen with a board balanced on the arms of a chair. But then I stopped sleeping and going to work. I stopped leaving the house and shaving. I stopped talking, stopped focusing on anything in front of me. She called over my folks to talk sense to me. Reverend Pritchett stopped by. And when I heard them talking about ‘getting me out,’ I decided I’d better get myself out first. I packed up one night and lit out west. And the only thing I can make or sell is . . . whatever that fall gave me.”

David drank the rest of his liquor in one long swallow. You’d think he’d have learned not to do that from his own story.

And that’s what it was: a story. A good one, like all of his, but a tall tale myth meant to make him seem like the Paul Bunyan of weird fiction or something.

“So you drank bad moonshine, beat up your wife while barely conscious,

stumbled into the woods, and got a concussion after falling into an old tree stump?" I said.

David eyed me calmly. "Yeah, if you think so."

"One of those McDantry people dragged you back home where you came to, and ever since, you've suffered the lingering effects of your concussion, plus some uncharacteristic guilt. Mystery solved."

"If you say so," he said.

Hugh, not helping, asked, "So there are different versions of us back where you came from?"

"Yeah," David said. "Barry here is writing for the *Saturday Evening Post*."

Hugh and I stared and he let us dangle a moment before laughing.

"Barry, I have no idea if you even exist, here or there. I'm not sure I'm creative enough to invent you or Hugh. Or, shit, all of Hollywood. Who would imagine the studio system? Jesus, I hope not me."

Then, being writers, we spent the night getting drunk and bitching about the money men.

• • • •

You know, Tony and I never got to speed around the desert in a Karmann Ghia convertible like David did with his girlfriends. We could never fight in public with me chasing him out of a restaurant to apologize, either, or walk close on the pier. We lived in a closet built for two for fifty years, and when I finally found the guts to step out, he was too sick to step out with me.

• • • •

The saying goes that to be great is to be misunderstood, and most people assume this also means that to be misunderstood is to be great. But there are lots of misunderstood people who are a long way from greatness.

When I crawled into my bed beside Tony that night, I wondered which one David "Leroy" Findley was: a visionary or some delusional hick good at sounding like one. Or maybe there wasn't a difference.

What did "Woodsy" even mean when you thought about it? Anybody can film random movements and rely on the viewers' perceptions to make it art, but unless it says something, what's the damned point? *Acres of Perhaps* wasn't in the "giving-voice-to-David's-demons" business; it was in the "entertaining-and-

enlightening" one. We made people think about race, nostalgia, paranoia . . . not the stitching of the Universe. Someone could create the *Clorox Kafka Hour* for that.

Tony rolled over under his sheets to face me. We'd just moved to this Craftsman bungalow in Venice then, and air conditioning was a science fictional concept to us. Even a fan was something that cost money, and so he slept without much on at all. I remember this now only because, well, I thought right then that Tony was as good as Melody any day of the week.

I told him what had happened, about the Mullard family and David's secret identity, about how the whole genius act had a clichéd story behind it—except for the falling into the netherworld part which was pure delusion. He listened with his head propped up in his hand under the moonlight, asking questions and nodding at the answers.

At the end, he asked, "So what is he going to do?"

David had ducked the question at the Derby so I could only offer my guess. "He'll probably keep avoiding her until she gives up and goes home."

He considered a moment. "You sound angry about it."

"I don't think angry is the right word. Annoyed. I'm annoyed things are easier for him because he has people like Hugh and Melody and me carrying his load of the ordinary."

"You know what I think?" That was one of my favorite phrases of his; it was like a motor revving. "Men like David make women into muses so they have someone to blame when they don't deliver the goods. And they make women into anti-muses, too."

"Anti-muses."

"Yeah. Like this poor Melody. She's the boat anchor mooring him to reality, right? So he builds it all up until she seems to be after his soul, and then he's justified in leaving her."

Tony was a part-time illustrator for magazines in LA and San Francisco, and he had a way of drawing exactly what you needed to see but no more. He sometimes did it with words, too.

"Do you think I'm that way?"

He smiled and reached for my hands. "You don't have a muse, love. In the same way astronauts and carpenters don't. You just do things."

Tony never misunderstood me, and sometimes that was consolation enough for not being great.

I'd leaned in closer when there came a thunder of fists against the front door.

Tony sighed and gathered up the blankets around him. Then he reached for his cigarettes and said, "Better go see what David wants."

"What makes you think it's David?"

He tapped the end of the pack. "It's the way his life works."

I pulled on an undershirt over my pajama pants and headed for the door. A shadowed head bobbed in the window, and I could tell from the wild spray of hair that it really was David.

"What do you want?" I asked through the door.

"Barry! You've got to let me in. They're after me."

"Who?"

"Melody and her folks!"

I imagined them walking down the street with torches and pitchforks, and I'll admit I liked the image.

"Where are they?"

"They're here," he cried, twisting the doorknob and thumping himself against it.

I opened the door and he stumbled inside. He tried his best to slam it again but I was holding it.

"This is silly," I said. "They're people. Be with her, don't be with her—just tell her the truth."

Out in the darkened street, I saw the Mullard family walking abreast in a single line, patrolling with flashlights like you would if searching for a lost dog. They pivoted as one group at the end of my driveway and marched toward us.

"Okay," I said, closing the door.

David did me the courtesy of bolting it shut. He reached for a chair to prop under it but I stopped him.

I watched through the window as the Mullards formed an arc around the entrance to my house like Christmas carolers. Melody left the group and knocked gently.

"Mr. Weyrich? I think Leroy is inside your house. Can he come out so we can talk to him?"

"Hold on a moment," I yelled. Then, turning to David, I whispered, "What do you expect me to do?"

"Tell them to go away. Tell them you're calling the cops."

"Mr. Weyrich?" This time it was the mother. "That's my daughter's lawful husband in there."

David shook his head but I leaned closer to the window. "Look, I don't want

to be involved in this at all. Maybe everybody should call it a night, get some sleep, and then get together somewhere tomorrow to talk it all over."

The Mullards closed in.

"Hey, Tony," David said.

Tony was leaning in the hallway in his navy blue pajamas. He lowered his cigarette from his lips and said, "Hello, David."

"You've got to talk some sense into her, Tony."

He arched an eyebrow. "Why me?"

"Because you have feelings and things," David said quickly, still peering through the window.

I watched as the two brothers broke off from the group and out of my vision. I wondered if I'd remembered to lock the back door. Then I wondered if it wouldn't be just as well for these guys to carry David out of my house and my life. Maybe I could hurry and unlock it—

Tony came closer. "Melody, honey?"

"Yes," was the quiet response.

"My name is Tony. I'm Barry's roommate."

Isn't that funny how quickly it ran off his tongue? He didn't even have to pause anymore.

"David—Leroy—isn't in a condition to talk to you right now."

"Has he changed form?"

Tony turned to David; he'd sat down in one of our living room chairs and was squeezing his temples with his palms.

"No, he's still Leroy," Tony said.

On the other side of the house, the back doorknob rattled. Then a giant rhomboid head with speckled stubble craned in through the open kitchen window. He peered around, looking down at the sink and up at the ceiling, maybe judging if there was room to climb through.

"Hey," I said, stepping over to the sink. I picked up the fancy new water sprayer gizmo and gave him a quick spritz in the face. He retreated sputtering and I slammed the window closed.

By now, David was holding his head in his hands, covering his eyes.

"Who the hell are these people?" I said.

"They think I'm possessed by the devil," he said quietly.

"So do I, but you don't see me climbing into people's houses to get you."

"They found me at the boardinghouse, I have no idea how. Melody's always been able to find me wherever I was like she can feel me, a phantom limb."

I wondered if Tony could sense me that way. Probably, knowing him.

"Do you have anything to drink?" David asked.

"For you, no," Tony said. "You smell like a gas tank."

"It's how I listen," he said.

Outside, the Mullards began to sing. They weren't bad a capella, but when the little one started in on the banjo, it was actually beautiful. Beautiful and scary because, Jesus, who carries around a goddamned banjo?

I glowered at David with my arms folded. "Your whole life is one long episode of *Acres of Perhaps,* isn't it?"

So began a strange siege, me sitting on the couch keeping an eye on the Mullards through the blinds, and Tony sitting in the other recliner watching David. The Mullards sang hymns in low voices while David muttered to himself with his hands clawed into the arms of my chair like an astronaut going up.

"This is ridiculous," I whispered to Tony. I probably didn't have to.

"Maybe everybody will get tired and go home," he said.

"We *are* home," I said.

Not long after, a rancid odor overtook the room. It took me a moment to realize what it was: David, head lolled back and his mouth wide open, had pissed himself in my favorite chair.

Tony figured it out at the same time. "It's not like that chair was cheap," he said.

I grabbed David by his shirt and yanked him up. A dark spot had bloomed on his pants.

"David, wake up!"

He rolled his head to one side and then the other, mumbling. The words were faint and garbled at first but then they resolved like a radio bearing in on the right station.

"What if people make cities itch?" he said.

"Jesus Christ," I said. "'Antelope umbrellas crying in the wind.' There. I'm a genius, too."

"You're the one who thinks it's magic."

"People who piss themselves in my house don't get to ever use that word around me again."

He tilted his head back way farther than I thought possible, opened his mouth like the tall front doors of a church, and let out a long, low wail. Then he pivoted his head forward again and said, "Where's my typewriter?"

I glanced around in case he'd brought it inside. When I didn't see it, I opened

the blinds and squinted on the porch. There was his black case sitting amongst the Mullards.

"You really want it?"

"Barry," Tony said in his admonishing voice.

"Yes," David said. "I've got to get this down."

"Excellent," I said. I turned the deadbolt on the door.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" Tony asked.

"Never surer," I said, opening it.

The Mullards all stood from where they were sitting on the low adobe wall, looks of surprise on their faces.

"He's all yours," I said, shoving him into their arms.

The two beefy brothers caught him while the mother looked down with disgust. She'd probably have let him hit the cement face first.

"It's okay," Melody said, her hands on the sides of his face.

"No, it isn't," David groaned.

"Peace be with you, praise the Lord, whatever the fuck," I said, holding up my hand jauntily and then slamming the door.

"Hugh's going to kill you," Tony said.

"No, he's not," I said absently, watching through the blinds as the Mullard brothers hoisted David on their shoulders like a trophy deer. "Jesus is cheaper than detox."

They'd left David's typewriter behind and, well, you can't leave something like that lying around. I reached out and grabbed it.

• • • •

David was a drunk, an eloquent drunk, and it was hard to blame him because hey, you've got to do whatever makes you brave. For some people that's booze, for others it's drugs, for others still it's narcissism or vengeance or desperation. I don't know what made it possible for me to face the page, but keeping stupid words like "magic" out of my head probably helped—telling myself it was like making a chair or a sandwich instead of something alive.

• • • •

It's not what you think, that I jumped on a chance to take out a rival. After that night, my frustrations with David turned to pity. He happened to be sick in a way

that helped him write stories for our television show, but it wasn't comfortable for him. It hurt him to do. It might even have killed him one day.

But first, as Tony predicted, Hugh wanted to kill me.

"'Jesus is cheaper than detox'? That's what you have to say?" he told me at the studio the next day. "People come *back* from detox, Barry."

"He'll come back. They might not even get him all the way to Jenkins Notch. We're going to get a collect call from a Howard Johnson's in Kansas after he escapes, and we'll go pick him up. But you know what? He'll damned well be sober."

"You understand he's the engine of this whole show, don't you?"

"Well, I like to think I'm useful, too."

Hugh brandished his clipboard over his head. "You're the brakes! You're the rearview mirror!"

"Okay, well, fuck you. But listen. David drunk would last what, another season? At the most."

"You don't know that!"

"At the most. Then he'd wrap himself around a tree or hang himself by his belt in a closet. You know how many scripts he'd write then? Zero."

"They're going to make him into a revivalist preacher."

Okay, I smiled a little to imagine old Leroy Dutton swinging a Bible over his head on a plywood stage somewhere, sweat staining the armpits of his short-sleeved buttoned shirt. He'd be good at it, I thought. Quick on his feet, anyway.

"Look," I said, "he's a married man. He has a wife and responsibilities and we shouldn't interfere with that just because you think he's the only way to make a television show."

"Married man?" Hugh said. "What the hell do you know about being married?"

I used to think Hugh only meant about thirty percent of what he said, less when he was angry, but it was funny how even irrational, he still remembered where to hit me.

I was considering where to hit him back when the stage door opened again and for the second time in as many days, Melody Mullard Dutton was walking through our woods. She was by herself this time, thankfully.

"There's something wrong with David," she said.

"Of course there is," I said.

• • • •

You know what Tony did every morning for fifty years? He'd open the office curtains facing out to the street, tying them neatly to the side. He'd straighten papers on the desk. He'd set down a cup of coffee he'd brewed on the stove, the way he knew I liked it best. He'd turn on the typewriter.

And because he did, I sat down every day. Sometimes I'd peck something out, but mostly I didn't.

• • • •

David had escaped, though he was hardly on the lam: He jumped out of the Mullards' 1940 DeSoto at the intersection of Wilshire and LaBrea on the way out of town, and now they were pretty sure he was holed up at the Derby. It says all you need to know about Hugh that he was relieved a beautiful woman and her good Christian family had failed to lure his writer to a wholesome life in Jenkins Notch.

"He knows where his home is," Hugh said later. "Not shuffling barefoot with a bunch of Snuffy Smith castoffs."

The only thing keeping the Mullard boys from storming into the Derby and carrying David out on their shoulders like a sack of grain was that Melody had a plan. In Hugh's office with her hands folding and unfolding in her lap, she explained it to us.

"Leroy thinks he's fallen through that old stump and he's now living on the other side, right?"

I had doubts he thought so literally, but I nodded with Hugh.

"When she taught me how to sew, Mawmaw,"—I think that's what she called her, and it made me think of a giant double mouth lined with sharp teeth—"told me that sometimes the only way to undo a knot is to push the needle back through it."

"Okay," I said, pinching the bridge of my nose. "I think we might be getting a bit too literal here—"

"So you want to push him back through the Knot again?" Hugh asked.

"Yes," she said.

"That still doesn't solve the problem of getting him back to North Carolina in the first place, does it?" I asked.

"We wouldn't have to if there was a forest here."

Of course, there happened to be the perfect forest not forty feet from us. A week earlier and the stage would have been New York City. A week later and it

would be acting as Moon Base Theta. The Mullards had shown up right in the middle of our very own North Carolina backwoods, almost as though it was destiny.

"All it needs is a Knot," she added. "Or something he thinks is one."

I watched Hugh's eyebrows lift in excitement as they did before any new production, when the budget shortfalls and actor disagreements and special effects problems hadn't started yet. If there was ever a man born to build a fake portal between worlds to convince a half-mad, half-drunk genius he was sane again . . . it was Hugh Kline.

The question, though, was why he'd want to do it, aside from the artistic challenge. As he leaned across his desk with a pencil and paper so Melody could sketch the stump, I wondered what his angle could be. When he glanced at me and grinned, I knew it for sure.

The Mullards wanted an exorcism. They assumed a sober, demon-free Leroy Dutton would climb out of that stump all blinking in the light of Jesus to return to Jenkins Notch. Hugh, on the other hand, assumed David Findley would climb out, look around at his crazy hick relatives and then never leave Los Angeles again. He wasn't exorcising the Devil. He was exorcizing the Mullards.

"If there's one thing I've learned about working with writers, it's to meet them on their own level," he told me after Melody was gone.

"What's my level?" I asked.

"You don't have a level, Barry. That's why I like you."

And hearing that—knowing it—solidified which fate I wanted for David Findley.

• • • •

It's not like I never wrote again after the show went under. I moved on to comedies and little dramas to keep food on the table, not because I was gifted at it, but because I showed up and produced words when they needed them. In Hollywood, that beats genius every time.

I never knew why guys like David Findley got all the credit for creativity. Anyone can wave his hands and yell "Magic dust!" or "interdimensional tree stump" to explain everything away.

• • • •

We left the set decorator to build the stump while we went to fetch David. He'd slipped away from the Derby by the time we got there, and we checked two bars before finding him again. I don't remember the place, but I do remember him sitting under the only bright light in the room, writing in a goddamned steno pad with an arc of empty glasses around it.

"Do we grab him or what?" I asked Hugh.

"No, let's try this," Hugh said, hunching a little toward the back as though he was trying to go unnoticed.

When David looked up, I could see his eyes weren't quite focusing on us, and the writing on his pad couldn't be decipherable even to him.

"We got rid of them," Hugh whispered.

We sat down on the other side of the table.

"How?" David asked, his voice hoarse.

"Told them you'd gone to the desert to think things through," Hugh said. "They'll be there for another four hours, easy."

David glanced down at the steno pad. "Thanks. I appreciate it. I need some room—"

"What you need," I said, holding up a hand for a waitress or a bartender or whatever worked in that hole of a bar, "is a celebratory drink."

"We all do," Hugh said.

"Yeah, we do," David said, dreamily.

So that was the plan. We let David drink as much as he wanted, "slaking the demon" as the Mullards would have called it, matching him with one drink of ours for three of his. We figured he'd get drunk enough to drag back to the studio for his exorcism in about two hours.

It took more like four and the cost of at least one episode to get him to the blubbering mess we required. He descended to that state in layers: first he was sentimental, then he was funny, and finally he was full of strange advice.

"You know how you can be as good a writer as I am, Barry?" he asked.

"Please tell me," I said. By then, I was barely keeping my own liquor down in my stomach where it belonged.

"By not imagining I'm a better writer than you are," he said.

"That's deep. You're like some alcoholic Confucius."

When David started to drizzle down his seat toward the floor, we figured it was time to get him home. I caught him before his head hit the carpet.

"Jesus," Hugh said. "Maybe we ought to take him to the hospital instead."

"We're taking him to a spiritual one." I ducked beneath one of David's arms.

“Come on, lift the other side.”

We got David into the car. We got the car across town. We got the car through the studio gate. We got David up, out, and onto his spongey feet. We got him out of the California sun and into the North Carolina backwoods in the time it took to write this paragraph.

The set was the best we’d ever built. I felt the warmth in those woods, the Southern stickiness of them. I smelled the moss. I heard the cicadas. I saw, yes, the winding path of planks leading off into the swamp.

Standing at the end closest to us was Melody.

“We’re here to take you home, baby,” she said, reaching for David. “We came through the Knot.”

He turned into my chest and made a few sloppy skids on the stage to get away. “Get out of here! This place isn’t for you!”

“It isn’t for you, either,” she said calmly.

“Come on, buddy,” I said.

Hugh followed us on the creaking path deep into the soundstage. I hadn’t realized it was that big. Helping David along those planks, I felt the danger of falling into the muck, of stirring up snakes. I felt the trees watching me.

We came to the stump—the Knot—in only a few minutes, but it seemed much longer. They’d outdone themselves with lumber and plaster: It was giant and creepy and it cost as much as three episodes we’d now have to film on canned sets in the back lot. But you could park a Volkswagen inside if you wanted to. The set decorator must have gotten it right because David recoiled when we got there.

“We’re going home,” Melody said like a beckoning spirit, a dryad or a nymph, her hand dipping gracefully from her pale wrist.

We propped David up near the edge. I peered down into the stump and saw the stagehands had lined the bottom with black cloth—a kind of hammock. It would catch him when he fell.

If he fell. He clutched the stump and wouldn’t even look inside. “I can’t go,” he said.

Melody steered herself into his vision. “Baby, listen to me. We’re going home now. You’re going to remember this all like a dream because that’s what it is.”

“I can’t take it back with me,” he said.

It was growing clear that we’d soon have to toss him into the stump by force unless someone thought of the right thing to say. Everybody turned to me.

It wasn’t a rational decision, what I said next. It came as some awful belch of

the id.

"There is no 'it,' Leroy," I said.

He closed his eyes as though that would close his ears.

"Nothing's talking to you or through you. You write weird stuff and what does it change? Nothing. Somebody sits up late at night watching our fucking show in an undershirt with a bottle of beer in his hand. His eyes get opened to the dark truths of the Universe. But then he crawls off to bed and gets up the next morning for work. He farts in the elevator, he looks down a lady's dress . . . it's all gone."

David didn't say anything, but he did slump further against the Knot.

"Even if you had something, people would just flush it down the toilet. It's *good* they flush it down the toilet, because how else are they supposed to sell insurance or sweep floors or wipe baby asses after knowing all of that? It's a defense mechanism."

Hugh's smile faded. "Hey," he said.

"It's selfish, when you think about it," I pressed. "Shoving people's faces in lives they'll never have, things they'll never feel that you made up out of nowhere."

"Selfish?"

"Yeah. That's what it seems to me. You're not supposed to see that stuff and you sure as hell aren't supposed to make us see it, either."

"I don't—"

It takes a writer to know how to demolish another writer. And with Melody looking on and her family all praying, I did it.

"Go home, Leroy. Go the fuck home. This world is lost. The one on your side of the Knot, though? Maybe it isn't. Maybe you'll give your magic to your kids. Maybe you'll just live."

David's voice cracked when he said, "What if I don't see anymore? What if I can only see here?"

"Then it wasn't yours to see in the first place," I said.

The little Mullard girl began to sing. Melody's brothers joined in as the harmony and soon the whole family had clasped hands in a circle around Hugh's fake stump.

David turned his back to me on his hands and knees and I wondered what he was doing. Then he put one wobbling hand on the edge of the stump followed by the other, and he pushed himself slowly to his feet.

"Hey," Hugh said again, pushing me away. "You do see things, and you need to share them with people who don't."

David closed his eyes and swayed a moment.

"No, I don't," he said quietly. "I'm not one of the good guys."

Melody came up smiling with one hand held out for him.

"Walk with me again until you are?" she said.

He took her hand with the wide eyes and open mouth of a man being saved at the last second from drowning in the sea. Together they stepped onto the edge. They paused and gazed at each other like the wedding picture. This was another one, a renewal of the vows.

"Do you want to say goodbye?" she asked him.

He glanced over at Hugh and me. Hugh was reaching for him with a look of feral desperation on his face. Me, I nodded to David and he nodded back.

"No," he said. "Never again."

Then she took him into her arms in a dancing embrace and they plunged into the Knot. I half expected them to disappear in a flash. Or maybe I hoped.

All I heard was the pop and creak of them hitting canvas. When we approached, she was cradling him close like an infant and he was unconscious.

The Mullards came forward with a blanket and they bundled David inside. The brothers hoisted him between them and started for the studio door.

"Thank you all," Melody said, clasping mine and Hugh's hands. "You saved a life today."

Hugh tugged his away. "No, we murdered a great show that made people happy." He turned to me. "You murdered it."

I didn't think so then, not yet, so I didn't even watch as he stormed off through the forest, punching tree after tree.

"I'm glad we could help," I said.

Melody kissed me on the cheek and hurried off after the limp form of her husband, the late David Findley.

• • • •

Tony wasn't well enough to travel in person at the end thanks to the cancer growing in his body like something on one of our old shows. I tried last October to rent a Winnebago and take him up the coast; he always loved the trees like David. We got maybe thirty miles out before he was too sick to keep going, but it wasn't him who said it. He'd have gone the whole way in that little plastic bathroom to make me feel better.

Make *me* feel better.

What he did instead with the last year he had was walk the world through Google Maps, steering down back country roads with the arrow keys. He went twice or three times across the country that way.

• • • •

I told myself *Acres of Perhaps* died for many reasons, not just because of losing our resident "genius." People gave a lot less of a shit about fantasy and a lot more about the bullet-flying, hose-spraying, billy-clubbing reality of the time. If you were square, you wanted to be told about better times on television in Westerns and variety shows. If you were cool, a show like ours couldn't keep up with the farm-league David Findleys on every college campus with speed, weed, and acid. If you wanted weird, if you wanted surreal, there was always the news.

We tried, though, and I wrote my best scripts in that last half season. Remember the one where the disgraced comic book artist has to draw pictograms for our first contact with an alien race? That was mine. I also did the one where the white-bread people of a wholesome Midwestern town chase the stranded motorcycle gang into a warehouse and burn it down.

But come on. It was over. And as the stories and scripts came slower to me, I began to realize I might be over, too. I knew it on the last day of filming when Hugh handed me my check.

"You know not to come back here, don't you?" he said.

"I sure do," I said, folding the check for my pocket.

Hugh and I made up a little before he died. We were in the elevator at a convention years later, standing in opposite corners with grinning teenagers glancing back and forth between us, when out of nowhere he said, *"The* fucking *Love Boat?* Really?"

I calmly looked at him and said, *"Flood Zone Manhattan?* Really?"

Deadpan, he said, "We're both writing disaster pictures."

"At least Ethel Merman dies in yours," I said.

We laughed together for as long as it took to get to the lobby, and Hugh patted my shoulder with one shaking hand on his way out. That was it. That was as close as we got.

The next year I was writing for *Charles in Charge.*

• • • •

This is Tony's computer, and I barely know how they work. I follow the paths he made for me, click the things he showed me how to click, let him do the looking I've always been afraid to do, and I've been exploring his mind when I'm not typing this.

Yesterday, I found the orange teardrop marking a spot in the North Carolina foothills in Google Maps. It had a label, and the label was, "Go here when I die."

So I am.

• • • •

Jenkins Notch is in its own valley between two ridges of the Appalachian foothills, and first you have to go up a road of hairpin turns and switchbacks before coming down again. Not that Tony went there in person, of course. But for him to find the town and find the farm, even when he was in too much pain to sit for twenty minutes at a time . . . it probably almost felt that way.

The place looks like one of our old sets, Fantasia Americana. There's a real general store where old men sit around a giant wooden spool playing checkers. There's a post office operating from an old mobile home surrounded on three sides by a handicapped ramp. They've got a Main Street, too, but the little hardware store and clothing shop have long been boarded up, and the only busy place in town is the Circle K convenience store.

I followed the line Tony drew for me off the main road and through town and into the forest and finally down a bumping dirt track with a ridge of weeds growing out from the middle. The closer I got, the more I worried about whom I would find at the end. I hadn't called ahead, and Leroy Dutton could stagger from his shack with one overall strap hanging loose from a beefy shoulder and a cocked shotgun on his arm, thinking I'm the tax man. I could end this journey bleeding out in the dust with my chest turned to hamburger.

That's not the reason I didn't go to see Leroy first, though.

I'm no commando or wilderness scout, so it took me some wandering and thrashing through the brush to find my way to the low-sloping hammock of loamy soil that David described for us all those years ago. I glanced between the sycamores for the little goblin things of "Woodsy," but I didn't see any.

When I came to a path of planks, I knew I was close. I followed them deeper into what now were oaks and cypress, big trees with heavy drooping limbs. Hanging from some were unlit oil lanterns, maybe placed by Leroy himself, and there was evidence people had been walking through recently: trimmed branches,

flattened leaves.

It never occurred to me that the Knot could have rotted into the ground over the fifty years since Leroy fell inside. It didn't seem possible. And when I reached a domed clearing with a single heavy beam of sunlight aimed at the center, I was not surprised to see the Knot waiting for me.

Our replica on the stage was almost perfect, but this one was even larger than I imagined. Even now, rotted down low to an irregular circle, it still felt mighty. Someone had assembled a half-circle of log benches around it.

I'd come a long way, right? I wasn't drunk or imaginative or knighted by the gods with any magical perception, but yes, I leaned over and looked down into the Knot.

It was dark, just as David had described. There was a slight intimation of a breeze, a breathing, also like he'd said. My eyes couldn't focus on the bottom, black and speckled with something like stars. It might have been night on the other side, where David Findley was still writing in an attic somewhere with a bottle of gin beside him.

Where Tony was speeding down the Pacific Coast Highway with me.

I closed my eyes and tipped myself inside.

• • • •

We had a hard time agreeing on the opening credits for *Acres of Perhaps.* A time-lapse of day fading to night in the desert? Turning pages of a book? The sparks of a campfire winding upward to the stars? A flying saucer hovering in observation above a tranquil Earth?

Hugh wanted something I called the Flying Antique Store, old porcelain dolls and Victorian chairs and grandfather clocks tumbling at the camera from some distant point in space, probably because the props were free. David, who couldn't care less about the credits, half-heartedly suggested the ticker-tapper of a news broadcast from the "far edges of imagination," something to lure in the suburban zombies he hoped to awaken.

My idea—and I've marveled since that it came to me—was to show a family sitting down to watch television on the other side of the glass, Mom in her housecoat and Pop in his loosened tie and the kids settling in, all of them staring expectantly at the viewers as though they were about to be the show. That's what we went with.

I saw none of those things falling through the Knot like I expected. I would

have settled for scenes from my life, because at least Tony would be there, but all I got was the stretch effect from *Vertigo,* zooming the edges of that stump into infinity, lined with swimming lights.

It felt like settling into bed after being awake for years.

• • • •

Tony was not the one who woke me, but I wasn't surprised. What were the chances he'd be waiting by the Knot on the other side when I came through?

The man who did was heavyset with horn-rimmed glasses and a head of white unruly hair. He wasn't in overalls and he didn't have a shotgun, just an undershirt and blue jeans.

"Barry?" he was saying.

"What year is it?" I croaked. "Who's the President? Did 9/11 still happen?"

The man who once was David Findley sat on the edge of the stump. "Tony's still gone," he said. "I'm sorry."

"Are you still Leroy Dutton?"

He clasped my arm and tugged me from the soft black soil. "Always was," he said.

With his help I got to my feet, knee-deep in leaves. I found my way back over onto solid land in three wobbling steps.

"Are you still . . ."

"A hillbilly? If you're asking if I can play a banjo, I have to say the answer is yes, but I can only pick out the first few bars of the *Acres of Perhaps* theme."

I peered down into the Knot and all feeling of infinite depth and darkness was gone. "So it is just a stump."

David glanced in. "I've gone back and forth on that. I've never believed like I did back then, but then, maybe I don't have to."

I felt very strange and light, and it took me a moment to ask, "How did you know? About Tony?"

"He sent a letter and told us you'd be coming."

Tony, still planning my travel from beyond the grave. "When?" I asked.

"I'd have to look at the letter," he said. "A couple of months ago. You want to come back to the house to see it, maybe get some water?"

"No moonshine?" I said.

"I quit that stuff years ago, believe me, and the McDantrys up and left in 1970 anyway. I bought their property from the bank."

"You own the Knot?"

"I own the Knot." He grinned. "Isn't that crazy?"

"Yes," I said. It all was.

"The kids and grandkids used it for a stage," Leroy said. "They did puppet shows and magic shows and little plays and Franny used to have her revival sermons here for us. She's a Unitarian minister now."

"Children played in the Knot?"

"They still do sometimes when they come to visit," Leroy said. "We built a little platform for it and set up the benches like our own Globe Theater."

"They don't . . . fall through?"

"Not literally, no."

By then I was feeling warm, and my head felt heavy and barely attached to my neck.

"Hey," I said, taking his arm before I fell back in. "That whole thing back then in LA . . . I wasn't your friend."

"I know," Leroy said.

"I killed you," I said.

"A little bit," he conceded.

"Stories came to you easily and love came to you easily and you could be whatever you wanted in the open and you didn't want what I couldn't have."

"I knew that fifty years ago, Barry. Did you come to hear how everything turned out okay? That's fine, but first you have to know that it didn't for a long time. For a long time, I was the world's angriest feed and seed delivery man."

"I'm sorry," I said quietly.

"You have to understand that, okay? You did something shitty to someone who saw you as a friend."

Keep going, I thought. Go all the way through with the needle, me or the Knot, I didn't care.

"But I did something you didn't. I healed and scarred over. Maybe it was easier here in the woods with Melody, but you could have done it, too, if you'd let yourself. You didn't have to write for *Diff'rent Strokes* or *The Facts of Life* or whatever you did, and you didn't have to blame me or yourself for it."

"I should have been the one who left the show," I said.

"Why? You were always as good as me. You're the one who didn't think so, only because you did it differently."

I squeezed my eyes shut with my fingers. I killed him for nothing.

"All those stories that could have been," I said.

"You still wrote some," Leroy said.

"No, I mean you. I mean your stories."

Leroy squinted at me. "Do you think I stopped writing?"

"I thought—"

"—that I'd be too busy shooting Indians and skinning raccoons? Who do you think wrote those plays and puppet shows?"

"It's not the same," I said.

"The same as what?"

"The same as *Acres of Perhaps.*"

"Barry," he said. "I don't want to let you off the hook without giving you some more shit first, but what do you think I've been writing?"

"Puppet shows," I mumbled. "Plays for kids."

"It was just a different network," Leroy said. "And my grandson Tucker? He can do one hell of an impression of a dropping atomic bomb."

Wait, I wanted to say. I wanted the world to wait, let me hear it clearly. "You wrote scripts?"

Leroy shrugged. "Sure. Here and there, maybe a couple hundred."

A couple hundred. Scripts. Of *Acres of Perhaps.*

"Are you sure I'm not on the other side of the Knot?"

"If you can't tell the difference, Barry, then maybe there isn't one."

• • • •

On our way back, we walked in silence until Leroy said, "You know, I could have written for *The Love Boat,* too."

"Could you?"

"Sure. They pull into Acapulco and at midnight, the ghosts of murdered Aztecs steal everyone's gold."

"You'd have to write in Billy Barty or Paul Lynde," I said.

"Okay. One is a famous diamond thief and the passengers hang him from a yard arm when he doesn't confess."

"That's not bad," I said.

• • • •

We followed the planks back toward a farm, not a gray shanty with the siding peeling at the corners but something with two stories and a gleaming metal roof.

A woman with gorgeous long gray hair hanging almost to her waist was climbing out of a giant Toyota pick-up truck. She was wearing a suit.

Leroy pointed to me. "Look what I found in the Knot."

She didn't close the door. She hurried over, her heels kicked free, but then she stopped with her hands on her hips.

"Are you taking him back to sin?"

"What?" I glanced at Leroy and then back to her. I never imagined she might be the one to greet me with a shotgun, probably not far out of reach in that truck. "No. No. Not at all. I wanted to—"

She pulled me in for a hug. I didn't raise my arms to return it right away, only slowly.

"It's okay, Barry. That's what my family thought. I just wanted my husband back." She leaned back, looking me over. "How long were you out there?"

"I think he might have been lurking there since the sixties," Leroy said.

She frowned but said, "Well, that would explain a lot. I'm sorry I just got home. Had to go to the school board in town."

"She used to be superintendent," Leroy said. "Still is, if you count all the 'consulting' she does."

I wondered if her district taught evolution. I had a feeling it did if Leroy was anything to go by.

"Are you going to stay awhile?" she asked me.

"Do you want me to?"

"We both do," she said. "Tony did, too."

"I'm sorry?" I said, not sure I'd heard.

"Come on," Leroy said.

We walked to the edge of the grass beneath a copse of trees toward a small shed or cabin with three lightly molded windows. He opened the door for me and inside were two desks, one a computer and one with Leroy's old typewriter.

"Tony sent it a few months ago," Melody said. "He told us you kept it for years."

"Yeah," I said.

Leroy pointed. "What I figure is you can use that and I can use the computer, or maybe the other way around, and I can write stories about walking skyscrapers and you can write stories about Mars."

"Who would want them?" I asked.

"Well, Tony would, for one," he said. "But I'm guessing we can find some asshole in Hollywood to sell them for us."

So I’m sitting now in a creaking swivel chair. I’m looking out through the windows. There’s a glass beside me of something called “unsweet tea” which is what we drink around here now instead of booze. I’m resting my fingers on the keys—I don’t plan to type, don’t plan to even try—but the cool plastic waits.

Waits for when I’m ready again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Will Ludwigsen’s stories of weird mystery have appeared in *Asimov’s Science Fiction, Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine,* and many other places including his collection *In Search Of and Others*. He lives in Jacksonville, Florida with his partner, writer Aimee Payne, as well as three cats and a dog who might also be writers of some sort. He blogs at will-ludwigsen.com and tweets as @will_ludwigsen.

How to Find a Portal

Debbie Urbanski | 6780 words

I remember as children we were warned about the women who drove the unmarked white vans that circled around our neighborhood during those long hot summers, in particular creeping slowly down the boulevard which ran alongside the park, where if you positioned yourself at the right angle, I suppose in front of the swings, you might be able to see a flash of a child's private yellow underwear as they pumped their legs upward.

"Where'd you get that stupid idea? These women aren't interested in anybody's underwear," my mom snapped at me.

"But you said—"

"Are you ever listening? That was something else. These women are different." *The portal creepers,* my mother and the other mothers called such women. I don't know why the vans were always white and always dirty, as if they had driven through trenches of mud, or why the drivers of the vans were always female, or what they received for doing what they did. "Irrelevant," my mother told me sharply when she was describing the women to me again after the weather turned warmer one particular March, and it was only a matter of time before the tulips sprouted up and I would be spending my afternoons at the park, on the swings. I was ordered to stay away from those vans, especially if the driver rolled her window down and looked me over in a familiar way, like a great auntie might, beckoning with her hand, which usually held some kind of otherworldly sweet, a sticky crystalline globe, or what looked to be a salted lemon drop. I was told to avoid the globes, crystalline or not, as well as any salted drops that they might offer me. Or not me, exactly. I mean, what was offered to the other children. No one had ever told me, *You're the one I was looking for.*

I began dreaming about those vans. In certain dreams, a van paused, finally, in front of me. The passenger window lowered. A delicious scent poured forth from the inside. Time slowed down. The driver of the van leaned out of her window and shook a piece of candy. Each movement of her arm took an hour. I stood there, uncertain of what to do, hoping the decision would be made for me: that either the van would drive away, or the hand would reach down, grab my corduroy dress, and pull me in.

My mother made it clear that no matter what those drivers promised, the worlds we would be taken to might not be pleasant ones. "Not all worlds have

waterfalls or dragons in them," she told me. I didn't believe her. I thought portal worlds sounded nice. A home for kids who didn't feel at home here. A place that turned you into something better than—"Don't be ridiculous!" my mother shouted at me. "If, one day, you forget everything I've told you, and you get into a van, and that van takes you to a portal, and the portal opens up—you need to close your eyes and run." She turned to glare out of the kitchen window. I looked too. What I saw out there was the dark. Or, rather, our reflections on top of the dark. My mother's voice quieted. "Or else you'll lose yourself. Are you listening to me? Those glittery worlds will eat you up."

In other of my dreams, the white vans drove past me without slowing, while neighbors watched from inside their houses, clucking their pink tongues.

• • • •

The children who were taken that summer I didn't know very well, except for one particular girl, Leslie, who was my friend. Not my best friend. I didn't have one of those. But a girl who let me tag along with her most afternoons at the park. We were on the swings when that particular white van pulled up and the window lowered. I thought the driver was pointing to me. She wore a pair of mirrored sunglasses so we couldn't see her eyes. I got off the swing. It was like my dream, in a way. Only this time I knew what to do. The woman shook her head. She pointed again, this time clearly at my friend.

Leslie jumped off her swing. "Bye!" she shouted as she hurried toward the boulevard. I followed her. Around us, or, rather, around Leslie, I could almost feel a new world assembling. It almost felt like a source of heat. The woman shook her head. She looked about to drive off if I continued walking. Leslie, my friend, or whatever you want to call her, turned to me and shoved me backwards. I fell. A rock cut my hand. There was some blood. When I got up, I returned to the playground. So I don't know what they talked about, Leslie and that woman. She passed a sweet to my friend. I saw the van's back doors open. Leslie climbed in. There was a mattress on the floor of the van, as well as a chair, and a bag of books, and a puppy. No one believed that I saw a bag of books and the puppy. They believed me about the mattress though. My friend waved to me. She was chewing on a stick of pink taffy, then somebody reached around her and gently pulled both doors closed. "Why didn't you get anyone? Why didn't you scream?" I was asked repeatedly afterwards. I gave many answers to those questions. None of my answers were the right ones.

The next day, our mothers marched downtown to the mayor's office, where they took over the sidewalks and shook their hand-lettered signs. "WE ARE OUR CHILDREN'S HOME!" they shouted. "HOME! HOME! HOME!" After a week of protest and chanting, the mayor appeared on the front steps to City Hill and promised a crackdown. Police cars began to stalk the park boulevard. Every white van that surfaced was pulled over, searched, towed. The drivers, now in handcuffs, hollered shrilly about performing a service: how all they had done was take some kids to what wanted them. Surely our mothers could have fought to close the park, but I think they wished for us to see the vans impounded and the women arrested, so that we'd know this part of our lives was over, and we might as well move on and start having different dreams.

It was arranged for an ice cream truck to appear in the lot beside the playground in the afternoons. Our mothers believed this would cheer us up. Every day we were allowed one or possibly two ice cream treats, depending on the treat you chose: two bomb pops or one king cone. Two dreamsicles or a chipwich. I always ordered two ice cream sandwiches, "the second for my friend," I promised. I would climb into one of the maple trees and eat both myself.

From my perch, I could watch the boulevard where the police ordered the vans to pull over and park. The drivers who climbed out of the vans were old, as old as our mothers, or older, though they raged as our mothers never did. There was something animal about those ladies, how, under the gaze of the officers, they shook, paced, howled. One of the women reminded me of a crocodile. It was the way she stared. Or there was the woman who brought to mind a snow leopard—who, in the space beside her van, prowled back and forth, as if she was just biding her time, as if she was readying for a hunt, until a police officer yelled at her to stand the fuck still. She wore a smoky gray jacket buttoned to her chin and a pair of matching gloves, though there was no reason to wear gloves on such a mild day. When the officer began the process of shoving her into the back seat of his squad car, she first twisted around, to stare in the direction of the park, where I was hiding. Nobody had looked at me in those trees before. She looked in my direction and shook her head roughly, sadly, like someone, like me, had already made, or was about to make, a mistake. I've been looking for a portal ever since.

The women and their vans did not come back. As for the girls, as it was mostly girls who had been taken, they also stayed away, often for years. We forgot about many of them. Their desks were filled at school by other children with similar sounding names, and when the portal girls finally did return, they weren't

children anymore.

I wonder what that feels like, to be watched as a child, to be chosen, devoured, then spit back out. I bet some part of that process is nice. I wouldn't know. Usually the girls were discovered in ditches. They were clothed in thin luminescent fabrics. Often they were crying. It was assumed, by our mothers, that the girls were crying for their snatched childhoods, that they had wanted to come home all these years but couldn't, despite whatever stories the girls tried to tell at first.

My classmates shied away from the portal girls. "They freak me out," a boy in my class said. I think he meant the jerkiness of their motions and their bright eyes. But I had questions for them. I went to their houses, and if there was no answer when I knocked, I rang the doorbell repeatedly. Whoever answered the door always looked worried. Sometimes the worried adult would right away order me home. Though other times, they said, "Not too long, okay?" and ushered me upstairs. The girls would be in their bedrooms, lying on their frilly beds. They didn't look normal anymore, but it's hard to say how exactly. They looked uncomfortable, though their beds were soft and covered in pillows and quilts. They did not bother to look at me when I started to ask my questions. I wanted to know where they went, and what they saw, and why they came back. Did they have to come back? And whether they were someone different there, and how do they find their portal again, and could they bring me with them this time. Sometimes I felt the portals, I told them. I felt it in on my skin. It was like feeling sunlight. Only I couldn't see where the portals were. I couldn't get to them by myself. None of the girls ever answered me. As if I wasn't worth the effort to turn their heads. If I continued to ask questions—Were there dragons in their world? Were there magic waterfalls? Were there gold crowns?—they became angry with me. One portal girl began to scream. Not any words in particular. It was only a sound. Another girl threw an ugly porcelain doll at me, at my neck. Once I dragged a girl out of her bed because she started laughing, and I left her there, sprawled on the floor, on her fuzzy pink carpeting.

Our mothers made us invite the portal girls to our sleepovers and our parties. At my cousin's twelfth birthday bash, the lost girls huddled in the living room, their faces strange. It was hard to look into their faces. Leslie was there, my old friend, or whatever you wanted to call her. She wouldn't talk to me either. "Leslie?" I asked. None of the girls spoke out loud anymore. They only whispered and only to each other. I don't think they were even whispering words. It sounded like nonsense when I eavesdropped, like they were saying, *Whoosh!*

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!

Later, after the ice cream cake was unboxed, Leslie climbed on top of my cousin's roof. I watched her leave the room, and I watched her climb, first scrambling up the deck and then onto one of the lower eaves. I didn't stop her or tell anyone. Someone else told. My uncle rushed to get a ladder out of the garage, then he dragged the ladder to the side of the house and clambered up. Before he could reach her, Leslie jumped. We were told she disappeared in the distance between the roof and the ground. An ambulance was called anyway. My cousin and my cousin's friends and I were ushered away from the windows. The curtains were drawn. My mother relit the candles. We had to sing happy birthday again while the ice cream on the cake puddled.

Several girls who went to that party, not portal girls, but girls like me, jumped off of their own roofs in the weeks that followed. I would have tried it, too, if it worked. That fall, I first found blood on my underwear, and right away I sensed a change in the air, a closing off, and a new feeling of disgust. For a time, it was like all the portals went away.

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I grew up. I met someone. I got a job. We bought a house. I tried loving my partner more than a portal. This is what adults grow up to do, correct? What I really mean is *wanting*. I tried wanting her more than another world. On the day we closed on our home, a 1920s Colonial nestled at the bottom of a hill, I walked around each of the empty rooms, and if I felt the possibility of a portal nearby, the first portal I sensed in a long while, I did not turn to look. Instead, I took my partner's hand and led her outside to our deck. The foyer of our house had stained glass windows that let in a golden light. The doorways between the rooms were charmingly trimmed and arched. In the yard, in the wild garden, a number of unknown plants thrived. Some of the plants had thorns on them. That evening we watched the setting sun color the sky as we looked out upon the rectangular swath of land that was now ours. "The home of my dreams," my partner said, rubbing her fingers on my knuckles, as I looked at her, and touched her hair, instead of turning around.

I thought becoming a mother would help. A lot of women talk about how motherhood has made them necessary. I convinced my partner that we should adopt a pair of children I found online, an adorable sibling set from Indiana who needed to be placed in an all-female home. It took half a year to finalize. My new

daughter liked me to carry her around the house, up and down the stairs, though she was six and it hurt my back to carry her. My son insisted we read to him all the time. He didn't care what the books were about. I read him the unabridged version of *A Secret Garden,* which contained many lengthy descriptions of plants. I read him Stud Terkel's *Hard Times.* He didn't care. Certain evenings, we sat in the family room beside the fireplace, eating stovetop popcorn and playing collaborative board games where no individual can win. Those were the good evenings. There were other evenings. I think I was expecting to feel happy.

Once I punched that precious stained glass window that hung in our foyer. "Look at this, the window's broken," I pointed out to my partner the following day. We smoothed scotch tape over the cracks. Neither of us had any idea who to call to fix such a thing. Once I grabbed my son's neck and squeezed him as hard as I could, shoving him onto the couch at the same time and holding him there. I don't remember the reason. I remember my son had developed a habit of mocking me or mocking his sister. Perhaps that was it. Why the neck, I wondered afterwards when he wouldn't let me hug him. Honestly, I think the problem was that people—my children, yes, but also my partner, and my coworkers—kept expecting someone different in my place. If I spoke using my own voice, or acted naturally, acting like who I was, a tangible sense of disappointment overtook the room, like a rancid smell in the air. As if, as long as I stayed, I would be regrettable.

My partner said those thoughts were ridiculous and maybe even insane. "You need to go into therapy," she insisted. I don't think it was that. I don't think it was me. "Actually, this entire world should go into therapy," I told my partner. "Yeah, well, I don't think that's going to happen," she said. It was never a matter of believing or not believing in the portals. I mean, they were there, at least for some people, whether everybody believed in them or not.

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I began looking for my portal again. "What are you doing?" my partner asked when she found me standing on top of a storage box in my son's closet attempting to run my hands along the ceiling. I looked in all our closets. I looked in our sugar canister, and in the trunks to both of our cars, and in the gutters to the garage. I crept into our crawl space where no one ever went. Had I found a portal in any of these places, I would have left my family. Surely there were other women out there, kinder women, who could have easily stepped in and taken my

place. There was only sugar in our sugar canister. There were clothes in our closets, and flattened paper bags in our trunks, and dead leaves plus one dead squirrel in the gutters. In the crawl space, I discovered a ground beetle infestation that had to be dealt with by an exterminator who couldn't come until the following Thursday. At night, in bed, my partner curled and asleep beside me, I sensed doorways creaking open ever so slightly again, enough to let a little breeze through from another world, a little breath. It had been years since I felt such possibility.

At work, I began researching other people's portal stories on the Internet. I had to do some pretty fantastic digging, as the news outlets still preferred to report only on the kids who went through, the girls in pigtails, the occasional wide-eyed boy. I wasn't interested in those kids or in the dirty old vans that had returned to the parks. *The portal creepers,* the newspapers still called them. I needed to learn about the adults who left, the people who didn't need portal creepers to find their portals. After weeks of research, my work finally began to pay off, as I started to perceive a pattern, or the possibility of a pattern, concerning which adults found portals, and when, and what they were doing when they found them. I took my notes on a yellow legal pad while pretending to converse on the phone with potential customers. My notes went on for many pages, and would have gone on for much longer, if my manager hadn't rifled through my desk while I was on break and photocopied my research. She brought the photocopies to a HR meeting, along with my computer's browsing history. "But I need my job," I said. My manager agreed as she escorted me to the back entrance, where my bike was chained to a lamppost. She waited on the sidewalk until I rode away.

My partner left not long after. She had become tired of living with a person (me) who wanted always to be somewhere else, somewhere she was not. At least this was how she phrased it. I asked her to take the kids. But the kids had never been her idea. Besides, wherever she was going, it was not a suitable place for a little girl and boy. "Where are you going?" I asked. She kissed me once, hard, on my forehead and promised to send a monthly check to cover the mortgage until the house sold.

I returned to Illinois with my two kids, to the house in which I grew up. It was tornado season. There were many more tornados than I remember. Numerous afternoons that first summer were spent huddled in the basement beside the holiday boxes, my mom clutching onto her flashlight that she occasionally shined into each of our faces, making sure we were still there.

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Here is how I now spend my day: I wake up. I wake the children up. I tell them to get dressed. I put out a box of cereal, milk, and two bowls, plus two spoons. I remind my children to get dressed again. They miss the bus. They are wearing the same clothes they wore the day before, the same clothes they slept in. I drive them to the grade school I once attended. They munch on dry cereal in the back seat, crushing the broken O's into the fabric of the seats with their thumbs. I drive back home. I might go to sleep. My parents wake up. They have things to do. Their lives did not stop because of my predicament. In the afternoon, my children come home from school, and they are as ravenous as little monsters. I am supposed to be finding an office job. I may still be wearing my sweatpants, or not. I put out a box of crackers that are infused with a kind of cheese product. In the hallway are pictures of me from when I was ten years old. The wallpaper of my childhood, the yellow and orange flowers that cover all three bedrooms, is heavy and haunted.

"I don't really have time for this," my mom warned when I first arrived to her house dragging the large black suitcases behind me. My kids were starving from the drive. My mom offered each of us a protein bar that tasted like vanilla sand. This was all my parents had in the fridge, plus three cartons of natural vanilla ice cream in the freezer. You reach a certain age, my mother explained, and you've eaten everything you've wanted to eat, and you're ready to stop eating. "That's depressing," I said. "Well, obviously, it's not," said my mom. The house was considerably less tidy than it had been on previous trips. There were piles of old *Good Housekeepings* on the countertops. VHS cassettes with illegible, hand-written labels were stacked next to the TV. Pill bottles had overtaken the kitchen, and in the family room, the pullout couch was always left open, the sheets twisted into a sweaty hump.

"That's where your father sleeps now," my mom explained. "There's no point in putting everything away, is there, if you're only going to get it out again."

I noticed other changes between my parents. My mother had begun to yell a lot. Not that I was judging her. I mean, I yelled, too. Or, rather, I had yelled, before I started looking for my portal again. But my mother yelled more than I ever had. She screamed at my father that there were grain moths in the pantry again. She screamed about that moldy smell in the basement. The shower drain was clogged with hair—his!—again. And so forth. I understood how she felt: this frustration that this world is not as it should be and no one is doing anything

about it. My father was now blind in one eye due to a botched cataract surgery. He spent his day in front of the TV watching our home movies. “Turn that god damn TV off!” my mom shrieked. My dad ignored her. “Why did I film the close-up of the streamers like that?” he whispered to me. Some days I spent the entire afternoon on a folding chair beside my father, and I rewatched my childhood. There were many more parties than I remembered. “When I turned the camera toward the sky, like that,” my father whispered, “what was I looking for?”

One afternoon, when the kids were still at school, I pulled my mother aside. “What’s going on with you?” I asked. I guess it was a stressful period in her life. I guess it was like this clock was ticking. “What clock?” I asked. “Stop interrupting,” she said. She had developed a growth in her neck behind her left ear. She didn’t have a good feeling about the growth. I didn’t tell my mother I was looking for my portal again. She probably knew.

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The surgery to remove the growth from my mother’s neck was scheduled one month out. There was the chance it would affect several important nerves in her face or that the biopsy would come back as malignant. “All a part of life,” my mom explained to me, as if everybody at one point will have to undergo this surgery. We were sitting in the kitchen again, drinking mugs of decaf tea and waiting for the after school bus to bring my children back. Outside it looked ready to storm, low clouds, gray and menacing. I asked what she was looking forward to after the operation.

“Eating with baby spoons,” she said.

“Why would you eat from a baby spoon?”

“There is going to be a bag attached to me via a tube.”

“What kind of bag?”

She sighed and sipped her tea. “When I was your age, do you know what? Nobody imagined they had a choice of worlds. We made do with what we had. And now I’m fine with my life, no matter how small it may seem to you. It sounds like an exhausting way to live, how you’re living.”

“And how exactly am I living, Mom?”

“You’re always looking for an alternative.” She touched my hand. “Do you think it’s an exhausting way to live?”

What I mean is, her hand, for a moment, rested on mine. Her fingers felt bony, skeptical. I think you can love people—children, mothers—and still want to leave

them.

It never stormed that afternoon. It just looked like it would. I think the people who live up north got all the thunder and rain. On the far side of a portal, there is a place where, instead of having bodies, there is only a bunch of thoughts floating around, and the thoughts interact with each other and entwine. Or there is another world where one's body keeps changing, or else it never changes, or else you get to choose what body you have. And bodies have whatever purpose you want them to have. There isn't just one purpose and after that purpose is gone, you've failed, and you might as well be dead.

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My mother and I began taking walks together in the late morning. On our first walk, we spotted several of the white vans that had begun to re-enter the neighborhood. I had no idea where the vans had gone these past years or why they were now migrating back. My mother tensed each time she saw one, hissing out a breath, though the vans never slowed down for us. We weren't, I suppose, what they were looking for. "We'll have to tell the children," my mother said. That night, she devoted the dinner table conversation to the dangers of the portal creepers. Her talk bored my kids. I wonder if it feels like these sorts of things happen all the time nowadays, children leaving for other worlds. "We know, Grandma," my son had said.

On this particular morning, I was carrying a satchel on our walk. My satchel was packed with essentials for a journey—granola bars, a compressible poncho, matches—in case I found a way to go. A bank of shredded and ugly clouds was moving eastward above us. My mother's surgery was a week away. We hurried across the street to the park shelter, and it was here, when I was sorting through my bag, attempting to reach a flask of water which had shifted to the very bottom, that I saw the portal.

Or, rather, this was when my mom pointed the portal out to me, as I had walked past it. As it had blended into the shadows of the trees.

But I was the first to walk past it.

It was not how I imagined a portal to look. It looked like a patch of darkness in the shade. "Oh wow," I said. On the other side, there appeared to be more darkness.

"Hmmm," said my mom.

"Maybe it's night over there," I told her.

A chilly and complicated breeze blew through the portal's doorway smelling of damp citrus. I heard the sound of water dripping onto a hard surface.

"Ready?" I asked my mom.

"No," she said.

I gave her a moment.

"Are you ready now?"

"I don't think this one is yours, dear," she said. At first I wondered how she knew but then it became obvious to me, the citrus, the initial darkness. That was all her. I suppose my portal would have smelled of flowers. I suppose it would have looked bejeweled.

All this meant was I couldn't go through without her, according to the portal rules as I understood them. "Okay. Fine. It's yours," I said. "Let's go."

My mom shook her head.

She said she needed my father there.

"But he's not here," I pointed out. This made no sense. Whatever two old people looked like when they loved each other near the end of their lives, my parents didn't look like that. They did not finish each other's sentences. They did not touch each other with affection. In fact, they didn't touch each other at all. "I don't know how long this portal is going to stay open," I told my mom. "Look, it could be one of those healing portals. It has that kind of citrus smell about it, doesn't it? The healing portals are supposed to smell like oranges. If you go through, I think you're going to get better." I motioned to her neck. "It's your portal, Mom. I can't go through it alone."

She told me she was going nowhere unless my father was present.

"Go home and get your dad," she said.

I ran home and found my father napping in the bedroom while a video played on the TV of my younger self battering a piñata that wouldn't break open. "Wake up!" I yelled. It took my dad awhile to even open his eyes. I shook him awake. My kids were sprawled out on the couch-bed in the family room drawing pictures of the monsters who lived beneath their beds. They had begun to have nightmares.

"Kids!" I asked. "Do you want to see the portal I've been searching for my entire life?" They wouldn't look up from their drawings, so I put on a documentary for them to watch about wild horses, and told them if we weren't back soon, they should go knock on the door of our neighbor, Mrs. Geshem.

My father couldn't run briskly anymore. Actually, he couldn't run at all, nor could he find his shoes. "Don't worry about your shoes," I said. "Shoes really

aren't that important right now." I had told my mother if the portal began to fade, she needed to hold it open with her hands. "I don't think it works that way," she said. If she couldn't hold it open with her hands, then she should jump through it, I told her, and keep it open from the other side. My dad agreed to wear his indoor slippers outside after I promised to clean the soles if we returned home.

The portal was gone by the time we reached the park.

My mother, sitting at a picnic table, was looking into the sky.

"You let it get away!" I shouted, kicking the picnic table bench again and again.

My father moved to stand beside my mother.

"I saw a portal," she whispered up to him.

"I'd like to see a portal myself someday," my dad said.

"I'd also like to see another portal," I added, "though it took me twenty-five years to find this one."

"Actually, I was the one who found it," said my mom.

A park squirrel scurried down one of the trees as we discussed where the portal went and whether it would appear here again any time soon. "I don't think it's coming back," said my mother. The squirrel approached the spot right beyond the picnic table, the spot where the portal had been. I think somebody in our neighborhood has been feeding the squirrels because they have turned very tame. "Go away," I told the squirrel. When it didn't, I hurled a rock at the creature. It let itself be hit.

Back home, I couldn't find my kids at first. It turned out the DVD had begun skipping so they ran, sobbing, to Mrs. Geshem's house. It was unclear whether they were sobbing because they were left alone or because their horse documentary was damaged. "It wasn't even twenty minutes," I told them in Mrs. Geshem's yellow kitchen, my son and daughter clutching onto their mugs of warm milk, the milk sweetened with a local honey. We were in that kitchen when the storm hit, hammering the windows with rain. My parents' basement flooded. A lot of boxes labeled "L. CHILDHOOD" had to be thrown out. This bothered my mother more than me. She said she felt like she was throwing me away.

The night before her surgery, my mother told me about two reoccurring dreams. In the first dream, she returned to her childhood house, only this time she was living there with my dad and me. But she had forgotten to pay the rent, and now the landlords demanded a meeting. "It's a very stressful dream," she told me. "If we get kicked out of the house, where are we going to go?" In her second dream, she found out her mom, dead for decades, had all this time been saving an

apartment for her. The apartment was a one-bedroom and overlooked an alley. It wasn't big enough for a family. My mom didn't know what she was supposed to do with such a place, or what her dead mother was trying to tell her. In the dream, my mom spends hours, days, searching through the apartment closet, and in the mattresses, and cupboards, for a hidden message. Neither of my mother's dreams seemed that important. I suppose other people's dreams rarely do.

There were complications with the surgery. NOTHING I DIDN'T EXPECT, my mom scrawled on her dry erase board, since talking wasn't possible for her then. CAN'T COMPLAIN. AFTER ALL I CAUGHT A GLIMPSE OF ANOTHER WORLD THAT DAY AT THE PARK! IF ONLY YOUR DAD COULD CATCH A GLIMPSE TOO, she wrote and then drew an unhappy face. The marker she used was red, which, when paired with the capital letters, added an urgency to her words. She ate bowls of applesauce and several jars of organic baby food.

After a three-day stay in the hospital, my mom returned home. There was a bag attached to her neck via a plastic tube. My dad drained the bag for her every day in the powder room. He and my mother began taking slow afternoon strolls, not long, sometimes only to the end of the block and back, or on other days going a little further and turning around at the park. They went even when the storm sirens were wailing and the sky looked sick. My dad wore a pair of binoculars around his neck while my mom held her notebook. On their initial walk, they spotted two portals glinting in the distance. On their second walk, they saw five. One of the worlds through the portal looked very soft, my dad said. Like if you took a step onto that world, you would sink right through to its very center. One of the worlds contained all the colors of a sunrise.

I didn't understand why portals kept appearing to my mom. Because she was on her way to dying? Because the portals were getting tired of all those energetic children, so they wanted someone old and dying? On my parents' third walk, a dozen more portals revealed themselves. I turned on another horse DVD for my kids and began sneaking after my parents on their walks. "Where are you going?" my daughter asked me. I learned how my mother's portals seal up if anyone but her gets too close. How they vanish with a gentle *swoosh.* Once there was a row of them, each a varying degree of brilliance, the last one blinding. When my mother saw such portals, she pointed and laughed, jotting an observation in her notebook, as if she had just spotted a mildly interesting bird.

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My mother never recovered from that surgery. Last week, she barely had the energy to get out of bed. Her daily walk consisted of strolling from her bedroom into the kitchen with my father at her side. Her portals have begun to line the hallway of this house. They appear in the windows to the kitchen. I would have gone through any one of them with her.

STAY AWAY FROM MY PORTALS, my mother wrote. YOU ARE NEEDED HERE.

But no one is that precious. Each of my mother's portals is, in my opinion, becoming more beautiful, like an attempted seduction is going on. At times there is a portal in every window of our house. This makes it difficult to distinguish the actual world outside. Certain portals appear to be constructed out of translucent silk. Other portals undulate as if made from waves. They smell of mountain passes or rain. Sometimes I can't help reaching out to touch them. If I reach to touch them, they darken, vanish. *Swoosh.*

My mother swats the beautiful ones away. The ones that look too much like wings. YOU KNOW I NEVER LIKED FANTASY. IT ALWAYS FELT TOO MUCH LIKE ABANDONMENT, LIKE GIVING UP, she wrote in her thick red lettering. After the surgery, when she stopped wearing her makeup, I couldn't recognize her face. She stopped dyeing her hair as well. At this point, there are too many portals gathering around her, and she no longer keeps a record.

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My daughter tells me the windows of the white vans cruising past her and her friends have begun lowering. She has gotten the feeling that someone, or something, is looking for her. "That doesn't have to mean anything," I tell her. I don't know what to tell her. Right now I am trying to construct a map of all the places my portal isn't at a particular moment of time. The leftover spots, I hope, will indicate where my portal might still be.

"Going through a portal isn't giving up," I told my mother. "It isn't abandonment. It's about hope and second chances. It's about believing in the possibility of other worlds and maybe finding the place where you always were meant to be."

ABANDONMENT, my mother wrote.

She wrote, GIVING UP.

At the bottom of her marker board, she drew a complicated shape in outline with numerous sharp angles. It could have been a maze. It could have been

creeping vines, the kind that strangle you in your sleep, or else the kind that grow a single orange flower. There seemed to be no beginning and no end to the object she drew. I think it had a heart in its center, though my mother has never been able to draw objects accurately, so it might not have been a heart. Then the timer on the microwave went off, reminding me to pick my children up at the bus stop. It was a windy day and the squirrels stayed away from me.

Do you know what it feels like to be on the verge of leaving the world? It feels like a part of you is finally about to be torn open, a part of your face, the fake part, the part that's smiling. I am not going to be surprised when that happens. On the way to the bus stop, I watch a white van, mud splattered all over its side, drive down our street slowly. At the corner, where my children wait in the morning, or where I wait for them in the afternoon, the van pauses. The wind blows harder. A piece of trash, a generic yogurt container, is picked up by the wind and taken.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Debbie Urbanski's stories have appeared in *The Sun, F&SF, Nature, Terraform, Cicada,* and *The Kenyon Review.* As a child, she watched an excessive amount of old sci-fi and horror movies, the kind involving very large insects, or giant women, or blobs, but eventually she stopped doing this. She lives now with her husband and two kids in Syracuse, NY. You can find her at @debbieurbanski or debbieurbanski.com.

To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight

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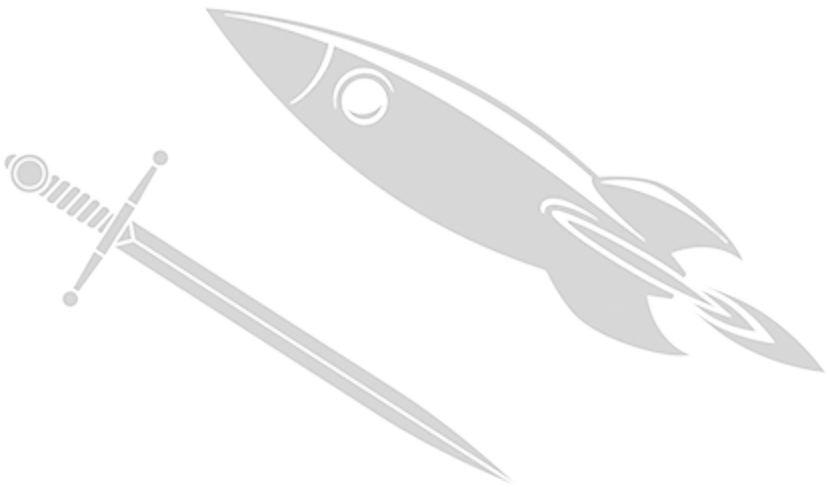

From Whence You Came

Laura Anne Gilman | 28170 words

The Vineart strode forward into the vineyard, his wide-shouldered form easily identifiable among the slaves, even though he wore the same rough-cloth shirt and trou as they.

"Easy does it, boys. Easy does it. We're not in a race, we're taking it slow and steady."

A hand on the shoulder of one boy easing him away, and Bradhai reached down to tuck the offending branch into place with a practiced move. "There. See?"

The slave, unable to meet his master's eyes, or even look into his face, nodded, reaching out to—slowly, carefully—do the same with the next branch, as his companions waited, silently willing the master to not notice them.

Bradhai, those slaves already forgotten, moved on, walking a careful path through the clumped vines, his gaze moving over the yard with a practiced slide, able to pick out the worker who was having trouble, or doing it wrong, without being distracted by the slow, steady movements of those doing it right.

He knew from personal experience that pruning the vines was brutal, backbreaking work, on your knees and reaching up. Each spring it took even experienced slaves a day or two to recover the rhythm.

He had enough slaves to deal with the work; as master, he did not have to be out here himself. And yet, it was a beautiful day, the sky clear blue, the sun bright and the air still cool. There would be enough days he would not be able to escape his workroom: better to take advantage now.

He stopped, and frowned at one clumping. There were two slaves attending it, carefully removing one fruit for every five and dropping them into the sack at their feet. The unripe fruit would go to his cook, who would make verjus, and the remains would be pitched into the backstack behind the barn, where it would decay into soil for the next year's garden. The business of the vintner might be spellwine, but nothing could be wasted.

Waste. He stared at the clump of vines.

"Don't bother, boys," he said. "Strip them all."

"Master?"

The first slave was one of his elders; he had inherited him from his own master, which meant the boy was no boy any more. Bradhai made a note to have

him taken from field work after this year's Harvest, and put to doing something more suited to his age.

"Strip them all for the kitchen. Mark it for removal." There was no sense of magic in those vines, no touch of the Root in them. Therefore, they were useless. He would have the space replanted with vines that still produced.

"Yes, master." The second slave, new to the field, stared at him with wide dark eyes, until the older one shoved him with an open hand and sent him back to work. Bradhai moved on.

He had only three yards surrounding the House. Two produced the pale red fruit that produced intensely tart—and profitable—growspells, the mainstay of his House. The third, far smaller and to the north of the House, on the hill that protected them from the worst of Iaja's coastal weather, were aethervines. He chose the slaves who worked that yard carefully; the plants were too rare, too expensive to trust to untrained hands. But that yard did not need pruning yet; it was too early in the year, and the fruit was barely a nub. So long as they kept the birds and beasts from them—and the spells decanted there were master to the task—all would be well.

As though to taunt him, a cloud passed over the sun, and he shielded his eyes to look. No, the skies were still clear, with only the occasional white cloud to contend with. The night air would be cool, but no risk of frost, and the ground was still full enough to not need more rain.

When he was still a slave himself, his ability to sense weather patterns had earned him his master's notice. It had earned him no special favors—Vineart Wy had been too canny for that, to open a useful slave to possible jealousy and abuse. But when his magic had shown itself, he had already been exposed to more than the average slave, and his transition to student had been relatively painless. And from that ability had come the desire—the need—to plant aethervines, a cepage Master Wy had no skill with.

The loss of Vineart Wy seventeen years later had still come as a shock, even though Bradhai had been through his training by then, working to turn the third yard from bare soil to a properly planted yard. He had not thought the old man could die.

"And what would you say about this new spellwine," he wondered as he continued pacing the yard, his gaze alert to anything out of line. "Would you pull that long face, and tell me it has never been done?"

But it had; he had communicated with the scholars at Altienne to make sure. It simply had not been done *here.*

“Or would you clap your hands and say ‘Well done, boy, well done?’”

In all likelihood, both. Vineart Wy had been both teacher and a champion worrier. But the vines whispered to him, the aethervines shaping an image in his thoughts, this new way to use their magic.

If he was to work it through, it needed to be now, while the vines were happily growing, and nothing else required his immediate attention. During Harvest, all would become chaos, and in the Fallowtime the vines would go dormant and no long whisper to him.

Mastery among Vinearts was not awarded, but earned. To achieve that level, and to expand his holdings, he needed to do something that would bring notice to him; notice and more traders with money, so that he could buy lands, and slaves to work those lands. This spell, if it worked, could do all that.

Bradhai passed the last cluster of vines, and paused, placing his hand against the thick, twisted stem. These vines had been planted nearly a hundred years before, from stock supposedly come down from one of the first vines shattered by Sin Washer. Like all vines, the magic pulsed within them, and each Harvest it was a struggle to see who would win, vines or Vineart.

“But we understand each other now, don’t we?” he said, his hand unerringly finding the cluster of fruit, where slaves needed to struggle and reach.

He plucked one of the smaller buds from the cluster and placed it in his mouth. Unripe, unready; to most there would only have been the harsh, tough skin, the bitter pit, crunching in their teeth, and perhaps a tiny squirt of juice, tasting nothing like the bright tartness of a ripe growwine. The skills and senses that made him a Vineart, though, they brought him the tingle of magic, deep within the fruit. Not yet ripe, not yet ready, but present, waiting.

A Vineart knew his grapes. And the grapes knew their Vineart.

“Vineart Bradhai.”

He turned, still sucking the sour magic off his teeth, to face his slavemaster. A former slave himself, as were all who worked in the yard, the man was small, nearly crippled with age, but with a cruel-looking lash coiled at his waist.

Bradhai himself had gone in fear of that whip. It was only years later that he realized it had never been uncoiled. Pep’s hand and voice were enough; he never needed more force.

“There is a man, Vineart. To see you.”

A man. Not named, not by personal address nor title nor occupation.

“And does this man have a purpose? No, of course he did not tell you. I will be there momentarily.”

The slavemaster ducked his head and walked back through the yard, stepping almost as easily as Bradhai himself. He had no magic, of course, but decades of living among the vines made you sensitive to such things.

"A man, to see me." It was not Harvest, when lords sent their factors to bargain with him, nor Fallowtime, when merchants sought to separate him from his casks in exchange for their goods . . . few visitors came to a vintner in spring or summer, when the world turned to growing things, and a Vineart had more on his mind than social scrabblings.

"If he is a man of standing," Bradhai said to the vines, "I should change into attire more appropriate. And yet, if he comes to see me, he must take me as I am."

And, in truth, he was not sure there was any clothing clean enough to pass for more appropriate; he had spent the day before in his cellar, working with the *vina,* and his clothing had been stained deep purple by the time he was done. He looked down and smiled to see the stains still on his fingers, their purple splotches only slightly paler than the vine-mark on his left wrist. No Vineart ever truly had clean hands, not once the *vina* accepted them.

Making sure that his belt was properly wrapped, the silver tasting spoon and horn-handled knife hanging properly, rather than tucked up for convenience's sake, he followed Pep's path, back to what—and who—awaited him.

• • • •

Three men waited for him, actually. Two wore the carter's guild badge on their chest, and looked as though they had swallowed something unpleasant. The third, a slighter, more weathered-looking man with ice-grey hair combed back against his scalp, exuded patience, his eyes fixed somewhere over the horizon.

"Gentlemen," he greeted them.

The slighter man recalled his gaze, and spoke. "You are Vineart Bradhai?"

It was a patently ridiculous question; who else would he be? Bradhai let the irritation roll off him, and nodded. "I am. With whom do I have the honor of speaking?"

His master had insisted that his student learn to speak properly, along with knowing his letters and sums. It was part and parcel of being treated fairly, Wy had said, when dealing with merchants.

"I am Shipsmaster Hernán," the patient man said. "For the Iajan Guild. And these are guildsmen Arias and Muño, of the Carter's Guild."

"Of course," Bradhai murmured, belatedly noting the much smaller guildmark

on the man's jacket. He did a considerable amount of business with the Shipsmaster's Guild; they were a regular buyer of his aetherspells, for the ships they sponsored. Carters he saw much less of: They had come here for a reason, though, and one they did not seem happy about.

So: The men who sponsored ships and the men who loaded them, come to see a Vineart, off-season. Why? "It is an odd time to be doing business, gentlemen, but I am—"

"Three ships bearing our guild sign have disappeared, this Spring."

That made Bradhai pause, even as he was about to usher them into the House proper. "Indeed? I had received word of one, not three." Such things happened, especially in the freshening storms of springtime. Not even the strongest of windspells could outrun a fast-rising storm: Magic gave way before nature in all things. But three? That was a hard loss.

"Three ships . . . bearing your spells, Vineart." That was one of the carters, his voice an unhappy growl. "Spells that were supposed to enable them to outrun any brigand, control any storm."

"Not control, but ease," Bradhai corrected. "No magic controls nature, as you well know, gentlemen." He stopped, aware these men were not here to listen, but to complain. He shook his head and said sternly, "My spells do not fail." Bradhai set down each man with a glare intended to stop the conversation. "Perhaps your sailors decanted them wrong, in their haste. Or they encountered a storm too strong to be eased, a brigand too fast or better armed, whom they could not evade. Such things happen."

"Three ships, each top of their line. One in the Dry Sea, two outbound for Caul. And none failing bearing any other Vineart's spells."

Bradhai frowned, and addressed himself to the Shipsmaster. "You are not the only ones who buy my spells, and not all ships fly under your Guild's banner. Have any others reported similar losses?"

The carters looked at each other, clearly amused despite the severity of the moment, and Hernán's face tensed. Bradhai sensed that he had somehow said something wrong, exposed his ignorance somehow. Vinearts were isolated, constrained by Sin Washer's Command to a life spent tending their vines, not meddling with the affairs of others. His master had trained him to deal with merchants within the boundaries of market-trade, not this.

"Would you tell another Vineart of damage to your vines?" the Shipsmaster asked, gently.

"Vinearts do not speak to each other," Bradhai said. "Save our masters, and

those whose lands border our own. You know it as well as I." There was another Vineart a day's travel to the south, who specialized in firevines. He and Bradhai traded casks each Fallowtime to supply what the other lacked. But otherwise, Vinearts kept to their singular task, and did not mingle.

"We are less isolated, but no less secretive," Hernán said. "To admit a weakness is to expose a weakness. But we know what we know, and that is that the spells we acquired from you . . . have failed."

It was an insult to his skills, but Bradhai knew the claim was false. His *vin magica* was true; his incantings were firm, and the only failure had to be in the handling and use, not the making.

"You bring proof of this?"

"We bring our word, and the loss of three ships, and all aboard them!"

The carter who had not yet spoken placed a hand on his more outspoken brother's arm, as though to caution him.

"Three ships, and all hands and cargo. Gone," Hernán said flatly.

That would explain why the carters were there; it must have been their cargo the ships were transporting.

"My spellwines work," Bradhai said again. "The fault was not within them."

"We must have proof of that, Vineart Bradhai. Else all our ships are at risk—and your reputation with them."

It was a mildly worded statement, but even an isolated Vineart knew a threat when it was issued. "Come, then. Let me show you."

• • • •

No outsider entered a Vineart's workroom; not even a Washer, the Scions of Sin Washer himself, who held themselves responsible for maintaining the Commands, would dare. But the House itself was open to all who were invited, and so the three men followed Bradhai without hesitation, up the pebbled walkway away from the Yards, to where a modest house waited.

Unlike a princeling's villa, which might house two dozen or more servants and half again as many family members, the building housed only Bradhai, two kitchen-workers, and Yakup.

The boy met them at the door, his plain trou stained with *mustus,* his shirt open at the neck and his hair tied back.

"Master."

"Go back to work, boy."

Yakup bowed in acceptance, his gaze flitting over the visitors but showing no other curiosity. If his master told him to return to work, then all was well, and not for him to question.

"You have a student."

"Obviously." Bradhai didn't mean to be curt, but that seemed another foolish observation: The boy was here, in his house; clearly he was no longer a slave. Vineart did not marry, did not take mounts, did not raise children. So the boy could be nothing save a student.

The House had three floors: above, the sleeping quarters, below ground, where the earth kept them cool, the workrooms, and the main level of kitchen, dining area, and the single room he kept for meeting with outsiders. He led them there, and closed the door behind them.

There were no windows in the meeting room, but as they entered, magelights sprang to life in small niches in every wall, casting clear white light that gave off no heat. The three men did not utter a sound, but Bradhai heard their steps falter ever so slightly, and he smiled to himself. Firevines were common enough, but they were none of his growing; to have such at command meant that he had trade enough to afford them from another Vineart, rather than making do with lesser spells or—worse yet—flame.

The room was large enough to house his worktable and the testing apparatus, a contraption of metal and wood that held a handful of flasks at the ready, at one end, and a smaller table with chairs at the other, with an expanse of cool stone floor between. He led them to the chairs, taking the largest one, and letting them choose who sat where among the remaining.

"Vineart, we have no—" the Shipsmaster began.

"You asked for proof of my work," he said. "And this I will give you." There was a small table by his chair, with a pitcher and glass on it. Lifting the pitcher, he poured a measure of liquid into the glass, and handed it to the nearest man, who happened to be the scowl-faced carter.

"And what do I do with this?" he demanded, holding the glass away from his face as though the faintest waft of its aroma might harm him.

"Oh, for Sin Washer's Love," Hernán said, disgusted. "He's offering you *vina*. If you don't know how to handle it . . ."

Apparently the carter didn't, for he handed it, carefully and with obvious relief, to the Shipsmaster. The latter looked into the glass, then held it to the light. Glassware was only slightly more common now than it had been when Bradhai was a slave, but Hernán handled it with assurance.

“Deep, but pale, the shade of a morning’s sun,” he said. “Your aetherwine. I am honored.”

“You have questions as to its efficacy,” Bradhai said. “I seek to reassure you. That is from the same pressing as your house acquired this year past. This is a clearing spell. You know it?”

Unlike the carters, a Shipsmaster knew how to use spellwines, and did not fear the Vineart meant to poison him, for he raised the glass to his lips and took a delicate sip.

Letting the liquid rest on his tongue, Hernán drew in air over it, a slow steady inhale, and then—his lips barely moving—murmured near-silent words of a basic decantation, triggering the spell meant to clear a room of noxious fumes.

As the magic within the spellwine responded to the decantation, a faint rustling came from the scraps of parchment and paper on the desk, and, although there was no window in the room, the distinct sharp tang of sea air swirled around them, many miles from the sea.

Hernán opened his eyes and smiled at Bradhai, an unexpectedly unguarded moment of peace.

“That proves nothing,” the first carter said. “This works, but that is not to say his others do.”

“If there was any failure of my spellwines,” Bradhai said, “then it was in the decanting of them, not the making or incanting.”

“Indeed,” Hernán said, still smiling. “Then we need you to test the casks themselves, under maximum stress, to show us wrong.”

“You brought casks with you?” He had seen none, but they might have left them elsewhere, in a cart, not wishing to bring too many strangers into his Yards.

“No. You must come with us. We must see it work properly, under proper conditions.”

• • • •

“Master, what?” Yakup was not questioning, but startled.

“I must go.”

“Go?”

“Are you a halfwit, boy?” Bradhai slapped him sharply across the ear, the usual tap to remind him to learn more quickly, and ask no foolish questions. “I must go and you must stay. At most, I will be gone a week, perhaps not even three days.” It was a day’s ride to the shoreline, and then a day back again. He had

argued, but the three men remained firm. Bradhai must prove himself, and his work, with what remained of the casks he had sold them, under the conditions intended for their use. So he would see their ships and their casks, and raise the wind for them, show them they were in error, and then he would come home.

"Master?"

This time, Bradhai did not chastise the boy. His uncertainty was understandable: Vinearts did not leave their Yards, and they certainly did not leave a half-trained boy in charge.

"Pep knows what to do in the yards," Bradhai said. "The old man has seen more grapes born than you and I placed together, for all that he has not the Sense. Let him be your guide, and continue the work you do here."

Yakup had been with him three years in the House, long enough to be trusted with the basic incantations, and the spellwines that needed only turning within their racks as they strengthened.

"You will do fine." Bradhai paused in his packing, letting the fine linen shirt rest in his hands, and looked at the boy. "You will do fine."

Bradhai was more worried for himself. He knew his spellwines had not failed, but what would it take for the guilds to accept it? Would they hold him responsible, no matter what the cause?

He finished packing, enough for a week's travel, and slid the leather strap shut. "Bring this downstairs," he ordered. Their visitors had taken their leisure on the grassy expanse by the road, their horses brought out for them, waiting for him to be ready. There had been no question of waiting: All four were anxious to be done with it.

The boy nodded, then picked the rucksack up and carried it away.

Bradhai looked around his chamber. It was a simple room, with a bed, a braided rag rug on the slate floor, and a chest of drawers that some long-ago tinker had painted with a design of twirling vines, and large, oddly green grapes, as though the unripe fruit had somehow swollen to full size. It had been his masters' before him, and perhaps his master's before that, and it still struck him with awe that it was his, now.

He would go, prove the efficacy of his work, and return. Annoying, but simple enough. And yet . . .

Through the window, the shutters open to the warming air, he heard the nicker of horses, and the low voices of men talking, and farther beyond, the shouts of the slavemaster, and the calls of slaves, working below in the yards. And under all that, the constant soft whisper of his vines, telling him that all was well.

For the first time, Bradhai doubted that reassurance.

• • • •

The trip down through the valley and to the port-town of Vélezsur had not been unpleasant. Bradhai was no horseman, but he could sit the sturdy bay gelding they had given him well enough, and the saddle was deep and well-worn, the sort best-suited for long, steady journeys. Still, it was a painful pleasure to slide off the horse's back, his boot soles hitting solid earth, even as his thighs cramped and his backside ached.

"A warm bath and a warmer drink will set you to rights," Arias said. Once away from the yards he had relaxed, and become a decent companion. They were in the courtyard of an ostlery, the hard-packed dirt worn under his boots from the countless wagons and hooves—of all sorts of creatures—that had passed through. Torches burned overhead, the crackle and scent of burning pitch, making Bradhai's nose twitch. To use open flame this close to buildings made him uneasy; could they not have afforded even a single firespell to tame them?

"He should go to the shipyard straightaway," Muño grumbled, but looked to Hernán, as Bradhai discovered was usual, for the final word. The Shipsmaster was in charge of this unlikely trio, for certain.

"It is full dark," Hernán said, "and we are done-in. I see no point in rousing the ship's captain and crew when the tests are best done in daylight."

The ostilarius came up to them as they dismounted, his leather apron tied at his hip, his shirtsleeves rolled down, and his hair slicked back. He was already bowing and scraping when he saw Hernán. "Shipsmaster, welcome, welcome. We have your usual room, and one for your companions, as well? You'll be joining us for eve-meal, or a private sup in your rooms? I—" and his quick gaze jumped over the carters, familiarly categorized, and landed on Bradhai. Boots, low and of worn leather. Clothing, dusty and worn. Hair, untrimmed in the older style. Nothing to take second note of, save that his gaze slipped back to Bradhai's waist, where the double-wrapped belt gave his identity away, even before the silver tastevan swung into place as he turned.

"Vineart," the ostilarius said, his tone caught between awe and worry. "You honor my small respite."

"He travels with us, Suero."

"Ah. Of course. Two rooms for the masters, and another for your companions?"

“That will do. And we will dine in your private room, if it is available.”

“I will ensure that it is so, Shipsmaster, Vineart.” Suero paused, and then nodded at the carters, as though barely willing to acknowledge that their company gave them rights above his.

“Impudent get,” Muño muttered, but it was less in anger than resignation.

“He is as he is,” Hernán said. “And he has the best meals and the cleanest beds on all the Long Road, as you well know—and as he knows even better. Come, and let it go, old friend. We have greater worries than one innkeeper not giving you proper respect.”

The private room was a small space. The table was solid, battered wood, laid with four places. A basic spell-light, not the more expensive coldlight, burned in the lamp on the table, and open flames flickered in niches in the wall, adding a warm yellow to the light that was not displeasing.

“Sit by me,” Hernán said. “We may speak while we eat.”

As though on cue, the moment Bradhai slipped into the indicated chair two young girls appeared, bearing platters almost as large as they. There was meat, a roast sliced thick and warm from the fire, and bread that was likely fresh that morning, and even a pot of creamy yellow butter. And, to show the innkeeper’s esteem for them, there was also a small saltcellar, if the meat was not done to their liking.

The four men fell to their food without further comment, the only sound that of chewing and the occasional clatter of heavy mugs as one of the girls refilled them with *vin ordinaire,* a *vina* that had not been potent enough for incanting. Bradhai wafted it under his nose, and identified it as a firewine, likely Berengian in origin. He sipped, and nodded. Berengian, and of a good vintage.

“Bradhai. That’s an odd name,” Arias said, his mouth still stuffed with food, spilling crumbs as he spoke. “You Vinearts come from anywhere, but I’ve traveled near-everywhere and it’s still strange to my ears.”

Bradhai paused, a chunk of bread dripping with gravy clutched in one hand. “It isn’t really a name. It was the only thing I said when the slavers found me.”

He had not spoken any language the slavers knew, not Iajan or Berengian nor Ettion, the trade-tongue. But the origin of his name did not matter for a slave, and even less for a Vineart. Bradhai they called him, and so Bradhai he was. “What is a name, after all, but what you come to when called?”

“A Vineart with a philosophical bent? Interesting,” Hernán said. “You have no knowledge of where you came?”

Bradhai shrugged, still eating. “It was not a thing that mattered.”

“Slavers,” Muño said, shaking his head. “I do not understand how you countenance such things. Bad enough that you may not take wives . . .”

“It was Sin Washer’s will,” Bradhai said. “To maintain the balance.”

“Thanks to Sin Washer, for his Solace,” the other three men murmured hastily, and tucked back into their meals, no more said about slaves, wines, or names.

Only Vinearts owned slaves. Only slavers—like traders, insular and close-lipped, with regulations and rules—could take a child from its home, with the parents’ blessing or without, if they felt the stir of the Sense within them. Then he would be piled into a cage with a number of other boys, some of them beaten until bloody, and paraded in front of Vinearts until one of them paid his fee, and took him home, either as labor for his Yards or, if he proved to have the Sense as well as the flicker, to be a student, and some day, if he were lucky, a Vineart.

Bradhai had never bothered before about the fact that the rest of the Lands Vin did without, or what they might think of him for it.

The idea left him thoughtful, but, he was worn from the stress of the day, his eyes began to droop before the servers cleared their platters. Aware that the next morning would be stressful as well, he declined an offer to join the others in the courtyard for an evening pipe, instead excusing himself to climb the stairs to the room he’d been told was his. It was scarcely a closet, the bed half as narrow as his own back home, but Bradhai was too tired to care. There was only a single candle in the room, no spell-lights, and with a sigh he touched the waiting flint-clock to wick, until a feeble yellow light danced into being, too tired to summon the blood-magic that would give him clearer magelight. He then stripped off his clothing, fell aching into the surprisingly comfortable bed, and knew nothing more.

• • • •

A Vineart woke early; it was in his nature to respond to the moods of the soil and seed. A sailor, he discovered, woke even earlier. There was no light in the sky when a fist pounded on his door, and Arias stuck his head in to *hissst* a wake-up.

“Tai and soot on the tooble,” he said. “Hoorry or it’ll be gone and you’ll be fair sore.”

That was what Bradhai thought he’d said, anyway. “Tai” had been the only word that truly registered, but thought of the thick, stinging brew got Bradhai up out of the bed and back into his clothing, making it to the table in time for there to still be some left. “Soot” turned out to be “soup,” a thick porridge of beans and

milk that Bradhai stirred dubiously, but as the rest of the men were eating it, decided to try it anyway.

He preferred his usual morning break of sausage and bread, but it wasn't bad, and he could see where an ostlery or inn, making a meal for so many, would prefer a single pot any child could stir.

"Fair weather rising," Hernán said. "We should make excellent time, once we cast off."

"Cast off?" Bradhai looked up from his soup, and frowned, suddenly unsure and quite sure he did not like what that implied.

"Man, did you think you'd be standing on the shore, waving your hands and swallowing magic? No, no, if you're to prove it wasn't your fault, my man must see the winds rise and fill his sails, and no lie."

Had there been any way to back out, to make his excuses and ride for home, Bradhai would have done it. But had there been any way, he would not have been there in the first place.

"You've never been shipside before, have you, boy?" One of the other men at the table spoke up, suddenly kind. Bradhai distrusted that on instinct.

"Vinearts are landsmen," Hernán said. "Of course he hasn't. And none of your tricks, matesman. This is an honored guest on the *ladysong* and you'll do well to remember that."

"Me, sir?" The matesman looked innocently at them all, and then snorted. "Oye, sir. Honored guest and off limits to the boys. I'll pass the word."

And with that, the meal seemed to be ended, as the matesman got up and started shouting to others in the main room, and the carters went off to settle their bill.

"You've nothing to worry about, boy," Hernán said. "If your spellmaking's as solid as you say, you'll give us a demo and then be back on your way, and all accounts settled."

No one had called him "boy" since Master Wy had died, but this did not seem the time or place to take offense. Bradhai knew that his spells had not failed. And yet, somehow, unease roiled in his stomach, disrupting his digestion unpleasantly.

"Go, fetch your things. It's a quick walk down to the docks from here, and I'm told the *ladysong's* eager to go."

• • • •

The *ladysong* was nowhere near as elegant or dainty as her name implied;

more the bellow of a cowherd, Bradhai thought on first seeing her heavy lines and wide girth in the grayish dawn light, and feeling how she wallowed in the water. Hernán had introduced him to the captain, a blustery man half Bradhai's size and twice his age, who seemed to have no name, only "captain," and then stashed the Vineart in an alcove away from the bustle of dozens of men each doing their job intently, and with a great deal of coarse yelling and swearing.

Bradhai held onto the bench he'd been put on, and tried to focus not on what was happening around him but the distant dark sea awaiting them, and the promise of the wind, once they were free of the harbor. His Sense twitched. His primary was the growvine, but the aethervines whispered to him just as strongly, else he could not grow them much less incant them into ordered spells, and the faintest tip of that magic lingered out there, in the ocean airs.

This was why they bought his spells, to fill their sails and drive them forward, to calm the sky's tempests, and bring them safe home again. His magic—the aether portion of it—was made for this place.

He focused on that, and the bustle and chaos around him faded, the rolling of the boat became a lull, and it wasn't until Hernán appeared next to him that Bradhai realized that he had left his alcove, and was standing at the railing, the wallowing of the ship having become a smooth roll, and the *ladysong,* released from the harbor's shelter, had become a different, far more elegant beast, riding the open sea like a horse might own the road.

"Ah. I had a thought you might be a sailor, under all that soil," Hernán said. "Welcome to the wild seas, Vineart Bradhai."

It hadn't been what he expected. The sea was dangerous, everyone knew that; the only reason to take the sea-road was to harvest the schools of fish that swam in the shallows, or to carry freight or travelers from one shore to another. You did not linger, and you found no delight in it.

And yet, the deep green-blue of the water, the spumes of white and occasional swirls of deeper black, somehow reminded him of the slopes of his own yards, the freshening breeze and the sun at their back akin to what he felt on a brisk Spring morning as the leaves unfurled, and the magic began to speak. Even the roll of the boat as it moved through the waters, the crackle of sails and wooden posts as they cut against the wind sang to him in a way he had not expected.

"It's beautiful," he admitted.

"Like a woman with a knife," Hernán said. "You admire but you stay alert, that's how a sailor survives."

Vinearts had no truck with women, armed or otherwise, save they had a

woman to cook for them, and Bradhai could not imagine Cook—kind, but not given much to speech—as beautiful, or dangerous.

"There are beasts in the depths, the great serpents, and the krekken, and the leviathans . . . but they are shy of ships this size, and only rarely seen, for all the stories crewsmen tell into their ale." Hernán shook his head. "Even brigands are rare—you encounter them by chance, and show them your heels as soon as you might. No, the danger is in the wind, Vineart. The wind and the waves, and their changeable moods. A squall can drive even the *ladysong* into the depths, while a dry spell abandons her to drift, helpless and alone, until she and all within die of despair."

"Save that they have windspells to protect them. I understand the importance of my work, Shipsmaster."

He put as much curtness into his voice as he dared, suddenly reminded of why he was here, against his will.

Hernán left soon after that, and the crewsmen working around him ignored him, so long as he stayed out of their way. It wasn't that they were rude; more that they simply had no time to deal with anything that need not be tied down, rolled up, strung out or otherwise adjusted to keep them moving forward. The sun rose into the first third of the sky, and the water changed from deep blue-green to an almost shimmering green, broken with wavelets of foaming white. Occasionally there would be a dark shadow underneath, where fish swarmed, echoing a flock of birds taking wing in the blue of the sky above.

"Normally, if we're not trying to make up time, we'd throw a net." One of the sailors, a weather-bit man with skin the color of the planking, saw him looking down. "They're fine eating. You do your magics, maybe we can pick some up on the way back in. Show you how sea-farin' feeds a hungry man."

"I'd like that. I think." There was a creek nearby that gave up silver-finned cotts; they were good eating, but Bradhai suspected the tender, almost sweet flesh would be nothing like what might be caught in the depths of the sea. Vinearts did not keep cattle, and while Cook maintained a garden out back, where she grew their essentials, their table depended on the flock that roosted in the old barn behind the House, eggs and flesh supplemented by meat and the occasional wheel of cheese from local farmers in exchange for a barrel of his *vin ordinaire,* the wines that did not hold enough magic to be incanted.

He wondered if the crewsmen would like a barrel of the same, in exchange for the fish, and if it would last long enough to be carted home.

"Hoy! West and down!" The call came from high above them, and Bradhai

craned his neck to look up, squinting as the sunglare hit him in the eyes.

"Hoy, west and down!" the sailor next to him yelled, passing the word along, and then poked Bradhai roughly in the ribs, forgetting—if he even understood—who the Vineart was. "Come see this," he said, and his grin revealed a mouth half-lacking in teeth. "A sight you'll never see on land, I'll vouch you that."

Uncertain, but willing, Bradhai allowed himself to be led further along the railing.

"There. See it?"

He saw nothing save the endless open waters, rising and falling in swells as they turned and rolled. Then the hint of something caught his eye, a change in the color of the water, a tension that had not quite been there before, almost the way he felt before a storm, or the evening before the first grapes began to ripen in the sun . . .

"Full on!" the call came, even as something burst through the surface of the water, a huge gleaming blue-black shape, fully the length of the *ladysong* but no boat, this, breaching from the water. It soared into the air a full length, turning to fall back into the water, surrounded by flumes, with a resounding crash that silenced all other noise.

"Sin Washer's Grace," Bradhai breathed, his eyes wide and his heart racing. "A leviathan?"

"Aye," the sailor said, as proud as though he had spelled the beast up himself. "And not even the largest of 'em, neither. Why I—"

"Full on!" came the cry again, and they both turned to watch, eager for a repeat. But this time the beast did not thrust itself out of the water into the sky, rather seeming to thrash on the surface, twisting and turning, its great tail rising as though to slap something down.

"Fire and rot," the sailor swore, and turned, shoving Bradhai away from the railing. "Take cover, man, and stay down!"

Bradhai could not move, not even for his life's safety. His gaze was caught on the great leviathan, trying desperately to escape something rising below him, something that had it in its grasp, somehow. A krekken? But no, krekken only emerged in storms, and the sky and sea were calm, save the battle in front of them. The ship, previously sailing alongside the leviathan's path, was now hauling about, hurrying to get out of the way.

And then it rose—no, not it. Two beasts, grey-green and elongated, heads the size of a cart, limbs pulling at the leviathan, great clawed pads scoring the heaving sides as it turned once again to escape. But what might work against men with

spears, or a krekken, could not avail it, not when those two great heads came down as though driven by a single intelligence, and each took a bite out of it.

Blood flowed, turning the water murky, and the wind brought the smell of entrails and raw flesh, making Bradhai gag and turn away.

When he recovered enough to look again, the seas were empty.

"Port and down!" the call came, this one far more alarmed. The leviathan was gone, but the serpents remained.

"Turn! Turn and away!" someone shouted, and the *ladysong* turned again, her prow heading away from the encounter, and another canvas sail snapped open overhead, released by sailors seeking extra speed.

The Captain's voice bellowed out again, louder than any sailor's chant or wood's creak. "Vineart! Now for your proof, if you will!"

Despite the "if you will," it was not a request. Grabbing the wineskin at his belt, Bradhai hurried to join the captain and Hernán, standing on the raised deck just behind the main mast.

"That? That is what you hope to save us with?" The captain said, spying the palm-sized wineskin in Bradhai's hand.

"I need no more than this," he said. In truth, he did not even need all that. But there was no need to tell these people how little spellwine was actually required. If their coin bought more, they were happy, and his House prospered.

He stepped onto the deck, and looked to the Captain. "What and where?"

The Captain might be worried, but he had a protocol he would follow. "Two lengths south and east, if you would, Master Vineart."

"I am no Master yet," he said, uncorking the skin with his teeth, and letting the stopper dangle from its tie. "But soon, with Sin Washer's Grace." With his free hand, he lifted the silver spoon from his waist, and measured out just enough of the aetherwine for the spell.

Silver was useless for cups or pitchers: spellwine and the metal did not well like each other. But for the brief time it rested in the shallow of the spoon, the silver caught the deep red glint of the wine, showing the clarity and depth of the magic.

He let it linger a breath longer than was needful, to ensure both the Captain and Hernán made note of the wine itself, then slipped the liquid onto his tongue.

Holding it there, he closed his eyes, and felt the magic surge within him. Others, ordinary folk, might use a spellwine; it was incanted for them to use. But a Vineart—especially the Vineart who crafted it—could sense more in the wine, call more from less, do more without cost. That was part of the blood-magic

within them, what tied them to their vines.

The decantation to raise the wind was a simple one. The trick was to make sure the wind did only what you wanted it to, no more and no less. While a Vineart could use blood-magic to influence a decantation, Bradhai had no desire to show off; he merely directed the spellwine to do what he had created it for.

"Rise and speed, sweet to our need." There was a skill to speaking decantations without swallowing the spellwine; Bradhai did it without hesitation. "Carry us hence, south and east: go."

The sails overhead snapped and belled, as more wind rose to join them, jumping the *ladysong* like a stone skipped from a child's hand, driving it ahead of the serpent even now rising in their wake.

"Ahead, Captain! Forward a th' bow and down!"

"Washer's piss," the Captain swore, and started shouting commands to the other sailors already in motion.

"What is happening?" Bradhai looked around, bewildered. "I did as you asked, I filled the sails."

"You did," Hernán agreed, clearly just as mystified.

"The other one swung around," the Captain said, in between shouting commands, the man in front of him hauling hard on the wheel. Bradhai felt the *ladysong* swing under him like a hard-reined horse. "They're trying to drive us somewhere."

"That's impossible." Hernán was certain of that, it seemed.

"Don't tell me, Shipsmaster; tell *them!"*

"Sta'board and down!"

Unable to help himself, Bradhai jumped down from the aft deck and, dodging sailors who cursed him without stopping, he went to the railing, and looked over. There was nothing that he could see, and he wondered if the ship's eyes had been mistaken—and then the water changed color, darkened. He realized that from that distance above, the eyes had been able to see far further down, predicting the—

The beast burst from the water, and Bradhai stumbled back, soaked with the sea brine. He did not think, he could not think, but his mouth flooded with *vin*-tinged saliva, and he swallowed, muttering what he'd meant to be a prayer to Sin Washer, but instead came out as a command:

"First Vine, defend us. First Vine, protect us."

And the magic within him rose to the words, driven by the *vin magica* in his mouth, and the *magica* within him, shoving the beast away with a blast of wind, sharp with the scent of land and sun, anathema to such a creature of the briny

depths.

It let out a sound that was neither shriek nor scream nor bellow, swung its great head around as though looking for the source of the magic, then shuddered and sank below the waters as swiftly as it had arrived.

"Gone, Captain! They're all gone!"

Bradhai stumbled back a pace or two, until his back was against something solid. He had used blood-magic. In public, in the presence of outsiders, he had called on the *magica* within every Vineart. The extension of a Vineart's Sense, the ability to use magic without drawing on the *vin,* was not something for outsiders to know. Had anyone noticed? His heart raced more from this new fear than aftermath of the serpent-driven danger.

No. No one had noticed. They were all too busy thanking the silent gods that the beasts had left them unmolested. No one had seen what he had done—

"Vineart!"

He turned, uneasy, and saw Hernán standing at the upper rail, expression unreadable.

Hernán had seen *something.* But all the Shipsmaster said was, "Come with me."

The Captain's quarters were cramped, and sparsely decorated. Despite the nautical design of the bunk, and the table that was bolted to the wall, Bradhai felt strangely at home. That comfort did not last long.

"You drove them off."

"I? I filled the sails with wind as you asked."

"No." Hernán shook his head. "I saw you. You did something, although I don't know what and the beasts gave up. What did you do?"

"Shipsmaster." Bradhai put on his best placating voice, the one he'd learned as a slave, sharing space with so many others who were not always of good temperament. "I had no spellwine to hand; I decanted no spell." Neither of those was true, in the absolute sense: a Vineart lived and breathed spellvines from the time they were bought as slaves until the day they died; the vines were on his skin, in his breath, in his blood. And a decantation was merely the key to a spellwine's use—for a Vineart, those doors were never locked. But he had not lied: he had used no spellwine, decanted no spell.

"Those beasts worked together." The Captain accepted Bradhai's denial, and moved on to more pressing concerns. "Serpents do not do that, Shipsmaster. They do not school, they are solitary creatures. And they are not that large!" He seemed offended, as though their size was a personal affront to him and his ship.

Bradhai was slightly relieved to hear that those monsters were oddities.

"Larger?" Hernán asked.

"By a length, at least. Mebbe more. And two of them? Two, working together, like hunting dogs!"

He wasn't going to let go of that branch any time soon, it seemed.

Bradhai was suddenly, unutterably weary—pulling blood-magic had a cost, always—and in no mood to listen to the two of them squabble over what was and was not possible. "You brought me here to prove that my spells worked, that they were not responsible for the loss of your ships. I might suggest, Shipsmaster, that you look to these larger, fiercer beasts as the cause—had a ship, unprepared, been caught between two or three such . . ."

He did not want to think what might have happened to the *ladysong,* had the creatures decided to attack it as they had the leviathan.

"Having done my service, and proven myself," he said, "I will leave you to find your solutions. If you would return me to shore, I will make my own way home."

"No."

Bradhai licked his lips, tasting the sea-spray still on his skin. Or perhaps it was sweat. "Shipsmaster . . ."

"You did something. You drove off that beast, ended the attack. Whatever you did, even if you don't know how, saved us. I need to know what it was. I need to be able to share it with the rest of our ships."

"You cannot hold me here."

They could, of course: He had no way of getting to shore, and the thought of trying to steal one of the lowboats they used for ferrying while in port, and striking out on his own . . . Even without the recent demonstration, the ocean was a fearsome thing for a man alone. Knowing what lurked below the surface? No.

He looked to the Captain, not expecting an ally, and was not surprised to see a frown on that weathered face. He clearly was not comfortable with the idea of restraining a Vineart, but neither would he argue with the Shipsmaster.

"You would keep me here against my will?" Bradhai had no idea how to sound menacing, but he tried to imply the very many ways that this would be a bad idea. He had no access to firewines, unless he could get hold of the ones already shipboard, but certainly if they tried to keep him here, he could ensure that their sails were becalmed for weeks.

"Of course not." Hernán seemed horrified that Bradhai could think that. The Vineart's tension eased, and then the Shipsmaster said "But if you abandon us, we

will have no choice but to admit that our ships were lost . . . because spellwines could not protect them, and the Vineart who supplied them turned his back on us."

Shipsmaster Hernán could play the not-quite-a-lie game as well. And he wagered Bradhai's reputation on the throw. The Guild would rather blame Vinearts than accept that the seas had become too dangerous for single ships to transverse.

They stared at each other, and Bradhai broke first.

• • • •

"Harini!"

Her companion's voice was low, sweet, and well-modulated. It also carried like the fog's horn on a winter morning.

"Harini, slow down. You walk too swiftly."

Rini did everything too swiftly. She walked too swiftly, she thought too swiftly, and assuredly she spoke too swiftly, without pausing to consider the ramifications and repercussions of her words. She had heard these laments since she was released from swaddling, and she had accepted them as truth.

She also did not care a leaf.

"What is it, Je'heirba? I am busy."

"Yes, I can see that. And where do you think you are going, with your long legs and your fast pace?" The older woman gestured grandly, her arm swinging out in an arc as though to indicate where, within the confines of the ship's length and width, her charge might be headed.

"I needed to think," she said. "I couldn't stay cooped up in the cabin any longer."

They had been at sea for three months, and the quarters given to her were half the size of her bedchamber at home. However, their size was not the reason she could not stay, nor was Je'heirba's constant fussing. Rather, it was the accusing weight of the manuscripts and calculations stacked on the desk, filled with information that she could not decipher.

Interrupted in her attempt to walk away from her frustrations, Harini instead turned and went to the railing of the vessel, staring at the *cause* of her frustrations.

"Here." Je'heirba placed a delicately woven wrap around her shoulders.

Harini accepted it with a muttered word of thanks. It was cooler here, out on

the cold waters, than it had been back home. They had come further north than she had thought they would, on her fool's chase.

"I am right. I know I am right."

"You are always right," Je'heirba said.

"It is one thing to be right," a third voice said. "It is another entirely to prove it."

Normally, sailors would spit at the thought of a single woman on board. The fact that no storms had stalled them, or beasts attacked, with *three* among the passengers, Rini could only assume the crew thought a small grace from one of the silent gods.

"I am *trying,*" Rini said in exasperation, slapping the railing lightly with her palms. "But how am I to do that when the rotted things will not show their face? A tease here, a sighting there, but not one will surface for more than a moment of time."

The solitaire joined her in leaning against the railing, and Je'heirba, no longer required, faded back to the comfort of the cabin. The older woman did not look like a fighter; her body was rounded rather than lean, and she wore long wool skirts rather than the usual leathers of other solitaires Rini had met, but she had come well-recommended enough that her father had hired her on the spot, when his only daughter had insisted on making this voyage.

And there had been evidence enough of her competence, when she dispatched two would-be bandits on the way from Harini's father's house to the docks. The solitaire had not even drawn the sword that rode low on her hip, but simply flicked a thick-bladed knife from a sheath on her arm, sending it quivering into the first bandit's boot-toe, and warning him that the second one would cut off something higher and more dear to him.

Rini was a scholar, not a fighter, but she certainly understood competence, and had soon accepted the solitaire as a trusted companion and sounding board.

"They're hiding from me. We have followed them in shallow waters and in deep, spotted them in prime feeding areas, and they see us, and leave. They are *avoiding* me."

The solitaire managed to keep any tone of teasing out of her voice when she asked, "Do you give them credit not only for that much intelligence, but malice as well?"

"Yes. No. It's possible. No, it's not possible," she admitted. "I am just frustrated."

A year ago, she had seen a serpent swimming along the coast by her father's

estate. It was not such an unusual thing: The serpents liked the warmer waters off the coast of Varsam for their breeding, and her people knew to leave them be.

But this one had been acting oddly, and Rini—who had been out in her little boat sketching the coastline, where a rockfall had occurred over the winter—had been intrigued enough to follow at a safe distance. And she had heard it singing.

Serpents did not sing. That was the stuff of legends, and Rini was a scholar, not a storyteller. But she had heard it making a low, sweet noise . . . And another serpent had come to it. A full grown one, not a spawnling called to its mother. And it had sung in turn, their noises twining together into almost a melody.

And then they had sunk below the surface, and Rini neither saw nor heard them again.

But the sound preyed on her. There was nothing in any book she could read, nothing any source could tell her, that would explain it.

And so—being the daughter of a man wealthy enough to indulge her, as he had given her leave to pursue her curiosity since childhood, she had arranged this ship, and this voyage, to find other serpents, and listen to them sing.

But they were avoiding her.

Harini did not take to commerce, as the men of her family did, but her mind worked in the same fashion: She studied her goal, and did what seemed most effective to achieve that goal.

"Will you direct the captain to another route?"

"What would you advise?"

The solitaire considered the question, her moon-round face and soft features saved from appearing placid by the fierce intelligence behind those features. "You have been following migration trails, yes?" They had gone over the maps together, the scholar and the warrior, so she was merely confirming what she already knew. Rini did not bother to answer her, but merely waited.

"If these creatures are acting out of their nature, then perhaps we should not follow them according to that discarded nature. Go . . . against what we know them to do?"

Harini frowned. "But that would take us back south. If I return without something to show for it, my father will never countenance my setting sail again."

Unlike Je'heirba, the solitaire had no hesitation in issuing the occasional set-down. "Your father would indulge you to your dying breath. You simply cannot bear to return home without something to show for it."

"I am fair found out." Rini released the railing, flexing her fingers to get feeling back into them. "Perhaps you are right. I am going about this in a logical

progression. Perhaps what we need is randomness."

It was against her nature as well; perhaps that too was what was needed.

• • • •

"The sea is not a garden, mistress. One does not merely 'wander' it blithely."

"Indeed not. One must be purposefully lost."

Since the captain had been one of those her father set to feeding his daughter's endless curiosity, teaching her how to read maps and chart the stars, he could only raise his hands in helpless defeat. He had been the one to tell her the stories of brave sailors who opened new markets simply by dint of becoming lost and found.

"Your father—" He tried one last route of escape.

Harini blocked it. "My father pays you—and quite well, I might add—but I am the one who makes the decisions, here." Her chin lifted, readying herself for an argument, but the captain shook his head at her, and continued.

"Your father lost a cunning negotiator when you were born a girl."

"Were I born a boy, I would have been locked into trade and barter from the time I could walk, never given the chance to learn anything new. Can you imagine that for me?" She gave an inelegant shudder. "No, thank you. Now. We can do this?"

"As you desire," he said, and his bow was only half-mocking. She knew the captain and crew, certainly Je'heirba, and possibly the solitaire all thought her insane, but they were passing fond of her, too, she thought. And her father paid them well to humor her whims.

• • • •

"With Maiar Orsio's regrets. Our land may border the seas but does not comprise the seas, and while the situation described indeed sounds precarious, we do not see that our men, trained to do battle on land, would be of use."

The *courien* paused, then added, "Further, it is our understanding that the maintenance of such situations is traditionally upheld with the use of vine-magic, and therefore would not be appropriate for our interference."

Another pause, but this time the *courien* dropped his gaze, his shoulders softening from the strict pose he had held while reciting the message. That was all that he had been given to say: not even a formal closing to soften the blow.

"Thank you." Bradhai handed the man a coin and dismissed him.

"At least he sent a *meme-courien.* The last three only replied by messenger-bird."

Bradhai couldn't even work up the energy to glare at the Shipsmaster, who lounged in the single comfortable chair, his feet up on a stool, to all intents and purposes perfectly relaxed—until you looked at the lines around his eyes and mouth, and the bleakness in his eyes.

"With respect, you're on your own, they mean." Bradhai sank into the other chair in the room, a far-less-comfortable horsehair settee, and rested his face in his hands. He had hoped some men of power, lured by the thought of having the Guild obligated to them, would be willing to defend the ships, to send bowmen to fend off attacks, deal with the beasts in a more effective fashion—and remove the onus from magic—and Vinearts.

"I did warn you," Hernán said, not unkindly. "They're landers. They think in terms of horses and swords and things that they can see coming. They simply can't fathom beasts that swim faster than their ships can sail, and can't be tracked with dogs."

And they would not interfere with things traditionally given over to magic. As the Vinearts were bound by Sin Washer's Command to abjure all power over men, so were the men of power forbidden to intervene with magic. But in this instance, the Command became an excuse for a thing they did not wish to do.

Bradhai rubbed the bridge of his nose and wished, not for the first time, that he was home listening to the whisper of the vines, the air scented with dirt and green rather than salt and sea, not surrounded by the bustle of Vélezsur outside the ostlery's window.

Hernán leaned forward, his brief sympathy pushed aside. "The two days I gave you are up, Vineart. We have gathered the items you requested, and they wait in the hull of the *ladysong*."

Two days he had been granted when they returned to shore, smarting from that first encounter with the serpents. Two days to gather the supplies he would need—and the hope of allies who would lift the burden from him.

"Magic must mend what magic has maintained." That had been the first curt response, sent by messenger bird. But applying to another Vineart . . . madness. More, pointless. They would not be so foolish to make the same mistake he had in trusting the Shipsmasters' consortium, not without the threat of their lies hanging over like a hailstorm waiting to destroy their fields. And even if he tried, they would not trust him . . . Vinearts were not forbidden by Command to speak

with each other, but it was custom, and custom was as hard to break as law.

"Harder, even."

"What?

"Nothing." He glanced at the Shipsmaster. The man had, all things considered, been a kind captor. Bradhai had lacked for nothing in comfort—but he could not return home. He was prisoner, held by a man who was not bound by any of Sin Washer's Commands and did not fear the Washer's censure, not in the face of what he feared more, on the open sea.

Bradhai had thought of summoning a Washer, but he knew it, too, would be pointless; they existed to remind Vinearts that their sole purpose was to serve the magic. And worse, if the Shipsmaster told others what he suspected . . .

No. Better to stay, and deal with this himself. But the distance from his yards was like a physical pain, an awareness that the vines were calling for him, looking for him, and he was not there.

"Vineart?"

He needed to find the spell that would control these beasts, drive them away from the ships. Then he would be allowed to go home.

"With the next tide then," he said, resigned.

• • • •

"Hai, Vineart." The sailor who had shown him the leviathan hailed him from the railing. "Come to cure us of our ills?" Bradhai had not slept all night, and not even double-brewed tai could put him in a better mood, but the man's cheerful greeting was impossible to ignore.

"Your ills, I suspect, there's no curing," Hernán said, coming up behind the Vineart, and the sailor whooped with laughter, as did the men working around him, hauling in ropes and pulling down others. It seemed utterly chaotic to Bradhai, but he thought the careful activity of a Harvest might seem the same to them.

"How are they so . . ." Bradhai struggled to find a word, as they walked along the narrow plank that led from dock to deck. "So casual?" he finally said, although that was not the word he had wanted.

"Casual?"

"After what they saw. And yet they go on as though nothing happened. I had always heard that sailors were a superstitious crew," and he stopped, realizing that he had just insulted the Shipsmaster, too. "I mean, I . . ."

Hernán laughed and clapped a hand on Bradhai's shoulder, not seeming to notice when the Vineart flinched from the touch. "We are, all and every one of us. But a life on sea is one of danger and uncertainty on the very best of days. What's a sea beast—or three—added to that, save the further assurance of a watery death?"

"You're all mad," Bradhai said, unable to stop himself.

"You're not the first to say so, nor will you be the last. But come, and save us from one uncertainty, and all will be well."

They came to the greatcabin, and Hernán paused, his hand on the door, before allowing Bradhai to enter. "Vineart, I know this is not of your choosing. This is forced on us all. But good can come of it. We can be useful friends, to have."

"Assuming I survive."

"Yes. Well. There is always that."

Hernán pointed out the door that led to the captain's quarters, then they walked down the narrow passageway forward, where an equally narrow door led into a chamber with two cots on either side.

"It's not grand, but we won't spend much time here."

There were no windows, no chairs, nothing save the two bunks and a small wooden shelf bolted to the wall between them.

"I'll spend no time awake, here," Bradhai said, trying to control his revulsion. "How do you live like this?"

"Go belowdecks and see how the crew sleeps," Hernán said, dropping his kit on one bed and sitting on it, looking at Bradhai. The Consortium's ships were wide-built, but most of the room was clearly given to cargo, not sleeping space. There was enough room for both of them to move around, but only just. Thankfully, the ceiling was surprisingly high above, even for Bradhai, who was taller than most, so he did not feel entirely constrained. "I realize it's not what you're used to . . ."

"It's not that."

In fact, it was far too much like he had been used to, once. Every Vineart came from the same place: the slave pen. Young boys were taken—or bought—from their families, plucked for the possibility of the Sense by slavers trained to determine such things; taken and sold to Vinearts, to work the yards for the rest of their lives.

If you had the Sense, it was a better life than any else; the work came simply, and became a satisfaction. But you lived and breathed and slept and worked with others in close proximity, often several to a bed-pad at night. Bradhai could not

remember a private moment until his master chose him to train.

This—the being dragged about, dropped into close quarters—was a memory he'd never thought to revisit.

Then Bradhai lifted his head as though he'd smelled something, his nostrils flaring even as something within him unfolded, searching.

"The casks?"

"You've a nose like a hound," Hernán said. "They're stored below us, yes. You'll be sleeping on them, in effect."

The casks he had ordered brought from his cellar, along with others he'd had the consortium buy from Vinearts with other specializations. He was at sea, alone . . . but some part of his vineyard was with him. The thought was enough to console.

"I'll need a place to work."

"That was trickier," Hernán said. "But we managed something. Come."

• • • •

It was not ideal. In fact, it was almost unworkable. But, as Hernán had said, finding space that was ideal was . . . tricky.

"This will suit?"

Bradhai looked around. They had cleared the forecastle of all cargo and low-hanging ropes, giving him perhaps eight paces in either direction, with a battered wooden table set up at the far end, against the rise. A hatch to the side led, he was told, to where his casks were stored, for easy access. "It will do. And the crewsmen know not to disturb me?"

"I told them you'd feed them to the sharks if they dared. Try to look fierce when they pass. It will feed the rumor."

And with that, Hernán left him to his work.

Bradhai took a deep breath, tasting the salt in the air. The first thing a Vineart learned in the first days as a student was that it was not merely the sun and soil that formed the fruit of the vines, but the wind and water as well.

The sailors thought they had brought finished spellwines from his Vintnery. But the liquid inside the casks, if Yakop had chosen properly, was far more precious than that. It was *vina magica:* the purest form of magic, not yet spellwine proper, not yet incanted with the structure that limited what that magic would—could—do.

An ordinary man could not use *vina magica*. If he tried it would be as though

using water; if he drank it, it would only make him foolish, and then ill. A Vineart, though, was no ordinary man. They heard the whispers of the magic, and spoke to it in kind.

With *vina magica,* he could find the incantation that would drive the sea-beasts away, and bind it into the liquid, making it usable by all who knew how to decant. A simple matter . . .

Except that he did not know the incantation. Spellwines were handed down, master to student, held within the vintner as much a trade secret as any the guilds might maintain. They could be adapted to take advantage of a weaker or stronger vintage, or specialized to do one thing better, but creating a new incantation entirely? You needed to consider the nature of the grapes, the average potency of the most basic harvest, the specific demands of the task required.

In his workshop, Bradhai had the calculations and research for the new spell he had been contemplating. A year's worth of work, and still it was not complete.

Bradhai had not told Hernán what an impossible task he asked. The Shipsmaster would have neither understood nor cared. He wanted only results.

"First, consider the need." His master's words from years ago, teaching him how to *see* an incantation within the structure of a spellwine. "Consider what it does. Let yourself become the need, and the solution. See how they tie together, inevitable once you understand."

"To drive them away . . . I need to know what they fear."

Bradhai turned and paced to the far end of the cleared deck, staring out over a racked pile of cargo, at the watery horizon. That morning, the water sparkled under the sunlight, making it almost impossible to watch directly. He thought he preferred its more somber moments, with the deep blues and greens.

"What does a serpent fear?"

He thought of the size of the beasts, and the massive teeth and claws, and shuddered. A single serpent was enough to make sailors wary. At this size, two or more?

"What *would* such a creature fear?"

"Same thing we all do," a high, fluting voice came down from overhead. "Fire."

Bradhai looked up, and discovered he was practically nose-to-nose with another face, this one hanging upside down, a felted, brimless cap obscuring the face above that nose.

"Fire," he repeated.

The newcomer nodded, still upside down. "First thing you learn, no open

flame nowhere. Not even in dock. Speshully not when in dock, 'cause it could spread."

Bradhai nodded himself, seeing the logic. He used coldfire because it was convenient for him; for those on the sea, housed by wood and cloth, it would be a necessity. No doubt they spent as much or more on firespells as they did on his windspells.

They did not demand their firespell Vineart to save them, he thought bitterly. *They value them more?*

"Or none were so fool as to fall for their ploy," he said. "No, unfair. They thought it was my spells as failed. They did not know."

Didn't they?

Impossible to know, and pointless to ponder. He looked back up at the boy, who was waiting patiently still upside down, as though hearing someone talking to themselves were perfectly normal. Perhaps, for him, it was.

"I am Bradhai," he said.

"Po."

Bradhai reached up to pull the cap away, and was rewarded by a pair of round black eyes set in a rounded face, perhaps eight years old, if that. Bradhai had known slaves with that same look, from the tradelands far to the east. Finding one here, on an Iajan ship, was unexpected—sailors did not take slaves. They did, however, travel widely. Perhaps the boy was a leavestaking from some voyage or another, whose mother did not wish to keep him.

"You're giving me a headache, hanging there," he said. "Come down."

The boy shrugged, and he slipped down from the rope he had been hanging from, landing softly on the decking below as though he'd simply stepped down.

"You're part of the crew."

The boy puffed out his thin chest. "Iyam."

"And you've seen serpents before?"

"Lots." Po reconsidered. "A couple."

"Including the ones we saw three days past?"

"I seen them. And one other."

Still. That was one more than he had seen. And the boy knew how the ship worked. He could be useful.

"What else scares the beasts away? Noise?"

"Nah. They ain'ts got ears." Po looked at Bradhai as though he should have known that.

"Ah. Smell? Is there a smell they dislike?"

The boy's own nose wrinkled as he considered the question. "Don't know. They like fish, though. Graver says you gotta be careful of 'em, when you pull in a big haul. They come looking to take it away from you."

Bradhai began to pace again, aware that the boy trotted alongside like a goat, looking for a treat.

"Fish—how many fish? Not when you're simply catching enough for a meal?"

"Nah."

As swiftly as Bradhai could think of something, Po answered, the two of them making a slow circuit around the space until a chime sounded, and the boy startled like a deer. "Watch change," he said, and bounced once on his heels and then sprang into the air to catch at the nearest rope, pulling himself upward to where, Bradhai supposed, he would report for duty.

It made sense: a young boy would be able to move higher, more easily, and their eyesight would be better than an older sailor—plus, they did not have the strength needed for most jobs on board. But it still made Bradhai's chest clench a little, watching him climb ever higher.

But thanks to the boy, he had a place to start now.

"I have firespells," he said to himself. "But no firevine *vina.* And merely throwing flame at them would be pointless. Anything that burned them badly enough to end an attack would also put the ship itself at risk. Which would be why they don't use firespells to begin with, you idiot."

Another thought came to him, tickling like an insect on his skin. In a different time, another place, he would have brushed it away, or considered it as a curiosity at best, a passing impossible thought.

Here and now, he captured it, even as common sense told him to let it go.

Fire was the logical weapon. He could not shape a firespell incantation—he had no Sense for that vine, no connection to those magics, even if he had access to *vina* of that nature, and decantations could not be unwoven, not without destroying the structure of the *vin* itself.

But he did have his aether *vina.* If he could incant that to carry an existing firespell away from the boat, toward the beast . . .

Manipulating another's spells is forbidden.

"No. Not forbidden. Just . . . not done." Tradition was important to a Vineart. Tradition carried down what was done, how and when. It was the centuries of experience, all the knowledge relearned, slowly and painfully, since the Breaking of the Vine. The Commands dictated that Vinearts work only their own yards, not coveting the work of others, but nowhere did it say that they could not *use* the

work of others.

Bradhai did not covet firevines. He had no desire to try them under his own hand; his nature was to grow and send, not to burn or illuminate. It would be no disobedience to the Commands to bind another's decantation into his incantation.

The only questions remaining: was it possible, was he capable, and would it work.

"If you want to go home, it *has* to work," he said grimly, and turned to the worktable, his thoughts already ranging over the *vin magica* he had brought, thinking which would be best to use, and what structure he should attempt.

• • • •

Three days later, Bradhai had nearly set the sails above him on fire twice, singed his eyelashes, and filled the entire belowdecks with a thick, white—but thankfully harmless—smoke. No incantation had worked.

And the serpents had been sighted, closer each time.

"The men say the serpents are following us."

Po was back, hanging upside-down again, as seemed to be his preferred position, the rope twined around his leg and arm in a way that should have been painful—it hurt Bradhai to look at it, so he kept his gaze down on his worktable.

"Are they?" He had heard the alarms, of course; there was no way to avoid the calls, or the scurry of the crew as they turned out to position, ready in case they were needed, either to flee or to fight. Bradhai had kept working; if they needed him, they would let him know.

Po shrugged, still upside down. "Dunno. Don't even know if it's the same or different. So long as it stays away, could be following, could be passin' by, don't matter."

Bradhai lifted the vial of aether *vina* and let a drop fall out into the silver tasting spoon resting on the table. The spoon's bowl was flat on the bottom, designed exactly for this, but even so it trembled slightly as the *vina* touched it.

That year's Harvest had been exceptional: Bradhai had kept aside a cask of it expressly to see how it would age. Once incanted, a *vin magica* held itself intact, with no deviation. But one that aged, untouched . . .

It had been a side project, one he'd had little time for, abandoned half-done. Now, it seemed as though Sin Washer had guided his hand.

"Bend and hold," he whispered to the wine, the words less important than the image he held in his thoughts. "Bend and hold." The *vina* shimmered, hearing not

only his words but his intention, the Sense within him speaking to the magic within it, in some way that his master had never been able to explain, but simply *was*.

Placing the vial down carefully, his gaze still on the spoon, he reached with his left hand and picked up the bowl of firewine he had poured earlier. Dipping his finger into the bowl, he let enough moisture coat his skin, and then carefully moved his finger to rest just over the bowl of the spoon, and the waiting *vina*. One drop fell, then another. He waited, and a third drop, smaller than the other two, splashed into the bowl.

Above him, Po held his breath. This has been where things went wrong, before.

The *vina* shivered, but nothing exploded. With luck he had used the right dosage this time.

"Hold, and enfold." Bradhai said softly, the words barely shaped by his lips. His breath touched the *vina* and *vin,* and he could *see* the former enfolding the latter, containing it within, flame inside air.

They both held their breath, the air around them hushed under the endless sounds of sailors and ship and sea.

Nothing happened.

"Be as one," Bradhai continued, sealing the incantation. "Hold ready, until called."

The *vina* shimmered again, the color becoming more intense, the clarity of the soft red liquid intensifying. Bradhai waited for the click in his Sense that would tell him that the incantation had sealed—

—when the liquid exploded, knocking him back, skittering across the deck until he fetched up against the ropes the sailors had strung there as a precaution, after the second time that had happened.

"Oh, rot," he said, closing his eyes. "I thought I had it, that time."

"You still livin', Vineart?"

"I think so, yes." He opened his eyes to see that Po had escaped the worst of the blast, and was lowering himself down slowly on his ropes once again. The others knew, by now, not to come investigate anything the Vineart was working on, unless he called for aid.

"I was closer that time," he said. "I wonder what went wrong?"

Po knew by now that the question was not addressed to him.

"Maybe," Bradhai said, getting up on one elbow and doing a visual check to make sure he hadn't missed an injury, "I should only use two drops. Even if it's

not enough to be effective, then I'd know to alter my—"

"Sta'board first quad, flat!" The call came from one of the eyes, and Bradhai got himself to his feet, ignoring the aches and pains, and only barely noticing that his nose was bleeding.

"Po, what?" But the boy had already started crawling up his ropes at a fast clip, the better to see what the excitement was about.

"Down" meant there was something in the water. "Above" was the sky—when a storm rolled in, or a flock of sea birds flew low enough and large enough to be a problem. Flat . . .

He turned in the direction indicated, his gaze sweeping the horizon the way his master had taught him, to find the single thing out of place. It took a minute, but he thought he could see, in the distance, the black dot that would indicate another ship.

The ship began to swing about, but slowly. The captain had decided to investigate, then, rather than avoid. That meant he did not think it was pirates, or Caulian raiders.

"Too far from the shoreline for that," he reassured himself. Raiders looked for choicer targets. They did not roam the open sea hoping to encounter something worth taking. And a pirate might think that the *ladysong* was a choice tidbit, but she was not running a merchant's flag, nor a land-lord's insignia, so most would pass her by, the effort not equal to the lack of cargo.

Someone hungry might take her on for the ship itself, and any potential ransom, but the odds of that, Bradhai assumed, were low enough not to be a worry.

Still. It paid to be cautious. He went to the table and began clearing away the debris of his work, wiping down the spoon—the silver undamaged, if slightly tarnished—and closing up all the various skins and jars, placing them into the empty half-cask shoved beneath the table. He rolled down his sleeves, used a cloth to wipe his face and hands clean of sweat and splatter, and retrieved his jacket from the hook he'd placed it on that morning.

It was one thing to let the sailors see him in a state of disarray—they respected him more for the obvious sweat, not less. But if they were to have company, the role of Vineart, master of magic, must be played.

• • • •

"We've lost them."

Harini did not swear. She did not rail against fate, the silent gods, or even the ship's pace, as she might have a week before. She merely rested her elbows on the table, and thought.

"Lady? Did you hear me?"

She raised her head and looked at the Captain. "Yes, old friend, I heard you. Your navigator can extract a pattern from the way the beasts were traveling?"

"The way those things have been swerving and ditching?" The Captain scowled. "He'll take it as a challenge, no doubt. Aye, he can plot it out."

"Good. Have him do so, and we will follow. I cannot believe that there would be no cause behind its actions. They are not random—there is no hesitation each time they switch."

They had spotted the three serpents several days before, and had been following them—at a respectful distance—since. In that time, the beasts had disappeared and reappeared almost continuously, changing direction in each instance, sometimes widely, sometimes not. It had supported her decision to search in a random pattern, but now that she had them to study, Rini did not want to risk losing them. Not until she'd gotten close enough to hear if these beasts sang, too.

"I'll not risk my men, getting closer." The Captain knew her thoughts; they'd had this argument before. "And before you offer again, I will not drop ye into a longboat and let ye float in. You'd be scarce a mouthful for one of them, and then there's me having to explain to your esteemed father. Better you should let me be et, first. Kinder to kill me."

"They've seen us, and not attacked," Harini pointed out, not for the first time. "They do not see us as either a threat, or a meal."

"They may just not be hungry."

Harini simply looked at him in disbelief. There had never been a serpent who was not hungry, not for three days straight.

A knock on the door prevented that argument from continuing.

"Captain? Another ship on the waters ahead, second quad and turning for us."

"Flags?"

"Can't tell just yet, sahr. It looks to be a merchant vessel, sahr. Out of the Lands Vin, by her lines."

Harini stood up, even as the Captain headed out the door. Had it been pirates, she would have taken to the inner cabins to wait out the battle. But a merchant ship? They were well outside Varshami waters; every contact could mean an expansion of her family's wealth. Harini might not have interest in that sort of

thing, but she knew its value. Her father would never forgive her if she let this chance contact pass by.

"And the serpents?" she asked, because—father or no—she could not let it go.

The crewsman bobbed his head, as though apologizing for bringing ill news. "None to be seen, lady."

She sighed and followed the Captain out the door. A merchantship encounter would have to suffice, for now.

By the time they reached the observancy, the other ship had come clear on the horizon. It looked to be smaller than theirs, but clearly built for cargo, riding low on the waters.

"Iajan, by the colors. And the banner above? Someone with better eyes pick it out for me."

There was silence, and then one of the younger crew shouted out, "Solid blue, captain!"

"Solid blue, and no design?" Harini was puzzled, but the Captain laughed. "Not one a merchantman's daughter would know, but familiar to me, no fear. They run under the Shipsmaster Guild's banner itself. Whoever's on that ship is worth knowing, for sure."

"Send a signal, Jak," he said to his matesman. "Request a passby, that we might give our greetings, out here in this wide, wild sea."

• • • •

The flag was raised, a long narrow banner of bright red silk, brighter than the dark red the heirs of Zatim Sin Washer draped themselves in: the red of flame, not wine. Every ship carried one, as well as the yellow of aid-request, and the white-and-black of plague.

There was hesitation, then a flurry of activity, and the other ship unfurled a matching banner. But even as the ships began to match speed, the waters between them darkened, as though some great shadow moved underneath.

"There!" Rini left off watching the approaching ship, and ran to the railing, her skirts tangling around her legs as she moved too swiftly for decorum or safety. "A serpent!" Her hair, teased by the wind, escaped from the high-crown braid she'd put it in that morning, and she brushed the strands away from her eyes impatiently. "There it is!"

She could see the long sleek form moving in the waters below, and her breath caught at its magnificence. Far larger than she had thought and moving so fast!

No wonder they had not been able to catch up with one; it slid past them and was gone—and then another shadow came at cross-angles, sliding beneath the ship's own shadow, and her breath caught again for a different reason. If the beast should think to rise up, underneath them—would it be enough to damage the hull? Might it capsize them?

The moment passed: of course it would not. It had ignored them until now, and the ship in no way resembled anything the serpent might eat. She resisted the urge to dash to the other side of the ship: By the time she got there, the beast would have moved on. It was best to wait for the creatures to return. Or not. But patience netted her greater results, over time.

There was a shiver through the hull, as though something had brushed up against it, and then the shiver spread to the water off to port. The serpent was rising! She had left her sketchbook on the bench when they had spotted the other ship, and she cursed that fact now, trying to remember every detail of what was happening. When the great head broke through the water, a sleek, wedge-shape covered with scales that glinted and glittered in the morning sunlight, she heard noises and shouting behind her but did not recognize what they meant to do until the ship began to move away.

"No!" she cried, not daring to take her eyes off the beast. "Stay!" But she knew they would not: This was too close for them. She could not order them otherwise; she did not have that authority, and if she insisted, they might well revolt. She would have to be content with observing from that distance, and be thankful for what was given.

Then the ship shuddered again, slanting sharply, but not from any impact of beast. A blast of wind came from nowhere, despite the clouds hanging lazily overhead, and hit them full on, catching the sails unprepared. The ship groaned like a living thing, twisting underneath them, but the serpent caught the brunt of the blow. Its head reared back and then jutted forward aggressively, as though to attack the air itself.

Another blast came, this time more tightly focused, missing the ship itself to hit the serpent. It reared back, exposing more of its elongated neck and a hint of greater body underneath, and then dove below the surface again.

In a heartbeat, it was gone, the waters returning to a normal deep green. And the wind ended as quickly as it began. Rini stared at the water in dismay, then lifted her gaze to the distant ship, and narrowed her eyes in deep suspicion.

• • • •

There was a protocol that was to be followed when two ships met at sea. In particular, there was a protocol to follow when two ships of unaligned powers met at sea.

Iaja prided itself on being the Queen of exploration—the Caulians might have sailor-fighters, but they did not go far from known lands. Iajans roamed the sea, and claimed what they found. Varsam, however, was equally proud, a land of fierce sailors and well-built ships, outside the Lands Vin and thus not yoked by Sin Washer's Commands. Customs were different. Laws were different. A simple misunderstanding could cause ripples and waves down the line.

Caution, and prudence, were called for.

Caution and prudence had never met Deshai Harini.

A meeting was arranged on board the larger Varshami ship, a carefully chosen party of the captain, Shipsmaster, two crewsmen with knowledge of the Varsham tongue, and Bradhai—not at his own request.

The moment the Vineart was introduced, she surged forward, her suspicions confirmed.

"You! You drove the serpent away! Do you know how long we had been searching for it?"

"Searching? Intentionally?" The *ladysong's* Captain was enough taken-aback that he responded to the girl, rather than ignoring her, while Bradhai was utterly at a loss. From the look of the other ship's Captain, the girl's outburst was a normal enough occasion, and also that he did not feel confident enough to discipline her.

"It is my responsibility to keep this ship and its crew safe," Bradhai said.

"It wasn't interested in you! It was—argh!" The girl was well-dressed in a long dark blue skirt and blouse, covered by a leather vest similar to what he had seen traders wear, but longer over her hips. Her skin was dark, her eyes darker, and her hair drawn flat in a braid that started at her crown and ran all the way down her back in a triple plait as thick as a fist. On closer observation, Bradhai decided that she was no girl, but a woman, and one more powerful than might be assumed from her attire and appearance on this ship.

"May I introduce our patroness, Deshai Harini, the daughter of Deshai Pravin, Master of the . . . you would call it the Weaver's Guild of Varsham."

"Far distance, and wet, for a weaver-girl to come," the Captain said, speaking not in the common trade-tongue of Ettion, but a dialect of Iajan unlikely to be understood by outsiders. Bradhai winced—even he knew better than to call her a weaver-girl—but Hernán stepped into the breach.

"As Vineart Bradhai said, the serpents have been a threat to ships within these

seas for months on end. We reacted in accordance with our orders. That you have seen no damage from them before this is a blessing of the Silent Gods and your own luck, far more than any disinclination of the beasts."

The woman—Deshai Harini—looked as though she might argue, but her own Captain stepped forward again. "Indeed. We treat the beasts with respect, and attempt to stay out of their way. Such aggression as you describe is rare in our waters, but we are far from home. That you have a means to drive them off is . . . of interest to us."

Bradhai felt his lips twitch, and repressed it sternly. The Captain clearly wished to bargain, but in truth they had nothing to offer. The windspell was merely enough to annoy the serpents: Had they wanted to attack the ships, he could not stop them. Yet.

• • • •

Protocol and curiosity satisfied, the Iajan contingent returned to their own ship in contemplative silence, the sailors more concerned with the possible return of the sea-beasts that what transpired on board. The argument did not begin until the narrow longboat had brought them safely to their own ship, in relative privacy.

"We should not have told her the beasts were following us. Now she will lurk."

"You find the presence of another ship troublesome?"

"I find her desire to follow—to *study*—the beasts, troublesome, yes." The Shipsmaster was clearly disturbed. He sat in his ornate chair in the captain's study, and glanced out the single window, his gaze drawn again to where the Varsam ship rested.

"She's the indulged child of a Varsam trader," the Captain said. "The sons go into trade; the daughters are given more leeway. Her curiosity is . . . quite admirable, in its way. If she had been born to Iaja, her father might have given her to the Crafter's Guild."

"A woman?" Bradhai was startled by that.

"Crafters claim that they are born, not made. If the silent gods felt need to put one in the body of a woman, who are we to question? The Guild takes all that qualify."

It was an odd thought, but not one they had leisure to discuss. Indeed, Bradhai could not bring himself to care about the woman, or her curiosity, or the oddness of life in another land where no vines grew. He had been away from his vines for

two weeks, and the urgency to return was growing; the need to perfect the incantation so that he could go home, free of the sword-threat Hernán hung over his neck, all he could focus on.

"I do not like a Varsam ship in these waters," the Shipsmaster said again, picking up a stylus and playing with it, absently. "They have no reason to be here."

"To have brought a ship this far . . . you think she masks some other purpose?"

"I do not know. And that worries me."

Bradhai stood. "Gentlemen, the politics of who sails where I leave to your capable hands. Mine are needed elsewhere. If you will excuse me?"

He suspected, in fact, that they were glad to see him go; he had been invited to the discussion out of courtesy for his position, and the fact that anything concerning the serpents of necessity concerned him, but politics and power were beyond his boundaries, and he left them to it, happily.

Po was waiting on the deck, seated with his legs crossed, and a pile of netting on his lap, his clever fingers untangling the weave. A neatly arranged pile to his side told Bradhai that he had been at the chore some while.

When Bradhai climbed the three steps to the deck, the boy looked up, his eyes bright and eager. "They say there's a woman captain on that ship, all the way from Varsham!"

"As usual, 'they' are wrong. The captain is a man. The woman is a . . . passenger. An important passenger, but no more. Are you here to watch me explode spells again?"

"No." Although the look on his face suggested otherwise. "I had a think."

At this point, Bradhai decided, even a shiprat's thinks were welcome. "And what were you thinking?"

"Spell's liquid, right?"

Bradhai frowned at the boy. "Yes." In practical terms, the magic was carried within the *vina,* it was not the *vina* itself, but some things outsiders—especially uneducated shiprats—need not know.

"And it's not working, here."

"No." He was being as delicate as he could, and yet still the incantation would not stabilize enough to hold the magic intact.

"Maybe it's 'cause the sea's so salty? Salt water ruins wine, iffin you try to cut with it, they say."

Bradhai started to scoff, and then stopped, staring at Po long and hard enough

that the boy began to shift nervously.

"Too much water," he said. "Of course." He was an idiot. Water diluted *vin ordinaire,* made it drinkable. No one would ever water *vin magica* . . . but spellwines were sensitive to their environment, in the growing *and* in the making. And here he was, on a vast ocean, working in air saturated with seawater . . .

"Not more delicate," he said. "Not more specific. Broader, greater . . ."

"Po." He took a flask off the table and handed it to the boy. "Go below deck and fetch me a . . ." He broke off that thought. "Never mind." He was treating the boy the way he did his student; a shiprat wouldn't know which cask was which, much less how to handle it. "Stay here. I'll be right back."

Unlike his cellar at home, the casks had been placed without discernible order, no careful planning. But even in the dim light below deck, Bradhai did not hesitate, moving swiftly to the cask he wanted. With the knife at his belt, he pried out the thick wax plug from the hole at the top of the cask, and used the siphon—a bone tube set at one end with a bladder—to drain off the *vin* he needed.

Returning to the main deck, he stared at the vials lined up on the table, set in a crudely carved block of driftwood he'd had one of the sailors pull out of the water a few days ago, when he started running his trials. The boy was in his usual spot overhead, dangling from a rope, watching curiously. Normally Bradhai would have run him off, but the boy was no risk, and had already proven himself useful. Not as useful as Yakop would have been, but there was as much use wishing for the First Vine as for Yakop's presence.

"Aether, earth, and fire." Flame, to drive the beasts off. Wind, to carry the flame to them. And a growspell, to increase the potency of the overall spell.

"This is insane." Blending was not forbidden, but . . . a Washer would tell him he overstepped his place, pushed too hard against the Commands. Then too, a Washer would not be trapped here in this floating wooden cage, serpents below and Shipsmaster above, keeping him from his vines.

"This once," he said, his hands reaching for the vials. "No one need ever know."

And, a more practical portion of his thoughts whispered, if he could perfect this—he could claim a Master's title, and his fortune would be assured.

He went through the steps of the incantation again, focusing tightly on what he wanted, on what he expected each portion of the *vina* to do, even as he layered them on top of each other, and then—carefully, so carefully—blended them together.

Po and Bradhai both held their breath, and even the breezes stilled for a blink,

the sails that were not furled falling limp before refilling again, the ship lurching to the side and making them stagger. The liquid swirled of its own, the incantation shaping the magic, teaching it the form it should hold, convincing it to maintain that form . . .

And the liquid stilled, the previously clear color now crystalline in its clarity, the intensity of the red rivaling that of a firevine's fruit, but with the sharpness of an aetherwine. Bradhai lifted the vial to his nose, and wafted it beneath his nostrils. He was not surprised to recognize the notes of a growwine, full of mint and leather—but tinged with char, a not unpleasant smokiness.

"Did it work?"

"I don't know yet." But he did. He could *feel* it.

Now he needed to test it. Which meant they needed a serpent to try it on.

• • • •

"What are they doing?"

"I have no idea." The solitaire joined Harini at the railing, their evening walk interrupted when they observed a flurry of activity on the other ship. Several of the crew seemed to be lowering something alongside, down into the waters, while others were busy unfurling the sails.

"Do they intend to leave?" Harini asked, puzzled.

"At sunset?" The solitaire looked doubtful. "But they are Iajan, and Iajans are madder than most. It's part of their charm."

Harini had never met an Iajan before. She had to rely on the solitaire's experience. The reliance—not having observations of her own—made Rini itch.

But once the object had been lowered into the water, the Iajan ship only moved a few lengths away, and then set anchor once again.

"They've set bait," Harini realized, her breath catching in her throat. "They mean to lure a serpent to them. What makes them think it will come? They never reacted to our bait."

"We did not have half a cow to offer them," the solitaire said dryly. They had taken on supplies at their last port, but fresh meat had not been seen on their table for weeks. "Fish they can catch on their own, after all."

"It won't work." She was certain of that. They had tried everything—short of half a cow, true—and the serpents had ignored them entirely. But if it did work . . .

"Find Je'heirba, if you would, please. Have her fetch my sketchbook and my

pencil case."

A solitaire was not a servant; one did not send her on errands. But Rini dared not leave the railing. Thankfully, the older woman seemed willing to do this thing for her.

At first, it seemed as though she had been correct. The water remained undisturbed, the only shadows on the water normal for approaching night. The object—buoyed by some sort of bladders—floated unmolested just below the surface.

And then it bobbed. Just once, but noticeably, as though something had tugged on it from below.

"They had to do this at nightfall?" she muttered, straining her eyes to see better. She could tell the Captain to move closer—but that might spook the beasts away. Plus, she wasn't sure how close two ships should be—when they had met, the two ships had remained distant, with the small, narrow rowboat ferrying the Iajans over to them.

The water rippled again, clearly more than tides or wind, and she whispered "Sin Washer save us," just as the serpent burst from the water, the half-side of cow caught up in its mouth. This was not the calm, singing pair she had seen off her home coast, nor the fleeting, sleek-muscled shapes they had been chasing in these colder waters. This was a beast in truth, the neck shorter, the body heavier, with stunted limbs alongside like oars of a lowboat. Water flashed off it as it shook the bait like a dog with a hare, and the scales glowed in the dim light like a muted rainbow, silver, green, and blue. The crew on her own ship burst into action, readying the sails in case they needed to flee, and she was aware of a shadow at her left shoulder: The solitaire had returned, her hand on the blade carried on her hip, her gaze managing to cover both her charge and the potential threat.

Harini did not believe that the beast would harm them. But she would not deny that the woman's presence was comforting.

"Look!" someone shouted as the sails bumped and clattered, a sudden wind rising out of nowhere.

No, not nowhere, no more than the earlier blasts had been from nowhere. This time she could make out the Vineart standing in the stern of the ship. He stood differently than a sailor, although she could not say exactly how or why, and his hands were raised, palms up, in what looked at first like a mockery of the Washer's Solace-Offering. It took a second before she realized that the Solace-Offering was taken from the Vineart's pose, not the other way around, and the

second blast of spell-wind hit the ship as a lance of fire slapped the serpent in the neck.

It screamed, its head thrashing in the air, and another beast rose next to it, not quite as large, with darker, more muted scales, and a more slender, triangular head, its snout adorned with long whiskers on either side.

"More to the left," the solitaire said, her voice hoarse with either fear or awe—or perhaps both. Another spell-blast hit the serpents, catching the pair equally, and they turned as one, moving toward the Iajan ship. The movement the Solitaire had called resolved into three more shapes, gliding through the water.

"Five? Five!" Rini was thrilled, and then terrified. One serpent was a risk. A pack of them? She had never heard of such a thing. Dare she get closer, dare look away long enough to take up her sketchbook?

"Be careful, be careful," the solitaire was whispering under her breath, but Rini realized it was not directed at her, but rather the souls on the other ship.

"Listen!" Rini forgot everything else as a sound carried in the wind. It was faint but unmistakable. "They're singing!"

She strained to hear better, to confirm that this was the same sound she had heard, so many months before. These creatures did not look like the serpents she had seen back home, but yes, they sounded the same: a sweet, warbling noise that sounded like a cross between a bird's cry and a hunting cat's yowl.

Harini repressed the urge to show her triumph in a manner unseemly to her position and family name, but she could not hide the glee in her voice. "They're speaking to each other."

"You don't know that for certain." The solitaire tilted her head, as though trying to hear more clearly.

"Yes. Yes, I do." Rini was convinced. They were speaking to each other, coordinating their approach on the Iajan ship.

"Birds sing. Dogs bark. That's not speech."

"It is to them," Rini said. Before, she'd not argued because she needed proof. And there it was, in front of her, the solitaire was a solid witness—but she needed more. More information, more time to observe.

The other ship, though, had no interest in her studies. As the five beasts slid through the water, another blast of wind came, and with it, another explosion of fire.

The beast hit sank below the water, while the other four continued on as though nothing had happened.

Rini was nearly knocked off her feet as her own ship took sail. She was ready

to cry out in protest when she realized that they were sailing *towards* the other ship.

Her concentration broken, she became aware of the shouts, and the sound of running feet behind her, and risked a glance at the solitaire, seeking explanation.

"The Captain will not see another ship endangered," the woman said calmly, her balance undisturbed, although one hand rested lightly on the railing. She seemed almost excited, and Harini was reminded that this was a woman who had chosen to make her living with a sword and bow, not in a shop or kitchen. The idea of a battle excited her.

Harini shuddered at the idea, then grabbed for the nearest handhold as the ship forced its way across the current, turning so that it was on a direct course to intercept the serpents before they reached the Iajan ship.

"I assume it would be useless to tell you to go into the cabin and hide. So brace yourself," the solitaire warned, as her other hand, strong and capable, curled around her weapon's hilt in anticipation. "This could get bumpy."

Harini merely rolled her eyes, and held on more tightly.

A course correction, and more yelling in the background and overhead, and their ship sailed too close to the Iajan ship for Rini's comfort—she could see the Vineart standing, a smaller figure by his side, the Vineart's hands now down at his sides. A heartbeat of suspense, and then they were past, slowing down reluctantly, like a horse unwilling to yield, bucking at the very last moment. Harini lost her hold, and was almost knocked overboard before the solitaire's fingers curled around her upper arm, keeping her secure until she could take hold of the railing again.

There was more shouting, from both crews, but Harini could not distinguish what was being said. The moment her feet steadied under her, she let go of the railing, tore loose from the solitaire's hold, and dashed across the deck, dodging sailors until she made it to the other side, with a clearer view of what was happening.

"Sin Washer be merciful," she whispered, seeing the coiling humps of the serpents rising and disappearing not a dozen yards beyond her, turning the previously peaceful water into a churn.

And then the water broke, and a massive head reared alongside the ship turning as though to survey the deck itself, massive black eyes staring directly at her.

Harini screamed, and the solitaire was at her side again, the blade now ready in the woman's hand, held low across her midsection. The other hand pulled Harini

away from the railing, putting the girl behind her.

For once, Rini did not object.

The beast swept its gaze along the deck with an uncanny stare like that she had seen in blind men, then raised its wedge-shaped head higher, heavy whiskers twitching once as though it were tasting the air. And then, as though dismissing whatever it had seen or smelled, the serpent slipped back underwater.

"Clear!" someone yelled from high above them, letting the ships know that all the serpents had disappeared. The solitaire slid her blade back into its sheath, with obvious disappointment.

"It decided two ships were too many to eat," she said.

"Perhaps." But Harini wasn't convinced.

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"Clear!"

On the *ladysong,* Bradhai collapsed onto the deck, his knees giving way beneath him. The deck was solid, and real, and he could ignore the way his body was shaking, and the bitter taste remaining on his tongue from the spellwine he had used. He sucked at his cheeks, an instinctive move for a Vineart to call forth his quiet-magic, and tasted a saltier, less bitter taste mingling with it. At some point he had bitten the inside of his cheek hard enough that it bled. The combination of spellwine, saliva, and blood was enough to make him vomit.

"Vineart? You're ill? Should I fetch the butcher?"

It took him a hazy moment to realize that Po was offering to bring the ship's surgeon.

"No. No. Help me up." His dignity required him to be upright, even if his clothes were splattered. Po, used to various foulness, did not flinch.

"Vineart!" The Captain was hailing him. "It worked! They've fled!"

He heard the crew celebrating, not only on the *ladysong,* but on the other ship as well. At some point he had been aware of the Varsham ship sliding into position, raising the aim of his decantation so as to avoid their rigging, but only now did he see that they had cut between the *ladysong* and two of the attacking serpents.

But not the other two, or possibly three, who had been coming from behind, faster and more evasive. Bradhai turned, scanning the waters, expecting them to make a sudden, painful return. But they too, were gone, although he had not hit them with spellfire.

The seas were quiet.

But whatever had ended the attack, Bradhai thought it might not have been him.

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While the two crews recovered from the near-attack, he asked to speak with the woman, Deshai Harini. The Captains of both ships, busy overseeing repairs and calming their crew, were more than happy to turn their troublesome passengers over to each other. Harini's bodyguard, a roundly muscular solitaire, had come, but settled in for a pot of tai, just beyond earshot but well within reach, should something threaten her charge.

The moment the two women were escorted onto their ship, the younger woman nearly assaulted him again. This time, however, it was with barely pent-up energy and enthusiasm rather than anger.

"Did you hear it? Did you?"

"Hear what?" He was caught off-guard, not expecting that to be her first question.

"Their singing. All right, maybe not song. But it sounded like singing. Didn't you hear?"

He had heard . . . something, but he would not call it singing. But he didn't want to anger her, and so hedged his response. "I was a little busy."

Her enthusiasm turned back into anger. "That's right. Busy. You lured them to your ship, and attacked them when they came."

She was at least a decade younger than he, at a guess, but he did not underestimate the strength of her anger. "My purpose here is to find a spell that drives them off. You knew that."

"Spells." She said it with a sniff, dismissive. "Magic makes us weak. It distracts us from the world around us, thinking that we can bind everything to our will. I will not have it on our ship." She suddenly recalled her manners, and added, "No offense to your work, Vineart."

He had heard of those attitudes before; the madmen of Caul refused to use spellwines, and the Trader-clans—while acknowledging the usefulness of *vin magica*—chose not to partake themselves, save where their clients insisted. He had not expected it of her.

"You use windspells," he pointed out as gently as he could.

"We do not."

They had managed to maneuver the ship so tightly, without spells? Bradhai didn't know enough about sailing to know if this was unusual, but he was impressed anyway.

"You study things," he said, changing the subject. "You watch, and you observe, and you draw conclusions."

"Yes." She looked at him sideways, suspicious. Her father might have seen no harm in such things, but clearly others in her life had.

"As do I." A Vineart's existence was tied up in awareness: knowing the feel of the soil, the health of his vines, the turn of the weather, the moment in time. "And like you, I have been studying these beasts."

"To kill them."

"To keep them away from the ships that must travel the sea's roads," he corrected her. "I've no desire to kill anything, if it will stay off our wake." He stared out at the endless waves, but his gaze was somewhere else, too far away. "In truth, my sole desire is to return home, back to my vines, where I belong. But I cannot do that until I have accomplished my task."

She seemed distracted by his words. "I've been gone from home two—no, three moons now. Some days I can barely remember it, what it's like to be on land." She looked at him, and he felt uncomfortably scrutinized. "Do you miss it? Your home, I mean."

He was awestruck by her question, that it could even be asked. "A Vineart is not meant to be far from his roots," he told her. "It hurts, to be away."

"They think I'm mad."

It seemed to come out of nowhere, an admission torn from her unwilling, and Bradhai didn't know how he should respond. This was not the conversation he had expected to have.

"The Captain, his crew, my nurse—even the solitaire, for all that she hides it better. They think me mad for this voyage, mad for thinking that the serpents are somehow more than dumb beasts, set here to eat and swim and nothing more."

"Dogs and horses, even cattle, they all make noises. Even birds sing to each other. It does not indicate . . ." He made a helpless gesture, not sure what she was expecting.

"They're different. Serpents, I mean. I don't know how. But they are."

Mad, indeed. But the silent gods were known to watch over the innocent and the mad, and she seemed to be both, no matter her family or training.

He was not sure how much that protection would extend over the rest of them—or her, for long, either.

Then something struck him, landing in the middle of his thought, and scattering everything else. "Different."

"What?" He had startled her—she turned around so violently, broken out of whatever deep thoughts she had, that her braid swung out enough to hit him on the shoulder. It was knotted with something heavy at the end; he winced, and rubbed the bruised bone.

"They're different, you said. That's what Hernán said, too. That these serpents were different. Different how?"

"I . . . they look different. The ones here, and the ones at home. But I thought—sheep and horses have different types, and dogs—I thought they were just . . . different."

"But Hernán saw it, too. Different from what he'd been seeing, looking differently, behaving differently. They're larger, more active, more aggressive . . ."

"Only toward you," she said.

"Toward anyone not-you," he countered, dismissing her objection. "But it almost seems as though using spells on them makes them *more* aggressive."

"They didn't hurt anyone," she said.

"No. They didn't." They could have—the nearest serpent was large enough, and close enough, that it could have done serious damage to both ships, rather than merely splintering a few planks. It could easily have plucked crewmen from the deck, had it desired.

It had not.

"What does it want? What draws it? Not food, even though it took the bait. And why so many? They've been solitary, or in pairs, in all reports."

"Maybe that's part of the difference," Harini said. "I saw pairs, back home, but here, they're larger, and they travel together, almost in packs. Never five, as we saw, but never one alone, either. Three, mostly, and almost . . . they almost seem to be working together to drive fish when they fed."

Her dark eyes widened in realization as Bradhai spoke the words.

"They're forming packs."

A new argument broke out almost immediately.

"We can't tell anyone," he said, instinctively hunching his shoulders and speaking more softly, as though someone might overhear.

"What? But it's an amazing discovery!"

She might be more worldly, more educated, but Bradhai had paid attention to the men around him more than the beasts. "Not while we're at sea—not to anyone who goes to sea, or might speak too freely. Think! One serpent terrifies them. A

pack, as we saw today, will send them into a superstitious frenzy. The idea that every time they go out to sea, they must contend with not single beasts, but three, or four, or five, working together?" Bradhai shook his head. "Confirmation of that would be chaos."

"But this should reassure them! Herd animals, and pack animals, they have a strict order of behavior." Harini shifted her entire body to face him, tucking her skirt under her for ease of movement. "Horses follow the lead mare, a single male dominates a dog pack. No matter what they look like, they're the same inside. If there're forming a . . . a pack? A school? Then there should be a similar leader for the serpents. If you can identify it, and drive it away, it will take the rest of them to safety."

She meant the serpent's safety, away from firespells and arrows. Bradhai decided not to argue the point.

"It's not just me. I mean, even if I could manage to do it again," and he veered away—already he could tell that she would be like a hound on the scent, if she even suspected the existence of blood-magic—"it needs to be something that anyone can decant, from the prow of a ship, under any circumstances. And I haven't figured out how to create that, yet."

"Magic." She said the word as though tasting it. "That's what a spell is, isn't it? A repeatable experience, clarified and codified, with set results following set actions, each time."

Bradhai wasn't listening, already deep into his own thoughts, trying to determine an incantation that could turn something so fierce and determined away from a ship without also endangering the ship and crew itself.

The two of them stared silently out at the waters, while the crewsmen, accustomed to the Vineart's peculiarities, and cautious about this strange woman who commanded her own ship, ignored them.

"Harini. Vineart."

The solitaire approached them quietly, then coughed once before addressing them both.

"What is it?" Harini asked.

"I have been listening to the crews speak. Both crews. They are perhaps more free with me than they would be with either of you to overhear."

Bradhai did not doubt that. For all that she was a female, the leathers and sword of her profession made her a more understandable figure than an unarmed male whose entire life was spent set apart from others.

"They are frightened." Harini sounded resigned.

“No, lady. Or, no more than any wise man would be, in these circumstances. But they are looking to the Vineart to accomplish something, and soon.”

“I know.” Bradhai had felt their uncertainty when he came aboard. Every failed incantation had grown that uncertainty—when the spell worked, their hopes grew likewise. Now, held between success and the creeping awareness that that success once would not be enough . . .

“Sailors are fickle as the wind,” the Solitaire said. “And they were the last to give up on the silent gods.”

Bradhai frowned at her, not certain what she meant by that. Harini, however, did.

“You think they would return to making sacrifices, to placate some half-forgotten sea god?” She sounded less horrified than fascinated, and Bradhai felt an urge to move away from her on their shared perch.

“They would not think it, now. They are civilized men.”

But, her voice implied, if you leave them uncertain for too long . . .

“You need to find a way to disperse them,” Harini said again.

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“Fire works. It’s the only thing that does. But why?“

“It didn’t burn them.”

“What?”

“I was watching,” Harini said, defensively.

“We all were.”

“No. You were looking to see what they did. I was looking at them. And it startled them, maybe even scared them, but it didn’t burn.”

“That flame should have burned everything.” Bradhai had felt the intensity in his mouth, he knew how sharp that flame had been.

“Water quenches fire?” The solitaire and Harini had followed Bradhai back to his workspace, the fighter pulling one of the water barrels over to sit on, while Harini stood at a distance, clearly fighting the urge to look over his shoulder as he worked.

“Perhaps it was diluted too much, even with the changes. Spellwines do not work well over long distances of water. Sin Washer made it so.”

“Why?”

He had never met anyone who asked why so many times, of so many things. “Who knows why a god does anything? Perhaps he did not mean to, perhaps he

had some greater purpose, perhaps the sea god had some hold over him we cannot understand. It simply is."

The Solitaire laughed. "Harini does not understand 'is,' Vineart. I am told even as a child, she insisted *why.*"

"The growthspell I put into the incantation should have carried even that distance and still been hot enough to burn." The fact that he had failed dug at him like a stone in his sole, enough that he was careless what he admitted in front of others.

"Water quenches fire . . ." Harini was caught on that idea.

"It should have been enough to set the sea itself on fire," Bradhai snapped. "I know the strength of my own skills."

"No, I am thinking . . . Have you ever handled a fish, Vineart?"

"I have a cook for that."

She sighed and shook her head, as though bemoaning the limits of his knowledge. "A fish has scales. They keep the flesh intact, able to move through the water the way we move through air."

"And?" He turned to watch her, recognizing the tone of voice, if not the words. "A fish, if put to fire, will burn."

"Scales keep them safe from damage. Their scales are thin, though. The leviathan has a thick hide."

"And no scales. So?"

"Serpents are deep-water creatures. Their scales would be thicker, like a leviathan." She frowned again. "Should be. None have ever washed up on the shore to study, and I've never been close enough to a live one to tell."

"Thick scales. Hard, and thick enough to be a shield against even magefire. Rot and blast, you're right." The fact depressed him. "I'm no closer to a solution than I was at the start."

"No, but it did work. You did make them go away. I think . . . Do you remember how that serpent looked at us? How large its eyes were?"

Bradhai didn't, but he kept silent.

"I think you blinded them. An animal that's blinded is vulnerable. That's what your spell needs to do: blind them temporarily, make them associate ships with not being able to see. Teach them it's a bad thing to go near them!"

Like waking up in the morning and knowing that Harvest was ready, Bradhai's thoughts cleared. "Coldfire."

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The next two days, Bradhai worked every moment he was awake, and slept only briefly, curled in a blanket on the decking of his workspace. Like Harvest, the urgency of the moment consumed him, and he barely noticed the passing hours, or the exhaustion, focused on the work in front of him.

"Breakfast, Vineart."

"Mmmm."

Po placed the wooden dish on the worktable, as far away from the collection of vials, wine sacks, and small clay bowls as he could manage, and fled. His curiosity had soon turned to boredom when nothing else exploded, and the Vineart's conversation turned to irritated grunts.

Bradhai ignored the food. His stomach was tight, but not from hunger. The more he worked with his wines, the easier it was to ignore how far he was from his vines—and yet, at the same time, it made the distance more painful.

"Into one, from three

Vin rise, carry and burn."

Intent was more important than words, the framing of thought and desire what shaped the magic, *seeing* what the final form would accomplish, molding the power to a specific end and convincing the magic to follow along. But the *vina* was stubborn, refusing to give in.

"Aetherwine," he said with a sigh. Perhaps . . . There was a trick he had heard of while working with the notes from the scholars at Altienne. Bradhai held his hand palm down over the vial, and with his horn-handled knife nicked the soft flesh so that a single drop of blood emerged and fell into the *vina.*

"And be," he told the magic. *"And Be.*"

He could feel the incantation moving within the wine. It should settle, accept the structure put on it, infuse itself with the incantation and change from *vina magica* to spellwine proper. Should.

"Oh, rot," he muttered, feeling the *vina* instead expand around the incantation. He had only time enough to regret that Po had left—this would be an explosion worth of his fascination—when the magic did something he hadn't been expecting.

It arced. Out of the clay bowl, through his hands, a shimmering, glittering spray of deep red that caught the sun like some kind of bloody rainbow, reaching high over the railing and into the sea itself.

And no one saw it but him.

He felt a moment of awe—whatever had happened, it was probably horrible, but the effect was so beautiful, so unexpected, so *magical* that he couldn't even

worry—and then something hit the side of the *ladysong* so hard that he crashed to the deck, only training and reflexes saving the bowl in his hands from spilling.

Chaos exploded around him as the ship shuddered again. The Captain barked orders, and the crew raced to carry them out, swarming up the masts and taking up weapons alongside.

Serpents! At least two, probably more. Bradhai couldn't see them, but he *knew.* He could sense them beneath the ship.

And with that sense came the knowledge that their arrival was not coincidence. The magic he had incanted, the spellwine hitting the water, had summoned them somehow. Connected them, serpent and Vineart, in this instant. How long? He didn't know, didn't want to know. The awareness pushed at him, thick and oppressive. Serpents were not restful beasts.

He tried to focus, clear his thoughts of distraction, but the chaos around him was too much, and then something grabbed his shoulder, shaking him.

"Gather your things." Hernán shouted in his ear. Bradhai half-turned, blinking out of his daze. The Shipsmaster had a rough-cloth pack slung over his shoulder, and his ice-grey hair was in disarray. "Now, Vineart!"

His hands unsteady, Bradhai carefully poured the new spellwine into a vial, and corked it. He should seal it, but there was no time; he had to put everything else back, make sure that it was secure . . .

The ship rocked again, and there was a noise that made his blood chill in his veins. He looked up, and saw that the tallest mast was shaking in a way it hadn't even in the worst storm.

Then he realized that the crackling noise had not come from the mast, but below his feet. He stared down at the wide planking, confused. Hernán grabbed him by the shoulder. "Take what you can, but we go, now!"

There was another crack, this one too much like bones breaking. A horn sounded from above, a sharp cry of warning, and Hernán swore, pulling him away from the table, his things half-gathered.

"But—" Bradhai protested, grabbing another wine sack at random and slipping the strap over his shoulder even as he reached for another.

"Rotted Vineart, there's no time! If you value your life, move!"

Crewsmen had stopped whatever they were doing, abandoning their tasks and moving for the railing, too. Hernán shoved his way through them, dragging the Vineart. The longboats were being lowered. Bradhai looked down and blanched. Just above the waterline, there were a handful of breaks in the smooth wooden sides of the *ladysong.* She'd been hit hard enough to be taking on water, and fast.

He barely had time to regret the loss of the winecasks still in storage before Hernán shoved him over the side, and he fell, hard, into the bottom of one of the boats.

There were others in the boat with him, and leather-wrapped packets and canvas bags, crowding his space until he was pressed up against the side of the narrow craft. They were dangerously overladen, even he could tell that from how low they were riding in the water. The knowledge of what might lurk nearby seemed enough to keep every man of them inside, rather than taking his chances swimming.

Not that the longboat—barely twice a man's length—would be any defense if one of the serpents decided to attack. The beast he had seen could swallow the longboat whole without choking.

"Row, you fools!" someone shouted, and several of the crewsmen grabbed oars, and began to move the craft away from the *ladysong,* heading toward Harini's ship, its sails run up but loose, awaiting the signal to go. He could see figures at the railing, calling them in, but their own longboats remained shipped. The refugees needed to reach them; help would not be coming, not while the serpents remained.

He craned his neck to see if Hernán had made it to the next boat. As Shipsmaster, he would have claim to the first seat available, surely. But he could not tell who was in the remaining boats.

Not all would fit. The longboats were for transport, not escape, and there simply weren't enough. Even now, some sailors were leaping into the water, abandoning the ship in the most direct fashion.

And then a wedge-shaped head rose from the water; not the leader he had seen before but another one, with a smaller head and no whiskers, and—

Bradhai looked away.

There were too many men in the water now, swimming toward the other ship. Some of them ignored the longboats, while others tried to grapple with the sides, begging to be hauled up.

Looking away and hating himself for it, Bradhai saw something else not too far away, cutting through the water's surface: triangular fins, grey as clouds and moving just as quickly

"Say nothing," a voice said in his ear, the breath foul with onions and rotted teeth.

Bradhai nodded. It seemed immeasurably cruel, but creating more panic would save no one. The longboat rocked uncomfortably as they rowed against the wind,

and someone screamed.

He looked, unable to resist this time, and the water a distance away was murky with blood. A sour taste rose into his throat, and the taste of spellwine flooded his senses. He hugged his belongings to him more closely, terrified that someone might try to toss them overboard, to make more room.

Growspells and aetherspells were no use, here. His blood-magic could not do enough, and he dared not try for the firewine—even if he could focus long enough to recall the decantation, he had no idea how to direct it without also endangering the wooden boat he was in, far more flammable than any serpent or shark. And the other ship—they were close enough now that he could see the ropes thrown down the side, ladders dangling, if they could just get near enough to reach. Sailors hung over the rails, shouting encouragement.

Then the watchers raised their heads, distracted, pointing and shouting, and there was a noise behind them that he could not describe. Knowing he should not, Bradhai turned the upper half of his body to look back, just in time to see the rear half of the *ladysong* turned end-up to the sky, while the front half sank, the water's surface littered with broken masts and sails. Someone behind him panicked then, flailing wildly and making the boat rock hard enough that water flooded over the rim, filling the bottom of the boat. Bradhai pulled his feet up, trying to balance on the narrow bit of seat he had been able to hang onto, and felt himself tip over.

He had two choices: let go of the wineskins and grab hold, or fall overboard.

The water hit him before he was aware that he had made a choice.

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Harini watched the disaster unfold with an odd but familiar sense of calm, while those around her went into a panic. She was concerned for those on the Iajan ship, of course. She wished no harm to anyone, and the Vineart had seemed an interesting man, if wrongheaded about many things. But there was simply so much to see that she found herself slipping into the same sort of detachment useful when observing creatures: patient and still, with no need to actually do anything, because there was nothing *to* do. Nothing but wait, and watch. When the alarm sounded, she had brought a spyglass with her, and now focused the tube on the Iajan ship.

There were at least four serpents circling under the other ship: She counted the heads as they rose and dove, marking the differences in each one. Three did not

have the great whiskers, one did.

"A male, and his females," she decided. Had the fifth one they had seen before had whiskers? She thought it had. A younger male, then, still allowed to tag along with its mother? Or a junior male, not allowed to breed? There was so much she didn't know, so much she couldn't know, the frustration made her grind her teeth.

"Harini! Hold this!" And the solitaire shoved one end of a rope into her hands, knocking the horrifyingly expensive spyglass to the deck. Harini opened her mouth to protest even as she took the rope, then was struck speechless when the solitaire put one hand on the railing of the ship and leapt over, dropping straight down into the water with a heavy splash.

The rope in Harini's hands played out, and she had to make a conscious decision to hold onto it as the knotted end came up, the rough fibers scraping against her palms and fingers. The weight at the other end was more than she could maintain, and she backed up, pulling until her shoulders and arms burned. It wasn't enough, she could feel her grip loosening as her palms sweated. But the solitaire was at the other end of that rope. She had gone into the water for some reason. Rini knew she had to hold on.

A sailor passed by, intent on some other chore, and she called to him, her voice cracking from disuse and dryness. He took the rope she offered to him without hesitation.

"Hold it!" she cried, and ran back to the railing, scanning down the length of rope until she found the solitaire. She had someone in one arm, pulling with the other hand along the rope, towing them both back to the side as the first longboat reached the ship.

Harini raced back to join the sailor, helping to hold the rope tight against the weight of two bodies climbing.

The first one to the railing was the Vineart, one hand clutching the rope, the other white-knuckled around leather thongs, dragging wineskins up against his body as he came up the side of the ship. His face was too pale, his eyes bloodshot from the salt water, his lean frame shivering as he left the water and hit cooler air. She managed to get him over the railing, another set of hands helping her move him out of the way, then she turned to pull the solitaire over.

"Is he alive?" the woman asked, before she was safely on deck herself.

Harini turned in time to see look of confusion on the Vineart's face. Then his eyes rolled up into the sockets, and he fell over backwards, crumpling as he hit the deck.

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"What do you think you are doing?" Harini stood in front of the Captain, her hands fisted at her hips. At the solitaire's advice, she had waited until he was alone to approach, but the delay had done nothing for her mood.

"I'm taking this ship and all those aboard her to safe distance. And then we are going to head for the nearest port in the Lands Vin, where we can get drop off the survivors and take on more supplies."

"We are not going to leave."

They were already too far away. The serpents had remained where they were, circling where the ship had gone down, but as night fell, Harini could not study them, especially with the crack in the spyglass, courtesy of it having been knocked to the ground.

The Captain's patience was exhausted, and so was the man. "Those beasts attacked and sank an Iajan merchant-ship. You do not understand the magnitude of that, Deshai Harini, but I do. They could do that to us without even blinking."

"They won't."

"You cannot assure me of that."

"They had every opportunity, and did not."

"Then why did they attack the *ladysong?* What changed?"

Harini didn't know. It near drove her mad, the not-knowing, and that, if the Captain followed through on his plans, she might never know.

"Go back."

"Harini." His voice was full of an annoying, frustrating understanding. "I cannot."

"Please." She had never asked for anything before, not like this. Not as supplicant, aware she might be refused. "Not all the way back, not for long. But enough that we can understand what happened—and how to prevent it from happening again."

Because it would happen again, they both knew that. Once an animal learned it could destroy an enemy, it would not stop unless dissuaded. For now, to protect them, Harini had no choice but to play this the Vineart's way. But first, the Vineart had to wake up.

• • • •

In a dream, he had been home. He had taken his work-clogs off and let the

night-cool soil press against the flesh of his feet, all the intelligences of touch and taste and smell carried to him, telling him that he was home, that all was well. The vines whispered in the pre-dawn air, the magic within them touching the magic within him, reassuring each other that they were safe, that they belonged, that the roots dug deep and the boundaries were secure.

Then pain woke him, and he was in a narrow bunk unlike his vinewood bed at home, the tossing of the sea below him nothing like solid stone and soil.

"What happened?"

The woman seating on the chair next to his bunk—uncomfortably cramped, in the small space, stared, as though she had been dozing in the chair.

"You're awake. Good, good. And well? No dizziness, no need to empty your stomach?" She was older, her once-dark hair threaded with silver, but her dark eyes were sharp over a high-bridged nose, and although she had a strange accent, one he could barely follow, her worry was clear.

"I'm fine." He was tired, and sore, and had a strange fuzzy taste in his mouth that made him think he had been working too much magic, but he couldn't remember why—

—and then, that easily, he did.

"The *ladysong*—"

The woman tsked. "Gone, it is. But you're safe and well."

He glanced around the tiny cabin, and breathed a sigh of relief as he saw the flasks and skins he had taken from the ship stored carefully on a shelf.

"I went overboard . . ."

"You did. And the solitaire and my girl, they hauled you out. Right worried they were, while you slept. I'll go fetch them now."

He took advantage of her absence to find his clothes, draped over the shelf next to the wineskins. They were stiff from the seawater, but he did not want to face Harini wearing only his smalls, or a blanket. There was no dignity in that.

It was neither Harini nor the solitaire who entered the cabin, but an older man, his face creased with years and weathering, his clothing fine, but durable rather than fancy.

"Svapan, First of the *youngest swimmer.*"

"My crewmates?" They had not been his, but he knew no other way to ask after them.

"We rescued a fair number," Svapan said. "But not all. Not enough." There was a pause. "Your Captain stayed."

Bradhai had not known the man well, but what he had seen, he had liked.

Vinearts did not form attachments, but the loss ached, nonetheless.

"And Hernán? The Shipsmaster?"

Svapan shook his head. "We recovered only crew, and you. No other passengers, none who identified themselves as such."

Hernán would not have been silent about his presence. And the First of this ship would have known the importance of having an Iajan Shipsmaster as guest.

Hernán was gone. Dead. Drowned or eaten by the serpents he so feared, Bradhai could never know, but gone nonetheless.

He was free to go. There was no one on this ship, neither among the refugees nor the crew, who knew the obligation—the threat—he had been under. And by the time he returned to his Vintnery . . . by the time the Guilds knew what had happened, and determined if they would come after him again, well, he would be wiser than to let them in, much less go anywhere.

His spells had not failed; the danger was deeper than anything he could face, and they would have to deal with it themselves.

"A great loss," he said to the First, his face composed to show regret. That seemed to satisfy the man.

"Captain's plan is to bring you folk to the nearest Lands Vin port, drop you there. You'll be fine with that?"

"Indeed. Thank your Captain for me, and for your care while I was injured."

The First nodded curtly, then left him to finish dressing. Thoughtfully, Bradhai washed his face and hands in the basin provided, thankful for the feel of clean water on his skin, and wrapped his belt twice around his hips in proper Vineart fashion. His knife and silver tasting spoon had disappeared somewhere between ships, and Bradhai felt a pang at that: the spoon had been his master's, handed over when the old man lay dying. The old man had been cold and harsh, but the feel of the smooth silver as it left one pair of hands for another had been all the praise—and acknowledgement—Bradhai could have wanted.

And now it was gone, sunk somewhere impossibly deep in the ocean.

Closing his eyes against the pain, Bradhai passed his hand over the wineskins and flasks; he had lost none of the ones he remembered grabbing. That was worth more than a spoon, no matter how many memories were attached to it.

The smallest skin of aetherwine, marked with the sigil of his making, and the sealed flask of firewine he had rescued he hooked to his belt, securing them carefully. After some thought, he took up the vial of spellwine he had incanted just before the attack and studied it. At home in his own study, he would have used precious glass, the better to observe the color and clarity. Shipboard, he had

been reduced to fired clay—which had weathered the sea far better, without a crack or seepage to be seen.

He tucked that into the small pocket of his vest, secure and out of sight, and then left the cabin.

Despite the Captain's plans, they did not seem to be any closer to land: From the feel of the boat, Bradhai guessed that they were still anchored, holding steady where they had been, surrounded by flat ocean below and a flat blue sky above.

The ship—the *youngest swimmer,* the First had called it—was larger than the *ladysong,* but sleeker and now far more crowded, despite its size. Bradhai saw several crewsmen he recognized, but Po was nowhere to be seen.

The boy might have been high in the riggings of this new ship . . . or he, too, might not have survived. Bradhai thought of Yakop safe back home, and felt an odd surge of something bitter and sore in his heart.

Walking on, refusing to look up to check the ropes and lines, Bradhai encountered the solitaire again. She had changed out of her sodden garb and was dressed now in leather leggings and a bare-armed tunic, with low boots on her feet, and a thick leather band around her neck. The blade was at her waist, but there were two sheaths strapped to her calves as well, one the length of his hand, the other longer.

Before, she had been a bodyguard. Now, she was a warrior.

They greeted each other with solemn nods, and he took up position alongside her, away from the railing but still looking out to sea. Harini was downrail from them, her attention focused on where the serpents slid through the waters still. She looked very young, just then, and Bradhai felt very old.

"You saved my life," he said to the solitaire.

"Your desire to live saved your life," she said, but seemed otherwise disinclined to disagree.

"I have been rude enough to never ask your name."

She looked startled by that, a little. "You and I, Vineart, we are known by what we do, more than who we are. But my name is Kseniya."

He stumbled over the pronunciation, a little, repeating it. "You are not Iajan."

"No more than you."

That was true enough: The slavers had sold him to his master, but he had not been born to those lands. His memories were vague of the time before the sleephouse and slavery, and only his name now remained of the boy he had been.

Kseniya was right; but he was glad he had asked her name.

"Has she slept since all this happened?" he asked, indicating Harini.

“I do not think she will, so long as the beasts remain,” she said, clearly resigned to the fact. “Her nurse coaxed her into eating something, and draping a blanket over her at night, but . . . Who am I to tell her to stop? She is in no danger here.”

“You do not think the beasts will attack us?”

“No.” She gave him a curious look. “And neither do you.”

“No.”

He didn’t want to say any more: It was too fantastical, too impossible. And yet he was no less an observer than Harini, trained from childhood to feel the flow and motion of magic. He could no more deny what he had felt before the creatures attacked than he could the devastation of insects, hail, or rot.

He was not comfortable speaking of magic to outsiders, but the nature of her own life meant that she was as restricted as he, with no way, he thought, to use his words against him—no way, and unlike Harini, a daughter of power, no need.

And also unlike Harini, she seemed disinclined to argue with him.

“Harini says that they are changing?”

“We’ve used too much magic on them,” he said. “We saw it years before with birds: For a time, a spellbound marker kept birds away, but the more we used, the less the birds were affected—and the smaller animals, even less time was needed. The faster they bred, the more accustomed they became.

“It took time, and more time, but the magic . . . the spells used to push them away from ships, the countless spellwines used on a ship while on the ocean . . .”

He was barely aware of the solitaire any more, thinking through the pieces, feeling his way as he might feel the texture and taste of the *mustus,* the first crush of the fruit, when it told him what sort of Harvest he had. “Spells do not travel well over water, we know this. But we never thought how they might travel *though* water.” He tried to imagine such a thing. Even having felt it, knowing how his incantation went awry, it was difficult.

The boy, Po, had been right, even as he was wrong. Salt water had changed everything.

“You’re saying magic has influenced their breeding?” Harini had joined them, drawn by their voices, and now broke in with a voice filled not with shock but comprehension. “The way a dog is bred to be a herder, or sheep for better wool . . .”

“Magic-bred serpents who are drawn to magic,” he said. “It’s only a theory, not __”

“No. It makes sense. I don’t know how, but it makes sense, and if it makes

sense, then it must be so."

"There are many things that are so in this world that make no sense," Kseniya said dryly.

"That is why they ignored my ship, why I could not bring them close enough to study. Because we use so little magic. There's too much use of it, and we don't think about what it's doing . . ."

Bradhai ignored her attack on magic and licked his lips, unable to summon even the faintest reassurance of saliva to a suddenly dry mouth. "It explains why they attacked us, when I tried the most recent incantation. They could not help themselves; it was too powerful."

"Is it also the reason they are larger? And so different-looking?"

"Maybe. I don't know." There were differences among the vines, the aethervine fruit larger and lighter than growvine, and the others different still. The *mustus* they created, when crushed, smelled differently, the *vina,* even the *vin ordinaire,* tasted differently. Might magics, driven into flesh, also create differences?

The thought stirred memory with him, uneasy. If magic changed flesh . . . what then did that make him? All the slaves who lived and slept, breathed and drank of the vines, Vinearts who spent their lives working the juice, taking the magic within them, forming and structuring it, using the ability to draw on the magic within themselves . . .

What were they?

"It will only get worse, won't it?" Kseniya, her voice quiet, but her body tense, as though waiting for a fight she knew she could not win.

"I don't know." He didn't want to know. He wanted to go back to his vines, to do the things Sin Washer had created him and set him to do. This was none of his concern . . .

But it was magic. And magic, by Sin Washer's command, was his sole purpose and concern. "Did you see this, Zatim?" he asked the long-dead god. "Did you plan this? Or is it simply a spill you never thought to clear?"

"Vineart?"

They looked to him for an answer, as though he knew what to do.

"Rot it to the root," he said, bitterly. He wanted none of this, not the knowledge, nor the women staring at him, one curious, one worried, and the safety of the oceans resting solely on him—for who could he tell? The idea that magic—undirected, unintended—could wreak such changes . . .

"No one can know," he said. "I will find a way to fix this, but we can never

speak of it."

"But . . ."

"He's right, Harini. You choose not to use magic, but the world needs it, needs to *trust* it. If they knew . . ."

"But . . ." The girl looked at them both, her eyes a little wild, as though they'd just told her to cut off a hand. Then her body deflated, the fight leaving her. "I'll know," she said. "I'll know, and I'll write it down, and even if I can't tell anyone. The record will be there."

That seemed important to her, so Bradhai nodded. Writing it down in her notes seemed harmless enough.

"What are you going to do?" Kseniya still watched him, still waited.

"Undo what was done," he said.

Thankfully, she didn't ask how.

• • • •

He had no access to the casks and sacks he had brought aboard the *ladysong,* now lost to the deep sea, along with the rest of his tools. But he had saved enough —he hoped.

And what he did not have, he would improvise.

The ship had a small amount of coldfire spellwine; even Harini's objections were not enough to induce sailors to use open flame on the open sea. He claimed that, and the growspell the Captain took from one of his crew, who had hoped to grow himself into something the ladies might like better. The spellwine was not his work—some lesser Vineart, Bradhai could tell by the feel, without even tasting it—but it would do. Firewine and growwine and his aetherwine: He would have liked a dose of healspell, just in case, but he might as well wish for Sin Washer to come down and lend a hand, as the captain refused to hand over what little the *young swimmer* carried.

Bradhai supposed he couldn't blame the man.

He gathered all his supplies together in the cabin they had given him—he alone seemed to rate his own space, while the other refugees were clustered together—and stared at it, willing the *vin magica* to tell him what to do.

Before, he had worked with what he knew. An incantation was a delicate, careful thing, precise and formal, to bind the wilder magics to obedience, but there were forms to follow, structures to use. This . . .

He was not directing the magic to do something for him, this time. He would

be asking it to *change* something.

Nothing he knew told him how to do this. Nothing he had ever learned led to this. You could not draw back the day, you could not unwind time. Growspells pushed forward, healspells could mend, but could not undo damage already done.

Bradhai stared at the wines, then turned to stare across the length of the ship, simply observing the scene the way he might his vineyard, waiting for an answer. Men worked as though it were an ordinary day, as though they were not all on edge, waiting for the first twitch, the first break in the water's surface. Men hauled rope and toted bales, polished gear and mended nets, making sure that there were no rips where the larger, valuable fish might escape.

Nets. Bradhai's gaze narrowed, and he looked at the sailors as though he had never seen such a thing.

"A net to bring what you want . . . and let the things you don't want slip through."

• • • •

Two days later, the crew was on edge, too long in one place, anchor down despite the wind rising with the sun, urging them elsewhere. Bradhai waited, alone, at the forecastle. He had ordered all but the helmsman away, sending the other crew down below, and the Captain had enforced the order. Only he, the Captain, and a handful of men armed with bows and squid-poison quarrels remained. None of them knew what might happen, but all expected the worst.

He was not ready, would never be ready, but there was no reason to delay further. Bradhai placed the two vials on the platform in front of him, and broke the wax seal on the first one, letting the contents touch his tongue. For a moment he relished the fullness of the *vin magica,* letting it remind him of who he was, and what he did. And then he used the earlier spellwine to call the serpents to him.

This time, he did not have the heart to enjoy the magic as it arched from him into the water. He waited anxiously until the water's surface broke, and a blunt-ended muzzle surfaced, whiskers first. Bradhai clenched the railing, but could not otherwise move as more of the long, thick neck emerged, and the great head—the length of a wagon—rose to eye-level, and turned to look at him. Somehow he knew it was the same serpent that had approached them before: the leader. He could have reached out and touched the nearest whiskers, thick as cable and

stinking of salt and dead fish, if he had a mind to.

He most emphatically did *not*.

"Kill it!" the captain, behind him a safe distance, if such a thing existed, was shouting madly. "Someone kill it!"

If it were that easy, they wouldn't have needed him.

What he was about to do was madness. Sin Washer had not issued a Command against it, because no sane man would try. But what other choice did he have? Bradhai had been too long from his vines, and if madness was the only way to return, then he would take that risk.

"The deep sea will protect us," he said, as much a prayer as a certainty, and uncorked the vial of the new, untested spellwine.

So few drops, to do so much. He placed them on his tongue, and felt the deep, sweet fruit rise almost immediately. Thick and full, all the flavors fighting each other for dominance. It was not a blend but a jumble, an argument.

The decantation was as simple as the incantation had been complicated.

"From flesh, rise. From blood, pour. From whence you came, return. Go."

The spell swirled around him, hesitant, and then exploded so violently that he was pushed back as though someone had hit him square in the chest, nearly knocking him down. The air around him shimmered, the same deep clear red he had seen just prior to the attack, and he caught his breath, bracing for another blow.

The great whiskered head turned to him, leaning in, the great mouth opening as though to engulf him, and Bradhai was almost knocked down again by the smell that filled the air—less of fish than expected, and more of something sweeter, no less salty but clean and healthy; the smell of blood and bone and living things.

The smell of sea-magic, unknown and unmistakable, a new thing, created out of so much being sent out, gathered and blended in the depths . . .

And then it was gone.

• • • •

When Bradhai came back to himself, all he could hear was roaring. Slowly, he realized that it was cheering, ringing down from every corner of the ship. He opened his eyes to find himself still at the railing. His fingers were clenched so tightly that he had shattered the vial, and the last drops of the spellwine mixed with blood from the cuts on his hand.

“It worked!” The solitaire nearly knocked into him, then embraced him in her excitement. Numb, Bradhai barely noticed. The sea in front of him was empty, the small waves undisturbed.

“Worked.”

“The greater beast, it pulled away and went below, and then they all . . . disappeared. Like magic.” She laughed, the high giddy noise of relief.

Bradhai nodded, but he felt uneasy, off-balance.

“All gone.” Harini was at his other side, but she was not laughing. Her gaze searched the waters, looking for even the slightest flicker of life, some whisker or tail.

A slight flurry at the side of the railing drew her attention, but it was only a school of spinners, leaping and diving as they swam past in search of fish.

“Gone.” He seemed to only be able to echo what others said to him, the inner silence overwhelming anything else. Yes, they were gone. His spell had worked . . . too well.

He understood now, too late. A vine’s fruit had skin and flesh, juice embedded, needing to be crushed and pressed. Once you removed the *mustus,* the flesh and skin were nothing, fit only for compost.

“What have you done,” Harini whispered. “Vineart, what have you *done?”*

He had taken the magic back, drawn this sea-magic out of the serpents . . . and they were gone.

He raised one hand to his chest, pressing his fist against his chest, feeling his heart thump, tight and sore.

What he had done here . . . another might do to him. Remove the magic . . . and the Vinearts were gone.

“Never speak of it, Harini,” he said, a harsh reminder. “None of us must *ever* speak of it.”

She turned to him, but there was no protest in her eyes, only horror.

“They’re gone. You did this.”

“Never speak of it.”

He did not threaten, he did not raise his voice, but her gaze fell, and her lip trembled, and he knew she never would.

Neither of them would ever forget, or forgive.

• • • •

And if, decades later, either of them woke in the stillness of the night, in their

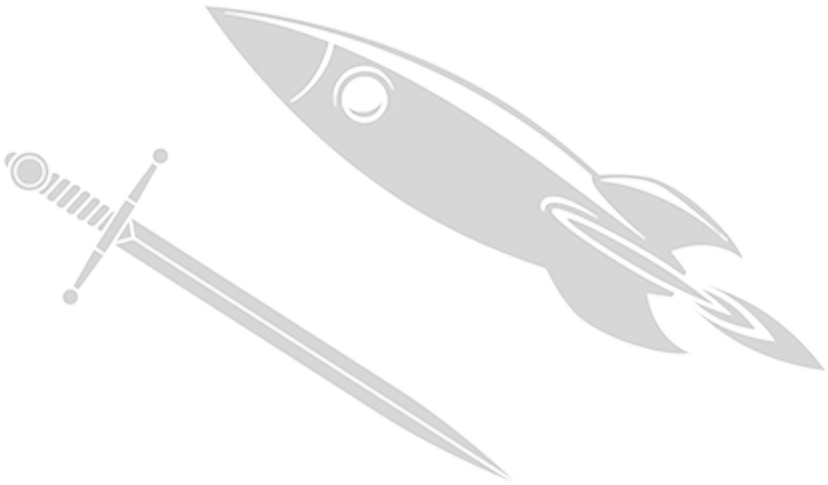
own beds far distances from the ocean and the memory of faint, sweet singing . . .

They never spoke of it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Anne Gilman is the author of more than twenty novels, including the Nebula award-nominated The Vineart War trilogy. Her newest project is the Devil's West series from Saga Press/ Simon & Schuster, beginning with 2015's Endeavor award-nominated Locus-bestseller *Silver on the Road,* and continuing with 2017's *The Cold Eye.* She has also dipped her pen into the mystery field as well, writing as L.A. Kornetsky *(Collared, Fixed, Doghouse,* and *Clawed).* A member of the writers' digital co-op Book View Cafe, she continues to write and sell short fiction in a variety of genres, including her new story collection, *Darkly Human.*

EXCERPTS



EXCERPT: *Bannerless* (John Joseph Adams Books)

Carrie Vaughn | 3662 words

Decades after economic and environmental collapse destroys much of civilization in the United States, the Coast Road region isn't just surviving but thriving by some accounts, building something new on the ruins of what came before. A culture of population control has developed in which people, organized into households, must earn the children they bear by proving they can take care of them and are awarded symbolic banners to demonstrate this privilege. In the meantime, birth control is mandatory.

Enid of Haven is an Investigator, called on to mediate disputes and examine transgressions against the community. She's young for the job and hasn't yet handled a serious case. Now, though, a suspicious death requires her attention. The victim was an outcast, but might someone have taken dislike a step further and murdered him?

In a world defined by the disasters that happened a century before, the past is always present. But this investigation may reveal the cracks in Enid's world and make her question what she really stands for.

Forthcoming July 2017 from John Joseph Adams Books (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)

CHAPTER ONE • HAVEN

A SUSPICIOUS DEATH

Enid came downstairs into a kitchen bright with morning sun blazing through the one window and full of the greasy smell of cooked sausage. Olive already had breakfast—sausage, toast, cream—set out on the table. In her dress and apron, her dark hair pulled back with a scrap of cloth, she was already at work—but shouldn't have been, in Enid's opinion.

"How are you feeling?" Enid asked, hoping to keep worry out of her voice.

"I wish people would stop asking me that," Olive said, not looking up from the batch of dough that she was kneading, folding and punching it into the

counter as if she could make it disappear.

Three other batches of dough sat rising in nearby bowls. Serenity household didn't need that much bread. Olive would probably trade it around the rest of Haven town.

Enid couldn't help herself. "How long you been up?"

Olive's smile was strained. "Up before Berol this morning." Berol worked the early shift at the goat farm outside town. He was usually the first one up.

"You sure you shouldn't be resting? You don't have to work so hard."

"I want to be useful. I have to be *useful*."

You are, Enid thought. Maybe part of Olive resting was just leaving her alone to mourn the miscarriage and recover in her own way. Which maybe meant making too much bread.

"Tea?" Olive asked as Enid sat and took up a knife to smear cream on a slice of toast.

"Sure."

Olive smiled broadly; such a little thing could please her. She bustled between the stove and counter to get the pot ready—of course, she already had water heated. When the tea was poured, Enid wrapped her hands around the earthenware mug to soak in the warmth, breathing in the steam, and tried not to nag too much.

They made small talk about the weather and the town, the late-summer market coming up and which of the outlying households might travel in, which of their far-off friends might visit. Usual gossip about who was sleeping with whom and whether the grain harvest was going to be over or under quota, and if it was over, would the committee let a couple of fields go fallow next year, though some would grumble that with a surplus the town could support a couple more mouths, hand out a couple more banners. Folk always wanted more banners.

After breakfast Enid helped clean up but only got as far as wiping down the table. Olive had already taken the plate and cup from her hands to put in the washbasin.

"What're you up to today, then?" Olive asked.

"I'm off to see if the clinic needs any help. Work's been slow lately."

"It's good that work's slow, yeah?"

When Enid had work, it meant something had gone wrong. "It is."

She put a vest over her tunic, took her straw hat from its hook by the door, and went outside. Didn't get much farther than that and stopped, seeing Tomas coming down the walk toward her.

Tomas was a middle-aged man, his silvering hair tied back in a short tail, his face pale and weathered, laugh lines abundant. Average height, a commanding gaze. He wore his investigator's uniform: plain belt and boots, simple tunic and trousers in a dark brown the color of earth, much deeper than any usual homespun or plain dyed brown.

A charge lit her brain: they had a job.

"Up for a tough one?" he asked in greeting.

"What is it?"

"Suspicious death out at Pasadan." His frown pulled at the lines in his face.

Enid stood amazed. She had investigated thefts and fraud, households that tried to barter the same bags of grain or barrels of cider twice, or that reneged on trades. She'd broken up fights and tracked down assaults. She had investigated bannerless pregnancies—women who'd gotten pregnant either because their implants had failed or, more rarely, because they'd thought to have a baby in secret. Keeping such a thing secret was nearly impossible—to her knowledge no one ever had. Though she supposed if they had managed to keep such a secret, no one would ever know. If you asked most folk, they'd say a bannerless pregnancy was the worst of the work she did. The hardest, because she would be the one to decide if the case was an accident that could be made right, or a malicious flouting of everything the Coast Road communities stood for.

Murder had become rare. Much rarer than in the old world, according to the survivor stories. It still happened, of course; it always happened when enough people lived in close-enough quarters. But Enid never thought she'd see one herself. And maybe she still wouldn't; suspicious death was only *suspicious,* but Tomas seemed grim.

"Maybe you'd better come in and explain," she said.

• • • •

Tomas made himself at home in the kitchen, settling into a chair at the table.

Olive, still at the counter kneading bread, looked up. "Hey! Company! Can I get you some tea—" The bright greeting was habit; she stopped midsentence, her eyes widening. It was the uniform. Always a shock seeing it, no matter if an old friend like Tomas wore it.

"I'd love some tea, thanks," Tomas said. "How are you, Olive?" His tone was friendly, casual—an everyday question, not the pointed one Enid and the rest of the household had been asking her for the last week, and so Olive was able to

give him an unforced welcome.

"Just fine," she said, wiping her hands on a dishcloth then scooping fresh leaves from their jar into the pot. "If this is about work, I can leave you two alone . . ."

"It's all right," Tomas said. "You're busy—stay."

Olive finished prepping the teapot, then went back to her dough, slapping the fourth batch into a smooth loaf, round and puffed and smelling of yeast.

"So what's this about?" Enid asked. *Suspicious death* was frustratingly nonspecific.

"A committee member at Pasadan requested the investigation. Man in his thirties, no other information."

"That's maybe thirty miles south, yeah?" Enid asked. "Not a big place."

"Couple hundred folk. Stable enough, mostly subsistence farming and some trade. Healthy community, everyone at regional thought."

"But are they really thinking murder?"

At the counter, Olive stopped kneading and glanced over, blinking disbelief.

Sam wandered in then, barefoot, shirtless, all wiry body, brown skin, and ropy muscles. Her Sam was thin but powerful. Folk thought he was weak, until he hefted fifty-pound bags of grain on his shoulder with one hand. He stood fast in storms.

"Murder? What?" he muttered sleepily, then saw Tomas and the uniform. "Oh, it's work. I'll go." He started to turn around.

"Stay, Sam," Tomas said. "Have some tea."

Sam looked at Enid for confirmation, and she hoped her smile was comforting. This would be all right; this was her job, after all. And Sam was family, part of what made her able to do the job. Someone to come home to.

"Morning, dear," she said, and kissed his cheek. He sank into a chair at the kitchen table and accepted a fresh mug from Enid. "Murder, you said?" He tilted his head, a picture of bafflement. Who could blame him?

Tomas continued. "No one's said the word 'murder,' but they want us to check." He turned to Enid. "You up for that? You're due to carry this one as lead."

"Well, yes. Someone's got to, I suppose. But—are there witnesses? What happened?"

"Don't know yet. They've saved the body. We'll see what we see."

"If they've got a body on ice, we ought to hurry," she said.

"I was hoping to foot it in a couple hours, after we've had a chance to go through the records."

Well, that was her day planned then, wasn't it?

"Is everything going to be all right?" Olive asked.

They all looked to Tomas, the elder and mentor, for the answer to that, and he took a moment to reply. How did you answer that? Certainly, most things would be all right for most people. But they never would be again for the dead man, or the people who loved the person he'd been.

"Nothing for you to worry about," Tomas said. "That's our job."

Our job. Investigators, moving through communities like brown-draped shadows of ill tidings.

"Oh, I'll always worry," said good, sweet Olive, and the smile she gave them was almost back to normal. Then she sighed. "At least it's not a banner violation."

She'd become deeply sympathetic to households caught in banner violations. Wanting a baby badly enough could make someone break the rules, she'd say, and then insist she would never ever do such a thing herself, of course. But she could sympathize. After all, you could follow all the rules, earn a banner, and then nature plays a cruel trick on you.

On the wall above the kitchen door hung a piece of woven cloth, a foot square on each side, a red-and-green-checked pattern for blood and life: their banner, which the four of them had earned. They'd all come from households that put their banners on the wall as a mark of pride. This was their first, and they could hope there would be more. Then Olive had miscarried. They had a banner and no baby to show for it. Enid kept telling Olive that they had time and more chances. No one could take the banner away.

• • • •

Enid and Tomas arranged to meet at Haven's archives, where they'd go over any records they had on Pasadan, looking for . . . anything. Something not right. Something that stood out and might explain any anomalies they found once they got there.

After Tomas left, she went to change into the uniform, the earth-brown tunic and trousers. Along with it, she put on the attitude she'd need to convince people she was in charge and her word was law.

Serenity household's cottage had a handful of rooms. The kitchen and workspace, several bedrooms. Olive and Berol had the downstairs one, Enid and Sam the upstairs. There, she sat on the bed, her brown tunic laid out next to her, her pack open at her feet, taking a moment to gather her thoughts. Sam found her

there with her guard down, holding head in hands, just for a moment.

He settled beside her, his weight creaking the ropes under the mattress, making her sway.

"Don't you have to get to work?" she said, straightening, combing fingers through her short hair to cover her unease.

"We're just putting the walls up on the new barn at End Zone. It can wait. You going to be all right?"

"Yes, yes," she said. "It's probably a misunderstanding. Can't really be a murder, can it?"

"One way or another, you'll figure it out."

"Nice of you to have faith in me."

She stretched out her hand; he took it and squeezed. His darker coloring contrasted with the pale sand color of hers. Both hands were calloused and weathered, rough, catching against each other. Pulling herself over to him, she gave him a long kiss, which he happily reciprocated. She hoped she would be back to kiss him again soon, and that he was right and she would figure this out quickly.

Back in the kitchen, Olive was clearing up her workspace. Finally finished with the bread.

"I shouldn't be more than a few days," Enid said, backpack over one shoulder. "Tell Berol I said hey, yeah?"

"Enid. I was thinking." Olive paused, staring at her clean hands. Avoiding looking up. "I was thinking maybe you should try. Maybe it was meant to be yours."

It. The banner. The baby.

How could Olive say that so easily to a woman about to leave for a death investigation? Olive was the one meant to be a mother; Enid couldn't seem to stop traveling. Enid teared up at the unfairness of what had happened, but she held herself calm—the uniform might have helped—and replied firmly, avoiding any tone that could be mistaken for anything but resolve. "I stand by what we decided. Don't go dismissing yourself so easily, my girl. The banner is yours."

She went to Olive, kissed her cheek before heading for the door. Olive appeared both exhausted and grateful.

Olive clasped her hand for a moment. "Careful, Enid. This sounds like a rough one."

"Don't worry," Enid said. "We'll be back before you know it."

"Better," she said sternly.

• • • •

Serenity was on the outskirts of the town of Haven, situated on the Coast Road. The place occupied a wide, grassy valley, bounded by distant rolling hills and lots of sky. Pasture, cultivated fields, orchards, and vineyards, and the households that tended them, spread out along winding paths and the shadows of old roads. The settlement that clustered around Haven was home to a couple thousand folk. Sometimes, especially on the big market days, the place even felt crowded. But mostly it sprawled.

The walk from Serenity to the clinic in the middle of town didn't take long, maybe twenty minutes, straight down the Coast Road. Enid passed a handful of other households, some garden patches, and workshops. The forge was lit, metalsmiths working, and voices carried from the potters'. Chickens muttered from coops, and goats chuckled from behind sheds.

Other Haven townsfolk were out and about; they started to wave when Enid came up the road, but saw the uniform and then held back. The uniforms changed people, and it didn't matter how familiar their faces were, most folk never treated them quite the same while they wore the brown. Enid could smile and wave back all she wanted; nothing seemed to change that.

The archives were in the cellar under the clinic building in the middle of town. One of the few surviving structures from before the Fall, it seemed incongruous next to the other buildings, which were all stucco and plank boards. The clinic was made of smooth concrete and metal, austere and oddly geometric, like a piece that had fallen out of a puzzle. An array of solar collectors covered the roof except where skylights peered through, and drainpipes fed into a cistern. The windows were tall and narrow, unadorned. A porch had been added, and orange and lemon trees edged the walkway.

Most of the space around the clinic was taken up with the town square, which hosted once-a-month markets and communal herb gardens. A couple of nearby households worked to maintain the gardens and process the herbs, drying them for cooking, preparing them for medicinal and household use. This late in the summer, the air in this part of town smelled heady, almost overpowering, with mint and sage and lavender and a dozen other scents rising up and becoming rich and languorous. The air was hot and sticky; Enid's hat kept the sun off.

The packed dirt of the main road through town had once been asphalt. It had decayed decades ago, so folk tore it out. This was way before Enid's time, but when she was young, Auntie Kath told stories about it, about the bones of the

world from before and what they had to do to survive. The shadow of that world remained, the streets in the same places and the foundations of buildings still visible. But a new skin had been put over it. This was all Enid had known, but Auntie Kath used to sit on the shaded porch of the clinic and look out, murmuring, *It's so different now.*

Tomas waited for her at the cellar's slanted wooden doors. She nodded at him, and he opened one of the doors and gestured her down.

Down a set of concrete stairs, the clinic's cellar opened up. A switch turned on a string of lights, powered by the solar panels on the clinic roof. The ceiling was low—so much so Tomas had to slouch—but the space was wide and filled with shelves, trunks, wooden crates, and plastic bins. Much of it was like a museum—odds and ends from before the Fall that folk thought might be useful someday . . . or might never be useful again but someone had thought worth saving, keeping dry and safe. The place had a musty, disused air that tickled the nose.

Books—hundreds of them—comprised the bulk of the collection. The founders of Haven had looted a couple of libraries, so the stories went. Practical books on farming, food preservation, irrigation, medicine—everything they thought they might need. But also an odd collection of novels, commentary, magazines, and newspapers—things that would have been disposable back then. Now, they seemed like a time capsule. Artifacts of a lost world. And then the diaries, the journals, the accounts and letters written by people who lived through the Fall. History, now. During their training, investigators were required to read the extant diaries and journals, to understand people, to understand where their world came from and why their rules existed. To try to keep all that from ever happening again.

A small desk in the corner served the investigators as an office, where they could review evidence and keep accounts of previous cases. Their collective knowledge. Committee records were kept here as well, pages bound into simple books with leather covers recording harvests, births, deaths, storms, local happenings, events of note. Local histories, local portraits.

There wasn't much. Various committees and investigators had only been keeping records for about twenty years or so; the notes didn't go all the way back to the Fall. Folk then had more important things to worry about; paper had been scarce, and they weren't convinced there'd be anyone around in the future to look at records. At some point, though, someone decided that writing things down might be useful. Planning resources and crops and babies and everything was easier if you could see the patterns. So, now they had records.

Enid and Tomas found the relevant volumes; each took half to read, and the tedious work began. They'd only been at it twenty minutes or so when Tomas asked, "Do you remember Auntie Kath?"

"Of course I do."

"She talked about how they didn't know what they needed to save. They couldn't save it all, so they had to choose. How later she wished there were things people in the early days of Haven had saved."

"Like cameras. Or latex gloves." Enid not only remembered—she could almost hear the old woman's low, rough voice going on about it.

"Plastic wrap," Tomas added, and they both chuckled. Plastic wrap had been an obsession with Auntie Kath, who insisted the item had a million uses, and she brought it up every time one of those uses occurred to her. No one had ever really understood what she was talking about.

"Someday we'll dig into an undisturbed cellar or an old archive and find some plastic wrap," Enid said.

He shrugged. "We've gone this long without it. No one's missed it since Kath died. But I wonder if this is how they felt. Trying to learn it all because we don't know what we need to know. But it isn't possible. We'll miss something but have to hope we won't."

They studied the records, hoping to get a picture of the town of Pasadan, to guess what they might find when they got there. But they couldn't predict, not really. Columns were labeled, lists of numbers written carefully in different hands, in fading ink. Names of Pasadan's committee members, short descriptions of them that in the end didn't say anything at all. This might have been any of a dozen small settlements on the Coast Road. But this was the one requesting investigation of a death.

They wouldn't really know a thing about the town until they got there.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carrie Vaughn is the bestselling author of the Kitty Norville series, about a werewolf who

hosts a talk radio advice show. Her newest novel is a planetary adventure, *Martians Abroad. Bannerless,* a post-apocalyptic murder mystery, will be released by John Joseph Adams Books in July 2017. Her short fiction has appeared in many magazines and anthologies, from *Lightspeed* to *Tor.com* and George R.R. Martin's *Wild Cards* series. She lives in Colorado with a fluffy attack dog. Learn more at carrievaughn.com.

EXCERPT: *An Oath of Dogs* (Angry Robot Books)

Wendy N. Wagner | 1413 words

Kate Standish has been on the forest-world of Huginn less than a week and she's already pretty sure her new company murdered her boss. But the little town of mill workers and farmers is more worried about eco-terrorism and a series of attacks by the bizarre, sentient dogs of this planet, than a death most people would like to believe is an accident. That is, until Kate's investigation uncovers a conspiracy which threatens them all.

Forthcoming July 2017 from Angry Robot Books

Chapter Four

When the Believers arrived on Huginn, they brought an array of remarkably sophisticated biological tools with them, understanding as perhaps no other group before or since that humanity could not flourish on a world devoid of terrestrial fungal and bacterial allies. Humans are as dependent upon invertebrates, fungi, and bacteria as they are upon air and water.

—from "Huginn: A Fungal Future," Peter Bajowski, PhD, in Nature

Standish dropped to her knees and squinted into the darkness under her bed. "You just had to roll your ball under here, didn't you." She finally caught a glimpse of the yellow thing, which had managed to find the farthest, dustiest corner. "Stay back, Hattie." She grabbed the bottom corners of the bed. It was surprisingly easy to move, probably all lightweight plastic and cellulose fiber. Every centimeter of the planet was covered in wood, but the stuff was too damned valuable to justify using in mere employee housing.

The floor creaked a little as she grabbed for the ball, and she realized she stood on a trap door. "I see we've found the crawlspace, dear doggie." She tossed the ball over her shoulder and wiggled the latch. The crawlspace was probably only an access point for the pipes and floor joists, but curiosity still called.

She shoving the bed farther out from the wall and dropped to her knees beside the trapdoor. It opened easily.

It was a shallow crawlspace, maybe a meter deep. Peering into the opening, Standish could make out pipes silhouetted in the dim light coming from above and from the screened vents dotting the walls. Just beyond the square of light cast by the open trapdoor, a sturdy rectangle sat, the size and shape of a storage box.

Standish caught the handle on the lid with her fingertips and pulled it closer. It was the same dull green plastic as the ones in her office, and not particularly heavy. She pulled it up and then carried it into the middle of the room, near the couch.

The box sat there, dusty and sullen. She ought to call Peter Bajowski and let him know she'd found some of Chambers' stuff.

She picked up her hand unit and then put it down. The box had to have come from the office, which meant it wasn't Chambers' personal property. It was her responsibility. Standish carried it across the room to the coffee table. She took a beer out of the refrigerator and sat down cross-legged in front of the thing.

Hattie sniffed the box and sneezed. On Earth, the air in Standish's apartment had been triple filtered, keeping out pollens and molds and most viruses. The dog probably hadn't smelled dust since she'd been a puppy. But the box couldn't have been under the house too long—it was only a fine layer of dust. Standish put down her beer and removed the box's lid.

"A map?" She picked up a folded rectangle. She recognized the typeface and heavy paper stock; this was the same stuff the Songheuser survey crews used. She opened it and spread it across the bin. Green filled the entire sheet, suggesting a heavily forested area. She found the label on the top left corner: Sector 13.

She'd just marked this map down as missing this afternoon, and here it was, stashed under her house like treasure. She could understand Duncan leaving the map in his UTV or losing it in the field—from the gaps in the map files, she'd guessed that happened to him quite a bit—but hiding it under his house? She refolded the map and set it aside.

She picked up the next item, a thick file folder, legal-style, with long brass brads to keep everything in place. There was no label in the plastic tab on the side. After a gulp of her beer, she flipped through the right-hand stack. Bills of lading, she guessed. Carbon copies of invoices, creased and stained. She had thought carbon copies died out two hundred years ago.

Standish smoothed out one of the invoices and tried to read the smudged text. It looked like the shipper was a warehouse out of Earth. Scanning the prices

running down the page, she found the shipping total and frowned. Zero. How the hell did someone ship this much crap all the way from Earth for free? Even email had a surcharge this far from home.

She flipped backward a few pages, looking for some sign of a credit or an overpayment, anything that would explain the reduced shipping fee. Nothing. Just free shipping on every page.

Standish put down the file. She couldn't see any connection between the file and the map of Sector 13, an unprepossessing rectangle of untouched forest. Everything else in the box looked like junk: a letter from someone who worked for the Port of Space City, full of statistics about the power of their wireless repeater. A note from Peter, written in a scrawl she could barely read. In the corner, the sketch of some kind of native life form stood out, the parts of the little plant (fungus?) carefully labeled in his illegible hand.

At the bottom of it all was a book. The thin volume looked ancient, the cover water-stained and bent. The dank stink of mildew rose off of it. It was an entirely Earth-y smell, and Standish wondered if Peter's neuroses about contaminating Huginn with their Earth spores and bacteria was a little more spot-on than she'd originally given him credit for.

She opened the book cautiously. It felt like it could crumble in her hands.

"April 23rd," she read out loud. *"Last month's Prayer Breakfast brought in the final thousand dollars we needed."* She looked over at the dog, watching with her head laid on her paws. "Hattie, this is someone's diary," she explained. "And it's sure as hell not Duncan Chambers'."

She turned back to the front, but it had not been personalized. The handwriting was clear and simple, the printing of someone with either the drive to be read or a naturally forthright disposition. Given the "Prayer Breakfast" reference, it was probably the latter—maybe one of those first Believers of the Word Made Flesh colonists.

Standish thought about putting the book back in the box with the map and the other oddments, but something made her set it on the couch behind her. She put the lid on the box and then slid the strange thing under her bed. She'd take another look at it all later. At least she'd found one of the maps on her list of missing or misfiled papers.

She sipped at her beer. But why had Duncan taken the map of Sector 13? Of all the sections of Canaan Lake's surveyed lands, it had to be one of the most boring. Maybe she'd take one of the utility vehicles and check it out tomorrow. She ought to get a sense of which sections already had power and

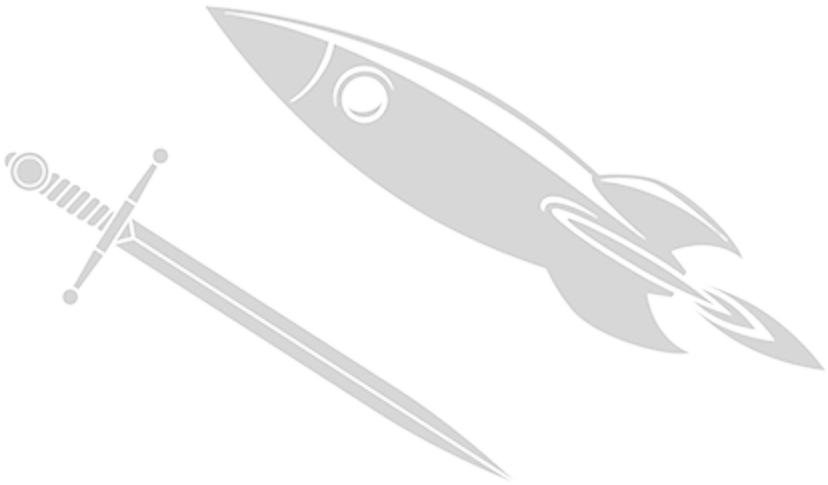
communications lines going through them. After all, it sounded like Songheuser's major priority for the area was getting everything ready for new development.

Which meant laying a whole lot of new cable—and since she was the only member of the communications department, she was going to be busier than a one-legged man in an ass-kicking contest. She drained her beer bottle and went to the refrigerator for another.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wendy N. Wagner is the author of *Starspawn* and *Skinwalkers,* Pathfinder Tales novels inspired by Viking lore. Her novel *An Oath of Dogs* will be out from Angry Robot in Summer 2017. She's published more than thirty short stories in anthologies like *Cthulhu Fhtagn!, Armored,* and *The Way of the Wizard,* and magazines like *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* and *Farrago's Wainscot.* She serves as the managing/associate editor of *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare* magazines. She is also the non-fiction editor of Women Destroy Science Fiction!, which was named one of NPR's Best Books of 2014, and the guest editor of Queers Destroy Horror! She lives in Oregon with her very understanding family.

NONFICTION



Book Reviews: July 2017

Andrew Liptak | 1532 words

Let's try some alliteration this month. Two of my favorite fantasy authors recently released their latest works, and entertainingly, their names both begin with B, and their books' titles begin with S. They're also fantastic epic fantasies that build on the worlds that they've respectively created, and interestingly, both deal with main characters that have a singular, driving instruction: kill someone they love.

Skullsworn

Brian Staveley

EBook / Hardcover / Audio
ISBN: 978-0765389879
Tor Books, April 2017, 320 pages

I'm not typically one for epic fantasy, but Brian Staveley won me over with his Chronicles of the Unhewn Throne trilogy in recent years. I appreciate his realistic approach to the subject matter, depicting the Annurian Empire as a practical political entity, with fairly rational characters working to alternatively uphold or topple it. Like most epic good fantasies, it's a story set in a world with plenty of space around the edges, and with *Skullsworn,* Staveley has given fans an interesting opportunity to continue to explore it: he picks up one of the side characters from his trilogy, and places her front and center in the middle of a standalone adventure. It's his version of *Rogue One, a Star Wars Story.*

The central character in question here is the Skullsworn assassin, Pyrre Lakatur, who shows up in the trilogy to aid the main characters. She's a smartass, confident character in the first three books, and Staveley takes the time to explore her origins. She's a novice priestess who worships Ananshael, God of Death, and at the start of the novel, she's undergoing her final test: Kill ten people in as many days, including someone that she loves. Along with two mentors, Ela and Kossel, she travels to a literal backwater city, Dombang, located in the Shirvian Delta, where she hopes to reconnect with someone she once shared a connection with, and then kill him.

Staveley has used sociopathic characters in his earlier books, and it would be easy to portray a badass assassin in a similar mold. Pyrre is far from sociopathic, though, even if she isn't bothered by racking up a considerable body count. She's

faithful to her god, carrying out his will. Her mission, to try and find someone to love—truly love, not just bed for the night—is one that fills her with considerable doubt, given how difficult it is. At one point, she goes to a temple for a goddess of love, and curses her out, saying that her god is at least reliable: Everyone dies. Not everyone gets the chance to fall in love. And killing someone is easy, but understanding her god's true nature is far more difficult.

Along the way, Pyrre instigates a revolution in Dombang to get closer to Ruk, the man she has in her sights. This allows Staveley to dip once more into his world's politics and society. This is a treat, getting to see more of the Annurian Empire in action. Nestled at the edge of the Empire, the city has ancient, violent roots that were suppressed with the Empire's takeover. The city is a nice fit for the Skullsworn, filled with deadly creatures, residents, and something ancient lurking in the swamps that kills anyone who stumbles across them.

Pyrre's journey in this novel is one that takes her from an inexperienced novice to someone who is the far more confident when we see her in later installments of the novel, and Staveley pieces together an origin story and prequel that actually functions well. Pyrre's growth as a character feels honest: As she kills various Dombang residents, she goes through an un-straightforward journey, and Staveley adds in some welcome twists and turns to make her an even more compelling character than when we see her in the series later on.

Ultimately, *Skullsworn* is a rewarding Unhewn Throne entry from Staveley, and a solid model for fantasy authors to emulate. The book presents not only a good character study (and there's more standalone novels to come from Staveley in the near future), but a rich exploration that broadens the world that he created.

Spellbreaker
Blake Charlton
EBook / Hardcover / Audio
ISBN: 978-0765317292
Tor Books, August 2016

When I first started writing and reviewing science fiction and fantasy novels, one of my earliest reviews was that of a new author, Blake Charlton, with his debut novel *Spellwright,* and later, his novel *Spellbound.* In those two novels, he introduced Nicodemus Weal, a dyslexic wizard who misspells his spells, often with dangerous or deadly results. The first two novels set Nicodemus up in the midst of a fantastic world with an impending magical threat that could threaten to

destroy the world.

Spellbreaker finishes off the trilogy. It had a rough journey to reach print last year. Charlton's editor left Tor, orphaning the author and trilogy, and there was a five-year gap between the publication of *Spellbound* and *Spellbreaker,* in which time Charlton became a practicing surgeon. That gap, however, seems to have served the book well when it came to story, because it feels as though it's the most mature and best installment of the trilogy.

Spellbreaker takes a giant leap into the future: Nicodemus and his wife Francesca DeVega have had a daughter, Leandra, who is now a Warden of Ixos, hunting Neodemons that come back from the old continent, forbearers of the prophesized invasion that Nicodemus fought against. She obtains a prophetic spell that shows her several potential futures: She will kill someone she loves, or she'll die herself. If she flees, everyone she cares about will die. This sets her down on a predictable path: Trying to find a way out of it, and coming to terms with what's to come.

Charlton never strays far from Leandra's story, and there are times when this book feels a bit overstuffed. It feels like it could have easily been a sequel to Nicodemus's arc, and that we missed a book along the way. We're treated to a complicated family drama that plays out as each of the characters try and figure out what's to come next. The family hasn't been together for years: Tensions between Francesca and Leandra keep them from speaking to one another, while Nicodemus and Francesca's respective duties have kept them apart as well. The book spends a considerable amount of time getting the family together, getting them over their problems, and tackling the much larger ones. It's a long and complicated book—one that certainly can't be jumped into right out of the gate—but it's ultimately rewarding as the narrative progresses. While Charlton gets back up to speed, we follow Leandra as she herself gets back together with her parents, learning more about her own textual, divine nature, the prophesy before her, and her role in the events that started with her father. Ultimately, it's a story about a family's bonds, and her journey is an incredible one that takes her from an angry young woman to someone who's willing to sacrifice everything she knows to remake the world.

Along the way, Charlton reintroduces his vivid and fantastic world. The strongest parts of *Spellwright* and *Spellbound* have always been his conception of magic, where words and sentences have incredible power, and magic is conducted through these spells (spelled properly, of course). There's a nice meta-feeling to this, as a fantasy author creates magic through words of his own. Where

the first novel was a fun start to the series, Charlton has built upon his world, and by the time we reach *Spellbreaker,* he's running with all cylinders firing. Fans of Max Gladstone's Craft Sequence will find much to like here, with an incredibly nuanced take on how magic works, and how devotion gives various gods their inhuman abilities and existence.

Charlton throws in plenty of surprises. It's easy for authors to follow a rote path for characters caught up in a prophecy, but it's notable that he manages to find alternatives along the way, making his characters struggle as they fight to save one another, but also to change the world in unexpected ways.

Both of these novels do two things incredibly well: they expand their worlds in interesting and in non-cosmetic ways, but retain a compelling character journey that heightens the emotional core of the novels, and by extension, the books that precede them. It's a difficult task, but both authors pull it off fantastically.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Liptak is the Weekend Editor for The Verge. He is the co-editor of *War Stories: New Military Science Fiction,* (Apex Publications, 2014). His writing has also appeared in io9, Gizmodo, *Kirkus Reviews,* Tor.com, BN Sci-Fi & Fantasy Blog, *Clarkesworld* and others. He lives in Vermont.

Movie Review: July 2017

Carrie Vaughn | 2069 words

Wonder Woman
directed by Patty Jenkins
Atlas Entertainment, June 2017

Wonder Woman: The World's Been Waiting for You

So, we finally have a live-action feature-length Wonder Woman movie. We've only been waiting forty years. That's the amount of time in which we've had six-and-a-half Superman movies and two long-running Superman tv shows (plus a cameo on *Supergirl),* and seven-and-a-half Batman movies and one tv show (if you count *Gotham).* Laid out like that, one begins to understand why Wonder Woman fans have been a little tetchy.

There's a lot to like about *Wonder Woman,* starring Gal Gadot and directed by Patty Jenkins. In some ways, it's overwhelming. It's like I had to wait for Christmas for forty years and no Christmas, however wonderful, is going to live up to that. The best thing to do would be to wait a year and watch it again and see how it holds up. For now, though, I'd like to breathe a sigh of relief and hope that this film breaks all the records and opens the floodgate for movies featuring all the other amazing women characters out there. Maybe now we can afford to have a bad superheroine movie without wondering if we're ever going to get another one. A women-led superhero film should not be this big a deal.

The story: on the island of Themyscira, the Amazons have lived in paradise, in isolation. From an early age, Diana wants to become the hero who will bring the peace of her people to the world. One day she gets her chance when a plane carrying American pilot Steve Trevor crashes nearby, and she rescues him. Trevor tells her of the horrific world war that has engulfed the outside world. In fact, the war invades, as the German navy that has pursued Trevor ends up on the beach, forcing the Amazons to mount a glorious defense. For Diana, the solution is plain: She will go with Trevor to the outside world and kill the god Ares, thus ending all war.

Of course, the situation isn't so simple, and Trevor spends much of the movie chasing after Diana and trying to explain to her that things aren't so simple. But Diana so believes in the inherent goodness of people that they can't possibly be so

horrible without the influence of the evil Ares. She learns otherwise, that war happens because people are problematic, and Ares isn't inciting war, he's feeding off conflicts that already exist. Diana's idealism is only a tiny bit broken, though—she still believes she can save the world. Even if it takes forever.

So much to unpack here. There are inevitable comparisons to DC's recent Superman and Batman movies, which have been criticized for their grimness, especially for their failure to acknowledge Superman's inherent idealism. But this film stands on its own—much like the way Diana's appearance in *Batman v. Superman* was so vivid and unlike the surrounding mess, that she might as well have come from an entirely different universe. We didn't even get a teaser for the upcoming Justice League film. One of my friends pointed out that in *Wonder Woman,* an entire town gets gassed to death, a prominent action sequence takes place in the trenches and wastes of No Man's Land, the film confronts the horrors of the first World War—and yet it all feels so much more optimistic than any of the recent DC films. That comes from the characters and their beliefs in greater values and purpose.

The movie I most want to compare this to is *Captain America: The First Avenger.* Like Captain America, the character Wonder Woman was born in the Second World War. The film avoids repetition with the wildly successful Captain America movie by moving back to World War I instead. But I argue that the function of setting the movie in the past is the same: The conflicts don't need any explanation. The good guys and bad guys are clear cut, easily identified, and the heroism is pure. These wars become wallpaper to serve as a backdrop for tales of unapologetic, un-cynical heroism. Modern conflicts are murky, filled with turncoats and subversion that make us question the very possibility of the heroic. Modern conflict is cynical, unwinnable. But the World Wars, particularly the Second, come with a built-in mythology that there really are good guys and heroism really can exist.

If *Wonder Woman* was going to model itself on anything, *Captain America* was a good choice, because it provides proof of concept that idealism can be earnest and not ridiculous. (Although I confess, when the climactic moment involved Trevor jumping on a giant diabolical aircraft filled with bombs, and he has to stop it before major cities are destroyed, I did wonder if we're going to find him frozen in ice at some point. I'm sorry. I won't bring up the ice again. But I am going to keep calling Steve's team of ne'er do wells the "Not the Howling Commandos.") The success of both these films suggests that modern audiences are absolutely starved for tales of earnest heroism, and that maybe earnest

heroism ought to exist in the modern era as well. Both DC and Marvel would do well to make note of that.

Now, back to *Wonder Woman* and what I liked and what I didn't. A successful Wonder Woman movie was always going to need more than just one woman, and the film aces that test. This movie has so many women in it. Glorious women. Big, tough women, not supermodels posing with swords. We also have Etta Candy, who I was worried would be comic relief but instead comes across as quietly, delightfully competent and smart. And the intriguing Dr. Poison, who I felt got short shrift in the film, shoved aside for more flashy villains. She and Diana barely interacted, and I wanted there to be more.

I adored the Amazons, particularly because they were not young. Diana's mother Hippolyta (played by Connie Nielsen) and her beloved aunt and trainer Antiope (played by a buff and badass Robin Wright—yes, that Robin Wright) are middle aged. Old enough to be the mentors of a vibrant young woman. These are women in the primes of their lives, comfortable in their skins and in possession of wisdom. Those characters would not have been believable if they'd been played by young actresses. It's wonderful to see mature, capable, deadly women on the big screen. More, please.

Diana's naiveté is both a strength and a weakness. She takes out a machine gun nest because she doesn't realize it can't be done. This determination makes up for the corny fish-out-of-water comedy, which I mostly forgive because it also shows up in the first episode of Lynda Carter's *Wonder Woman*.

Some of the action sequences and framing were absolutely gorgeous. This film is in love with the athleticism of the human body, and even when the CGI got cartoony, it was still fun to watch. I particularly loved a top-down view of Diana deflecting a dozen bullets during a back-alley ambush. The long action sequence in No Man's Land made me cry: It's a striking image of this one person trying to single-handedly put an end to the horrors of that war. So hopeful, against a backdrop of such misery—it's heartbreaking.

I love that Diana is superpowered, and that she fights because she's good at it, and not because some trauma in her past is driving her to be a hard-bitten warrior. Tiny Diana desperately begging her mother to let her learn combat is adorable. ("I don't need a sword. Just a shield. No sharp edges!")

I think the film had just a little too much of Steve Trevor, although Chris Pine sells the rogue with a heart of gold interpretation of the character nicely. I was a little bummed that in the big climactic moment, Diana needed to be inspired by what the men around her were doing, and not by the inner strength that had

served her so well for the rest of the film. It's done for a reason; there's a theme here—that love is perhaps the greatest human power there is, and it's Diana's love for her comrades that inspires her. I'm torn, because on the one hand it's important to show that she can fall in love, that she has human emotions and human interactions that don't detract at all from her power. But I felt the focus shift away from her just a bit more than I liked.

One more quick note: I've been a fan of David Thewlis (probably best known as Professor Lupin in the Harry Potter movies) for a long time, and I'm so pleased that he gets to chew on a big chunk of scenery here. (Spoiler: He's totally Ares!) It's like he's been biding his time all these years as the quiet, unassuming guy in the background, just so that you wouldn't expect him here.

Wonder Woman is part of the holy trinity of comic book superheroes. Next to Superman and Batman, she's the only hero to remain continually in print since her creation. While Superman and Batman have had some kind of tv or movie versions in production for a big chunk of that time, Wonder Woman, barring a couple of fits and starts and failed pilots, really only had the 1970s tv show starring Lynda Carter. That show was a cultural milestone, and I make the argument that it helped launch an entire generation of woman writers (like me) in urban fantasy and other sub-genres who grew up watching her and took it entirely for granted that women could be kick-ass heroes. (Interestingly, *Wonder Woman* director Patty Jenkins also cites the Lynda Carter version as in inspiration: "I'm interested in the Wonder Woman that I grew up with," wapo.st/2rKfgX1.)

Why has it taken another forty years to get another live-action version of her in production? Well. I had a chance to see that failed 2011 pilot starring Adrianne Palicki, and someday I'd like to shake the hand of the network exec who killed it, because that thing needed to die. (Note: it was absolutely not Palicki's fault; she did the best she could with what she had.) Here's a taste: The last scene shows a morose Diana Prince petting her cat and eating chips while struggling to fill out her online dating profile. Seriously, I'd rather not have a live-action Wonder Woman at all than that monstrosity.

So, it took forty years because some creators out there still think that anything starring a woman should look like a bad day in the *Cathy* comic strip. Or that a woman should be a sexy pinup before she's a powerful hero. And then they can't figure out why nobody buys into it.

I get asked, still, "How do you write strong women characters?" and I find the question increasingly baffling and rage-inducing. You write a character. You just write a regular human character, and you should be able to come up with a whole

list of different traits before you ever get to gender. Diana is powerful, ambitious, stubborn, naive, empathetic to a fault, a lover of life and experiences, filled with a quiet rage, and also with a deep faith in the ultimate goodness of people. The story in *Wonder Woman* builds on all of this, grows out of the hero she is, and doesn't impose on her some tired stereotype of what someone else thinks she ought to be.

So, *Wonder Woman* gets it. The great mystery of how to make a successful superhero movie with a woman character was never that much of a mystery, for anyone who took the time to think about it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carrie Vaughn is the bestselling author of the Kitty Norville series, about a werewolf who hosts a talk radio advice show. Her newest novel is a planetary adventure, *Martians Abroad. Bannerless,* a post-apocalyptic murder mystery, will be released by John Joseph Adams Books in July 2017. Her short fiction has appeared in many magazines and anthologies, from *Lightspeed* to *Tor.com* and George R.R. Martin's *Wild Cards* series. She lives in Colorado with a fluffy attack dog. Learn more at carrievaughn.com.

Interview: Carrie Vaughn

Christian A. Coleman | 2335 words

Carrie Vaughn is best known for her *New York Times* bestselling series of novels about a werewolf named Kitty. Her most recent novels include a near-Earth space opera, *Martians Abroad,* from Tor Books, and a post-apocalyptic murder mystery, *Bannerless,* from John Joseph Adams Books. She's written several other contemporary fantasy novels, as well as eighty-plus short stories. She's a contributor to the Wild Cards series edited by George R. R. Martin and a graduate of the Odyssey Fantasy Writing Workshop. An Air Force brat, she survived her nomadic childhood and put down roots in Boulder, Colorado. Visit her at carrievaughn.com.

Tell us how you got the idea of setting a murder mystery and a coming-of-age story in a post-apocalyptic backdrop for *Bannerless.*

The idea evolved slowly. I've been working on a series of stories set in this world for a number of years. I introduce the idea of strict rules and enforcement of such rules, so inevitably I wanted to know more about the people who do that enforcing. So Enid came along in the short story also called "Bannerless." She jumped off the page for me; she was so vivid. I wanted to write more about her. I've been interested in writing more mysteries, and the setup seemed perfect: a classic detective character in this post-apocalyptic setting, with a chance to explore the setting through her eyes. The possibilities really opened up.

The cataclysmic storms caused by climate change wipe out nearly all the technologies of contemporary society, save for a few. How did you decide that medical technology and solar energy would survive in the Coast Road, the world of your protagonist Enid?

From the start I wanted to work with the idea that a cataclysm like this wouldn't automatically wipe out all technology. That the first generation of survivors would work really hard to save the technologies they considered most important: i.e. medicine and some kind of electricity. I also posit a setup where the core of the Coast Road world was founded by the staff of a medical clinic, so

they had access to such medical technology from the start.

You frequently refer to the remains of demolished cities of the past in terms of bones. The remains serve sometimes as the foundation for new communities. Where does this recurring image come from?

One model for a civilization growing up after the fall of a previous civilization is in early medieval Britain. The Romans left ruins everywhere. Later cultures built their walls on Roman walls, used the blocks from Roman buildings, named their towns using corrupted versions of Roman town names. You can't escape Rome—but it's in bits and pieces. Roman culture didn't survive in Britain intact. Bones seemed like a good image for something where the shape remains, but not the entire structure.

You explored Enid's world in your Hugo-nominated short story "Amaryllis," which, contrary to most post-apocalyptic stories, has a positive ending. What made you want to explore the dark side of this world at novel length in *Bannerless?*

It's a multifaceted culture with both good and bad to it, and Enid is in a unique position to see both. I went into the story assuming that a culture built up like this one is, with a huge amount of scrutiny to go along with the community building, is going to have some unintended consequences, such as the bullying of outsiders.

Enid investigates the mysterious death of Sero, an outsider in the town of Pasadan. As an investigator, she's also an outsider. Are you drawing from your experience as a military brat to inform her story?

I'm probably not the best person to answer that: the influences of my growing up in the military are usually more visible to other people than they are to myself. I will say that when you grow up moving around all the time, you get to be pretty observant, and get used to making instant analyses of new places you end up in, just as a matter of survival and trying to fit in. That may be one of my favorite things about Enid—the way she's constantly observing and sizing up every

situation she encounters.

Her investigative partner Tomas tells her that the most important thing about being an investigator is being kind. Why is that? As feared members of society, investigators have a lot of responsibility and stigma to bear.

Yes, they necessarily place themselves as outsiders. But I also feel like they need a huge amount of empathy. Their job isn't really to punish people; it's to keep the whole society functional. Enid's very concerned with process—not just what happens, but how it happens, how people get from point A to point B. She wants to understand.

The responsibility of population control still falls entirely on women. They have birth control implants surgically inserted in their arm until they and the other members of their homes prove themselves worthy of raising children. Proving their worth earns them the banner, or license, to procreate. Do you think we have the potential to establish an egalitarian society where the responsibility of population control would be shared evenly between men and women?

I'd like to think so, but honestly I'm not sure. Women shoulder so much of the burden of having children, especially physically with what childbearing does to their bodies. The incentive for women to be able to control their reproduction is so much greater than it is for men: I'm not sure the burden will ever be truly equal, no matter how much we might wish for it to be so.

Despite the restrictions on childbirth, the society Enid lives in seems very sex positive. Any Puritanical attitude toward pre-marital sex is virtually absent, and young adult Enid is able to fully enjoy the physical aspect of her relationship with teenage Dak without having to worry about judgment from others. Did you always intend this to be a trade-off?

Absolutely. So much of the stigma around sex is also tied up in reproduction, having children, who cares for the children, etc. There's a reason the sexual revolution coincided with the wide acceptance of birth control: birth control puts

“sex” and “having children” in two different categories, so we can finally talk about one without worrying about the other. I think a culture that takes birth control entirely for granted does so because it acknowledges that people are going to have sex whether there’s a stigma or not. Might as well have fun.

Dak is a wandering minstrel-like character who woos Enid with his guitar playing and earns his keep with his music. What do his songs sound like to you? Did you have any musician in mind when you came up with him?

I mostly had the whole troubadour tradition in mind. One thing humanity will always have, will always preserve, is music. The kind of songs I imagine him playing are the ones that have always been played when you have a guy with a guitar around a campfire: folk songs, cowboy music, traditional songs, and so on.

You split Enid’s story into two alternating arcs: her investigation of the murder at Pasadan and her coming-of-age as a young woman. What made you want to alternate between the two timelines rather than tell her story chronologically?

I wanted to show how she became the person she is. I wanted to show someone whose attitudes and decisions clearly grew out of her experiences, and I thought alternating the timeline was an interesting way to do that, as well as explore a lot of the Coast Road world, which I couldn’t do with just the one storyline. I was influenced by LeGuin’s novel *The Dispossessed,* which also alternates between the main character’s current life and his younger years.

A storm marks three important phases in Enid’s life: the first time we meet her as a young adult; the end of her coming-of-age arc; and the end of her investigation of Sero’s death. The storms reinforce the continual aftermath of climate change and signal moments of intense change for Enid. By the end of her investigation, what do you think is the biggest change for her?

I’m hoping that there’s a sense that all the turning points build on each other. Earlier in her life the epic storms demonstrate to Enid how her society functions, how people really do need to help each other and how some kind of leadership is

often needed to facilitate that. The second storm teaches her survival, and gives her confidence. Nothing seems quite as difficult after that. By the last storm, when Enid has lost her mentor and yet been able to solve the crime on her own, I think that gives her the confidence she needs moving forward. Her arc is cumulative.

During Enid's investigation, this line comes up several times: "A town ought to be able to fix its own problems." This remark from the citizens of Pasadan not only shows their deep displeasure of being investigated, but also goes against the social engineering of their world. In a post-scarcity scenario, the towns of Coast Road need to help each other out, as you just said. Their lives depend on trade with one another, and in the worst-case scenarios, on such impersonal arbiters as the investigators. It seems as though we would have a difficult time letting go of our individualist and industrial-age mentality even after an apocalypse.

Well, this is a political debate the US has had with itself from the beginning. Federal versus local rule, the libertarian ideal of individuals working cooperatively against the reality that there always seems to be that one person screwing it up for everyone else, hence the need for some kind of governance. I think there are plenty of Coast Road towns that do manage to work out problems themselves without needing to call in investigators. But I'd argue the very existence of investigators is part of their incentive for doing so. No one wants investigators in their town, so it behooves them all to do their best themselves.

***Bannerless* addresses the fall-out of climate change. And in our current political arena, climate change is a hotly debated issue and downright disregarded by the current administration. You said on your blog that your fandoms, one of which is *Guardians of the Galaxy,* are getting you through these times. What are some other fandoms you turn to?**

Star Wars, absolutely, which I've loved since I was small. The entire Marvel Cinematic Universe, really. These are great characters I like spending time with, and larger-than-life conflicts that seem resolvable. I'm also finding my way back to Star Trek, because I find these stories about crews working together and caring about each other to be really comforting.

Did you find writing *Bannerless* helpful in processing what's taking place in today's current events?

I'm not sure helpful is the right word. There's a weird sense of watching the actual world go down an even worse road than the one I propose, and that's not at all a helpful state of mind. (If you want to know how climate change, epic storms, and epidemics can destroy the country, defund the CDC, NIH, EPA, and emergency response agencies and let's find out!) But I have a hope that readers will engage with these issues and see how they apply to the actual world through reading *Bannerless.*

On the flipside of our political climate, you won this year's Colorado Humanities & Center for the Book Award in genre fiction for *Amaryllis and Other Stories.* Congratulations! Tell us about the award and what it means to you.

Thanks! It's a great feeling, getting recognition for my small press, oddball short story collection. I'm proud to be identified as a Coloradoan, and this definitely puts me on the map as a Colorado writer, which is neat.

On your blog, you also wrote about reaching your ten-year mark as a full-time writer this year. Having written *Bannerless,* what does this milestone mean to you?

It means a little more confidence, I think. Despite some shake-ups, I'm still in the game, and that's a huge comfort. Even when the writing isn't going as well as I'd like, or the business throws me a curveball, I know I can get through it, because I have before. *Bannerless* is my twenty-first published novel. I can't claim to be a newbie anymore!

As you embark on your tenth year of full-time writing, can you tell us about the latest projects you're working on now?

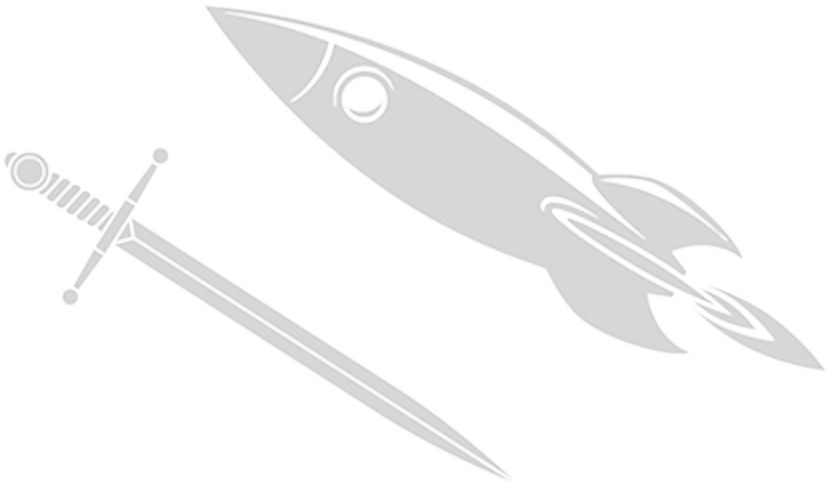
I'm currently working on the sequel to *Bannerless.* I haven't settled on a title yet, but I hope to soon. I also have a bumper crop of short stories coming up,

including a prequel to *Bannerless,* which should appear on Tor.com in the next year or so. I'm also involved with George R.R. Martin's Wild Cards series and writing for that. I always have a few projects cooking, and that's the way I like it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christian A. Coleman is a 2013 graduate of the Clarion Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers' Workshop. He lives and writes in the Boston area. He tweets at @coleman_II.

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHTS



Author Spotlight: John Grant

Jason Ridler | 982 words

This story reads as more fantastical than most "harder" SF (casinos in space!), but clearly with SF extrapolations that grounded its wilder elements. Was there a desire to explain as much unveil in this work?

Most of my fiction tends to fall into crossover territory—sf / fantasy, fantasy / noir, fantasy / politics, speculative / mainstream, etc.—so the fantastication within an ostensibly hard-SF setting doesn't seem odd to me! To tell you the truth, I hadn't really thought about it until you mentioned it. What I set out to do was to try to create a future society where people simply take for granted a lot of things that we'd regard as impossible. Hence the shapeshifting, the body-swapping, the "astral projection" (through blances), distance not being much of a barrier, and so on. So I guess that, yes, this meant I had to do a deal of fantastication.

On the other hand, I was delighted to discover that one of those pieces of fantastication—the law of conservation of data itself, which I'd sort of made up out of whole cloth—is not so far adrift from some of the ideas that I later read about in books and articles by Real Scientists.

Or maybe I was just kidding myself and that wasn't what they were saying at all.

I loved the detailed sharing of information on not just the "Law" but the world of the story, and yet among the regular critiques of science fiction (where the strange needs to be explained far more than other genres) is that "info dumps" ruin immediacy, urgency, etc. How did you keep the exposition so fascinating?

I've always rather liked infodumps myself. For me as a reader, they can actually *help* the pacing, if they're used right—look at all the infodumps in Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy,* for example: Especially in the original radio version, they're not only an absolute delight in themselves, but they give a real sense of scale and time's passage to the narrative. And I can remember reading many years ago one very long hard-SF novel where in the end I guiltily started skipping the actual story parts and just reading the infodumps,

which were full of fascinating bits of real and invented science.

So I'm really glad you found the infodumps in "The Law of Conservation of Data" didn't detract from the rest—phew!

Second-person is a harder sell, but by using it you enmeshed us in the protagonist's journey with Suze, Mana, and the gang. Why was second-person the best POV for the story?

The story actually started off being told in the second-person future tense, but after a while I came to the conclusion that the only person who'd enjoy that would be me, hellishly impressed by my own second-adolescence cleverness, etc. So after a bit of thought, I reverted to second-person present.

I did want very much to use the second-person, though, because I wanted to get across the sense that this story isn't happening to aliens (even though humans of the far future, assuming we last that long and do expand into space, will be different enough from us to be of different species [plural] from us) but to people—to *you,* in other words.

I'm not sure I'm making sense here . . .

Among my favorite aspects is the corporate nature of sex that the group is exploring. Even in a place of galactic lust and sin like the casinos, there's a lot of dialog on contracts, insurance, accountability, and consent (including the labeling of places like *Ten Percent Extra Free).* What compelled you about this subject and its relation to the world?

Personally, I find the way that legal matters infest our daily existences utterly depressing. At the moment, thanks to a recent spell in the hospital (congestive heart failure, since you ask), I'm dealing—or, rather, my superbly patient wife is dealing—with bureaucracy gone mad in the form of the American healthcare system, so I imagine that if I were to rewrite "The Law of Conservation of Data" today, this preoccupation would show through even more clearly.

Do you have any projects coming up that you'd like to share with our readers?

The main book I'm working on at the moment, scheduled for next spring by See Sharp Press, is a new edition of my 2007 offering *Corrupted Science: Fraud, Ideology and Politics in Science.* As you can imagine, with a president who thinks climate change is a hoax and an Environmental Protection Agency headed by someone who seems hell-bent on destroying the environment, climate

included, I currently have more material coming in than I quite know how to handle! I'm also doing a prodigious amount of updating in other areas of the book, and filling in some gaps—stuff I simply didn't know back in 2007. All told, the new edition is expected to be up to fifty percent longer than the first one.

Aside from that, I'm about to inflict upon my agent another nonfiction book, provisionally called *Psi High,* about purported mental powers like ESP, prophecy, and faith healing, the pseudoscientific investigations thereof, and the methods many of the practitioners deploy to separate the credulous and the vulnerable from their cash.

As for fiction, I have a few short stories I'm tinkering with at the moment. And I'm rather lackadaisically developing a cozy/hardboiled detective novel—Miss Marple meets Mike Hammer sort of thing—possibly to be called *Tea-Shoppe Tramp*. I'm not certain if that one'll ever see the light of day, to be honest, but it keeps me off the streets.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Jason S. Ridler is a writer, improv actor, and historian. He is the author of *A Triumph for Sakura, Blood and Sawdust,* the Spar Battersea thrillers and has published more than sixty stories in such magazines and anthologies as *The Big Click, Beneath Ceaseless Skies, Out of the Gutter,* and more. He also writes the column FXXK WRITING! for *Flash Fiction Online.* A former punk rock musician and cemetery groundskeeper, Mr. Ridler holds a Ph.D. in War Studies from the Royal Military College of Canada. He lives in Richmond, CA.

Author Spotlight: Alvaro Zinos-Amaro and Adam-Troy Castro

Alex Puncekar | 1143 words

This story has a mythical, almost parable-like feel to it. What were the inspirations behind the story? Did it require any special research?

Alvaro: The idea itself was all Adam-Troy's, and I talk more about our collaborative process below. In terms of research, I relied mostly on the Penguin Classics edition of Pu Songling's wonderful *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. I'd just picked it up before the story got underway—talk about fortuitous timing—and besides reading some of its captivating stories for tone and flavor, I worked my way through most of the ancillary material (intro, notes, etc.). Hence the story's epigraph.

Adam-Troy: I, on the other hand, did no special research. Honestly, none, except for looking up Alvaro's email address. Aside from the opening premise of an assassin who always expended the least amount of effort entirely, to the point of eschewing outright murder if he could, I was the one who had the idea that this sounded like a moral fable, and like a (vaguely) Asian fable at that, though I confess I was after the flavor more than the actuality, and Alvaro carried it the rest of the way.

It's interesting—and a bit refreshing, really—to see an assassin who sees killing differently than most. Su reminds me of other supernatural beings in literature who grant wishes that don't always turn out to be how the wishee desires them. His moral complexity makes me wonder if what he did to Dou and Gan was either a wonderful gift or truly vile. What was writing this character like? Did he change or evolve from the first draft to the final draft?

Alvaro: Adam-Troy excels at the kind of moral complexity you're talking about, and at showing how something that appears fantastic may in fact be horrendous upon reflection (see, for example, his recent kicker of a story, "James, In the Golden Sunlight of the Hereafter" in the May issue of *Lightspeed).* I think we were both on the same page about Su's character from the start and didn't feel the need to change it much from draft to draft.

Adam-Troy: Yes, we proceeded directly from the premise that this was going to be a story about the abandonment of murderous impulses.

What was collaborating on this story like? What challenges (if any) presented themselves?

Alvaro: This marks my second collaboration with Adam-Troy, and the process was quite different than on our first story, "Shakesville" *(Analog).* In that instance, I became aware that Adam-Troy had the first half of a story but was finding it challenging to figure out a suitable second half, and I knew he was going for a certain voice which I felt comfortable pulling off. I suggested he let me take a crack at finishing it and he was pleased with the outcome. We then went through a few rounds of edits for stylistic consistency. In "A Touch of Heart," Adam-Troy approached me with a synopsis for a proposed story. He was busy working on several other projects at the time and asked if I'd be interested in writing a first draft. I loved the summary and jumped at the chance. The only real changes I proposed were the story's title, and an elaboration of the ending; nothing major. He'd had the idea of hitting a "grace note" at the end of the story and I suggested turning that into a full scene for heightened effect. His response was enthusiastic, and we were off and running. After I handed in my first draft, he expanded on and enhanced a number of passages, and we did this a few more times until we were both satisfied with the results.

Adam-Troy: Extremely so. Alvaro is a terrific writer as a singleton—and I am damned lucky I read these comments over before sending them, as autocheck just changed that word to "simpleton"—but he is also a great story doctor, even when working with those of us who fall well below the category of grandmaster (though, of course, he's collaborated with a grandmaster as well). Our collaborations appear to be becoming a habit, as we already have a third completed story in the electronic can.

Do either of you have any upcoming projects we can look forward to?

Alvaro: My nonfiction book *Traveler of Worlds: Conversations with Robert Silverberg* is a current Hugo finalist—vote early, and vote often (or however that goes)! I'm continuing to write the book review column for *InterGalactic Medicine Show* and to review films for *Words* (Hex Publishers). I'm also looking

to launch a new interview series, primarily with horror writers, over at *Words.* I have a story titled "Morphing" coming out in the anthology *Blood Business,* edited by Josh Viola and Mario Acevedo. I'm working on several other new stories. I'm also coming up on the final third of my first novel, titled *Equimedian,* and hope to share more about that soon!

Adam-Troy: Alas, after multiple delays, the latest novel long-teased as a reply to Spotlight "What are you working on" questions turns out to have been a career wrong turn; the completed book exists, but for various sad and boring reasons having to do with permissions and various equally dull-to-recount editoralia (a freshly-coined word), is doomed to remain on the shelf, forever. Alas! But this happens, and so I've moved on. I am now about 40,000 words into another, a mainstream thriller. I have multiple stories coming out here at *Lightspeed* and in this magazine's sister publication *Nightmare* (most recently, last month's rather creepy "The Narrow Escape of Zipper-Girl," (nightmare-magazine.com/fiction/narrow-escape-zipper-girl) Already in the *Analog* pipeline, but not yet scheduled are the next two novella-length installments in the continuing adventures of the vengeful operative Draiken, the first of which will be called "Blurred Lives." I am also still doing book reviews at the glossy magazine *Sci Fi,* and have just recently begun my review column in *Nightmare* (nightmare-magazine.com/nonfiction/book-review-june-2017), which will cover books and movies, depending on my mood in any given month. There's other news brewing, which include a couple of genuinely exciting developments, but none of it is yet public; I can only say, helplessly, that it's there, really.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Alex Puncekar lives in Ohio and is finishing up his MFA at Youngstown State University. You can find his published work in *Aphelion: The Webzine of Science Fiction and Fantasy* and *Jenny Magazine,* or you can find him on Twitter @AlexPuncekar.

Author Spotlight: E. Catherine Tobler

Sandra Odell | 874 words

"Mix Tapes From Dead Boys" immediately thrusts the reader into a tense setting filled with extraordinary sensory details. I was particularly struck by the description of how she moves through and around the tangle of cables. As a writer, what elements do you focus on when crafting the opening of a story? How do you write a story that would grab your attention as a reader?

Story openings are typically challenging for me. I find that if I don't get the voice right, the story itself isn't right and it stutters rather than flows. It can take a while to find that voice, and until I do, I often flounder about, trying different things. The structure of this story was immensely helpful, though, given I wanted to create a mix tape of sorts, with each section, or track, taking us deeper into this very strange story. How do you start a mix tape? What does the opening track need to do?

This story is disturbing and surreal, bringing to mind elements of Clarke, Dick, and Butler to mind. Tell us a little of the inspiration behind the story.

I had the title written in my notebook for a long time. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with it. Who were the dead boys? How can the dead send someone a mix tape? Was that literal or metaphorical or something else entirely? When I started noodling around with band names, I knew the story would deal with sound and perception, and that was when a friend led me to the idea of images embedded into songs (bit.ly/2s2w0K6). Which, on its own, sounds like fiction, but it's something bands have actually done in our world—Aphex Twin, Nine Inch Nails, Disasterpeace. And that idea blended perfectly for me with the idea that someone was being sent messages from dead boys.

I appreciated the use of bands and song titles as chapter headers, particularly since these aren't songs with twenty-first century references. It is easy to believe that these are real songs that have meaning to the characters. Stepping back from the orbit of Neptune, looking at the setting as a whole, what does this world look like to you? What do you imagine is

happening elsewhere in the Sol system?

This story connects to others I have written; I call the series "Distances," because I spend a lot of time exploring distance and what it means to different people. In this system, strange things are emerging from a very long and deep slumber, and these things (these beings?) are disrupting the natural order of things. In the orbit of Jupiter, a helium miner finds herself plunging into the planet's clouds; on Europa, oceanographers are vanishing; on Mars, bones are discovered; and on Titan, something even stranger.

Not only do you write short fiction, you also have numerous novels under your belt, and are also the editor-in-chief and head badger at *Shimmer Magazine*. Do you find that these facets overlap, that elements from one influence the others? Does writing long fiction improve your short fiction, or does being a writer help you as an editor?

I find all creative work helps other creative work. Often, when I'm stuck on a story, I go work on my cross-stitch, or painting, and this allows my brain to work its story stuff out in the background. Being an editor definitely helps with being an writer; I can see clear approaches to stories now that I didn't when I was only writing. Learning how to take a story apart and see what it's doing has improved my work, too. I do think being a writer helps being an editor, too—I never want to change the meaning of a story I'm editing, because as a writer, I know how important that is. I'm not sure if writing long fiction has improved my short fiction; I have a lot to learn yet when it comes to novels.

Some writers liken the act of writing to the act of cooking, and you have been known to post photos of many a wondrous meal. Do you think there are any similarities between working your way through (or around) a recipe and writing?

Absolutely. In writing, as with cooking, it's good to know the shape of the thing you want to make, but it's also vital to know when to detour. It's good to know what works together and what doesn't. It's also great to experiment en route to getting there!

What's next for E. Catherine Tobler? What can eager fans look forward to in the second half of 2017?

The fourth adventure in my Folley & Mallory series, *The Clockwork Tomb,* is out from Apokrupha, and if all goes according to plan, the fifth may be out before the end of the year. I hope to be able to share more adventures in my traveling circus, too!

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Sandra Odell is a 47-year old, happily married mother of two, an avid reader, compulsive writer, and rabid chocoholic. Her work has appeared in such venues as *Jim Baen's UNIVERSE, Daily Science Fiction, Crosssed Genres, Pseudopod,* and *The Drabblecast.* She is hard at work plotting her second novel or world domination. Whichever comes first.

Author Spotlight: Debbie Urbanski

Arley Sorg | 1693 words

Even though the portals are the speculative star of this story, I feel like it's really about relationships, and about how imperfect our relationships can be. That disconnect between what we think we should be together and what we really are. In particular, the moment where the mother doesn't want to proceed without her husband is really striking while ringing true, revealing so much about the protagonist and her family, but also touching upon the fallibility of perception and judgment in general. Are these people and their relationships familiar to you, or representative of specific individuals? Are these ideas personally important to convey?

I do feel like there is a very narrow and repetitive definition of what love can look like if it's still to be considered love. I'm talking about all sorts of love here, including a love for one's children and also a love for one's partner. We seem to slowly be expanding who can participate in this dominant vision of love, which is so great, but I get frustrated that the vision still pretty much contains the same things, only with different people thrown into the mix. I see this kind of narrow definition in popular culture, certainly—movies, songs, books—but also I feel its judgment in my own life, in my complicated marriage and in my relationship to my children. That there is this checklist of things that must be present in one's significant relationships, and if those things are not there, it doesn't qualify.

I hate such checklists. But it's difficult not to internalize such messages and start focusing on what you think needs to be in a relationship rather than focusing on what actually is there. And I know I'm guilty of applying my own version of a checklist to other people and to my family as well. When I look at my parents' marriage of many decades, I don't always totally understand their love. At times, it has looked like unhappiness to me, and when I was younger, I certainly was more dismissive. But why can't unhappiness be part of someone's love? And maybe it's not unhappiness to them anyway. I'm also certain I'm missing something beautiful about their relationship, something only the two of them can see, something I sense from time to time at the edges.

What love is, what it contains, really should be defined, and redefined, and reimagined, by the people involved in it, not by the bystanders and observers. So yeah, this is kind of an important idea for me to explore in my writing.

I like how the story plays with the notion of the dirty white van and what it signifies, making it similar but very different in its threat, and in doing so, toying with the assumptions (and potentially the emotions?) of readers. What sorts of risks, if any, are involved in evoking these images? Did you consider not utilizing the concepts of luring people into vans and framing the threat in a different way?

I began this story after my annual visit home to see my parents, and during this visit I remembered for some reason this sign we used to have in our front window declaring us a Ronald McDonald "Safe House." The sign meant that if a child was lost, or being chased by someone, the lost/chased child would know it was okay to knock on our door and ask for help. No child was ever lost or chased in my neighborhood, to my knowledge at least, but I grew up in the '80s and everyone back then was worried about child abductions. That memory of the little sign brought back a whole slew of memories, of school assemblies where we were told about the strange dangers of the world—poison overdoses, and people who would pressure us to use addictive drugs, and strangers who would lure us into their vehicles, which were often described as white vans. We were never told what would happen to us if we got into such vehicles. There was only this atmosphere of fear and danger, but it was unclear what the adults around us were actually afraid of. What happened to the children who got into those vans? No one would say. I doubt I was the only child intrigued by, or attracted to, the idea of this hidden and dangerous world surrounding the mundane world where I lived. I wanted to write about how it felt growing up in an atmosphere like this. During the writing process, rather than focus on the reality and tragedy of actual child abduction, I tried to zone in on the limited way I understood the world in elementary school, as a place of fear, and mystery, and strangeness.

There is also the notion of fear and, on the one hand, being drawn towards something that terrifies other people; on the other hand, related but different, the idea of not really seeing a threat where other people see one, perhaps because the threat isn't what all the terrified people think it is, or perhaps because an individual can't/doesn't/won't perceive a threat for what it is. In the story (as is often the case in real life) this perceived and misperceived threat is accompanied by misinformation and partial truths. Are these divergent and contradictory experiences of fear common to our

culture; are they common or meaningful elements in your own relationships and experiences?

I do feel like we as human beings are often drawn to complex things that contain both attractive and damaging elements (and a lot depends on who is allowed to define "attractive" and "damaging" here). So I think you're right: Frequently, the things we want can terrify other people, sometimes for good reason, and other times for misinformed reasons. A few years ago, I was writing a lot about cults, and reading about them rather obsessively. I wanted to understand what people were getting out of cults, including damaging cults, that they couldn't get from the ordinary world. That part of the narrative is often overwhelmed and silenced by our focus on the damage cults can do.

But what I was thinking about when writing "How To Find A Portal" was suicide. I had been struggling with depression and suicidal ideation for a while and was having trouble figuring out how to make this world feel like enough to keep me here. Suicide seemed as attractive to me as any portal would be, a path to another life maybe or at least the absence of my current life. Because suicide is such a scary topic for many people, the attractiveness of suicide is so rarely acknowledged: that it can contain this great beauty and relief to someone who doesn't want to be here anymore. I don't know if that beauty and relief can be understood by someone who hasn't considered suicide for an extended period of time. My husband was frightened, of course, and my therapist was adamant that nothing good will come of killing myself, and I realized there was this huge disconnect here. Well, there were a lot of disconnects, but the one I was interested in exploring was my feeling toward suicide versus most other people's—the attraction that resides in something forbidden and damaging. (The question can be raised, I suppose, whether the portals in my story are damaging? I imagine that depends on who is being asked).

I appreciate greatly the courage of our conversation, the honesty, and the personal nature of these answers as well as your story. Is it difficult to bring these aspects of yourself into public light? Did you always address these sorts of ideas in your work, or is it something you developed or grew into?

Writing is a space where I try to be as honest as I can with myself and, in doing so, be honest with whoever will end up reading my work. So much of life

can feel like a performance, to me anyway, and I'm uninterested in keeping that performance going when I sit down to write. I've tried to keep writing as a place without shame and judgment, where I can explore whatever light or dark thoughts I want or follow the passageways that aren't part of my public self. I guess I wanted to apply that same honesty to this interview.

Was it always this way? When I first started writing seriously, I was a poet, and I remember writing a lot of poems about the TV show *Dawson's Creek.* I also remember my poetry teacher asking me to please write about something else. Of course he was right. These were not great poems. But looking back, I think I was drawn to writing about that show for legitimate reasons. My childhood was very different from the childhood the characters were experiencing, and I was interested in that gap between the messiness and strangeness of an actual life versus an accepted narrative. The stories that are easier to hear versus the stories we might hesitate to tell.

So I think I've always been interested in the way lives—my life, but also other people's lives—differ from society's main narratives. Becoming a parent did complicate my life and make this disconnect more obvious, but it also gave my writing a clearer purpose—that by offering alternative narratives of motherhood, or relationships, or whatever, maybe I could normalize my own experience as well as other people's experiences that fall outside of the main narrative.

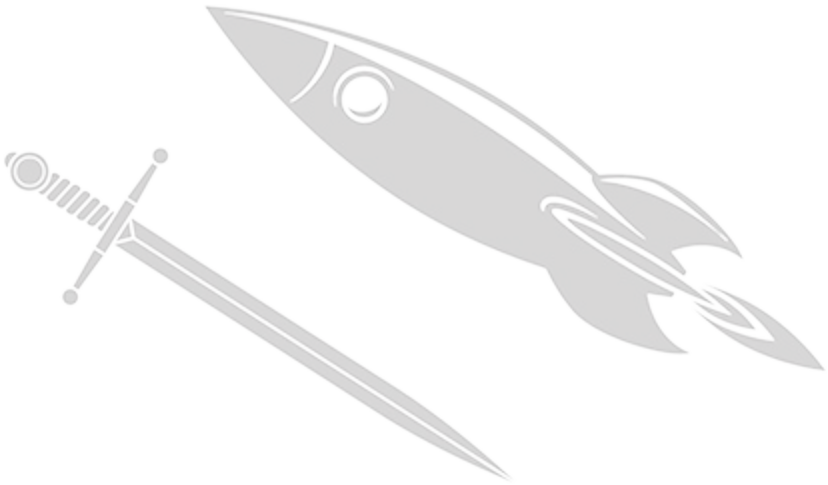
What are you working on now that we can look forward to?

I'm finishing up a story on marital rape, a topic I rarely see addressed, maybe for obvious reasons, as I think it will be a difficult story to read. And I'm planning to delve into some non-heroic end of the world stories soon.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Arley Sorg grew up in England, Hawaii, and Colorado. He studied Asian Religions at Pitzer College. He lives in Oakland, and usually writes in local coffee shops. A 2014 Odyssey Writing Workshop graduate, he is an assistant editor at *Locus Magazine.* He's soldering together a novel, has thrown a few short stories into orbit, and hopes to launch more.

MISCELLANY



Coming Attractions

The Editors | 136 words

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All that, and of course we also have our usual assortment of author spotlights, along with our book and media review columns.

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