AN ANTHOLOGY OF
WINNING FANTASY STORIES

CHAMPIONS

WITH STORIES FROM
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Champions: An Anthology of Winning Fantasy Stories

Edited by Alex S. Bradshaw

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About the Editor

Foreword

One of the reasons I wanted to put together this anthology was to showcase the wonderful writing talent that's out there in the everyday internet and not just the talent of the authors but also the variety of the speculative genres. From god prisons to spells gone wrong and flirting with supervillains I believe that this anthology shows how engaging and varied the fantasy genre, with a healthy sprinkling of science fiction and occasionally horror, can be.

All of the stories in this anthology are taken from the FantasyWriters community on Reddit. It's a wonderfully helpful and friendly community so if you are a budding writer who's working in the fantasy genre I would highly recommend that you take a look. You can find them at www.reddit.com/r/fantasywriters.

Every story in this anthology has won the monthly competition run on the FantasyWriters forum with a short story prompt. The prompts are really varied though some of them have quite restrictive word limits (which I never think is a bad thing to stretch your creativity!). If you're a budding fantasy writer then you might like to try a few of them for yourself; I know I have! Some of the stories in this anthology might have stretched beyond the limits of the original prompts as they've made a few tweaks to the story before it was included here, but I think that just adds to their value here.

You may recognise some names here as some of the authors stories are forum veterans who always seem to appear when a novice writer is in need like some sort of cyberspace superhero and others are from writers who have seemingly appeared from nowhere with a fantastic story that stays with you.

Given how much I have enjoyed all of these stories I hope you will feel the same, and I know that I will be keeping an eye on the authors to see if I'm able to pick anything up by them in future.

If you take anything away from this anthology I hope it is a feeling that everyone can try their hand at creating a story and that it is worth taking a chance on an unknown author because they might just be the hidden gem you've been looking for.

I hope you enjoy.

December 2011

Prompt: Write a short, fantasy story beginning with this sentence: "I guarantee you won't find the same quality for a cheaper price," the merchant insisted.

Winner: Ken Lim

Ken is a speculative fiction writer and a life-long reader of fantasy. When he's not crafting stories, Ken geeks out on gaming, movies and TV. In addition to Exigent, Ken has written The Starfall Knight, the first novel in a new epic saga.

Visit Ken at: http://www.goodreads.com/kenlim

Exigent

"I guarantee you won't find the same quality for a lower price," the merchant insisted.

Perhaps, Norward thought, but can it kill a dragon?

Out loud, he said, “And what price would that be?”

“Forty crowns.”

Next to Norward, Ilia scoffed and crossed her arms. In her own realm, the young fae woman never hid her opinion.

The merchant’s whiskers twitched, his rodent features scrunching with indignance. He lowered the firearm back to the counter bearing his other guns and assorted weapons.

“I am flexible,” the merchant continued. “It does not have to be gold. I accept bottled moonlight. Or perhaps a pound of nightshade picked by a virgin?”

There was a time when Norward would have become angry at an answer like this, believing it nothing more than coarse sarcasm. He knew better now. The fae realm was different.

“It’s a little presumptuous to be talking of price,” Norward said. “I don’t even know if this weapon is any good.”

“Oh, but it is!” The merchant’s rat-eyes twinkled. “Look at the stock, pure Maashdian blackwood polished until it gleams like your cold human steel. And the muzzle is forged with such precision – how would you say, Jurmun?”

"German."

"Yes, like your German constructioneers."

Norward caught Ilia's gaze as she rolled her eyes. The merchant's attempts at salesmanship weren't the worst Norward had seen but for most faefolk there was still much to learn about humans and their counterpart world.

As Ilia wandered off to inspect a spice-monger, Norward asked the rat merchant, "How does this firearm operate? I see no trigger."

"That's the beauty of it," the merchant replied, "it operates through Spirit. Simply load your faeshot, grip the stock thusly." The merchant demonstrated through mime. "And fire the weapon, just like any other fae device."

"A few problems with that," Norward said, counting off his fingers. "One – I have no facility to fire the weapon." Few humans did. "Two – what use is faeshot in my world. Three – where would I obtain stardust to create more faeshot. Four – I'm sure you're well-stocked with it, aren't you?"

"Oh? You plan to take this back to Terra? The firearm cannot be used for much else besides hunting pixies."

Norward always found it strange that the fae referred to the physical realm as Terra but it made a peculiar sense; using the word 'Earth' would imply that the fae realm existed on another planet when it was simply a new dimensional aspect.

"It's not much use to me, is it?" Norward replied, more forcefully than he intended.

The merchant frowned – at least, that's what Norward assumed from the downturned whiskers – and said, "Who are you, again?"

"I didn't say."

"Right." The merchant looked at Norward up and down, perhaps trying to gauge something from his suit. The merchant gathered his goods from the counter. "I don't think I have anything for you."

The merchant made as if he were closing and eyed off Norward. Norward shrugged to himself and headed over to Ilia. She swept back her long hair and sniffed a fine red powder in a ceramic bowl.

"Any luck?" Ilia asked.

"No. He got a little abrupt at the end."

"Yeah, I saw. The Mandate doesn't say anything about faefolk being nice."

Norward nodded. The Mandate was part of the treaty between the fae and humans that defined criminal behaviour for humans visiting the fae and the faefolk visiting Terra. All else was dictated by common-sense, although Norward felt that this was a decreasing commodity.

"Well, it was a worth a shot," Ilia said with a quick smile. "Weapons are rare here. Not much use when mana and Spirit are both so plentiful. Are we heading back?"

Norward nodded with a familiar sinking feeling gripping his chest. Failure, stress. He had been sure that a fae device would hold the key to cracking open their investigation. There was simply no other explanation as to the fatal wounds sustained by the dragons found on Terra – Earth, he corrected himself.

Ilia led the way through the bazaar towards the closest intersecting leylines. Technically an elf princess, Ilia had eschewed her familial responsibilities – which she always insisted were shallow and pointless – to use her ability to walk between planes in the employment of the United Nations Fae Liaison Initiative. As investigative partners, Norward had seen her grow and learn so much in the past six months that if it weren't for her incredibly young age – a reckless four-hundred years old or so – she would have been considered a foremost expert in human interaction by the fae rulers.

"Here," Ilia said, stopping next to a wooden bucket. A green toad hopped out, disappearing behind another stall.

Norward held her hand, as always cool and porcelain.

In the next instant, they were standing in an alleyway, tall buildings on either side. A black dumpster lay to Norward's left, the stench of rotten meat and spoilt milk overwhelming.

"Home sweet home," he said.

"Hey, I don't pick where the leylines cross," Ilia replied.

Norward scratched his stubble and smiled. "Come on. Plenty of paperwork to process."

"Fantastic." Ilia pursed her lips and followed Norward out of the alleyway.

#

The United Nations Oceania offices resided in a nondescript building next to the Treasury Gardens on the eastern edge of Melbourne's central business district. As Norward and Ilia entered the building, the security guard nodded amiably and waved them on.

Norward swiped his key-card on the door bypassing the lobby and Ilia followed suit. Norward pressed the elevator call button and a set of doors dinged immediately.

"Race you?" Ilia asked, inching towards the broad staircase illuminated by the building's windows.

"Suit yourself." Norward entered the lift as Ilia sprinted to the stairs, her fae gossamer dress fluttering in the rush.

Elves were the most human-like of the fae realm's inhabitants. They were much shorter and physically weaker than humans, however, in the fae realm their innate magical abilities augmented their bodies and minds. On Terra, these same abilities were blunted so Ilia took every opportunity for physical exercise. At least, that's what Norward assumed. Perhaps Ilia really liked running up stairs.

At the fifteenth floor, the elevator doors opened to Ilia huffing and puffing against their office's secure entrance.

"I... won...." Ilia wiped her brow. "Ugh. Sweat."

"Congratulations."

Norward swiped his key-card and opened the door which led directly into the open-plan office. Ilia shut the secure entrance behind her, still panting.

Familiar sounds of discussions, the clack of keyboards and the television tuned to 24-hour news washed over Norward. There was no receptionist for their department. The most recent Gallup poll showed that 64% of people still didn't think the fae realm was real.

Norward made his way to his desk, greeting his colleagues as he passed by. He sat down, immediately opened his drawer and grabbed his phone. Although not banned, complex electronics were frowned upon in the fae realm. Moreover phones and mobile internet signals did not extend there. Norward switched on his computer and plugged in his phone.

He rearranged the top drawer, a small bottle of powder catching his attention. Powdered dragon scales. He took one gram per day to shore up his calcium but there were other effects, one in particular that kept him alive.

Ilia tossed away a sweat-laden tissue and plonked onto the seat at the desk opposite him. She frowned, her shoulders barely visible above the desk. She pulled a lever on the chair and the pneumatic system slowly rose.

"Someone used my chair while we were away," Ilia said. She switched on her computer and started typing immediately.

"You have to wait until it loads first," Norward said.

Ilia peered at her screen. "How inconvenient. I'm ready to write my report now!"

"Agent Norward!"

Norward turned around at the sound of his boss' voice. Cynthia, his manager, was no longer a field agent but she still projected authority as naturally as anyone Norward had ever worked for. She strode between the desks, not a hair out of place in her steel-grey bun, and said, "What are you doing here?"

"Paperwork, Cyn."

"Haven't you read your email?" she asked.

"Not yet."

"Don't you check your phone?"

"I don't take it when I cross, you know that."

Cynthia grunted. "Why's the office paying for it?" she muttered. Out loud, "Anyway, don't start your paperwork. You're not done yet."

"What do you mean?" Norward logged into the network.

"Read your email, Michael!" Cynthia stalked away to harangue another of Norward's colleagues.

Ilia peeked over the top of her monitor. "She used your first name. She must be really P-O-ed."

#

The chopper's engine slowed to a dull whine as Norward hopped out onto the tundra grass. He waved at the pilot who nodded and turned his attention to an e-book while he waited. Ilia rounded the front of the chopper and joined Norward on the short walk.

"Cold, isn't it!" she said.

Norward only nodded. He disliked the massive bulk of his snow-jacket but it was all he could buy on such short notice. As always, Ilia wore only her gossamer dress and showed no sign of discomfort; however, she had deigned to exchange her spider-silk slippers for hiking boots.

They crested the rise and the latest victim met their view. The dragon had sustained a massive wound to the throat, Norward quickly surmised. Perhaps from a height and closer to the summit, tumbling down, if the furrow in the ground was anything to judge by.

Park rangers and a pair of local police had already established a cordon. Mount Cook attracted enough tourists that such action was necessary and this linked back to Cynthia's consternation at the office. So far, the dead dragons had only been found in the wilderness. The discovery of another victim close to a tourist attraction drew the wrong kind of attention.

One of the rangers approached Norward and Ilia. He was young with a solid frame presumably built from patrolling the national parks in the region. He briefly doffed his ranger hat. "Afternoon. I'm David Carter. You're from the liaison unit?"

Norward shook his hand. "Agent Norward. This is Ilia."

"Very pleased to meet you, Ranger Carter," Ilia said with a coy smile. Norward suppressed a sigh – she always turned up the charm upon meeting new people, part of the reason she hated being introduced with the title 'agent'.

"And you, Ilia." Carter's gaze lingered on her for a moment before he gestured to them both to follow.

"Tell me what you know, Ranger Carter," Norward said.

"The creature was found this morning by hikers heading to the summit. The blood was fresh at the time. Rangers were called in immediately and have been on-site since then." Carter lifted the cordon and they passed underneath. "Not much else to tell, agent."

Norward nodded. As was always the case, the human first responders never quite knew what to do with these cases even though they were more similar to homicide than they realised. By the sounds of it, however, this time they had found the victim relatively soon after death.

The dragon lay on its side, blood on the grass having since dried. Norward tread carefully around the body, its brown striations seemingly absorbing the sunlight. Like most other dragons, the softer underbelly was a bone-white with smaller metallic scales but they were now covered in bloody maroon.

Upright, the dragon would've stood more than twice the height of a man and as wide as a semi-trailer. Norward noted that this particular species had four limbs with wings sprouting from its upper back. It was a sentient species, one whose upper limbs were more like arms, its claws like hands.

"Norward?" Ilia said.

"What is it?" Norward paced around, hopping over the long tail. Ilia pointed at the dragon. The larger bone-like scales from its shoulders and back had been removed, exposing sinewy muscle that glistened in the light. The removal of the scales and subsequent blood loss would've caused the death of the creature in any case.

"Carter?"

"Yes, agent?" The ranger approached, hands on hips.

"Are you positive that no one touched the dragon since this morning? Removed its scales?"

The ranger nodded. "It was found like that. I remember since it was so damned strange."

Ilia examined the wounds, all traces of playfulness gone. "This is expert work, Norward. It's Roene, it's gotta be."

#

Norward rubbed his neck as he entered the Snowline Lounge. The hotel's shower had been reinvigorating – better than the one in his own apartment, if he were honest – but travelling for work was hardly ever relaxing.

The evening crowd had started trickling in. The waning daylight outside would soon give way to the warm glow inside. For now, the fading afternoon sun glinted off Mount Cook and the Southern Alps. Norward caught snatches of conversation as he walked over to Ilia's booth – the dead dragon would be the centre of attention for the next few days.

Ilia looked up as he approached and she smiled. Papers from the case file were spread across the table while Ilia scribbled her own thoughts in a notepad. Norward stole a glance at her notes as he sat down opposite – as expected, it was written in a fae script.

"You still don't believe me, do you?" Ilia said. She took a quick sip of her lemon cocktail.

"It's not that," Norward replied. "Roene's disappearance doesn't necessarily mean he's our guy."

"But it's strangely convenient, isn't it? One of the world's foremost poachers goes missing and not one month later, the first of the dragons turns up dead."

Norward leaned back and stopped his reply as a waitress approached. He ordered a beer and turned back to Ilia. "How can a human take down a dragon? There's no evidence of heavy

weapons. The wounds look consistent either with small-arms fire or some sort of melee weaponry." He shuffled through the papers, looking for the second dragon's autopsy. "Here – the one in the Andes. Casings for 7.62mm rounds found in the area. Three bullets removed, found lodged in the cervical and thoracic spine with the requisite wounds. And this one, number three – 7.62mm rounds, wounds on the thorax and throat consistent with a blade."

"But it doesn't make any sense," Ilia said. "A dragon, even in Terra, can still protect itself against these sorts of weapons." She shook her head. "The killer would need magic to remove the dragon's defenses. I don't know – what if Roene is part-fae?"

Norward shrugged. "We have no records to indicate that he is. But it would explain a lot. He could be using fae weaponry, perhaps something more deadly than that pixie-gun."

"I'm clutching at straws," Ilia said. "He's not. Part fae, that is. Our lorekeepers were quite sure."

"What about the possibility that one of the faefolk is working with him?"

Ilia met his gaze, her pale eyes like icicles. "Impossible. The Mandate forbids it. Killing another fae, let alone on Terra? Say what you like about the fae but none would break a contract, let alone a treaty."

"I don't see how you could –"

"Shut up," Ilia said. She stared into the distance, her hands splayed out like a mime pressing against a wall. "Multiple crossings, Norward."

"Are you sure?"

Ilia nodded and Norward patted his concealed holster, reassuring himself with the bulk of his pistol.

Ilia shoved the case files into her satchel and sidled out of the booth. "Come on!" She trotted towards the exit, almost bumping into their waitress.

Norward fished out his wallet and paid for the cocktail and the newly delivered beer, taking the bottle from the waitress' hand as he left the booth. He chugged the drink – no sense wasting it – and tossed the empty bottle into one of the metallic bins.

Norward followed Ilia outside, the last of the sun's rays disappearing over the mountain ranges. The doorman glanced at them momentarily then turned his attention back to the uneventful carpark.

Ilia dropped her satchel near the door and took a few steps forward, her slippers silent on the gravel.

"Norward?"

"I'm here."

"Ready your gun."

Flashes of blue and violet played against the grass in the distance. Norward motioned to the doorman and said, "Go inside."

The doorman nodded and complied, closing the glass doors and backing away a few steps. Norward turned back to the carpark and the national parklands beyond. The lights were growing brighter, no – Noward squinted – they were getting closer. Fast.

Norward drew his gun and stepped next to Ilia. Her face had grown stoic and her fingers twitched in readiness. The lights crested the hill and sped over the road.

Ilia raised her hands and Norward's ears popped with pressure. The lights drew closer and Norward raised his weapon. Inside the azure lights, he could make out tiny humanoid figures. Pixies.

He felt an ethereal web burst from Ilia's hands towards the charging pixies. It was an invisible force powered by Ilia's native abilities; it would not last long here.

The pixies, at least eight of them, dashed to either side of the web and the conjuration continued past them with nothing more than ripples in the air like heatwaves. Ilia muttered a curse and prepared another web. Norward felt his ears pop again.

"What if you miss?" Norward asked.

Ilia glanced at his gun and replied, "Maybe they'll attack us." Under the Mandate, wilful injury or killing of the fae was prohibited unless in self-defense. The same applied to fae against hostile humans.

The pixies grouped together, their natural violet and azure glows mixing and pulsating as they sped towards Norward and Ilia. The elf pushed out another web and the pixies scattered again.

One of the pixies was not spry enough and the web caught its foot with an electric snap. Norward heard the pixie squeal and it vanished, forcibly returned to the fae realm. The web dissipated.

The remaining pixies zoomed in. Norward ducked and swore as the tiny creatures nipped and stung at his ears and hands and arms. He swatted at them with one hand, the other keeping a firm grip on his gun. Even if he were clear from the Mandate, he wouldn't have been able to draw a bead on the annoying gnats.

Ilia fared little better as the pixies swooped in like kamikaze pilots except that they continued flying and returning for more. Ilia's hands trailed with blue elfin fire. She slapped one or two and the pixies fell to the ground, stunned for a second before taking flight again.

"Enough!" Ilia bellowed. "Do you know who I am?"

"Saarikspawn Saarikspawn Saarikspawn..." The lilting voices of the pixies were almost whispers in Norward's ears. The creatures relented for a moment and assembled in front of him and Ilia.

"That's right!" Ilia said. "Lord Saarik's daughter! By attacking me and Norward, you've broken the Mandate!"

"No no no... incorrect incorrect incorrect."

Ilia took a threatening step forward. "Truly? By the Mandate, I could rightfully kill you all." Ilia's hand flared with blue fire again. "Who sent you? Why are you here?"

The pixies did not respond. They hovered in the air and exchanged glances with each other. One of them flew forward hesitantly and Norward tensed his arm, ready to swat it out of the air.

"Cannot answer. Send us back? Use the web in self-defense?"

Ilia grunted. "Send yourselves back."

"Oh, very well. We will send ourselves back."

The pixies retreated, slowly gathering speed and disappearing over the nearby ridge.

Norward holstered his gun, feeling somewhat foolish for having drawn it in the first place. He rubbed his skin where the pixies had stung him but he felt nothing more than insect bites. "What was that all about?"

Ilia shook her head as she retrieved her satchel. "I don't know. How many were there?"

"Eight? Ten?" Norward shrugged and opened the doors to the hotel complex. "I'm hungry." He looked back at Ilia, her hand frozen on the strap to her bag. He asked, "What's wrong?"

Ilia bit her lip. "I counted ten."

"So, we're in agreement. Fantastic." Norward gestured to the bar. "Let's eat."

"More than ten came through the crossing," Ilia said. "They didn't care about my questions. It wasn't their job."

#

The helicopter's spotlight passed over the police cordon as it flapped in the darkness. Norward scanned the grass beneath, leaning out as far as he dared. Next to the pilot, Ranger Carter adjusted the spotlight, revealing the indentation where the dragon should have been. Ilia swore.

The body was gone.

#

Under the glow of an electric lantern, Ilia skulked the perimeter of the crime scene, alternately staring into the sky and glaring at the cordon tape as it snapped and rustled in the night breeze. Norward crossed his arms, wishing he had brought his jacket. Next to him, Carter seemed comfortable in his ranger uniform.

"Spell residue is heavy here," Ilia said. "Like a thick paste. On the ground, in the air. Bleh."

"So they used a spell to move the dragon?" Norward asked.

Ilia nodded. "I almost flunked basic thaumaturgy but I think it was a spell of planar travel. Not everyone can do what I do, so a spell is the only other way of crossing." She sighed. "They're complicated things. We'd need a diviner to find out who cast it. And time. We don't have time."

"Don't you worry about that," Norward said. He gestured to Carter. "Did you install the devices I asked?"

Ranger Carter smiled and nodded. "I certainly did, agent." He stepped to a small, misshapen rock and lifted it with one hand.

"What is that?" Ilia asked.

"Surveillance camera with proximity sensors," Norward said. "I was planning on checking it in the morning."

Carter handed the innards of the fake rock to Norward. Ilia approached gingerly as if the falsity of the device would hurt her.

"They wouldn't have had any idea, would they?" Ilia asked.

"I don't think so," Norward said. He pulled out the hard drive and handed the rock back to Carter.

The ranger said, "I'll get the laptop." He headed to the chopper.

Ilia stepped closer to Norward, sharp shadows of the lantern painted across her face. "What will you do when we find these people?" she asked softly.

Norward met her gaze. "I'll arrest them. We will arrest them."

Ilia said nothing for a moment. "Are you still taking it?"

"Yes, of course."

"We should find the warlock and kill him."

Norward glanced over his shoulder – Carter had only just found the laptop. Norward said to Ilia, "You cannot say such things. Not out loud, at least."

"Maybe," Ilia replied. "But we both know that he'll never raise the curse willingly. He needs to die." She seemed about to say more but instead looked away. Norward felt a flush of relief, knowing the full extent of Ilia's charisma.

Carter returned with the laptop and Norward handed over the hard drive. The ranger loaded the video files, the laptop screen bright against the dark surroundings.

Ilia leaned in close. "Amazing. You filmed all of this with a rock."

Carter glanced at Norward and he shook his head slightly. Sometimes it was just not worth the time to correct Ilia.

Norward fast-forwarded the footage until several figures entered the frame. With the sun dipping below the horizon, they surrounded the dragon's body and raised their arms as one.

"Is there sound on this laptop?" Norward asked.

"Yes." Carter fiddled with the settings of the computer and a slow chanting emanated from the tinny speakers.

Ilia nodded. "That's a spell of travel, as far as I can tell." She examined the screen, the participants. "Can you freeze the movie? And – now!"

"What is it, Ilia?"

She pointed at one of the women, an elf wearing a long dress with a high neck. "It's grainy but I think that elf is a servant in the employ of my father."

"Are you sure?" Norward asked.

Ilia nodded. "It's not just the face or the clothing. The way she favours her right arm – a sore shoulder from laundering and mopping all day. Rolling hips from the same."

Norward examined the elf – now that Ilia mentioned it, she did appear familiar. Granted, he had only visited Saarik's estate twice before.

Ilia gestured to Carter and he resumed the video.

The chanting continued and spots of light marred the video, slowly blinding the camera. The chanting ceased. The light levels returned to normal and the dragon was gone.

One by one, the faefolk walked away from the site. The mountains and sky filled the frame.

Norward's heart skipped as the last person meandered past the camera. Roene.

He jabbed at the keyboard, freezing the video. He would've recognised the face anywhere.

"It's him," Ilia said.

"So, you were right," Norward said.

"Was there ever any doubt?" Ilia smiled, showing her teeth. "We have to cross. Not here though."

#

With Carter's help, they returned to the hotel to retrieve their belongings and immediately flew out to the airport. Norward organised a connecting flight to Wellington; unbeknownst to most people, it was home to a major leyline intersection.

The fae realm was largely analogous to Earth in terms of the landmasses and oceans. Once upon a time, they were identical but humans and the faefolk had diverged in culture, history and technology. The major differences lay in the cities and habitats – in Wellington's case, the fae realm held a sprawling tent-city called Wellarch that had sprung up around the worship and utilisation of the powerful intersection located there.

Norward and Ilia crossed, instantaneous as always, and appeared in the centre of the Wellarch temple. Five stone arches stretched around them, a pentagon of open air. Beyond

the arches lay the tall outer walls of the temple which were constructed of thick fae greystone. The temple bore no roof, remaining open to the night sky.

Norward stepped off the dais. They had arrived in the witching hour. The temple was silent.

Ilia motioned to him. "Come on. We should be able to find a way to my father's estate from here."

#

Ilia paid for a professional thaumaturge to transport them to her father's lands. The journey was similar to crossing and Norward's immediate disorientation quickly dissipated.

Lord Saarik's estates lay in the equivalent of the Black Forest region in Germany, on the outskirts of a fae town called Erfinden. Norward and Ilia had appeared outside the main entrance to her father's lands, a long dirt road wound out behind them, snaking between the green hills and woodlands.

Ilia stretched out her hand to the iron-wrought gates and the infused metalwork opened at her mere presence.

"You seem calm," Norward said.

"Why not? Because my father might be involved?" Ilia shrugged. "No sense worrying. We'll soon find out."

She gestured at Norward to follow and they entered.

The gates closed behind them with a gentle click. Even in daylight, the Saarik estates appeared endless, the fenceline extending into the distance. The tudor mansion loomed ahead, located behind an ornate crystal fountain. The tree-lined path curled around the waterwork centrepiece, serving as a driveway for fae carriages and rare automobiles.

"Is it strange to return like this?" Norward asked.

"No," Ilia said. "You mustn't apply your human values on fae familial relations. My father and I don't hate each other. But, he knows where my duties lie now."

The double-door entrance to the mansion opened and a matronly elf woman strode out.

"Who is that?" Norward asked.

"Not sure," Ilia replied. "Let her come to us."

Norward halted next to Ilia, the expanse of a large oak shading them. The woman approached. She wore a pressed jacket and a long skirt. Her shoes thumped on the packed dirt road.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"Fae Liaison Unit, ma'am. Agent Norward." He extended a hand, which the elf ignored. Unperturbed, he continued, "This is Ilia Saarik. And you are?"

The elf ignored Norward's question and eyed up Ilia instead. "Typical human. You could've at least gotten a proper look-alike."

They had little time to waste with fae prejudices. Norward surreptitiously nodded to Ilia.

"I am Ilia Saarik. Who are you? Where is my father?"

"Who am I? I am Lord Saarik's steward. Who in the stars are you?" the woman snapped. "I suggest you leave immediately!"

Ilia pointed at the oak and the woman's eyes widened. Ilia lowered her finger slowly and eventually pointed at the woman.

The oak's branches whipped out and wrapped around the steward's body. She screamed but the snake-like wood tightened, her lungs squeezed. The steward kicked and gasped. Her arms remained locked to her sides. The oak's branches slithered around, covering her body, moving down her legs.

"Mistress Steward, is it?" Ilia said with a mocking tone. "I do not care for your attitude. Is this proof enough for you? As steward, you must know that no one else but my father may command the estate as I can."

The woman nodded furiously. "My name is Lotti! Please, I am new to your father's employ. I am sorry!"

Norward nodded to Ilia and she relaxed. The oak placed Lotti on the path and the branches moved back into position. If Norward hadn't seen it with his own eyes, he wouldn't have guessed that there was anything untowards about the tree.

"Lotti," Norward said, "we need to know where Lord Saarik is."

"It's about the dragons, isn't it?" Lotti asked. She almost hugged herself but stopped, grabbing a wrist with the other hand. "He shipped one off, not hours ago. Blasted dragons."

"Where is he?" Ilia asked.

"He is gone," Lotti said. "But I know which leylines he crossed at." She examined Ilia, this time with a kinder gaze. "You can cross as well?"

"Of course," Ilia said. "I am his daughter."

#

The head of the dragon became visible long before they reached the lip of the incline. Ilia rushed forward, her slippered feet barely crunching into the packed Antarctic ice. Norward followed as best as he could. He cinched the fae overcoat closer to his body, his hands growing cold.

As they reached the crest, Ilia hissed to herself. In the trough below, a black-scaled dragon sat upright on its haunches. Before it stood two men – a human dressed in thick snow gear and an elf wearing a tailored suit.

Norward drew his gun. "Halt! United Nations Fae Liaison!"

The two men turned – Roene and Lord Saarik. The dragon craned his gaze to Norward, a lazy motion that dismissed him and his weapon.

Ilia trotted down the slope while Norward followed, plodding through the snow and ice. He squinted as the sun reflected off the white landscape.

"Agent Saarik!" Ilia yelled. "Don't move!"

Roene and Lord Saarik raised their hands in surrender. The dragon huffed and steam blew out of its nostrils.

"What is the meaning of this?" the creature asked.

"Don't be alarmed, friend," Lord Saarik said. His voice was like honey.

Norward approached, his gun still levelled at Roene and Ilia's father. "Do you know who these men are?" he called out.

"Lord Saarik," the dragon replied. "And his associate, a Mister Roene."

"They're dragon killers," Ilia said. "Whatever they've promised you or however they've lured you, they are planning to kill you and sell off your body parts. They killed another, not one day ago!"

The dragon dropped to all fours with a deep thump that sent shivers through Norward's feet and legs. The snow shuddered.

With a long drawl, the dragon looked directly at Ilia and said, "I know, child. Human interference has become more and more common. So, here we are. A desert of ice."

Norward caught his breath as he drew next to Ilia. His mind whirled. Was this a crime? Was the willing death of a fae creature illegal?

"Why?" was all he could muster.

The dragon sniffed the air. He turned his head to Norward and sniffed the air again. "Ah," the dragon said, "such youth. But youth spoilt by an illness, correct? A curse."

Norward nodded. His arms started to ache and he slowly lowered his gun while keeping his gaze on Roene and Saarik.

"If my instincts are correct," the dragon said, "the powder of my scales will keep you alive. It will keep your body safe from the creeping necrotic curse. And for your human science of the body, your medicine, I am sure there are many others who would benefit similarly."

"Agent Norward," Lord Saarik said, "we have met before."

"Yes."

"Do you know how long dragons live for? In the fae realm?"

Norward shook his head.

"Daughter?"

Ilia wriggled her fingers but Norward knew that webbing her father and the dragon would serve no purpose. Instead, she answered, "Dragons are immortal within the fae realm."

"I did not know that," Norward said.

Lord Saarik bowed from the neck. He steepled his fingers and continued, "And so, with the recent collapse of the Veil, peoples and creatures can cross into the opposing realm. Here, in Terra, dragons can die.

"With the help of Mister Roene's particular talents, we can do this painlessly. Efficiently. And so too, the harvest."

Norward turned to the dragon. "I can't believe you would do this willingly."

"Wait until you have lived forever, human." The dragon smiled. "Besides, I go with the knowledge that I can save you and others like you. What more could I want? What better way to leave this plane?"

Roene drew forth a sawed-off shotgun, an ornate weapon made from polished blackwood and intricate whitegold. It had a trigger but was still a fae weapon. They did not need much else to kill a willing dragon.

"I... I can't let you," Norward said. Regardless of anything else, he still had a job, a duty to uphold the Fae Liaison's mission as well as the Mandate. Norward raised his gun and flicked the safety off. "Roene, put down your weapon. You and Lord Saarik are under arrest."

Next to him, Ilia twisted her hands around so they faced palms towards her father and Roene.

"Don't try it," Ilia said to Roene. "Webs are faster than you can pull that trigger."

Roene said nothing. His breath steamed in clouds in front of his hooded face. Lord Saarik glanced between Ilia, the dragon and Norward.

"Perhaps." Lord Saarik slowly turned his palms out, mirroring Ilia.

Norward suppressed a grimace. "Stand down! By the power of the Fae Liaison Initiative, I order you both to stand down!"

"It's over!" Ilia said to her father. "My web will return the dragon. You're both under arrest!"

"No," Roene said.

He aimed at Ilia and fired.

Her ribcage exploded in a shower of blood and bone. Ilia's web pulsed aimlessly from her outstretched hands.

Norward fired and Roene's head snapped back. A red mist hung in the air for a second and faded.

Saarik bellowed and rushed to Ilia.

The dragon bared its teeth and lunged at Norward. He leapt backwards and instinctively returned fire.

The bullets tore into the dragon's unprotected throat and black liquid burst out.

The dragon toppled forward and crushed Lord Saarik as he sprinted over the snow. Flat on his stomach, the elf lord reached out to his daughter. He fell still.

Norward gasped and dropped to his knees. Norward looked to Ilia's body, his vision blurring. The dragon's blood poured out, staining all around it. Every breath bit into Norward's lungs. Was the dragon smiling?

The Antarctic wind picked up. The white blinded him.

January 2012

Prompt: Write a short, fantasy story in a completely non-European/non-Western setting. The story can take place either in a real, non-Western location (Asia, Africa, etc.), or in an imaginary, non-Western land of your own creation!

Winner: Ian Michael Everett

The Seed of Apostasy

oh the gods... how they writhe.

He woke up, sweat dripping from his forehead. He had a feverish nightmare, a terrible dream full of shadow and fear. It was still late; there was no light outside. The moonless nights were colder, especially in the winter. And yet the Temple was always warm. It was kind of hard not to be. He had no idea how many of the Firebrothers might be up, meditating, performing passion rituals or just roaming around in general.

He preferred sleep to the other methods of rejuvenation available to him. The passion rituals were... fun, but he never truly felt rested after them. Meditation he did not have the patience for.

He felt his heartbeat, listened to it for minute. His second heart he had to search for a couple of seconds before finding it. It was never in one spot on his body and the rhythm it beat to was odd. Today it was in his shoulder.

He lay back down to go back to sleep, but it was no use: he was awake for good. He got up to dress himself. The black robes of the Firebrothers suited him. He was a simple man and did not make a point of primping or dressing to draw attention to himself.

He left his room quietly, not intending for anyone to notice him. There were a few other Brothers and Sisters in the hall, walking around, talking with each other, or just silently minding their own business. One Old Brother walked by, whistling to himself. He bowed in reverence.

He found himself winding to the central chamber of the temple. The building was large and ornate, fashioned from stone and iron. It was circular in design, revolving around a central chamber. It was towards this chamber he headed. A large, iron door blocked his path, immovable by human strength. A small pipe jutted out at waist level next to it. He lifted his finger to it and searched for the second heart inside of him. It beat.

A small flame leapt from his finger and into the pipe. There was a burst of steam in response, and the iron door opened to the central chamber. He stepped inside, awestruck as always at what lay there.

The Old Brothers called it the Tumor Tree, a piece of flesh from He Who Basks In Flame. Every sect of the Five Gods had a Tumor Tree. It was a mass of fleshy tentacles with a central, fibrous trunk. It quivered occasionally, and small, spherical seeds hung from each tentacle and pushed out of pores on the main trunk.

He sat down to watch the tree, observing its grotesque yet appealing nature. It seemed to beat in time with his second heart. He heard footsteps come up from behind him. He turned to see Ushuon, his old childhood friend. The boy was tall, but his face was childish and friendly. His eyes were like ice, subverting the innocence his face gave off. He was bald and his skin was a dark tan.

"Hello, Jutyr," Ushuon said, greeting him in a friendly fashion. He appeared not to be bothered by the giant Tumor Tree, whimsically smiling as he watched it with unreadable eyes.

"Ushuon. You could not sleep either?"

"No. I am not one for the passion rituals, I decided tonight." He sat down next to his friend.

"You'll be breaking many of the Sisters' hearts," Jutyr said, smiling at his friend.

"Yes, it is hard being the most handsome Brother." He grinned, looking onto the Tree with a gleeful expression.

"I only tried the ritual once. It was not as restful as the Old Brothers led me to believe."

"I had to try it a few times," he said, hastily adding, "you know, to make sure." He looked pleased with his joke.

Jutyr rolled his eyes.

"Do you remember when we partook? When we became brothers?"

Jutyr thought for moment. "The more vivid memory for me is when we first found out we were both accepted."

Ushuon shook his head. "I cannot forget when I felt the second heart beat for the first time. The feeling of fire wrapped around me, the warmth in my veins."

"Oh wait, I do remember you crying like a girl," Jutyr said quickly. Ushuon hit him in the arm, laughing, but was quiet again after a moment.

"These Seeds," he said, plucking one of the small spheres from the Tree. Jutyr gasped.

"You know we must not touch them! Only the Old Brothers can do that!"

Ushuon held a finger up to his mouth, shushing Jutyr. "They'll never miss one." He examined it, looking it over. It was a small thing, connected to the very essence of He Who Basks In Flame, the God the Firebrothers worshipped and followed. He who gave them power over heat and flame, He, one of the Five Gods Who Slumber.

"I almost wish... to swallow it," Ushuon said quietly, pressing his lips against it.

"No! It will kill you!"

"It's hard to believe these are the second hearts in us, eh, Jutyr? They look like normal seeds. If you did not see the Tree, you would not believe they were out of the ordinary."

"You're making me uncomfortable, Ushuon."

Ushuon smiled. He threw the seed to the ground and pointed his finger at it. Fire roared from his fingertip at the sphere, consuming it in a second. Ushuon's eyes glowed with light, breaking the cold ice that was normally there.

"You remember ingesting your seed, don't you?"

"How could I forget? That I will never forget. But Ushuon... you aren't suffering from the Insanity, are you?"

"The Old Brothers tell us that those who call it the Insanity don't know what it truly is. They don't know that they are ascending to be with the God we call our own. If I was ascending, you would be celebrating. And no, I am not suffering from it. Not yet, I think." He sat down. "The Old Brothers tell me I may ascend soon though."

The Insanity. Everyone who had a Seed in them and were connected to one of the Five Gods would develop it eventually. There was a higher rate in the Brotherhood of Fire, because He Who Basks In Flames had the most ambient energy of all the Five Gods. Those who followed He Who Rests In The Skies rarely developed the Insanity, but that was because their magic was too weak. Power had its costs.

An Old Brother, taller than either of them, weathered with age, skin wrinkly and hair white, came into the room, looking over the two boys sitting under the Tree. "Jutyr! I wish to speak to you. Ushuon. The High Master wishes to see you."

The two boys looked at each other, unsure of what to think. Ushuon shrugged and left the room. The Old Brother, Rhuikar, approached Jutyr after Ushuon's steps died out in the hallway.

"Jutyr. How has your training been?"

"It goes well, Brother. I have enjoyed working in metallurgy."

"Yes, blacksmithing is one of the finer, academic aspects of our faith. Tell me, what do you know of the other sects of our faith?"

Jutyr thought to himself for a second. "It is easiest explain it around the five elements. We have He Who Basks In Flame who rules over the element of fire. He Who Lies In The Abyss presides over the power of water. He Who Rests In The Skies has mastery over wind. He Who Sleeps In The Earth is the lord of stone and rock, and He Who Dreams In The Stars is the influencer of mind and spirit."

"Very good, Jutyr. You may be wondering why we make you learn this, even after you've already become a Brother. The only thing that should matter should be your devotion to He Who Basks In Flames, yes?"

Jutyr felt like it was a trick question. "What are you saying?"

"The Brotherhood expects its devotees to be versed in these things because they affect us. It is useless to deny the other sects of our faith when they too can express their powers. I know many Brothers, some of them Old, some of them Young, who wish to pretend that the world outside our Temple does not exist. I am glad you are not that way."

"Thank you, Brother," Jutyr said, blushing a little.

"Now, you may be wondering why I have asked to speak with you privately. Do you know who I am?"

"You are Brother Rhuikar, one of the Oldest Brothers, and the Brother chosen to represent us on the Emperor's Council."

"Yes, you speak true. What you may not know is each member of the council was asked to pick an apprentice."

Jutyr gasped, his eyes widening. "You mean-"

"Yes. I want you to be my apprentice."

Jutyr got onto the ground, bowing as low as he could. "Brother, you honor me."

"Up, boy. Tomorrow you will accompany me to the Council. Get some sleep."

Jutyr rose to see Rhuikar already leaving the room. He stood there by himself for a second. Suddenly, Ushuon entered the room again. "Well that's wonderful news!"

"You didn't see the High Master?" Jutyr asked, still in a daze.

"Not yet. I wanted to hear this first. I'm glad for you." He grinned at his friend, slapping his back. Jutyr chuckled nervously.

"I suppose I should get some sleep. You need to see the High Master."

"Yes," Ushuon sighed, "I suppose I do." He turned to walk out of the room. He looked over his shoulder, throwing Jutyr a strange glance. "Be careful what you dream." With that he was gone.

Jutyr was left standing there, unsure of what to call back. By the time he got out of his daze, Ushuon was long gone. "What... what was that supposed to mean?"

they twist and they turn and they tear and they reap where they do not sow

The next morning, Rhuikar personally woke Jutyr up. "Get up, apprentice. We will be leaving in five minutes."

Jutyr rocketed out of his bed, throwing his robes on as quickly as possible. He brushed his hair quickly, smoothing it down. Rhuikar watched him quietly, saying nothing. He only nodded when Jutyr presented himself before him.

The pair walked down the hallway around the central chamber, saying nothing to each other. The hallway was a little more packed with people as Brothers and Sisters made their way

through the hall, looking for their rooms or for things to do. Some stopped to chat with each other, making plans or telling stories. Some even went in the same direction as Jutyr and Rhuikar: towards the exit, to run errands in the Capitol.

The main gate, large, iron and ornate, was opened wide for all to pass in and out. It let into a simple foyer where rows of chairs faced a statue of an odd creature wrapped in fire. They did not let outsiders go in past this point.

"Is that really what He Who Basks In Flames looks like?" Jutyr whispered to Rhuikar, who immediately burst into laughter.

"No, no, boy. That is simply an artist's interpretation. The Gods have no physical form that mortals can comprehend or grasp." He wiped a tear out of his eye, heavily amused at Jutyr's question. Jutyr felt ashamed, hiding his blushing face from his master.

The pair went outside into the Capitol. The Temple was located on the southern edge of the large city. It was a huge place; buildings and palaces more ornate than forests and taller than mountains made up the center, while smaller but equally as grand houses and shops filled in the gaps and spilled out onto the plains surrounding the city. It was truly a hub of civilization, but one could expect no less from the Capital of the Empire, home of the Platinum Throne.

A tall building stood out just off the center of the city. It was rounded at the top, wider at its base than its peak. It was part stone and part glass, and green light constantly shone from inside. "There is the House of the Platinum Throne. The Council is meeting there with the Emperor."

Jutyr swallowed. He was going to be meeting the Emperor of the North. He had never thought he would even be apprentice to Rhuikar, let alone this. He followed the Old Brother through the city, marveling at his circumstances.

The city was crowded as usual, with people bustling around running on errands. Various men called out their wares on the side of streets; rugs, animals, and even one who sold only cabbage. Jutyr would have felt lost had he not had Rhuikar to guide him. They traveled their way through the city, past the people, the horses, the men carrying carts and the children playing.

Before Jutyr knew it, the House of the Platinum Throne loomed over them, a giant testimony to the might of the Empire.

"It was built long ago by the Commune. You know the Commune?" Rhuikar whispered, leaning over to Jutyr.

"Those who worship He Who Sleeps In The Earth."

"Yes. For a time, they had fought against the Empire, but when the Empire, along with our Brotherhood and its weaponry, brought them down, they offered it as a sign of peace, and have been friends to the Emperor ever since." Rhuikar scowled with his last sentence.

They entered into the large building. Many people were gathered into the lobby, where they discussed politics and philosophy. Religion rarely came up; that was the domain of the Great Faith. There were men wearing odd clothing, women running around with serving cups and platters, dressed in lavish yet revealing dresses. Politics was a world completely foreign to Jutyr, and he preferred to keep it that way.

Rhuikar led him towards a large door guarded by two men in intricate armor that made them look like insects. The armor Jutyr knew to have been forged by the Brotherhood, for he had been into the store room and seen the armor they wore. It looked to have had work added on, as if the Emperor had also had other blacksmiths work on it, or had the Commune add stone reinforcements to the metal. Jutyr sniffed in disdain at that possibility.

The guards let Rhuikar pass, nodding to him curtly as he walked by. The room inside was a stairwell, housing a circular set of stairs, wider than many of the halls back in the Temple. The pair walked up, up and up, and Jutyr set about counting the number of stairs. When Rhuikar stopped him at the very top, he had long since passed a thousand and had given up counting.

"You must be quiet. I don't want you to talk at all. You must do whatever I ask, but you only answer to me, or the Emperor. Am I understood?"

Jutyr nodded his head quickly. Rhuikar led him to a door, large and ornate. He pulled it open and led Jutyr in. Inside was a decently sized room, about the same as the Chamber of the Tree in the temple. It housed four chairs in a semicircle facing a larger, silver throne. "This is the Council Chamber. The four representatives meet here, to try and manipulate the Emperor into what they want. The Emperor is a hard man, so it is not easy. The Brotherhood has found favor in recent times due to the skirmishes with the Southerners on our borders, but before that peace kept us from being useful.

"Shouldn't there be five representatives?"

"The Cult of Mist does not partake in this game. They deem it beneath them." He thought for a second. "It very well may be. But we must. The others are already here," Rhuikar said, pointing to the men sitting in the three chairs not designated for Rhuikar with a splash of red. They all had their apprentices standing next to them silently. One of the apprentices was a girl.

Jutyr recognized the representative from the Commune. He did not know his name, but he had seen him before. He was a tall man, and what he wore was a combination of stone and cloth. Jutyr snorted, but Rhuikar silenced him, obviously feeling the sentiment. The Brotherhood did not look kindly on the Commune. In an effort to integrate better into the Empire, they had taken to calling themselves Earthbrothers after the Brotherhood, and many Firebrothers still resented this.

The other two men he did not recognize. The representative for the College, those who worshipped He Who Dreams In Stars, was a thin man, with an emaciated face. He had beady eyes, with wrinkly skin. His apprentice was the girl, and she kept her hood thrown over her head, but Jutyr could see her feminine features from where he stood. The representative from the College turned to look at Jutyr, smiling faintly.

So you are Rhuikar's apprentice, hmmm? Be careful of the games we play. They can be... dangerous.

The voice rang in his head as clear as anything he'd ever heard, but the Collegiate's mouth had not moved. His smile grew a little, but Rhuikar's growling voice grabbed the man's attention.

"Stay out of my apprentice's head, mind mage."

A laugh soared from the other side of the room. It was a short man, short but thickly built. His face was like a mountain range, full of crags and peaks and age. His eyes shimmered with light. “The Collegiates have always had trouble ignoring the beat of their seed, much like you, Firebrother.”

Rhuikar glared at the short man. “And you hardly use it at all, Yesthin. The Skymonks might as well not even have seeds.”

“We do not wish the Insanity upon ourselves. Only the Brotherhood finds glory in that.” Yesthin spit.

“I have not come here to hear the squabbles of petty rivals who wish to have a pissing contest,” rang a voice that made Jutyr jump to attention. It was a powerful, authoritative voice. “I have come to seek advice, and to hear the words of wise men whose devotion to the Gods provide an excellent example to all people. Do not make me think less of you.”

The men turned to acknowledge the owner of the voice, who sat upon the center throne. Jutyr had not seen nor heard him arrive, but now he wondered how he could have missed him. The man was the largest person he had ever seen, and for as much muscle and height he had, he possessed equal amounts of hair. His beard was enormous, stretching down to his chest, and the hair on his head, tied into his braids, fell well past his shoulders. His eyes and nose were the only part of his face visible, and they reminded Jutyr of a savage wolf.

“Emperor,” the men all said in union, bowing. The apprentices, along with Jutyr, murmured the statement as well, bowing their heads.

“You illuminate us,” Rhuikar declared.

“You stabilize us,” said the Earthbrother in the far chair away from Jutyr.

“You teach us,” the Collegiate added.

“You free us.” Yesthin’s statement seemed the end of the formality. The other men sat back down in their seats, but the apprentices remained standing next to their masters.

“Odd, for it seems to me that I would not need a Council if that were the case. If I were really so divine, I would not need to seek advice.”

“You do not seek advice, but discussion, Emperor. The answers you seek will be gleaned by you as you steer our words,” the Collegiate said, appearing to be pleased with his statement.

“You tell me what I seek, Thalram?” The Emperor asked in a dangerous tone.

“No, no, I simply mean that you do not need to rely on the words of old men, no matter how wise or devoted.” His voice shook. Jutyr could not help but smile at the thought of the man being thrown out of the council for his insolence.

The Emperor simply dismissed the whole matter with the wave of his hand. “The Southern Kingdom has been encroaching on the borderlands again. I do not want to take up my banner against the men of the desert, but if I must, I will.”

“Your Divine Grace, if I may inquire, how far into the borderlands has he moved?” Yesthin asked.

"He has moved along the ridges of the Tenglith Mountains, assimilating the coastal lands and some of our villages there. He does not appear to be interested in moving further."

"It seems to me the Southern King has grabbed worthless land, Emperor," said Thalram. "The people there have not sent their tithes in many months."

"This is true. I do not want to risk total war with the South if I can avoid it, especially over land that is contested already, and poor land regardless."

"I have been there myself Your Grace, and it is mostly marshes. The soil is poor and the people make money by not tithing and dealing with the South. You would be giving away land that is already his," the Earthbrother added, a bit sadly. The Commune profited in times of war and rebellion, as their stone additions to armor and fortress were invaluable.

Jutyr was suddenly aware of what was going on. The Collegiate and the Skymonk were arguing in favor of not going to war, while the Earthbrother sadly gave in, because the Commune stood to gain from the prospect of battle. In times of peace, the Empire tended to favor the College and Church over Brotherhood and Commune.

Rhuikar suddenly spoke up. "What Thalram fails to mention is that the land there is a wonderful strategic point if war were to break out. The land there is protected by the Tenglith Mountains, but there is a pass to move troops and equipment through. If they fortify it, the Mountains are impassable to most armies, and the land they protect would make an excellent harbor for the South, wouldn't you think, Emperor?"

The Emperor turned to Rhuikar, silently observing him for a second. "You speak truth, Firebrother. Very well, I will send a scout to see if they have taken the pass. If they have not, I will fortify it. If they have, I will attack at the harbor that we already own, and the people will remember where their allegiances lie."

The other men turned to look at Rhuikar. Thalram and Yesthin both held looks of anger, but the Earthbrother almost had a look of gratitude in his eyes. Both the Brotherhood and Commune would profit from a war, between weaponry and armor. Jutyr could not help but admire his new mentor.

The discussion turned to various matters after that, and the men all debated with each other, trying to gain a favorable position. Jutyr did not know how long they remained there, but it could not have been more than a few hours. The Emperor eventually dismissed them with a wave of his hand, retreating to a doorway that led to the upper, personal chambers of the House.

Rhuikar decided to leave before the other men did, who lingered to chat amongst themselves, or ask their apprentices to get them drinks. Rhuikar leaned over to Jutyr on the way out. "We have scored a major victory here. Too long has the Brotherhood sat by, losing favor in times of peace. The Emperor will have need of us if there is war to be had. I regret that we must share this victory with the Commune, but I will take anything at this point."

They left the House of the Throne, heading back to the Temple. There weren't as many people on the streets, and they took several back roads to save time. They did not talk, but Jutyr could feel the happiness of victory radiating from Rhuikar as they walked.

Jutyr noticed something funny as they walked. A mist was developing. It seemed odd for this part of town; they were not near the docks, and it carried the smell of something other than the sea... something... something like sulfur. There was a shimmer in the mist, a shiver in the air. Jutyr realized what was happening just as the mist collected into a ball of liquid, which forced itself into Rhuikar's mouth. Rhuikar had been too caught up in his thoughts to notice, and now grabbed at his throat, unable to get the ball of water out.

Jutyr reacted as quickly as possible. The Firebrothers always carried a bag on them that contained flammable powder and oil. Jutyr tossed this bag directly at the shimmer in the mist, waiting until the last second to ignite it. It burst out in a fiery wave, immolating the shimmer, and suddenly a man stood there, batting at the flames with his arms, rolling on the ground. Rhuikar gasped out the water as the assassin lost control over his magic.

Jutyr closed the space between them, locking the assassin's arms in a special grip he learned in his grappling lessons. The Firebrothers had always been keen on both sword fighting and martial combat. Jutyr had opted for the martial combat with an emphasis on grappling and disarming.

"Mist cultist," spat Rhuikar in between coughs. "Who sent you? Was it Thalram?"

The assassin did not respond, instead, forcing water into his throat. He sputtered for a moment, and then was still. Jutyr let go of his arms as soon as the man was limp.

"I'll need to get to the bottom of this later. You did well, Jutyr. Thank you for saving my life. I can see my apprenticeship was not misplaced." He smiled a bit, recovering from the altercation.

Jutyr beamed back at him, standing up from the assassin's body.

shadow and fear and pain and death and do you think your gods care? they do not. they do not.

The next few weeks went by plainly. Jutyr did not accompany Rhuikar again to the council, as no council had been called. From what he learned through gossip, the Emperor had discovered a garrison at the pass, and was preparing his troops for a pre-emptive strike on the harbor near the Tenglith Mountains. Excited whispers about what this meant for the Brotherhood echoed through the temple.

Jutyr had not seen Ushuon since that day in the Chamber of the Tree, though Jutyr visited it often under the pretense of meditation at the same time of night. Rhuikar said nothing of it while they studied together, dismissing the issue as irrelevant. Jutyr had begun to worry about his friend.

it is not light and yet it blinds me. it is not noise and yet it deafens me.

Jutyr awoke from his nightmare. There was something wrong, but the dream was fading too quickly for him to grasp onto it and remember the details. He shrugged to himself and got out of bed. He couldn't recall a night out of the last ten where he did not awake from sleep like this.

He threw on his robes and headed down the halls. They were quiet, but he could hear passionate moans from Sisters and Brothers performing the rituals behind their doors. It was not always restricted to heterosexual intercourse, but most often it was. He shivered. Neither of those things appealed to him very much, though he did know a few Sisters who would gladly take him in.

He headed to the main chamber, opening up the door with his fire again. He was struck with a sense of déjà vu as he did so, but he shrugged it off. There was a burst of steam and the door opened.

Waiting for him in the main chamber was Ushuon, standing there alone. He was naked and tears were rolling down his cheeks. He turned to face Jutyr, a grin stained in blood on his face. Jutyr realized to his horror that Ushuon had been biting himself and tearing off chunks of his flesh with his teeth.

"I... I taste good, they say. They can taste for me," Ushuon managed out between pained sobs. "They are all around us, the children. They are not the father, but they are here. The father does not care. Not our father, not any father." He bit himself, digging hard into his arm. He swallowed the flesh before Jutyr could rush over to stop him.

"Ushuon!" Jutyr cried out, "What have you done to yourself?"

Ushuon giggled. "The Old Brothers want me to Ascend. They say I am ready. The children tell me I am ready. They say they will take my mind to be with the father. But I have seen the father, and the other fathers too. He Who Basks In Flames... We worship him but he does not care for us. Do you think he cares about you, Jutyr?" Ushuon turned towards his friend, all his intent on him.

Jutyr stammered. "I... you... you are babbling about nonsense!"

"The blind do not call the world nonsense because they cannot see it," Ushuon admonished, assuming his most patriarchal voice. He giggled to himself. "They want me to Ascend. I do not. The children want to take my mind and leave my body here. They want to take me to be with the father, but I have seen the father. Did I tell you I saw the father? He Who Basks In Flames?"

"Where... where did you see him?"

"I saw him in my darkest dreams. We are a mote of dust in his eye, nothing more. The other fathers... they do not care either. They do not notice a small world siphoning a drop of strength from their ocean. They do not see us." He paused for a moment, breathing loudly through his nose. "I have a choice, my friend."

"What is your choice, Ushuon?" Jutyr was now grasping Ushuon by his arms so that he could not bite himself anymore.

"You remember how when we first ingested the seed, that they taught us we must control the fire in us, or else we would be consumed by it? That is what the passion rituals are for, so that we can control our bodies even in that heightened state of emotion and arousal. That is why we meditate so that our seed does not destroy us."

"Ushuon, what are you saying?"

"I am saying this, Jutyr. I am saying I can let the children take my mind to be with the father. I can be with all the fathers and be broken and remade every second, just to be broken again. I can drink from truth like a fountain, and puke it up again because I cannot contain the vile fluid. I can be amongst the heavens, always burning, always dying, always living. Or, I can give in."

Jutyr only stammered.

"Be careful what you dream, brother."

There was light all around him as fire engulfed him. He used his seed to block the flames from burning him, but his hands were scorched in the explosion. When the light died, there was nothing remaining of Ushuon. He was truly gone. The world turned to black as he heard someone rush into the room. He fell over, unconscious.

hate hatred hat hate ugh in the corner of your eye on the back of your neck hate

"He's waking up."

Jutyr opened his eyes. He was in an unfamiliar room with two men he did not recognize. There might have been a nightmare, just like every other night, but something seemed more important than far away dreams. Ushuon popped into his head, but he was unsure why.

"Where is Ushuon?" he asked.

One of the two men, the taller one, with a trim goatee but unkempt hair, looked at him sadly. "Ushuon died, Jutyr. We... rescued you from what he did."

Jutyr said nothing, letting the memory flow back. A lump developed in his throat. "I... I see. What happened to him?"

"He went Insane. He succumbed to that which all devotees of the Five Gods must succumb eventually, unless they die first. But he opted out instead, choosing to die and go wherever it is we go after death. Jutyr, we're offering you a choice like the one Ushuon had."

"What choice?"

The other man, bald and medium sized, with a thin face, placed a seed on the table, much like the ones from the Tree in the Temple.

"You could eventually 'Ascend' or go Insane, however you want to call it, or you could die, like Ushuon. We are offering a third choice. We call this the Seed of Apostasy. No one knows we have it or others like it. Most have not heard of it, save a few of the Oldest Brothers, or the head of the College. But we have it, and we've kept it safe for situations like these. This Seed

will destroy the seed inside of you, but will not kill you. You will be completely cut off from He Who Basks In Flames. You will never again make magic, or call upon that power. But you will not go Insane either, and you will not have to fight your body to keep it from burning up."

Jutyr picked up the seed. It was about an inch wide. He examined it for a second and placed it back on the table, not saying anything.

"You would be branded an Apostate to the Faith, and would be hunted. You could never live in the Capitol again. But you would be free from that reality of which you have gleaned."

"How do I know that what Ushuon told me was just the ramblings of an insane man?"

"They are pretty consistent ramblings if that is the truth. Everyone who has gone through the Insanity talks about the fathers, or the Gods as you know them, and the children, and going to be where the fathers are. Some die, and some bodies stay alive, but comatose for the rest of their natural life."

"I see."

"The choice is yours. We leave the seed with you. If you take it... we'll know. We'll find you." The two men left the room quietly.

He gasped awake again, realizing that he had just awoken from a dream. He sighed, stunned at how vivid the dream had been. Then he noticed the seed sitting on his end table. His eyes bugged, and he grabbed it quickly, stuffing it under his pillow.

There was a knock on the door. Rhuikar entered. "Hello, Jutyr. I'm glad to see you awake. It's been several days since... since the incident. How are you doing?"

"I am okay. I feel good."

"Be careful with your hands. They have been burned badly."

Jutyr looked at his hands. They were carefully wrapped in linen strips and he felt cold underneath the wraps. He knew if he took them off they would reveal scarred and burnt skin. He sighed.

"I am sorry, Jutyr. We had been trying to help Ushuon, but he was just uncontrollable."

Jutyr raised a hand to stop Rhuikar. It was surprisingly disrespectful from his position, but Rhuikar heeded it anyway. "It is alright. The Ascension... not everyone makes it through."

"Indeed. But I am disturbing your rest. You must need a lot of it. I will see you when you recover." Rhuikar stood up to leave the room, stopping by the door. "You might be pleased to know that the Emperor officially declared war on the South after a successful battle over the harbor of Tenglith."

Jutyr managed a smile. Rhuikar left the room quietly, gingerly closing the door. Jutyr waited a minute before pulling the seed out from under his pillow. He looked at it, and thought about eating it. His world would change forever. He could not live in the Capitol, and he might always be hunted for what he was.

He stuffed the seed back under his pillow. I will sleep, and if I dream again of... of the fathers.. then I will take the seed. He closed his eyes, falling into a deep slumber.

February 2012

Prompt: Write a fantasy story in only 10 sentences.

Winner: jp_in_nj

JP lives in New Jersey, USA, where he works days as a technical writer, evenings as a parent, and occasional nights as the customer support monkey for a popular and very productive SF&F online writing workshop. Sometimes, he writes.

Allisande Always Comes Back

I've left her in restaurants, left her at gas stations, left her in airports and on ocean liners. The time I left her in the Sahara, it took eleven months before she came home to climb into bed with me and my new wife.

I've killed her seven times now, but every time she opens the door, it's the same: warm wet kisses and crimson tears and how I have missed you, my dear lovely human. It took me a while to realize what she was saying, that true love never dies.

So the last time I left her, just before the Kemal brothers found me in their vault, I watched her swallow the diamonds one by one, the adoration in her eyes at war with the bite of the stones and the knowledge that she would need to die yet again if her body was to fade back to wherever it was that she came from before the witch had brought her here and rooted her to my soul.

The tongue I'd paid for the love spell had been a harsh price at the time, but twenty years later it seemed a bargain. All the Kemal brothers could get from me was my screams, and while no one likes to hurt, for the payoff I knew was coming, I was willing to suffer.

And suffer I did. But Allisande always comes back.

April 2012

Prompt: Write a scene featuring dialogue between at least two characters. The scene must be solid dialogue (no attributions, descriptions, etc.), and cannot exceed 1,000 words. The characters cannot be identified by names or descriptors (i.e. "the tall man"), but we must be able to tell them apart.

Winner: Ian Michael Everett

A Grievance

"Hello, sir. We apologize for the long wait, and that a representative of the king could not see you personally. I am a representative of a representative of the king. How may I help you?"

"Yes, I would like to discuss a grievance with my town."

"And what town are you from, sir?"

"Helsrind."

"That's in the Falvarath county, correct?"

"Yes, yes."

"Beautiful mountains. I've dreamed about owning a house up there."

"Expensive, really. Sometimes not worth the payments. And also there is my grievance. So... if we could..."

"Of course sir, sorry sir. Just a woman's pipe dream. What grievance would you like to file?"

"The good people of Helsrind have ostracized me, calling me a killer of children, a raper of women, etcetera..."

"Oh my goodness, sir, that's terrible! Do you know why they might have called you these things?"

"I'm an introvert, I don't like to associate with others – so you can imagine the challenge for me right now- and I may dabble in a bit of necromancy."

"Introvert, lack of association with others and necromancy- wait, what?"

"Necromancy, yes."

"..."

"Oh don't you start that too!"

“Sir, necromancy is illegal and endangers lives. It’s no wonder people have shunned you.”

“Necromancy is not illegal! I have read-“

“Sir, you’re making a scene.”

“I. have. Read. The sub-laws regarding necromancy, and alchemic necromancy is not illegal as its byproducts may provide cures to diseases and other beneficial potions!”

“You have to have papers for that, sir.”

“I do!”

“Can you show them to me, sir?”

“...Well I don’t have them with me.”

“Then I can’t verify that you are licensed to perform alchemic necromancy. How much of what you do is of that nature?”

“Part of what I do is alchemic necromancy.”

“And the other magics you indulge in?”

“Eeeehhhhh... regular necromancy.”

“...”

“Well how am I supposed to practice alchemic necromancy if I don’t have a working knowledge of regular necromancy?”

“Sir, I’m not asking for excuses. Have you at any time used necromancy to raise the dead? To reanimate flesh that may or may not have been attached to its original host?”

“I am not saying anything that will incriminate me.”

“Sir, you already have. But this conversation is not being recorded, nor is under surveillance. However, if you do make a scene, there are guards here that will not hesitate to lock you away or even execute you.”

“... Yes, but not a whole body. I have reanimated the arm of crippled child.”

“And why did you do that, sir?”

“He was one of Helrind’s young men! Do you think I was going to just let him be a cripple for the rest of his life!”

“Calm down, sir. People are staring.”

“...”

“The townspeople could have sent him to the temple of Shirald. I understand it’s only a few leagues away.”

“Helrind has a deep seated hatred for Shirald. The next closest temple is near here, and the journey is perilous. Not to mention expensive. Helrind can barely afford protection, let alone journeys to temples.”

"If the journey is so perilous, then how are you here, sir?"

"Well, I am a necromancer."

"Noted, sir. So they sought you out? A known necromancer?"

"I... er, may have impersonated a priest."

"... sir, I would recommend not telling me anything anymore."

"Well you keep asking questions! I thought I was the one who was supposed to be filing grievances!"

"Your grievances have been noted. But may I ask, what happened to the boy you healed?"

"He got the rot. His arm turned on him, then decayed. The decay spread to the rest of his body. That I'm not proud of."

"Only priest magic can fully heal, sir. You should have known this."

"Well, damn it, woman, I had to try!"

"Sir."

"..."

"So is this when the people turned on you?"

"Yes. I was working on a way to reverse it with alchemy, but they tore down my house and broke all of my equipment. For helping them."

"It didn't sound very helpful, sir. With all due respect."

"That's the problem! There is no respect for necromancers!"

"Well, sir, most necromancers have been notably evil."

"Not me!"

"The magic has been so corrupted by those who have used it, that it is unredeemable, sir. That's the reason alchemic necromancy is still legal. The effects are brought about by substances, not the pool of dark magic necromancers call upon."

"... you know, you know a lot about necromancy."

"I studied it, in my classes, sir."

"What school?"

"Sir?"

"I asked, what school?"

"Jur's End, sir. Here, in the capitol."

"How old are you ma'am?"

"I am twenty nine years old, sir."

“So you were in the school ten years ago.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, see, that’s funny. I am an alumni of Jur’s End, myself. Of around twenty years ago. I’m younger than I look, I know, but well...”

“Yes, sir, necromancy.”

“But I was around during the scandal involving the Headmaster Shiro, before it was the Headmaster Geral. You know, he was put away for necromancy. Eventually executed. He was one of those evil ones, it turns out.”

“Yes, sir.”

“But the unofficial policy of the school was that necromancy, even its history, would not be addressed, even mentioned in the school. Any teacher caught would be immediately expelled.”

“What are you suggesting, sir?”

“That you couldn’t have possibly been taught about necromancy at school, and learned it from an outside source.”

“... yes, sir.”

“But now you do this. Why?”

“I was never talented in other magics, sir. So I took a desk job.”

“I see. Well, my grievance has been filed, yes?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll make sure it gets looked into.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“...”

“What?”

“I hate this job.”

“I can help with that.”

June 2012

Prompt: Write a fantasy poem or lyrics for a fantasy song. The poem/song can be anything from a haiku to an epic poem.

Winner: Brooke

Brooke has been telling stories (most of them fantastical) for as long as she can remember. Her current focus is an urban fantasy series that she hopes to reveal in the near future. When she is not writing, she works professionally in the world of theatre. Brooke lives in the United States with her husband, Jason, and her cat, Django.

Dragon Slayer: A Sonnet

The knight stands tall, in bright shining armor,
sword in his hand and a shield on his arm.
He's the hero of peasant and farmer,
killing villains, keeping maidens from harm.

The white knight rides his steed forth to the cave.
A fiery heat billows from within.
Many have faced her, and though they were brave,
She ate them before the fights could begin.

"I come to slay you," our hero declares.
The great beast speaks with a sigh and sits up.
"Do not meddle with a dragon's affairs.
for you're crunchy and taste good with ketchup."

Her strong jaws snap as she gobbles the knight.
Unhappy ending: a dragon's delight.

August 2012

Prompt: Using twists on already existing races, such as fey, orcs, elves, dwarves, or The Planet of Hats trope.

Winner: Lesley Taylor

I have always invented stories, but it took me a while to write them down. Once started I couldn't stop.

My first fantasy novel, Heart-Brother, was long-listed in the 2011 Mslexia Women's Novel Competition. I am about to start submitting my second novel, Changeling, a dark fantasy, the first in a planned series.

In between novels, I write short stories, some of which are also fantasy. One of these, Quarterday was published in the March 2015 Mslexia magazine.

She

She was alone, the only one of her kind. Soaring effortlessly above the mountains, perpetually focused earthward as she circled north, she gloried in their familiar outline, now gleaming bright against denser skies. Next time, their mood might be different. Until then, she silently bade them farewell.

Following the earth's curve, she wheeled seaward. First the little sea and then the ocean, darkening as the sun set.

Wrapped in the arms of night, she flew on, her great wings stretched to minimise effort.

Tireless, feeling no hunger, she had no need to land. Below her, lesser fliers hovered and flapped, inferior to her in every way. They could not, as she did, maintain a level flight and constant speed, or extract and synthesise nutrients from the air.

Once, curious, she had descended to inspect them. Seen at close range, the lesser beings were blocky, ungainly things with opaque bodies, sharp claws and beaks, ugly in comparison to her glossy translucent body and wings. Fearing her, they dived and scattered. Regrouping, the larger among them swooped close to her head, beaks and claws aimed at her great all-seeing eyes.

Startled, but unafraid, she tilted her wings and rose. Her downdraught sent them spinning out of control. None came close to touching her.

Her mind tickling with amusement and distain, she soon left them far behind.

#

The rising sun shone through her. Delighting in its warmth, she rolled, straightened, twitched her feelers and rolled again. Below her, the ocean sparkled, its tiny islets strung out in curved lines.

Sometimes she landed to bask on the hot pale sands. Today she preferred to look rather than feel.

She had no wish for irritating sandy grit in the folds of her wings. There was not always a convenient cloudburst for cleansing.

#

Soaring through a crackling storm, she felt something strange, a pang deep inside, new and disturbing. Long after she flew into calmer skies the feeling remained and sharpened. Hunger.

Puzzled and anxious, both emotions unfamiliar, she glided on. Another sensation made its insidious way into her mind. Weariness. Doubting herself for the first time, she spiralled earthward, her body growing heavier – its load too great for her fragile wings.

Struggling to hold her wings level, she landed awkwardly, her limbs collapsing under the weight of her body, her wings crumpling. She attempted to call on her usual strength and failed. Her sight began to mist; her wings stiffened, growing as opaque as her body. Failing to understand what was happening, she made one last effort to stand, to fly.

Agony ripped through her and she fell, too weak to try again. Shaking her head against the cloudiness covering her eyes, she watched the extrusion from her body wriggle and drop clear. A small winged creature emerged from its cocoon, stretched, turned to the adjacent cocoon and ate voraciously. It crawled to the next feast, ate and crawled on, repeating its meal until nothing remained. Replete, it stretched again, opened its wings and flew, but she saw nothing of its flight.

#

She was alone, the only one of her kind. Soaring effortlessly, she saw peaks reaching for the sky.

Mountains, she decided to name them.

September 2012

Prompt: Write a complete story in 1,000 words or less. The catch is that two of the following three sentences must appear in your story.

1. The cut was more than just irritating.

2. He had never seen such riches.

3. The gurgling was repulsive.

Winner: Doe22

The Binding

"This is it," thought Aleni, "today I either become a mage or die trying."

Everything was ready: the circle drawn, the fires lit, the words spoken. She had purified herself, body and mind, in preparation. There was no reason to delay, no reason but the fear of what lay ahead.

Ten years had passed since Aleni first sought to become a mage. All the work, the pain, the humiliation that came with being a mage's apprentice came down to this. If she succeeded in reaching the other side and binding a spirit to her will she would be a mage in full. But failure would leave her lost forever, one more tortured soul on the other side.

Taking a breath to compose herself, knowing her every move was watched by the entire council of mages, Aleni stepped forward and knelt in the circle. Quickly, leaving herself no time for hesitation, she cut a line across her palm with a flint knife. Barely registering the pain, she pressed her hand to the last incomplete line at the center of the circle, completing the intricate design with her own blood.

A great light flared at the edge of the circle. Aleni took her hand away and rose back to her feet. Complete now, the circle would sustain itself until she broke it. Aleni looked all around but could see nothing beyond the wall of light. She felt the pain in her hand as an irritant, irrelevant to her greater challenge. She waited.

Soon a whispering began, softly, almost unnoticeable at first, but growing louder all the time. Closer...louder...Aleni could hear different voices crying out to her now.

"Help me," said one.

"Please, oh God, please make it stop," a woman, pleading.

"He hurt me," a child this time. "Daddy hurt me."

The voices piled atop each other, a deafening roar of plaintive cries. Aleni could see the spirits now, vague shadows moving and contorting just out of reach beyond the light. They stretched and bent in unnatural shapes, almost human but subtly wrong. Each one begged Aleni to save them.

This was the first trick. The spirits sought the taste of life. Sensing a living being in their realm, they sought to lure Aleni out of the circle's safety. First they would plead, then they would tempt, then they would attack. Aleni knew what was in store. She waited and watched the spirits until they faded back into silence.

Now came the second trick: temptation. The light and shadows shifted into glorious shapes and colors. Aleni looked out at fields of gold and jewels, exotic palaces and monuments. She had never seen such riches. She took in the sight unmoved, knowing it for the deception it was.

The spirits realized their failure quickly this time, and swept away the illusions. All was light and silence again. Aleni braced herself.

Suddenly, a roaring wind swept up and a great pounding beat against the walls of the circle. Aleni's blood bound her to it, and though the spirits could not touch her, she felt each blow. The pain was terrible, radiating out from the cut in her palm. The cut was more than just irritating now, it was a risk to her very life. Having failed to trick her with pity or greed, the spirits sought to break Aleni's will with pain, and by so doing break the circle which protected her.

Driven to the ground, Aleni focused everything on her mental defenses. Screaming in pain, she held against the spirits' onslaught until finally, the attack ceased. The wind subsided. The spirits could not sustain a long assault, for each blast drained their power. Aleni drew in long, shaking breaths. Gathering herself, she stood and prepared for the final, most dangerous part of her test.

To bind a spirit Aleni must leave the circle. It had been both her protection from the spirits and a tool to wear them down. Having now expended themselves, it would be easier for Aleni to bind one. Still, this was the most dangerous moment. Aleni would stand fully in the other side, the spirits' home, unprotected. Her life would depend on her training and the strength of her will. Walking to the edge of the circle, Aleni took one last breath and stepped forward.

The light was all around her now, beautiful and bright, but Aleni had no time to enjoy it. The spirits rushed forward to drink away her life. Aleni raised her hand up to the closest spirit. She felt it twine about her body. A phantom tongue ran along the cut in her palm, eager for a taste of her life's blood. This was what Aleni had waited for. Just as her blood had bound the circle, so too would it bind this spirit.

Focusing her will, Aleni screamed a word of power. The spirit voiced a high, keening wail and attempted to break away. Aleni felt it fighting her, claws scraping against her mind. She bore down, and forced the spirit to submit. The keening died suddenly and the spirit was drawn into her body through the cut in her hand.

Aleni felt the spirit's power bloom within her. As her bond with the spirit was completed Aleni's body began to glow with the light of the other side. The other spirits fell away in fear. Unafraid of them now, Aleni returned to the circle. She summoned up her newly bound spirit's powers to transport her back to her own world. Light flared again.

Aleni reared back, gasping, her body on fire. She was back where she had begun, in the dark, surrounded by the council of mages. She looked at her hand, at the now healed cut upon her palm. Drawing up her power, she called light to illuminate the room. Aleni stood before the assembled mages as an equal and knew that she had succeeded, she was a mage.

October 2012

Prompt: Write a fantasy story with horror leanings (sometimes known as "dark fantasy"). Ghosts, vampires, zombies, and werewolves are welcome, but feel free to come up with original monsters of your own!

Winner: songwind

Rap Once For Yes

I didn't think anything would really happen when Joey suggested we have a seance. I mean, who hasn't seen that kind of thing in the movies? It's all old ladies rapping on tables and weird lights in crystal balls.

So when Joey suggested we go to the local cemetery on Halloween and try to talk to the dead, I played along. I figured it was just an opportunity for the two of us to spook the others with our special abilities.

"I think it sounds fun," I said. "We can wear our costumes and bring candy and stuff. Any if anyone else comes lurking in the cemetery, we'll scare the pants off of them."

What the rest of the group didn't know is that Joey and I didn't just study at R. Bradbury Middle School. We had classes after school and on the weekends. We were honest to goodness wizard's apprentices. My mom was a healer and a seer, so I was learning plenty about how to keep people in good working order and find things that are hidden. Joey also lived with his master, but it wasn't one of his parents. All the other adults just called him Joey's "guardian." Joey's master was a necromancer.

Before you get too wound up and start thinking I was palling around with a zombie master, necromancy isn't really like that. Well, I guess you can go that route, but mostly necromancers are sort of like caretakers of the dead. They make sure spirits rest easy, put down anything less scrupulous wizards raise from the grave, that sort of thing. And sometimes, they communicate with spirits.

Bill fancied himself the manly man of the group, so he couldn't back out of anything Joey and I would do. So it really only left the girls.

"My dad has a Ouija board," said Katie. She seemed to like the idea. The problem was her best friend, Sarah. She'd decided she was too cynical to go around believing in things. We all turned and stared at her.

"Fine. Fine!" Sarah said at last. "We'll go in the stupid graveyard tomorrow and have a 'seance' if it makes you happy. And Joey can push the Ouija pointer and claim it's not him. I'll bring my sketch pad and make some rubbings, so at least my evening won't be a total waste."

We didn't have that much time before things started up for the evening, so we all headed home to get ready. I walked with Joey for a bit, trying to find out what he was up to.

"I'm not planning on a funny-voices and table-knocking seance," he said. "Jim taught me how to speak with the recent dead. As long as someone's been buried in the area in the past week, I should be able to get in touch."

We set off in our separate directions after a little more small talk. I was already starting to think about what I had that would make a good costume. After a bit of deliberation I decided to go with "mummy." I was pretty sure we had enough ACE bandages.

#

The cemetery where we were meeting was just a few blocks from my house next to the oldest Catholic church in the city. According to Jim, there were graves in that cemetery from as far back as 1745. Its newer section opened decades ago, and while it wasn't abandoned, it hadn't been modernized, either. The lack of internal light posts of wide drives made for a deliciously spooky atmosphere.

We all met at the front gate of the cemetery. It looked like I was the only one who hadn't been planning to dress up until today. Sarah had her art folder, which meshed surprisingly well in her Raven costume. She was the superheroine, not the bird, complete with gray leggings and a deeply hooded cape. Bill had on a plastic breast plate and helmet for the gladiator look. It showed off the fact that he was in the best shape of all the guys, but he looked cold. Katie was the first of our friends to embrace the trampy side of girls' Halloween costumes. She was some sort of vampire, complete with cape, but instead of traditional formal wear, her dress had a miniskirt and a really deep neckline. I was uncomfortably aware that she'd really started filling out since the last time I looked. She had her family's Ouija board in its box under one arm. Joey was in full wizard regalia - blue robes and pointed hat, complete with silver moons and stars. He had a backpack slung over one shoulder. I guessed it was full of seance gadgets. My wrappings were under a cheesy pair of my dad's old Bermuda shorts and a flowered shirt, so I wasn't even missing my jacket. I hadn't brough along anything except what I could fit in my pockets - my pen knife, house keys, wallet, and some change.

"Uh oh," said Sarah, pointing into the cemetery where a few flashlights could be seen, "looks like we weren't the only ones with this idea."

"Don't worry," Joey said, "that's not where we'll be going anyway."

"Where are we going?" asked Katie.

"You'll see."

Everyone had remembered a flashlight, so there was no trouble navigating through the unlit headstones under the old trees. We startled a couple of high school kids making out behind

one of the bigger monuments, but once they saw we were moving on they ignored us. The moon was full that night, casting the area outside the beams in a silver light. It was more pretty than creepy, really. I said as much.

"You'll see," Joey said again. He was eating this stuff up.

We trekked through the silent cemetery, and Joey showed no signs of stopping. It wasn't long before I realized what he meant about the light. We were headed to the oldest part of the cemetery, a heavily wooded section that jutted off at ninety degrees to the fence around the main boneyard. The original church had burned down hundreds of years ago. The old graveyard and its low stone wall were all that remained.

The trees grew close together, and their canopies tangled up to make a dense, rattling roof. Enough dried up leaves remained on the trees to block the moonlight. It was a different world under those trees.

Joey walked directly across the uneven ground of the plots to a large stone with a flat top. He set his backpack down on top of it and started unpacking. He handed me a thing blanket, which I unfolded to make a place to sit.

Bill's flashlight doubled as a lantern. It was suddenly possible to see our surroundings without shining a spotlight on them. This outing was getting cozier by the minute.

I looked at the engravings on the headstone, thrown into sharp relief by the lantern, and all my feelings of coziness disappeared. "Gerald Peltier," it said, "1804-1847. A Wise Man."

I jumped up and ran to the other side of the stone with Joey. "What the hell are you doing?" I whispered sharply.

"What?"

"You said you scouted this place. You picked Gerald Peltier's tombstone on purpose? Are you insane?"

"The man died nearly two hundred years ago, Seth." Joey said slowly, like he was talking to a little kid. "I'm sure the Butcher of Birmingham was put to rest a long time ago."

Joey and I had both learned about Peltier as part of our extracurricular studies. He'd been a necromancer, like Joey's Master. No one recorded exactly what set him off, but he began to raise the dead and tried to use them to take control of the town. Hundreds of people had died before one of the Sheriff's deputies had managed to shoot him. He was the only bad wizard our state had ever produced.

And Joey wanted to ave a seance on his grave.

"Look, man, I just think it's pushing our luck," I said, "Let's move to another grave. Maybe at the very back of the main area."

"I said he's been gone to the Beyond for ages. Jim's great grandfather saw to it. Being this far from the new graves means we won't have to worry about getting swamped. Peltier's just for atmosphere."

I sighed and walked back around the stone. I'd just have to hope that Joey knew what he was talking about. The little circle of light didn't seem welcoming anymore. I felt like I was trapped in it, and its brightness meant I couldn't really see what was coming for us on the outside.

Katie had set up the board, so I tried to focus on the Ouija experiment. I concentrated on expanding my senses, so I could see any supernatural forces at work on the pointer or the board. Katie and Bill took the first turn. Once they were both settled, the pointer started to move in a gentle circle.

"Okay, I'll ask first," said Katie. "Is there a spirit with us?"

The pointer slowed, then crept across the board to the space marked 'YES'. Katie oohed softly, and Sarah scoffed. There had been no glimmer of magic around the white plastic.

"Sweet," said Bill. "What's your name, Spirit?"

The pointer was still boringly mundane as it started to creep toward the 'B'. Then, halfway there it lit up to my senses and jerked both kids toward the 'J' and stopped there. Bill's hands came off the pointer as it stopped suddenly. He and Katie looked at each other, surprised.

"I didn't do that," said Bill. "Did you?"

"No way," she replied. Katie's eyes were bright with excitement. Even Sarah was paying attention.

Bill put his fingers back on the pointer, and it jerked again, this time to the 'A'. Katie and Bill were ready this time, and kept their hands on the pointer. '-SON' followed in short order. The pointer stayed bright with magical power as it danced over the board.

The pointer's jerky, straight line movement continued, inscribing a star over the board. Bill and Katie were getting used to the thing's movement now, and kept up.

"Ask it something else," said Sarah.

"Why aren't you resting, Jason?" "Why are you still here with us?"

The pointer inscribed more pentagrams, and the amount of power built up in it continued to grow. After three more circuits, it lurched toward the 'I'. Katie shrieked. 'WANT' followed quickly after. The pointer stopped moving in the center of the board.

"I guess he left," said Bill. He sat up slightly but kept his hands on the pointer.

Katie and bill both shouted in alarm as the pointer zipped away to the end of the alphabet. Katie's fingers stayed with it, but Bill lost track of it and sat back on his rear end. The pointer continued moving with just one user.

V

E

N

Katie screamed in pain, and the smell of burning filled the air.

G

E

“Katie, let go!” I shouted.

A

“I can’t! Help me!” Katie sobbed. Sarah and Bill started backing away.

N

C

“Joey! Now would be a good time!”

Joey’s voice cut across the noise, pitched low and strong. “Unquiet spirit, I call you to me! Unquiet spirit, do not torment the living! Unquiet spirit, the path to your rest is with me!”

I turned to Joey. He had laid out a cloth embroidered with the magical diagrams that his Master used in his work on the top of the tombstone. It glowed with the power he had called into it, in the mundane world as well as to my enhanced senses.

“What the hell is going on?” Sarah asked. “If this is some kind of practical joke, it’s not very damned funny. Ha ha, let’s spook the atheist.”

“Not everything is about you, Sarah!” Katie screamed. She was bent double over her hands, and tears ran down her face. The pointer of the Ouija continued to dart back and forth over the board, spelling ‘VENGEANCE’ over and over.

I crouched down beside Katie, and reached gently for her wrists. “Let me see,” I said, trying to be soothing.

“No! Oh, God, oh Jesus, it hurts!”

“I know, that’s why we need to look. We need to see how bad it is.” As soon as I got my hands on Katie’s wrists, my magic told me it was bad. I had never seen burns this bad, but I thought they probably went all the way to the bones. There wasn’t a thing I could do about it, either. Trauma this severe would require Mom. I was afraid that even if I couldl get in touch with Mom, Katie was going to lose her fingertips. I tried to send soothing through her wrists and into her hands. It seemed to help a little, because Katie stopped wailing, but continued to rock and sob.

“Sarah, do you have your phone?”

“What?” Sarah was totally rattled. “Oh, of course! I’ll call 911.”

After falling, Bill had continued to move away from the Ouija board, and was now scrambling to his feet. He gave Katie one wide-eyed look, then turned and ran toward the main section of the cemetery. I didn’t blame him.

Joey’s voice continued, though it had dropped to a drone. The Ouija’s pointer slowed, then stopped. The aura surrounding the little plastic pointer streamed toward Joey, who was chanting with his eyes closed in concentration.

“Joey, look out,” I cried.

My shout interrupted his concentration, and he looked up at me. “Look out? For wha-”

His head shot back and his eyes rolled up into his head as the magic struck. He choked, then a quiet moan escaped his lips.

"Seth? What's happening to him?" Sarah had dropped her phone, and was staring back and forth between Joey and Katie. "What the hell is going on?"

"Vengeance is what's going on, little girl. Can't you read?" The voice was Joey's, but the words were all wrong. He was speaking in the smooth sing-song accent of the antebellum South. I'd never heard Joey even try to imitate that accent. His family was from New Jersey.

"Joey, don't be stupid. I'm freaking out here," Sarah said. She was starting to cry, and backed away from Joey with her portfolio held up like a shield. "This isn't funny anymore."

"Your Joey would be crushed to know he'd upset you so, my dear, but he's not exactly a going concern anymore. But don't worry, you'll all be together again soon. This whole town is going to go to Satan to pay for what they did to my grandfather."

"Run, Sarah," I said. "I'll help Katie. Just get out of here." I tried to sound braver than I felt, but at least I had a few defenses.

"Now, now, can't have that," said Peltier. He gestured sharply, and the Ouija pointer rose from the board and buried its sharp end in Katie's throat. As the fountain of blood splashed out of her neck to the waiting board, the spirit began laughing with my best friend's mouth. He came around the tombstone and backhanded me to the ground. I fell in front of the next headstone as he laughed again.

Jason Peltier, the hero worshiping grandson of our town's most infamous resident. Oh, no.

I ran. I should have stayed to help Sarah, but I couldn't. I should have tried to stop the bleeding before Katie died, but that laugh got me right in my spine. I took off into the densest part of the trees, looking for a place to hide. I had the idea that I could climb the wall around the old graveyard and lose myself in the small forest that remained behind it on the old church lands.

"Rise! Rise my children, and walk again!" Peltier's voice followed me as I ran. I found a place where three old trees had grown together, and hid behind them. I peeked around the tree to try to see what was happening.

Dirt over the grave closest to me was heaving, like labored breathing. After a moment, a skeletal hand pushed up through the soil. It was followed quickly by a head whose eyes glowed a baleful and sickening green. Its head swiveled unerringly to lock on to me where I hid.

Oh, no. Hades and Jesus and Buddha and anyone else listening, please help us. I scrambled around on the ground and found a thick branch, about two inches wide. It was still green where something had knocked it off a living tree. I took it in both hands like a bat, and ran from behind the tree with a scream. I smacked the skull from the skeleton before it could completely leave its grave, but all around me the plots were heaving and breaking open. I ran for the newer section of the cemetery as quickly as I could. I had the idea that maybe the heavier caskets and better embalming techniques would stop the corpses there from rising.

I saw the cemetery wall fall away to my left as the area opened up to the larger plots. From ahead I heard the confused and pained screaming of the high school couple we'd surprised earlier. The new cemetery was no safer.

For the moment I was clear of any of the walking dead. I took a chance and ran for the wall. It was higher here in the new section, but still only about six feet. I jumped as high as I could, and scrambled until my elbows were over the top of the wall. The ground was soft from recent rains, and stayed flat outside the wall. Jumping from that height probably wouldn't even hurt my feet.

As I gathered myself to drag my body the rest of the way to the top of the wall, I felt a hand close over my ankle. I shrieked in surprise and kicked out with my other foot, but the iron grip on my shin dragged me backward and I flopped onto the ground, biting my tongue. I felt coppery blood well up in my mouth.

"Why did you leave me, Seth?" I looked up in horror to see Sarah. The hood of her costume was down, and her neck canted grotesquely to the side and lay flush against her shoulder. Her eyes glowed the same sick yellow as the skeleton I'd destroyed. She raised a fist and clubbed me in the head where I knelt. "Why?"

I scrambled away from my friend, screaming. I stood up, limping where her grip had injured something in my ankle. "I'm sorry, Sarah, I'm so sorry."

"He knows where you live now, Seth. He'll be going after your dad, next." The corpse smiled. The extreme angle of her neck pulled the other side of her mouth open and turned the smile into a grimace.

I swung my club at her head. Bark scraped my hands and the zombie staggered backwards, but kept coming. I was never going to be able to knock its head head off with its neck in such good shape.

"I'm sorry Sarah," I said as I swung for her knees. I realized I was crying. She smashed her hand into my shoulder, which made my left arm go numb, but I kept swinging with the right. Eventually her knee bent backward. As I'd been hoping, she wasn't able to move very fast that way, so I could get away from her.

More corpses were approaching, in various states of decay. There was no way I'd be able to take them out without the rest dragging me down. I called my magic and used the spark of life left in the branch to grow it out into a crude point while I still had some breathing room. I whispered to the grass to grow up around the feet of the corpses and stop them, but it only slowed them down.

I ran at top speed toward the narrowing ring of undead, and slipped between two men in suits as they fought free of the clinging blades of grass. I could see more of them coming from the street side of the cemetery, and could hear faint screams from the street outside. I swore, and turned back toward the old churchyard.

Jason Peltier was on his way out to meet me. He spread Joey's arms wide in welcome as he saw me. His movements were jerky, like he was controlling Joey's body with a remote control. "Ah, Seth. I see you've come back to join us. That's good. If you don't fight me, I'll give you

peace as your reward for helping bring me back. The boy might have held me off, you know, if you hadn't distracted him."

The words arrowed into my heart and I started crying again. "I'm sorry, Joey. I'm so sorry."

I ran forward and raised the branch over my head. When Peltier put up his arms to protect his head, I pulled the branch down low. I jabbed the sharpened end of the branch as hard as I could at his throat, and collapsed him. Peltier's uncoordinated arms couldn't get down in time, and the sharp hardwood tore open my best friend's throat.

Peltier cocked his arm and slapped me hard on the temple. I saw stars and my stomach lurched, but I held on. Where he had touched me burned with some kind of magical attack, but it faded away as the life ran out of Joey's body.

I saw back on Joey's stomach, and looked around tiredly at the zombies gathered in a ring around us. They stood quietly for a moment, eyes fastened on me, then collapsed in heaps where they stood.

I stood wearily and brushed the dirt from my clothes. I left the stick I'd used to murder my best friend where it pinned through the flesh of his neck to the ground. I stumbled over the close packed bodies of the zombies and headed for the entrance.

I found the older kids a few rows in from the walls, still half undressed. The girl's head had been completely turned around. I stopped and covered her with Dad's shirt. It was truly a marvel that she'd gotten so far.

I walked the four blocks to my house with seeing another living soul. The corpses had made it most of the way there before collapsing. Three large mummified bodies lay sprawled on my lawn.

I reached up and gently soothed the place where I'd entered the boy's skull. I reached out with my will and raised the fallen zombies to their feet. I headed toward the front door with them at my flanks.

I did promise the boy his father was next.

December 2012

Prompt: In celebration of previous challenges, the challenge includes all of the challenges from the previous year. The winning entry used April's challenge: "Write a scene featuring dialogue between at least two characters."

Winner: DaisyJay

Friends Forever

"Oh, finally! You're awake. I've been waiting all day."

"What? Where am I? God, my head hurts."

"You're at my house, silly goose. Come sit down with me."

"But I don't know you."

"Right. Strangers. I'm Elizabeth. Elizabeth Merriam. There, now you know me. What's your name?"

"I... Uh... I'm Lila. How did I get here?"

"Lila? Oh, that's beautiful! So much better than the last one Daddy gave me. 'Jane.' Blech. Her name is Anastasia now, much better. Come sit down!"

"You didn't answer my question. Did I faint or something?"

"You could say that. Anyway, I'm glad we don't have to change it. I prefer for my friends to have beautiful names."

"But I don't know you."

"You will, Lila. Goodness. It really is so pretty. Lila. All the other girls at school have beautiful names. Collette, Isobel, Marguerite. But me? Just Elizabeth."

"Right. Well, I think I'm just going to go home now. I've got a Russian lit final at noon. What time is it?"

"It doesn't matter. I wouldn't worry about any tests. Daddy arranges for the best tutors for my friends and I."

"No, I'm pretty sure I don't have a tutor. I live in the dorms. At the university. I'll just be leaving. Where's the front door?"

"Silly goose. I told you. You're going to stay here. You won't like what happens if you try to leave, trust me."

"There's been some kind of misunderstanding. I appreciate your help, but I'm just going to go home-"

"You are home, Lila. You can't leave. I know it's rude to talk about money, but Daddy paid a ton of it to make sure you could stay with me."

"Wait, you... You bought me? That's impossible. This is not happening."

"Calm down, Lila. You're not a slave. You're my friend! It's just that, well, I guess you could say your transportation was expensive."

"My transportation? Are we still in Connecticut? You sound like we're still in Connecticut."

"Of course we are, don't be ridiculous."

"Then I'm leaving now. I'm not going to be kidnapped by some snot-nosed little - OW! What the heck? Is that a force field?"

"Not exactly. I told you, Lila. Trying to leave would be very bad. Now, I wish you'd apologize for saying those things. You hurt my feelings. The other girls say things like that. My friends aren't supposed to speak to me that way."

"Listen, sweetheart. I'm not your friend. I'm getting out here if it means I have to crawl out your bedroom window."

"NO! YOU ARE MY FRIEND! DADDY!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. No need to call for... Dad. I'm sure you and I can work this out, okay?"

"I won't call him if you apologize."

"Fine. I'm sorry, Lizzie. I'm scared, okay? You seem like a sweet girl, you must get that. But you really can't keep me here. People will be looking for me."

"No, they won't."

"What? I'm not some street urchin. I have a family. I have dinner with them in Danbury twice a month. I talk to my mother almost every day. They'll all notice if I just disappear."

"But you didn't disappear."

"Technicalities? Alright, then. They'll notice if I suddenly cut off communication without saying goodbye."

"But they already have."

"They have what?"

"Said goodbye."

"No, I'm pretty sure I would remember a conversation that ended with 'I'm going to go live in a mansion and have private Russian tutors and tea parties forever and ever. See ya!'"

"What do you remember? From today, I mean?"

"I woke up this morning, I took a shower, I had Pop-Tarts for breakfast. God, I have to stop eating those. I did some last minute studying and then I - Crap. What did I do?"

"Mmhmm. Think harder."

"I got in the car, I remember because it took forever to get the frost off of the windshield. I put on some classical music that I hate because supposedly it makes you think better, and then I... I... What is going on? What did you do to me?"

"I saved you, Lila. Well, Daddy did. Don't you understand? Daddy saved you, and now you get to stay with me. You'll never want for anything, ever again."

"Saved me from what?"

"Think harder. What happened after the classical music? What happened on the bridge?"

"The bridge? I - Oh, no.. No no no no no..."

"See? Now you understand."

"I need to sit down."

"I asked you to do that when you woke up, but you started yelling at me."

"No. No. No. This is not happening."

"Honestly, I thought you'd be happy. From the way Daddy tells it, you weren't on your way to a very comfortable place."

"So what, you're a ghost? Or an angel? Am I in Hell?"

"What? No. Don't be ridiculous. I'm perfectly alive."

"Then what does that make me?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you. My friend."

"But I'm... dead?"

"Daddy is a pretty powerful guy."

"And I have to stay here... With you... For how long? Forever?"

"Along with all my other friends. I think you'll get along wonderfully. They're all really pretty, too."

"But what happens when you... You know..."

"Die? If I die, I'll have a daughter of my own way before then. You'll be her friend."

"Oh. Of course."

"It's alright, Lila. Now, I thought you and I could have a girl's night to ourselves, get to know each other before you meet the others. What do you think?"

"I guess I don't have a lot of options."

"Do you wanna watch a movie?"

"Do you have The Breakfast Club?"

"I can find it."

"Alright."

February 2013

Prompt: In 5,000 words or less write a fantasy story around the themes of 'growing up' or 'coming of age'.

Winner: Ian Michael Everett

The Dim Rite

The woods were a curtain of darkness, festering with shadow and mystery. The boy was alone, and he was lost, even though he held a map. Paths marked on the paper were not the same he was walking; he doubted they had ever been like the map but once, when someone had drawn out the ways of the forest after their trip.

The caravan that had brought him here was far behind, at the outskirts of the woods, waiting for his return or for one week. Whichever came first. His father was among that group, his sword in hand. If he looked back, he might see it shining against the night, to guide him back when he was finished with the Dim Rite.

The Dim Rite. All boys of his line has done it, or died doing it. The leaders bore the gifts and the curse it bestowed upon them with unflinching resolve, for the good of their clan. The steel made them strong, better than the other clans of the valley. And now it was his turn to disciple under his father and earn his steel.

The dimsteel sword at his side was what he had brought with him to change. The secret the gods had given man, to make them better than the beasts and horrors of the world, was dimsteel. Regularly, it was good metal, excellent for swords and spears, sharper than iron and bronze, but it had one fatal flaw; it immolated at the slightest spark. But its true power could only be brought out by bartering with gods.

And so the Dim Rite. The boy walked down the treaded path, aware that it seemed to be moving underneath his feet with some revolting power. The forest grew thicker as he went further in, and using his meager ability to track, he followed the denser woods, feeling that they led to a focal point. His father had prepared him for this moment, proud of the boy's development. The boy was a natural leader, his father said, a man who made friends and allies well. The whole clan loved him, and would gladly follow him after his father passed. And so the Dim Rite.

The boy was afraid, though. There was no moon, no stars to see past the tops of the trees, and the only light was provided by his dying torch. It had been many hours since he entered the thicket, and he had to wonder how long his father would wait. He didn't know how many days it might have been; sunlight did not pierce the woods any better than moonlight. He sometimes heard things in the woods. He had not slept yet, though he was very tired.

There was a small ring dangling from a necklace, its cool metal pressing against his chest. He held it for comfort, when the forest seemed to grow its darkest. It had belonged to his mother, and when she had died giving birth to his sister, his father had given the ring to the boy, as a reminder of his mother's strength and resolve. Grasping it, fear passed and he felt safe.

He came to a clearing, lit by the small stars and two slivers of moon. It was not the point he was looking for, for there were no gods here. There was, however, a small rabbit. He eyed it suspiciously, then turned to look back at the forest. When he looked back to the rabbit, it was at his feet, having crossed the space between in a little under a second.

"Human," it said.

The boy took a step back, frightened. "You are one of the Wed!" he shouted, holding his torch out. Everyone knew the Wed were afraid of fire.

But the Wed being advanced, undaunted by his torch. It should have at least flinched, at least halted its advance. "These are not your woods, human." As it spoke, its voice shifted pitch from deep to high, distorted and became clear again, filled large spaces and was muffled underneath a blanket. Its presence, contained in such a small thing, threatened to crush him.

Were the boy a Wedlander, one of those strange men from the south, he could bind the Wed being to him, and make it serve him, but he was merely a human. The Wed would overwhelm him, consume him, and then use his body, or worse, turn the boy into a Wed being as well.

"There is no place here for humans, anymore, human." After this, its body shifted as it spoke in strange, eldritch languages that the boy did not know, and yet knew miserably, deep inside his soul. He crawled backwards, trying to pull the dimsteel sword from its scabbard. The thing that lunged towards him was no longer a small rabbit, but a white furred thing with gnarled limbs. It did not occupy just this space before him, but twisted around it in white and green rings, as its head and feet shifted at impossible angles. The Wed revealed itself to the boy, and he was struck dumb.

His sword was out of the scabbard, but he had no awareness of it. It fell from his hand, and he began to walk towards the Wed. The ring on his chest seemed to scream at him, and he felt it push backwards against his skin, trying to pull him away from the Wed. But it was not enough to make him stop.

The boy dropped his torch, which landed on his dimsteel sword. He cursed his ill fortune, and watched as the blade ignited and burned away in an instant. His last defense, useless as it was, was gone. A rancid smell filled the air, the smell of burning metal.

The Wed being screeched, and danced into the forest, releasing the boy from his stupor. He fell to the ground, drained of all energy, holding his ring. The world faded out.

The father waited outside the forest, holding his shinesteel sword. He had done the Dim Rite, many years ago, and knew what dangers the boy might face in the woods. His sword burned brightly, a guiding light to the boy and a ward to the creatures that might follow him out. If his son survived, he would bear a sword just like his father's, a sword that proved his right to rule

the clan. If he did not come, that rule would be passed to another family after he died, and they would send their oldest male into the forest to claim a shinesteel sword.

A loud roar came from inside the forest, a scream of foul energy. He worried even more, but stood where he was. This trial was his son's, not his.

The boy awoke, and now a dim sun hung over the clearing, at high noon. It still did not seem very light in the forest, as if a great storm cloud hung over it. But there were no clouds, nothing but a clear sky.

He stood up, groaning with the effort. His body was sore from sleeping awkwardly all night long, but he was still in one piece. The Wed had simply fled, leaving him alone in the clearing. He puzzled over that, and found his dead torch and the hilt of his incinerated sword. It still gave off the rancid odor, but he picked it up in the hopes that it might still have some dimsteel to change.

He heard a rustling from the other side of the clearing. He turned on his heels quickly, his torch held like a club. But there was no Wed being nor was there any creature at all. There was only a large tree, scorched by some fire long ago, but its leaves still bloomed and held on. They were white, in sharp contrast with the pitch black of the bark.

Hello.

The voice filled his mind, washing over it like warm water. It was a gentle voice, but powerful nonetheless. More powerful than the Wed being from last night. This was not a Wed, then. This was a god.

Speak, boy.

"I... I come to you seeking steel," the boy said, trying to recall the prepared words.

The tree laughed. You already have steel. I can see it. I can smell it.

The boy looked at his sword hilt. He had thought that the dimsteel had all burned away, but perhaps some of it had survived?

Not that. The ring.

The boy looked up in shock, clutching his ring. It was made of dimsteel!

The tree laughed again and scuttled towards him, its roots squirming throughout the earth like snakes and insects. A large, bleeding eye opened up in the trunk, setting its gaze firmly on the boy as it advanced.

The boy was, neither for the first or last time, struck dumb. He could feel the god's awful presence bearing down on him with little effort. If it wanted to, it could crush him with a thought. Here, with no ill will, it seemed a thousand fold more threatening than the Wed being had been.

It came within a few feet of him.

You come seeking power, not just steel. You seek validation of your divine right to rule. You seek strength to lead. Is that incorrect?

The boy stammered. The tree sighed.

No, it's not. Your father, and his father, and his father, and his father, and his father, and his father, and his father, and his father, and his father too, and before them, a different line, and before that Neanderthals, a word that has no meaning to you, and before them another as well. All have sought the same thing, and I have given it.

For a price.

"A price?" the boy asked. "You mean, the trade."

Trade, price, barter, sacrifice, call it what you will.

"What is your price?"

The tree seemed to grin. Never let the merchant set the price.

"Doesn't this depend on what I want?" the boy asked.

You want strength. You want to dominate, to make men submit. Is that incorrect?

And for the first time, the boy thought about that. His father made men bow. His grandfather had made men bow. And kings and chieftains and everyone who had ever held crown and scepter had made people bow. Did he want that?

"No, I don't."

The tree blinked.

Then what do you want, ring bearer?

No longer the boy, the ring bearer said, "I want strength, power and validation, but not to dominate." The boy had seen the power to dominate, had been dominated by the Wed. "I want to inspire, to bring out the best in men. I want to make allies, not slaves. I want men to want to follow me, not force them.

The tree blinked again. Then it laughed and laughed and laughed. The ring bearer blushed.

No, no, the tree patronized, that will never do. Men need to be brought to heel, not led by an equal. You must be better than them.

"I will be better than them!" the ring bearer shouted. "I will be better than every king who has come before me. Men will celebrate my life and mourn my passing! I won't be another conqueror, not another tyrant!"

The tree had stopped laughing, seeing the ring bearer was quite serious. Not a conqueror? Not a tyrant? Men need a firm hand to guide them.

"I know what they call you," the ring bearer said. "They call you the King of Winds. The Lord of Woods, Master of the Mountains."

The tree blinked once more. Yes, but I thought these names had passed out of telling.

"No," the ring bearer said. His mother had told him about the old legends, of men who worshipped the spirits of the world and the gods who ruled all things. The old religion of his

people that had almost been forgotten. “Do you force the winds to serve you? Or do they do it out of devotion? Are the woods your slave? Do the mountains grumble at your commands?”

The tree was silent.

“As you are with your subjects, I will be with men.”

Such ambition. Where did it come from? I see your father’s blood in you, but that is not where it comes from. There is another of the Houses in you.

“Yes, my mother is not of my clan.”

I see it, though her people never came to my domain. But I see it. Very well, I will give you what you wish. The power to inspire and ignite men.

“And your price?”

I know the future, ring bearer, but I need a name to see it. That is my price. Your name.

“My name is Yösian,” Yösian said.

And the tree laughed again. It was wild laughter, dangerous laughter, knowing laughter. The laughter of a god.

I have another price, for another gift, then.

Yösian started. There was only one gift, one price. He had gotten off relatively lightly, giving only his name.

You will need strength to dominate, no matter how much you say you don’t need it. I once mastered the winds, the wood, the mountains, and that required dominion. I will give you dominion, in exchange for your life.

“My life? What good would that be to give me these gifts and then kill me?” Yösian asked.

The tree chuckled, scuttling into the woods as it did so. No, I want you to live it like you said. I want you to become as I am to the winds to men. Swear to me that you will.

“I swear,” Yösian said.

It is done. Bear your gifts well, ring bearer. They were well earned.

The father waited at the edge of the woods. An unholy screech filled the air, and it was very close by. He narrowed his eyes, looking for the source as he prepared his blade for battle. Then he saw his son, Yösian, sprinting through the thicket, shining sword in hand. The boy swung his weapon mightily, striking an unseen foe. Another shrill cry, and the boy was out of the woods, spinning on his heels. The soldiers behind the father cried out, readying spears and bows for the unseen enemy.

A creature of the Wed poured out of the forest, rings upon rings of white and green, and a twisted hare’s head. Its paws thundered on the earth and fire roared from its eyes. The father readied his sword to ward it away, as his shinesteel was considered the most powerful of recent memory. He swelled with pride to see that his son’s sword shone just as brightly.

Then the boy did something he did not expect. He sheathed his blade and walked towards the Wed being, and held out his left hand. Upon his finger shone a star, descended from the heavens to adorn his son's hand. It burned brighter than any shinesteel he had ever seen, so much that he thought the boy had discovered a new power in the woods. And in a way, the boy had.

Yösian advanced on the Wed being. It had pursued him the whole way out of the forest. He could not make it serve him, but the ring warded it away, burning its skin and eyes, such that it had. It was a few moments of tension, but finally the creature retreated into the forest, filling his ears with its alien words, threats of some kind that receded into silence.

He turned back to face his clan, and found every single member of the caravan on their knees, including his father, bowing their heads in honor. He laughed aloud, and swore he could hear the wind laughing with him.

March 2013

Prompt: In 3,000 words or less, write a fantasy piece that takes place in a futuristic setting.

Winner: Ryan Hampton

Shackled Gods

"This is Minos One requesting permission to dock."

"Tartarus Seven acknowledging. What is your carry, Minos One?"

A brief silence cut the airspace as the pilot logged the passengers on his vessel. "Myself, six crewmen, two prisoners and their two guards; eleven in total."

The rapid clamor of fingers on a keyboard filled the pilot's ears as his eyes took in the sight of the approaching moon. The base was like an island among a calm sea of gray. The cratered surface of the moon was uninviting, to say the least, but it held some alluring property about it. Somehow this floating rock had enamored people from all walks of life for millennia, but in the end it was just a crater-covered rock circling the Earth. And at this rate, they'd be getting uncomfortably close to said rock.

The pilot shifted uneasily in his seat.

"Roger that Minos One, you are clear to dock in Charonium Bay Six. You have forty minutes for drop-off and refueling."

"Understood. Minos One out."

The pilot turned in his chair as he enacted docking protocols on the system's autopilot. Two stern-looking men stared without emotion at the sight before them. Hanging like rosaries from their necks were strange but powerful weapons.

"Welcome to Moonbase Tartarus gentlemen, prison of the Gods."

#

"Hey kid, wake up! You can't sleep forever!"

Shaking. Someone was shaking him.

Rattled and disoriented, a young man of twenty years brought a hand to his face and rubbed his eyes. His body ached from having been still for so long and likewise his mind felt scattered as if shrouded in a veil of static that kept him from thinking clearly.

"Don't worry kid; the effects of the drug will wear off soon. Just take it easy for now and try to get used to the augmented gravity." The voice was gruff but Sam could sense subtle notes of compassion hidden behind an outward image of strength.

"Drug? What drug?" He struggled to grasp what was happening; his memory was fuzzy but he assumed this had something to do with this drug he had apparently taken.

"The drug they use to keep us sedated for transport. Filthy bastards, they treat us like fuckin' animals."

Finally the young man opened his eyes and the image which came into focus before him was that of a giant of a man with skin as black as the void of space that surrounded them.

"Transport? I don't..." He stretched his sore muscles and winced at the pain of movement. "Where am I?"

The black giant chuckled and shook his head with ironic amusement. "Man that drug must've really done a number on your memory, but you'll be all right soon." He turned his great black head and stared hard at the young man. "You're in Tartarus, kid. So-called 'prison of the Gods' for people like us. Worse than that, we're in the 'unknown' cell, where they put those whose power they don't know yet."

People like us. What little comfort he felt from the man's reassurance was nullified by this statement echoing through his mind. He was the outcome of a 'mistake' geneticists made almost a hundred years ago. They succeeded in restarting evolution, giving birth to people with extraordinary abilities.

Humans. Were they so afraid that they would be killed off like so many genetic predecessors before them? So afraid that they would gather all of his kind and send them away to be imprisoned like beasts under careful watch? Apparently so.

"What's your name, kid?"

"Sam."

"Well Sam, welcome to the last place you'll ever see. The name's Sirus." Sirus went back to picking anxiously at his fingernails.

To see such a strong man appear so unnerved was discomforting at best; despairing at worst. Even as he considered this, Sam's memory was beginning to clear and a secret smile crept onto his lips.

Sam sat up and looked around the chamber. It was small, gray, and contained four others besides himself and Sirus. There were cameras at every angle and a single door. Small holes set in a vertical line on the walls were the most curious aspect.

"So what's the deal with this 'unknown' cell? I thought everyone in Tartarus went in personalized cells to counteract their abilities?"

A ragged old man curled up like a ball in the corner of the room looked up at this and stared hard at Sam.

"Like I said, it's where they put us when they don't know what we can do yet. Titanium alloy reinforced walls, electro-magnetic fields, fire-proof, soundproof, and able to be gassed in less than six seconds. Since we're unpredictable they have us in maximum security resistant to the most common powers. And if they want they can either knock us out or kill us before you could even make it to the door."

Sam's eyes moved rapidly about the room until he was sure he had memorized every significant marker, every detail of the room, as well as the people therein.

Sirus looked away. Like a distant melody drifting through his skull Sam heard a voice that was not his own.

"So are you hiding your ability like the rest of us?"

Sam looked around, confused. The voice was hollow in his mind but still clear. Was Sirus speaking out loud? He couldn't see his lips but somehow the quality of the sound was different; unnatural.

"Don't make a scene, this is my ability. I can make mental links between people, all the traffic goes through me. The big muscles are just to throw them off...metaphorically and literally. Just think what you want to say and I'll hear it."

Sam lay down on his back with his hands beneath his head. "A hub-minder? Those are pretty rare." He took a moment before continuing to sift through his thoughts.

"I can't remember. I was captured. They said they would put me under and turn me in to the authorities. I roused for a couple minutes when they had me and heard them say something about a biomarker, and then they gave me an injection." He rubbed his nose and examined the outcome absentmindedly.

"The biomarker tells them if you're one of us even if your power hasn't manifested yet. Seems like the drug is hurtin' you more than the rest of us but you'll get your memory back within the week, I'm sure."

The old man in the corner continued to stare at him. Suddenly, he stood up abruptly and threw his hands up, dancing about like a lunatic, babbling some nonsense, and pulling at his long gray hair. No one seemed to take particular note of this so Sam did the same, assuming the man had simply gone insane in captivity.

A voice clouded in static came over tiny speakers near the cameras. "Calm down Kronos. It's almost feeding time; just make it easy on yourself and sit back down." The old man stopped and stared hard at one of the cameras. He grinned a wide, toothless grin and bowed, pretending to tip an imaginary hat at the surveillance camera.

He sat back down and resumed staring at Sam. There was something strange about him that Sam couldn't place, some glimmer in his eye, a twisted smirk on his cracked lips.

"What's his problem?" Sam spoke, not caring whether the guards heard his question.

"That's Kronos--well, at least that's what everyone calls him. He was the first prisoner of Tartarus and he's kept his ability secret from everyone for nearly fifty years since his arrival." Sirus's voice pulled with hints of sadness. What could be said about a life lived behind the same four walls? He didn't blame the man for losing his mind, if just to save his life.

"I've only got about seven years to my name. The others are Jeff and Caitlin. Jeff's been here a couple years, but Caitlin just got here a few months ago." Sam heard the hollowed voice again in his head. Trying not to draw attention he looked over to see a skinny redheaded man, maybe mid-20s, talking in hushed tones to a young attractive girl with long auburn hair. Probably a few years younger than he was; she had been unsuccessfully trying to avoid letting Sam see her smiling at him from time to time.

"Who's the kid?" Sirus turned his head at Sam's question. He had just noticed the young Japanese boy huddled to himself across the room.

"No clue. He must've arrived with you."

Sam stared hard at the young boy. A memory tried to surface but in the end his thoughts were still too muddled.

That night Moonbase Tartarus turned its back on the sun. It would be almost thirty days before they would see those shining rays again. Sam considered this fact as he lay down to rest, his eyes focusing one last time on the unblinking stare of Kronos before sleep took him.

#

"Sirus, it's time." Sam's thoughts to himself, knowing they would be heard loud and clear by the man sitting next to him. Sirus looked up as a troop of guards entered the chamber with covered platters of food. It had been three days since Sam came to Tartarus and his memories had all but completely returned--all but the memory of his power.

The black giant stood an imposing figure over the guards though their weapons seemed to glare back at him from shining chests of polished chrome. They wore a special light-weight armor that retained most of the properties of the chamber they were in; around their necks hung weapons shaped like guns, but these guns did not shoot bullets of any kind. Instead they emitted inaudible high-density microwaves and while not harmful at low levels, when used in high-intensity bursts the guns induced electroactivity in the brain and thermal expansion in the inner ear causing extreme pain, immediate disorientation, and remote neurological compromise. Effectively, it was a weapon that neutralized the brain, approved for use on Tartarus alone.

"I have an offer to make." Sirus's stare was harsh and set on the leader of the men who now aimed their weapons at the indomitable figure before them. "If you'll guarantee me a private cell without the electromagnetic disrupters, I'll tell you the powers of everyone in this room."

Jeff immediately leapt up, glaring daggers at Sirus. "Sirus, no! You'd betray us all just to get your own cage?!" He made to charge but Caitlin quickly caught him by the wrist.

A guard rushed over and kicked the redhead in the stomach, yelling at him to stay quiet. The leader of the guards eyed the hub-minder suspiciously.

"And how do you know what their powers are?" He raised a brow in question, inspecting the man.

"The same way I know that you're thinking that you would've known if we'd spoken about our powers out loud. How I know you're thinking of using the newly emptied cell in block one as a potential cell for me." Sirus did not smile though the guard's mouth curled at the tips.

"A mind-reader, eh?" A short conversation over a radio tucked in the guard's ear ensued while the prisoners all shot hateful glares at Sirus. Sam simply sat with his legs folded, a look of calm acceptance on his face.

"You've got yourself a deal, Sirus. Spill it."

Sirus moved over to the side of the room with the guards and began to point. "Jeff is a pyro..." The little redhead squirmed in the grasp of one of the guards. "...Caitlin is a listener and the Jap is a watcher." Another guard cuffed Sirus's wrists behind his back; two hot probes touching against his wrists, sensitive to even the slightest overreaction in movement.

"A pyrokinetic, a girl with heightened hearing, and a boy with advanced eyesight. What about Kronos and the new kid?" Sirus looked first at Sam.

"Sam's a conduit--controls electricity--and Kronos...well I'm afraid his mind's too far gone for me to read. I don't even think the old lunatic realizes he has a power anymore." Sirus hung his head as if in shame for the deed he had done, but secretly and for the briefest moment a smile broke again on Sam's features.

"How do I know you're not lying?" The guard's blind confidence showed even through his question.

"You've never spent much time in this cell, have you?"

The guard smiled like an idiot. "Fair enough. Prepare for transport." The men left with the food and Sirus, sealing the door behind them. Sam eyed the conspicuous holes along the wall and waited for the hissing of invisible gas as it seeped into the cell, crawling over his skin like ants.

Then everything went black.

Phase One complete.

#

The next time Sam awoke he was in a slightly different cell with a number of new faces. His hair stood on end all over his body and again his mind was fogged.

"Oy new guy, yer sittin' in me spot!" The words were masked by a thick Irish accent. A tall, skinny Irishman with short brown hair stood over him and gestured him to move. "I won't say it again lad. Move it."

Sam scrambled to his feet and went to the other side of the chamber, noticing with each step he took that he could feel more and more of a magnetic pull at his body.

"Don't mind Carney over there. He's claimed that spot for a long time. It's the point furthest from all of the electromagnets so it's the least uncomfortable for conduits." A woman who appeared to be in her late thirties with short black hair sat at his feet tapping on her thighs like a drum with her fingers. "They use the magnets to keep us from usin' our power. It's annoyin' at first but ya get used to it. Kinda." She bade him sit and he followed, but he couldn't help but wonder how Sirus and the others were doing.

"M'name's Fiona. I'm Carney's older sister. You must be Sam." Sam looked skeptically at the woman, taken by surprise that she knew his name already.

"How do you know my name?" He was cautious; he didn't know who he could trust yet. Then he heard a familiar voice in his mind and truth dawned on him like the summer sky he might never see again. "Don't worry Sam, I've filled her in already, she's going to help us out."

"I didn't, yer name tag told me!" She laughed heartily and slapped his leg.

"They still think I'm just a mind-reader so they put me in a room without the mental disruptors. I can still use my power for at least a while so I'll set up a link between you and Fiona, just give me a sec." It was comforting to hear Sirus's deep voice and to know that their plan had worked out as expected.

Sam stood, glaring angrily at the woman and walked to another part of the room. Then the dancing voice of Fiona entered his mind.

"So what's the big idea? Why'd ya lie bout bein' a conduit?" Sam pretended to count something on his fingers while Fiona went back to drumming on her thighs.

"I was sent here by the resistance corps on Earth. I'm here to break down the gates of Tartarus and free everyone." Fiona stopped drumming abruptly, her eyes widened and she turned to Carney who stood with his arms folded across his chest, staring at the newcomer intently.

"How?! Now that you've emptied out the unknown chamber everyone's in a room personalized to counteract their power. Besides, e'ery prisoner has a respective guard so they still outnumber us! There's almost a thousand of us on this base and who knows how many restricted areas between all the cells and the different launch bays! There's definitely no way we can sneak out undetected and no way we can win against those guns what scramble yer brains like an omelet!" Panic was evident in her voice, but it was not panic brought about by fear that he would bring trouble to them or even get them all killed. It was the panic born from anxious hope; hope that she may once more feel the moist grasslands of home between her toes.

"They underestimate us; they think they've got a perfect hold on us and that is their weakness. You see, Sirus and I aren't the only ones who lied about our powers. All the others from the unknown cell have been misplaced as well. Just take it easy, act normal, and wait. I promise you that within the week you will see Earth again." Sam was much calmer than she. He had been

preparing for this for years. He knew the layout and he knew the requirements and the movements of everything in Tartarus. He had honed his ability relentlessly just for this...now all he needed to do was remember what that power was.

He spent the rest of the evening finding out as much about the people Fiona knew as he could and discussing a possible course of action. He hadn't known what resources would be at his disposal when he got there but he was trained to make do with what he had.

Late into the night, as everyone in Tartarus pretended to sleep in the Cell ring, a deep thunderous voice rang out in Sam's mind.

"It's taken me a while but I've got you to everyone. All of the prisoners will hear you." Sirus sighed heavily; the task had clearly taken a toll on him.

"Everyone, within the week we will break free from Tartarus. I need to know everyone's specialty and the extent of their abilities. If you want to get out of this place..." he paused, thinking carefully about his next words "...you will do exactly as I say." And curiously, not a single voice rose in opposition.

"All right then, let's get busy."

Phase Two complete.

#

Three more days passed and Sam's memories had fully recovered. His preparations were complete. Everyone in the Cell ring knew the plan and everyone knew the part they had to play.

If the plans Sam had studied were accurate, Tartarus was made up of several concentric rings. The outermost layer, the Cell ring, was where all the prisoners were kept. The next ring inward was the Guard ring where the guards were stationed while they watched over the prisoners during the day. Both of these rings were separated into five blocks at similar points. Access between any of the blocks and between the two rings at any of the blocks required a different key card. The next ring was the Housing ring where the guards lived on the base; it was cramped but livable. The only access required here was between any of the five blocks from the Guard ring to the Housing ring and then a single entrance to the innermost ring on the north and south sides, close to blocks five and three, respectively.

There was no master key, but there was a master control. In the Control ring, all of the bases operations were controlled through a number of independent systems. Each ring had its own system and there was no system over these. The programming was suited for control at the micro level. At the center, beyond the Control ring was the hold which contained the Unknown Cell and the cargo elevator that led down into the landing and launch bays; that was their objective. Since there were as many guards on the base as there were prisoners, there were enough vessels to get all of them off in case of emergency--or in case the prisoners they were supposed to protect broke free.

Sam opened his eyes and looked about. Everyone's stare periodically came to him and he knew they were all counting on him.

The door to their cell opened and a crowd of guards in peculiar rubber suits entered with trays of food. The door closed behind them. Sam stood abruptly at the center; in Carney's spot.

"You there! Sit down." The guard brandished his strange weapon at Sam and threw the platter of food onto the ground in front of him. The tone of his voice was belittling, as though he spoke to an ill-trained pet.

Then his eyes met Sam's.

Once Sam knew he had their attention he spoke: "Stop. You're all going to do as I say, understood?" His mind reached out to the soldiers, gripping their very being with his will and manipulating it with his thoughts. They were strong in body but weak in mind and within seconds he had them under his absolute control.

"Yes, sir," rang the unified response.

"Good. Which of you is the Block Director?"

"That would be me, sir." The one who threatened him stepped forward. With the Block Director there Sam could be sure no one else would be giving this room any attention in the Guard ring.

"Do you have access to lockdown protocols?" Sam seated himself again, having to send a glare at Carney to keep him from doing anything rash.

"I do, sir. For levels two and three, but Robert has the protocols for the Cell ring." Another came forward stiffly. "Sir."

"Great. Here are your orders." Sam recited the incredibly specific orders he had come up with nights before. Every word had meaning and his clarity would be the difference between success and failure. "I will need all of you to stick to the schedule and do whatever it takes to fulfill your duties to me. Until you are needed you are to go about your day as usual, understood?"

The guards all stood straight and saluted with a single "Yes, sir" emanating from their lips at once. When the time was right they would follow his orders and remember nothing.

"Then go." As if snapped out of a trance they resumed throwing food at the ground with disdain but exited soon after.

Sam crossed his legs and closed his eyes once more, resting for the coming night.

"Now, everyone, we wait."

Several hours passed until the clock approached 1:00 a.m. All of the guards not on night duty in the Control ring would be asleep.

Time to commence Phase Three.

As the synchronized clocks struck one Sam strained his hearing for a particular sound but heard nothing. He could only hope things were working. In block four a door opened to the

'watcher' cell where Shohei, the Japanese boy from the Unknown Cell, was waiting patiently. Shohei was not only a conduit in actuality, but a very special type of conduit. He used the electrical pulses in networks and machines to understand and manipulate data and information, and as such, he was the crux of the entire plan.

"I'm in the system, Sam, releasing Cell ring controls." Everything was working so far; the guard Sam controlled had opened Shohei's gate and now Shohei could release everyone in the Cell ring from the master control through the series of systems that connected them together. A nearly soundless click came from the door and the familiar pull of static faded in the room.

At 1:10 a.m. everyone had grouped into the halls and cell areas of blocks two and three; all but Jeff who stayed in his cell in block five. Quietly, a dazed guard paced into Guard block two and placed a key card and a watch on a table then went to Guard block three and placed another card, continuing back to his quarters without a single thought.

At 1:12 a.m. an alarm sounded throughout Tartarus. The nightly security check was right on schedule. At the same time a mechanical voice came over the PA system: "Level two lockdown initiated. Access between Guard ring and Housing ring closed."

Near Sam now stood the domineering figure of Sirus, the timid form of young Shohei, beautiful Caitlin from the Unknown Cell, and a number of other faces he was seeing for the first time.

"All right everyone, we've only got a few minutes before the guards react to the alarm and start trying to get in so we have to move quickly. Shohei, get us into the Guard ring for blocks two and three but keep the others sealed."

The young boy nodded his head after hesitating for a brief moment. "Wakatta taichou!" Shohei made his way to a control panel on the inside wall and held his forehead against it; he closed his eyes and concentrated hard.

'Understood, Captain!' Sam was proud of the kid; he had been so nervous while they were preparing for the mission but now he was doing so well!

At 1:15 a.m. a satisfying 'beep' came from the door and soon everyone was pouring into the Guard ring.

"Caitlin, round up the other pyros and head to the block one and four access gates...start a fire and make sure once they get in the Cell ring that they don't reach us."

The girl tossed her long hair and flames danced on her fingertips, a spark lit in her eyes. "With pleasure, darlin'."

Sam turned to Fiona and Carney. "Take a few of the conduits and fry the surveillance systems but don't take too long." Fiona smiled to Sam then to her younger brother who was reluctant as ever to be following orders.

"We'll have it done, Sam."

Sam's mind was a blizzard of thoughts, plans, expectancies, and calculations. The lockdown procedure could not be overridden for fifteen minutes; they had to move before then.

At 1:20 a.m. Sam gave the order to release the override restriction on Block five. Within the minute the loud sound of a gate opening and guards flooding into the Cell ring could be heard by all and many of the younger prisoners shuddered at the sound. A single glassy-eyed guard lingered in the pyro cell, dropped a key card and a watch, and moved on. Most everyone was in the Guard ring by this point but the guards would be circling behind them given time; the fires would only serve to stall them.

"It's done Sugar." Caitlin winked at him then rushed into the Guard ring with the rest of the pyros followed closely by Fiona, Carney, and the conduits. Sam and Shohei were the last two through the gate which closed with a crunch behind them. Sam turned to an older woman named Marianne as she listened intently.

"What's their status?"

The old woman paused, pressing her wrinkled fingertips against her temples. "The Housing ring is all but empty, they've reached the barriers but the system is taking care of it quickly."

Sam turned to Shohei who was waiting by another control panel with his head in place. "Lock it up Shohei." Just as everyone heard boots stomping into Cell blocks two and three, the Cell ring was sealed, buying them another fifteen minutes.

Sam stared at his watch as it turned to 1:30 a.m. and the prisoners entered the mostly deserted Housing ring. Sam led and Sirus covered the rear. The apprehensive mass froze suddenly behind their leader as a single soldier came hopping out of a room on one foot, struggling to get his left leg into his pants and stopping in his tracks when he saw the prisoners, his eyes wide. Sam stared hard at him, his eyes digging deep into the man's conscience.

"Go back to bed soldier, you need the rest."

The guard let his pants drop and turned back into his room. "Sleep is important" he mumbled to himself.

A collective chuckle showed that everyone was in good spirits; their plan was working beautifully so far. Unfortunately things would get trickier from that point on. There was only one doorway on this side of the base between the Housing and Control rings.

At 1:37 a.m. another guard surrounded by three lifeless bodies in the isolated control room released the level three locks between the Housing and Control rings. The prisoners wasted no time in moving through the small opening. "Shohei, lock down level two." In another minute it was done, but Sam could hear screams and yelling coming from the Control ring. He rushed through the opening pushing people aside and diving to the floor as flames streamed over his head. All around them were lines of guards and some of their own lying face-down on the floor.

"Carney! Fiona! Do it!"

The brother and sister grabbed hands and pointed their free hands at the guards on each side. Everyone felt a charge in the air, a turbulence flowing about them like a strong wind as the surrounding area became more and more polarized. The guards began to panic and struggle to hold themselves in place as their weapons were torn from their hands and they fell at the feet of the shackled Gods, shackled no more. Three huge men, approaching ten feet tall, charged the

right flank and began smashing the guards around like rag-dolls. The left flank was already burning or frozen solid; one had a weapon shoved straight through his chest.

At 1:45 a.m. the guards had already moved to the Guard ring and were working at a frenzied pace to surround them. Those in the sealed control rooms trembled in fear; paralyzed by the disbelief that protocols they had put in place to prevent this type of insurrection were keeping them from stopping it! With every step forward that got them closer to the center, and freedom, the guards were one step behind, but only one step.

By 1:50 a.m. most everyone had moved into the cramped space of the Control ring where Sam waited patiently by a series of adjacent doors. He looked through the window...where was the last guard he controlled? He should be there! Another four minutes crept by as they waited to see if the guard would make it. Everyone was asking Sam why they had stopped; screaming that the guards would be on them in just a few minutes. Sam was panicking...they couldn't stand against the full force of the guards, not for long, not in this tiny space.

Some people started to visibly lose hope and outwardly contemplated taking their own lives rather than going back to being caged like animals.

It was 1:56 a.m. and in two minutes the guards would enter the Housing ring and then the Control ring. Sam looked frantically at Shohei. "I can't change it! They've shut down all of the primary systems! Only a manual input from the other side can open it!"

Then, as if answering their prayers, the wily old face of Kronos popped up behind the reinforced window. With a toothless grin he pressed a few keys and all of the doors opened.

While everyone else hurried to the freight elevator Sam went to Kronos. Next to the old man a slight distortion of space began to shiver and ripple until the clear outline gained shape and revealed the redhead Jeff, a number of keycards in his hand.

"Worked like a charm!"

Sam smiled back at Jeff and patted him on the shoulder. But how had Kronos escaped? He couldn't be reached through Sirus, he didn't know about the plan and they would've gassed his chamber. It was then that Sam noticed how fewer clothes Kronos was wearing and how short his hair had become. Did he plug the gas holes?

"I knew as soon as I saw you that you'd save us from this place." The old man was surprisingly coherent. Had his insane antics all been an act?

"A good guess." He looked skeptically at the old man.

"Not a guess, I knew." He smirked and then skipped away like a child to the platform where everyone was waiting.

Caitlin flew by him and blew him a kiss. "That oughtta hold'em for a while." Sam looked back to see the entire Control ring aflame and burning fast. Then Shohei ran past him, still looking shaken but with a tentative smile on his face. The doors behind them were shut and the control box smashed.

At 2:05 a.m. the elevator began its descent, powered by several conduits at each corner and with the extra ropes held tight by the strongest of the bunch. Sam let out a deep sigh and relaxed.

At the bottom everyone spread out to the various escape ships. Sam looked back for a moment, remembering the few who had sacrificed themselves to get everyone else there.

His watch clicked to 2:20 a.m. and the first ships launched from Moonbase Tartarus, its gates blasted open by force. There was cheering and laughter on all of the ships. None could believe that they were finally free of that place; even Kronos who had spent the majority of his life in a single cell. Now he was free. They were all free and the shrinking orb of the moon had already become just a dark shadow they would keep behind them as they moved forward towards their bright future.

"We did it everyone. We earned our freedom. Set your autopilots for the coordinates I gave you and sit back. In a few hours you'll be back on Earth!" Another rallying cry came out over the intercom between the ships.

"And when we do, we'll show those humans why they once feared Gods!"

End

May 2013

Prompt: This month's challenge was magical realism. A genre of fantasy that portrays the magical and supernatural as completely normal parts of everyday life.

Winner: David Eubanks

David Eubanks is a mathematician who works in higher education doing number-crunching, accreditation, and other administrative work. He writes sci-fi novels for fun, most of which are found at lifeartificial.com. The short story here was turned into a novel Klick, which will be released when it's ready. He can be reached at deubanks.office@gmail.com.

Recollections of I.W. Meterschmant

When Ede took her customary deep breaths and leaned on the chalkboard at the front of seminar room, no one thought the world was about to change forever. It was an ordinary scene. Over the summer, they had tried to replace the black slate with a whiteboard and markers, but old Drennen had barred the door. He could tell you about some of the foundations of transdualism that were made on its plane surface. I had myself seen the first sketch of the Foundational Forms Principle marked out here with flakes of chalk falling from the precise strokes of a much younger Drennen. He always wrote in a simple block print, with a careful hand. For that discovery alone, the sheet of black slate should be venerated and be taken to some museum, but there was more, far more.

The tip of the chalk clicked against the stone. A tap. A small beginning, curling into a symbol for infinitesimal ontogeny. Ede continued, making two lines of symbols, setting up a topological basis for the development of her idea. I felt that there was some problem with her metric space definition. I wanted to speak up and show that the wunderkind was wrong in her foundation, but I couldn't quite identify the error.

"No. Stop." Drennen said. He lifted his long pen and pointed with it. The tip waggled around from his perpetual shaking. The body was weakening, but his mind showed no sign of it.

"It's right," Ede said. She was not accustomed to confrontation, and her voice trembled.

The graduate students in the seminar sensed vulnerability, and were eager.

"The metric is backwards-fulfilling," Sufferling said, his arrogance in full force.

"Only the null space satisfies all those conditions," Jareds said from my left. He was quick in mind, but prone to laziness, and the clown of the bunch. He half-stood and invited others to

appreciate his cleverness. He got a few chuckles, which he milked for more by adding "Nihilo ex Ede."

I saw a smile flit across Drennen's lips at that, but his ample eyebrows were clumped together in concentration, and his breathing was labored. He began to wheeze. It sounds selfish, but I was glad that Ede's project didn't seem like it would be competing for summer research money. She'd gone too far, as usual.

"Let me show you," she said. "If I can just—" she turned and added a cause-state diagram to define the operator she was interested in. It had some symbol attached that I didn't recognize.

Sufferling and Jareds stood up to dismiss her, and several others made to rise as well, but Drennen sat like a stone. It became very quiet, except for the tap-tap-tap of the chalk. Everyone who had risen sat back down.

Once she got going, Ede seemed to pull energy from the room, as unlikely as that would seem from the dourness of the observers. She took our blank silence for encouragement, and although she spent little time looking at us, she did check between lines of formal transdualism and its complex diagrams to see if Drennen had changed expression. When she had covered half the available space with neat efficiency, she stopped and turned. Her finger pointed to the last line. The strange symbol was decorating an equality, and I squinted at the board, backtracking to find its definition. It only seemed to appear in the operator diagram that Ede had drawn, which was self-referential in a way I'd never seen before. Its definition was contained within its own definition. This was undoubtedly what Drennen had objected to, but he was mysteriously quiet now. If she was right, if you could get away with this strange loop, then—what? It hurt my head to try to bend around that corner. I felt a terrible flash of envy that Ede could create such novelty so effortlessly. Nothing I had produced in my long career had been as creative as this.

"No!" This time Drennen raised his voice, something I'd never heard before.

"You should know." He paused and coughed for a while, until his sleeve was dark with moisture. "Know that there are differences." He bent over this time and wretched air from his diaphragm so violently that specks of red spattered onto the oak table. "Between what can be done." And paused, this time just to breathe. It was a long inhalation, full of the room's stale air. "And should," he finished.

I found myself mouthing the word "be," and then, because it still itched, "done."

The heads of the students and younger faculty swiveled from Drennen to Ede.

"It works," she said. She was afraid, but it didn't stop her. She carefully formed and projected the word again, showing the intellectual tenacity that hid in her slender form.

"I can prove it!" she almost shouted. The third word was a bowl brim-full with contempt.

"Sit!" Drennen shouted again, and then went into a bout of coughing that I thought might kill him. Jareds pounded the old master on the back, which I don't think helped.

Ede turned pale. Her jaw was fixed in fury. I think we were all amazed by the transition. It was clear she'd finally gone mad, confirming two years of speculation. I had only a slight twinge of

guilt for thinking that most of us would be happy not to have her around, so that lesser lights could shine.

She sat then, opposite Drennen. The table was wide enough that they could just touch fingertips if they outstretched their arms.

"Show me," Ede said, with more control. "Show me I'm wrong."

Drennen straightened, and an old fire flashed in his eyes. He didn't say a word, but swiped his finger across the oak tabletop in a cursive description of her assumptions, and then diagramed a contradiction with his fingertip.

Ede read this upside down, and countered with gestures of her own. It identified a subtlety that Drennen had missed: the continuity of infinite sums requires something stronger than the usual treatment. She gave an example, proving the need for a new kind of 'uniform convergence' that would ensure the conclusion, and she did it with such spontaneity that it made me suck in my breath. That little demonstration alone would have been enough to earn her the degree. My skin began to prickle with the knowledge that I was witnessing something extraordinary.

Drennen wasn't finished, however. He acknowledged her correction with a gracious nod, but then attacked her central premise: the bizarre self-referential structure she'd defined. Or rather it defined itself. Or something. Drennen's mind leapt three or four consequences beyond mine, and he sketched out in grand flourishes the limit of these iterations, the result of such a monstrous meta-object existing. She inserted figures here and there to correct his understanding of her concept, and the two of them collaborated right before my eyes to create a whole new sub-field of transdualism. In following years, the resulting journal articles for Self-Induced Drennen-Ede Quintic Forms would take up four rows of stacks in our library.

Drennen's eyes fixed on the table and every flick of finger with the intensity of the damned. His breath came harder, and the shaking of his limbs became so pronounced that he grabbed Jareds' hand and used it to steady his own. This arrangement was not satisfactory, however. Jareds nor I by that time had any clue what they were doing, and he was more of an impediment than a help. Drennen sank back in his chair and watched, spitting out a word now and then.

Ede slowed her presentation, but used both hands to keep her place, simultaneously making an argument in two different transform domains. I have never seen anyone since who is able to argue independently with the two halves of brain, as Ede seemed to be doing. It was incredible to watch.

"Yes," Drennen said, and he tried to rise in excitement. It was too much for him. "Yes," he whispered.

"Then you just take that manifold we used earlier," Ede said, "and invert the co-causal diagram, see?"

Drennen turned white. His mouth gaped. He saw where she was going. None of the rest of us did, but we could see the light in his eyes.

"See?" she said. "The symmetry takes care of the rest."

Everything came to a stop. There was no sound except the master's breathing, whistling faintly. He gathered himself for a question. I'll never forget the way my colleagues appeared at that moment, their faces turned toward the old man in bug-eyed anticipation. Only Sufferling stared at Ede instead, an expression of pure hatred written across his features.

"Show me the rest," Drennen said.

Ede blinked several times. I saw that her eyes had formed tears, but I never knew if they were happiness, or if she had some glimmering of what came next.

She stood up and wrote in the air. She used two fingers of each hand begin to connect the two strands of logic, one from the right, one from the left. The last figure brought the self-induction operator into the construction, and set some chain-like recursion in motion. Drennen follow the last gestures with Ede as a mirror, and their fingers touched at the end, bringing the domains into congruence to complete the proof.

People will tell you that their heads exploded, or other nonsense. Or that people down the hall heard it. I was there, and that's not what happened. There just was a series of small clicks, between a crunch and the snap of fingers. Then Drennen's head hit the table with a solid concussion, and the cries for help began. It took some moments to notice that Ede's eyes were glassy and unseeing, the pupils dilated to maximum. She swayed, but did not fall. Unlike Drennen, she lived for several weeks, but she never spoke again.

The autopsies showed the micro-vacuums that had formed along the circuitry of their brains, like the grounding of a lightning stroke. The branching trail of destruction destroyed those two marvelous minds in the instant of their supreme genius.

So, yes, I was there at the birth of physical transdualism, the discovery of the limit point of world-truth, and the danger of holding it directly in one's mind. But although we know some of what Ede showed us, I was there, and I can tell you: she saw things we'll never see again for at least a hundred years.

Every few years, the facilities department comes to remove the blackboard, in order to upgrade the seminar room. Nowadays it's a smart-board projector or some such they want to install. They talk about pedagogy and showing donors where their money goes. But I'm the department chair now, and I stand there just like Drennen did, and don't let them pass. Last time they sent down the Vice President to talk to me. I sat that intense young man down and told him about the room and its ghosts. I even let him take Drennen's place at the table. I showed him where the history of the world changed one day in a discharge of fate and genius. I expected awe and respect. But the man wasn't capable of understanding. All he saw was wood and stone, which he called 'low-tech'. He was too polite to say so, but I knew as soon as I was gone they'd make their changes.

I sat in my old seat for a long time after he left. Until the room sensors hadn't seen enough activity, and the lights went out. People would do well to remember what happened here, and to venerate it. On these surfaces—this slate and this oak--Ede and Drennen made the world pivot on its axis.

August 2013

Prompt: Write a fantasy piece that explores this concept by having two separate versions, and therefore two separate endings. Each piece alone must be below 2,000 words but can be more than that in total.

Winner: quantumsheep

Quantumsheep is 28 years old and he lives in the west of Ireland.

Journeying West: Version One

It was one of those scorching hot days on the ranch where you got tired from doing nothing. The sky was bright blue and cloudless, and the heat from the sun was relentless. Even the animals that were usually able to tough it out had scrambled under trees and bushes to find whatever shade they could. All in all it was a day for lounging around and doing a heck of a lot of nothing.

I had just turned eighteen – a man now for all accounts. I helped my father on the ranch and did chores around the house, but I had an older brother to do the brunt of the work. The ranch was never going to be mine, I'd accepted that. It didn't make leaving any easier though. Summer would soon be over and I'd be taking the train out west. I'd probably be working down in the crystal mines with half the damn town. There wasn't much employment for a man around here, and most young people without an inheritance had to leave.

I planned on enjoying my last few weeks by kicking back every evening with a few beers and catching some fish down at the river. My friend Archie joined me as often as he could. Course, he was the banker's son, so he didn't have to bother with leaving at all. I would miss him when I went. You get to know someone real good when you hang out a lot – you can let your guard down and be yourself. Sitting by the water, fire crackling, beers open, river flowing... it was nice and relaxing.

"When you leaving?" asked Archie. He asked that every evening, like I was going to change my mind or something.

"Probably next week," I said to him. "Maybe sooner if I get the chance."

The fishing rod lines swayed gently in the water. A plume of dust whistled gently across the riverbank. Archie gulped down the last of his beer and refilled his cup from the skin we'd brought with us.

“Hey, I brought something with me today,” said Archie. He flashed me a smile, showing his pearly white teeth. It was a mischievous smile... he was definitely up to something.

“What have you done now?” I asked him. I was smiling too though, he knew I was a goody-two-shoes but I always went along with his antics for the heck of it.

Archie reached behind the big log we were sitting on and fished a tiny metal box from his pocket. Crystal dust. He opened the clasp on the front of the box and showed me the pale blue powder inside.

“Shit man, is that ice crystal dust?” I said, touching the dust lightly. It stung the tip of my finger. “Where’d you get it? We only keep a tiny bit in the freeze box to keep our meat fresh.”

“I have my ways...” he said with a wink.

Archie picked up his holster and pulled out his gun. He opened the ammo loader and tipped the ice crystal dust into it. Then he stood up and headed towards edge of the river.

“Hey, what are you going to do?” I asked, knuckling him on the arm. He pulled backwards away from me and shook his head.

“Stand back and watch.”

I made a face at him, but he just smirked all the more. “Tell me!” I pleaded.

“You are such a little worrier,” he said, laughing. He ruffled my hair until my dark brown curls fell over my eyes. “Just chill out and watch.”

Archie lifted the gun and pointed it towards the river. He pulled the trigger and blast of powder burst from the end of the gun. It darted into the water with a noisy splash. As the water settled itself, tendrils of white burst from middle of the water. They spread across the surface of the water and eventually turned it into ice. Archie shot the water a few more times until the ice thickened up and spanned across the river. When he had unloaded the gun, he had created a narrow bridge of ice over the river.

“Dare you to walk across it without falling,” I said to him.

“I dare you,” he replied.

It was my turn to smile now. “I asked you first... chicken.”

He hated being called a chicken, it was the best way to push his buttons. He pushed me aside and walked towards the ice.

“Hey, wait, that’s too easy,” I said to him. “Take off your boots too.”

I honestly didn’t think he’d do it, but I’d teased him already and he had to prove what a big strong man he was now. He cocked his head to one side in defiance and pulled off his boots theatrically, flinging them at the ground to make his point.

“I ain’t no chicken, squirt,” he growled mockingly. He flung his Stetson on the ground with his boots and took his first step onto the ice.

It was freezing, it had to be. I could see his eyes widen as he felt the cold of the ice on the soles of his feet, but he said nothing and kept walking. I could hear the sound of his feet peeling away from the sticky-cold surface of the ice.

He looked back at me. "You not going to join me out here?"

I threw off my shoes and made my way out towards him as well. I edged out slowly, sometimes getting stuck to the surface and other times nearly sliding off the edge. When I got to the middle, Archie was hopping from foot to foot, standing in my way.

"You going to move, or what?" I asked. He knew what I meant – it wasn't a request, it was a challenge.

Archie reached out towards me and tried to push me off the ice, but I caught his hand with my own and pushed it back. He tried using his other hand but I countered him in the exact same way. Both of us were on the ice, hands entwined, each trying to use the weight of our bodies to force the other one back. The cold of the ice as my feet pressed against it was overwhelming, but I hated to lose a fight – even if it was a play-fight. Eventually, Archie's foot buckled underneath him and he smashed down onto the ice. He toppled over the edge and pulled me down with him. The two of us splashed into the water.

"Get off me!" I yelled at him, treading water to keep myself afloat.

He thought I was serious for a moment and stopped, and that gave me a chance to push him backwards into the water. He disappeared under the surface, and I whooped and cheered in victory. The air bubbles popped on the surface of the water and then vanished. I stopped cheering and poked my head underwater to see if he was okay, but two muscled arms wrapped around me from behind.

"Thought you had me, didn't you?" he joked between gasps for air. He squeezed my arms into chest, locking me up and preventing me from swimming. I kicked out at him with my feet.

"Let go!" I said.

"I will if you admit I win the fight," he replied. He pressed his head right up against the back of my neck. "You know you want to."

I felt the hairs in the back of my neck stand up. I stopped kicking out at him and relaxed a bit. He released his crushing grip on me, but kept his arms wrapped around me. His lips were still pressed up against my neck. We stayed there for what seemed like ages - treading water, his arms around me. I arched my head back towards him instinctively, and he pressed his lips to my neck. I turned around to face him and he pulled me towards the riverbank. We climbed out onto the bank, our wet clothes sticking to the dry dust. We stared at each other – just stared, saying nothing.

Then he kissed me. Proper, full-on-the-lips kissed me. It wasn't like anything I'd ever felt before with Mary-Beth or the other girls I'd seen. It was a forceful, hard, hungry kiss. Nothing like the polite, dainty kisses I'd had before. This had real passion behind it. Suddenly, all these feelings of friendship were something more, something far more intense. I responded, never realising how much I'd wanted it until right that very second. How much I wanted Archie.

Later, when the sun had gotten lower in the sky, the ice bridge began to fall apart and drift down the river in little chunks. We'd lain under the willow tree for hours, arms and legs entwined, just being. I decided to get up and start putting my clothes back on.

"What now?" I asked him. I had never been one for making decisions. Archie was always the smart one that knew his numbers and how to figure out stuff.

"I don't know," he mumbled.

"That's not like you," I joked. I couldn't help wondering what this all meant. And right before I had to leave town for good.

"Well, I can't be good at everything," he replied. He wiped a curl from my face. "Maybe you can think of something, huh?"

We looked at each other for a moment, and then one of the fishing rods started wiggling by the river. Archie leapt up and raced towards it. After a little reeling and tugging, he pulled a little trout from the water. It flopped on the riverbank noisily, choking on the air.

"Will I keep it or throw it away?" he asked me.

"Keep it. Definitely keep it," I replied.

The fire had gone out earlier, but I threw a sprinkle of fire crystal dust on a few sticks and it blazed to life in an instant. We set up a little frame of sticks over the flames and cooked the fish on it. It blistered and blackened over the coals, and we gobbled it up hungrily. We'd worked up quite an appetite.

Archie poked the embers with a stick absently. He looked like he was lost in thought, or thinking about something important.

I tapped his head with my finger. "What's going on in there?" I asked.

"Just thinking."

"About us?"

"About you leaving next week."

Silence fell between us. Archie kept poking at the fire with his stick while I rested my head on his shoulder.

"Our fathers would kill us, you know," he said finally. "if they ever found out."

I sat up and shrugged my shoulders. "I've copped a beating before. I could handle it."

"It's not just them though. It's everyone."

"I don't care."

"We'd be outcasts."

Archie was different to me, I'd forgotten. He had a life here, an inheritance, and a job with his father in the bank. He had everything to lose, unlike me. All I had was a train ticket out west to the crystal mines.

"Let's enjoy the next couple of weeks then," I said, my voice trembling.

Archie nodded and kissed me on the lips.

Journeying West: Version Two

It was one of those scorching hot days on the ranch where you got tired from doing nothing. The sky was bright blue and cloudless, and the heat from the sun was relentless. Even the animals that were usually able to tough it out had scrambled under trees and bushes to find whatever shade they could. All in all it was a day for lounging around and doing a heck of a lot of nothing.

I had just turned eighteen – a man now for all accounts. I helped my father on the ranch and did chores around the house, but I had an older brother to do the brunt of the work. The ranch was never going to be mine, I'd accepted that. It didn't make leaving any easier though. Summer would soon be over and I'd be taking the train out west. I'd probably be working down in the crystal mines with half the damn town. There wasn't much employment for a man around here, and most young people without an inheritance had to leave.

I planned on enjoying my last few weeks by kicking back every evening with a few beers and catching some fish down at the river. My friend Archie joined me as often as he could. Course, he was the banker's son, so he didn't have to bother with leaving at all. I would miss him when I went. You get to know someone real good when you hang out a lot – you can let your guard down and be yourself. Sitting by the water, fire crackling, beers open, river flowing... it was nice and relaxing.

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"I have my ways..." he said with a wink.

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"Hey, what are you going to do?" I asked, knuckling him on the arm. He pulled backwards away from me and shook his head.

"Stand back and watch."

I made a face at him, but he just smirked all the more. "Tell me!" I pleaded.

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overwhelming, but I hated to lose a fight – even if it was a play-fight. Eventually, Archie's foot buckled underneath him and he smashed down onto the ice. He toppled over the edge and pulled me down with him. The two of us splashed into the water.

We scrambled under the water for a moment, until eventually we emerged on the surface. The water was streaked with ribbons of red. Blood, I thought. I couldn't feel any cuts on my body, and when I turned to look at Archie I could see the side of his head had a large gash.

"You bastard!" he screamed. He swung a fist at me, but his arm fell too low and skimmed the water instead.

I apologised to him, but that made him angrier still. He grabbed my hair and pushed me under the water. I pulled away and came back up for air.

"Are you crazy?" I yelled. I swam away, but he dove towards me again. I elbowed him in the face to keep him off me, and struck him on the side of the head. His eyes widened and then drooped quickly. He slunk into the water, unconscious. I dived down and pulled him up to the surface with me. I scrambled onto the riverbank and dragged him out with me.

"Wake up!" I cried, tugging at his shirt excitedly.

Blood seeped quickly from the gash on the side of his head, and he didn't respond to my shaking or shouting. I pressed his chest and breathed into his mouth to try to expel any water in his lungs. No response.

Later, when the sun had gotten lower in the sky, the ice bridge began to fall apart and drift down the river in little chunks. I had been lying beside Archie under the willow tree for hours, right beside his body, crying and shaking and pleading with him to wake up. He could be such an idiot sometimes when he lost a fight, but I'd never meant to hurt him. He was my best friend.

The fire had gone out a while back, and I gathered some sticks together to restart it. I took a pinch of fire crystal dust and set the wood ablaze. My stomach growled, half hungry and half nervous. There'd been a tug on the fishing line, but I hadn't the energy or the willpower to eat anything. Archie was lying there under the tree, lifeless. And I would get the blame. A young rancher boy leaving town soon and the banker's son ends up dead? They'd assume I was trying to rob the bank, for sure.

I picked up Archie's gun and tipped the rest of my fire crystal dust into the powder chamber. I gathered up Archie's boots and stetson and holster and flung them into the fire. Then I collected some more dry wood and made a bigger fire. I dragged Archie down from his resting spot under the willow tree and heaved him onto the flames. Then I fired shots at him until I used up all the powder in the gun. A ripple of flame burst up from the bullet wounds in a scorching blaze. I had to step back a few steps from the fire because the flames were too hot.

I waited for a time, until the makeshift pyre had reduced him to ash. I found a crevice between two rocks and dug a hole with my hands and a flat stone. I scooped up the ash and bone fragments in the drinking cups I'd brought and threw them into the hole. Afterwards, I splashed water on the fire to put it out.

I hadn't planned on leaving for another couple of weeks, but the call of the west was never so clear. I would leave for the mines in the morning.

October 2013

Prompt: In 1,500 words or less, write a fantasy story wherein the protagonist is a monster.

Winner: Alex Woods

Alex Woods is a 28 year old writer from Liverpool, UK. He writes mostly short fiction, and has been published in a number of small magazines. He is currently working on a seemingly never-ending first draft of a debut novel.

Monster

I slumped down into my chair and waited for a reaction. Seconds ticked by, and he was just looking at me like I had lost my mind.

"Tell me again." He said, eventually.

"Easy. Easiest decision I ever made." I examined my fingernails. They were shards of glass, smooth and sharp. "You see, it's dead, all this." I waved my hand at the cavernous room like I was dismissing a servant. "It's dead. You have to adapt, Allard."

"And this," He spoke slowly. "This stuff you're talking about, this is adapting?"

I nodded, and couldn't help but smile.

"I don't know, Ban, really." His eyes drifted away from me, over to the cold fireplace that dominated the drawing room. It was a grand old thing. It even had little gargoyles beneath either corner. Scaled-down miniatures of the ugly little bastards that lurked above the Cathédrale of our ancestral home. "What would he say?"

"Forget him, seriously." I said. "In fact, I think he would understand, in a way, you know. You think that generation never adapted? Did we travel by horse and cart when we arrived in this country? No. He had a Morris Minor."

"Yeah, but – "

"Hey, I'm just saying. This is a way we can keep this thing going." I gestured to room again, less dismissively this time. "I understand why he did what he did. I get it. After that long, after the world has changed that much, there was just no place for an old ghoul like him. But this, this is how we can keep this thing alive, this is how we can keep ourselves alive."

"And you've tried it?"

"Allard, I've tried it. It works."

"It works?"

"It works a fuckin' treat, brother."

It wasn't his fault. He was just that way. It was the way the old bastard had him trained up. Traditions, he called them. Our way. The family path.

You see, our name used to mean something. Not just here, either, all over. Back home, out east, even as far as Russia, man, they knew about our family. So when myself and Allard came through, well, we were expected to carry on these ancient traditions and hallowed rituals and rules of conduct and blah blah blah.

But it's like, that old shit isn't relevant any more, you know? And as far as I'm concerned, the moment the old guy decided to put himself in the ground for good, well, that was the bell well and truly rung for family tradition. That was it for the name he cared so much about. It became about survival, it became about us.

"Listen, Al, what I'm saying is; give it a chance, man. Come with me, tonight."

"A hunt?" His head raised.

"Well yeah, kinda'." I rose from my seat. "Stay here, I'll get you some stuff, OK? We'll go when I get back."

He nodded and looked a disconsolate, beaten man. I knew he could never turn down a hunt, no matter what the price.

The hinges of the front door groaned and something took off into the tall grass of the garden. I was careful on the porch steps as I knew they were rotten beneath the boards. Last thing I needed was a fall through those and risk a Goddamn impaling. I moved out into the street and left the house towering above all others in the road, dark and terrible. I thought about him sat there in the old guy's chair. Bug-bitten red silk and lousy floorboards. Heavy cloth covering the paintings that rested now on the floors along the hallways and around the edges of the tall rooms, as the walls could no longer be trusted to hold a nail and support weight. This is the only way, he will see that.

#

I dropped a bag onto the table. He looked like he hadn't moved an inch since I left.

"What is it?"

"Uh, kind of like, uh, ritualistic garments." I smiled, exposing our famous family trait.

He pulled a pair of black jeans from the bag and stared at them like they were stuffed with garlic.

"Oh, Ban,"

"Listen, man, this is it. Ok? We can't just go lurching about the city in capes and knee-high boots, snatching up maidens. Not with all those cameras and police and street lights and

automatic weapons and bear mace. Don't even get me started on finding a virgin dressed in white around this city. Open windows and softly billowing curtains? " I rolled my eyes. "Not any more, chum. This is it for us now. You put that on, you follow my lead. It's easy, seriously. You just, don't really say anything much at all."

"You don't say anything?"

"Nope, just kind of, be moody and possessive. And, like, kind of give them a few hints that you might, maybe, possibly, be an ancient, stone-hearted predator that preys on the flesh and blood of vulnerable young women."

"Ban,"

"Yes, bro?"

"Even the cardigan?"

"Oh, man, especially the cardigan. You see, sure, we're animals. But the cardigan; that shows 'em that we're - I don't know...saveable?"

"Bancroft Jaqcues Nosforatu IV, you are a monster."

"Bro,"

"You are a stain on our great and bloody family name."

"Allard,"

"You drink that which has been tainted."

"Al,"

"You are a cross-worshipping, cardigan wearing, eye-liner applying, lying son of a bitch, and honestly, I think maybe a genius."

"That's nothing, man, wait 'til you try this."

I placed a small bottle of silver liquid on the table.

Far above, in an abandoned bell tower, a large crow screeched, unfolding it's great wings, scattering birds into the air and mice throughout the old house, scrambling on worn out carpets in cold, dark rooms. In a nearby, brightly-lit semi-detached with a nice blue ford parked in the drive, a father chewed his fingernails and watched a plastic clock on a kitchen wall. Struck by an involuntary shudder, the hairs along his neck and spine lifted on goose-pimpled flesh and he swallowed hard.

"What, what is that?"

"That, Al, is glitter."

November 2013

Prompt: Write a fantasy short story that incorporates tragedy without said tragedy relying on someone's (or something's) death with a 3,000 word limit.

Winner: Christine S.R. Jackson

Christine S. R. Jackson is the author of a children's fantasy book called 'The Hummingbird Familiar,' and a fan of silly speculative short stories. In 2010, she won `The Maurice Hodgson Memorial Award – Silver Medal` at Douglas College for her student writing. She lives in Vancouver BC, which isn`t as rainy as its reputation would lead you to believe.

Loose Threads

Zeke locked his truck. “You're not going to bring the metal detector?”

“I won't need it,” said Casey. She trudged across the road, resting her shovel against her shoulder, and stopped in front of the one vacant lot that happened to belong to Zeke. “You lived here?”

“How can you tell?”

“The lilacs. Ghost gardens keep coming up, long after everyone's gone.”

The lot where Zeke's childhood house had stood was now a weed-choked field, with only his mother's lilac bushes to mark the spot where his bedroom window had been. But as they walked through the waist-high grass, Zeke noticed other remnants of the house: cracked slabs of pavement split by thorn bushes, uneven ground that sank into a foundation pit filled with muddy water, and rusty pipes that zigzagged out of the ground like metal roots. All details that he'd missed from the road, when he had first bought the property.

Casey's brow furrowed. “No house.”

“Nah. We packed it in the truck.”

“That's a joke?”

“Sorta.” Zeke craved a cigarette.

“It wasn't torn down, though,” Casey said, matter-of-factly.

“More treasure-hunter wisdom?”

Casey shrugged. “If there'd been a house, I would see it.”

The move was still among Zeke's more vivid memories. It had been a miserable, piss-pouring day, just like this one. Workers slid in mud as they ratcheted the house onto an enormous trailer. And then they had dragged it halfway across the province, diverting opposing traffic on the two-lane highway. Even as a cynical high school kid, Zeke hadn't been too jaded to think it was cool to move and take your whole house with you.

"Ah. You're like an archaeologist." Zeke pronounced the word with all its romantic action movie connotations, though he guessed the reality was more like cleaning a bathtub with a toothbrush. "You've got that professional intuition."

"An eye for details that others miss?"

"Right. History written onto rocks and stuff."

"No," she said, pulling up the hood of her windbreaker. "It's not like that at all."

As Casey moved through the yard, her gaze was unfocused, and she tripped over the raised concrete that divided the former garden from the lawn. Her expression was slack, without emotion, until her lips pressed together in concentration. Her fingers twitched through gestures like a dog kicking in its sleep. She was doing that thing that Zeke had once hated, where she stumbled around like a glassy-eyed stoner.

She bent over, prodding the soil with her shovel, and unearthed the handle of a bicycle.

"Lucky find."

Casey shook her head.

"Right. You just had a feeling about this spot," Zeke teased. "Is this when you tell me about my rough childhood?"

"I'm not into cold reading."

He didn't bother pointing out that she should know too much about his past for it to be a cold reading. If he did, she would only pretend to remember, and her acting fooled no one except herself.

Casey dropped her shovel and yanked on the bike's handle, as if she hoped to pull it out of two feet of mover-packed earth with the strength of her arms alone.

"Hey, forget the bike. We're—"

The bike came free, and earth sagged into the space where it had been. It was every inch the ten-speed that he had ridden until its gears came apart, except that this bike was new. Its metallic blue paint job still sparkled, even under a grey sky.

"You don't want it?" Casey let the bike tip into the weeds and walked away.

"But it's..." Zeke shook his head. It couldn't be the same one. It had to be some other bike that just happened to have the same frame, paint job, and holo-foil Pokemon stickers on the seat. But staring at it brought up a wave of nostalgia, and he knew in his gut that the bike was his. His heart stuttered, and he gave it a few good smacks.

Casey roamed around the lot like a sleepwalker. "I told you this wouldn't be what you expected."

#

“Is it time-travel?” Zeke leaned against his truck. He had called an early break, and opened the thermos of hot chocolate he had intended to save for later, when they would be cold and wet.

“I don't think so,” said Casey.

“Can you see ghosts?”

“Of toys?”

“I meant the people kind.”

“If there are any, I haven't seen them.”

“Maybe you just didn't notice.”

“That's possible.”

Casey was the type of person who would walk right by her best friend in the supermarket because the store, conceptually, wasn't one of the places where her friends were supposed to be. She'd told him once that she still remembered him as 'Math Classmate, Two Seats Right' a year after they had started dating.

Even when he'd chanced on her garage sale two weeks ago, when he first got back into town, she'd gotten that deer-caught-in-headlights expression as soon as he greeted her by name.

The first words out of her mouth were, “Oh hey. I haven't seen you siiince?”

It was her standard probing question for smalltalk with acquaintances she didn't recognize. Zeke tried not to hold it against her. It was just how she was wired.

“I'll save you the trouble,” Zeke had said. “High school boyfriend. Eleventh grade.”

And then she had smiled, not the forced smile of 'appropriate social interactions,' as she had once put it, but the one she saved for people who seemed to get her. “You could have said 'Zeke.'”

“Glad I don't have to try to remember where I sat in ninth grade math.”

And when Casey was distracted by someone interested in buying a lamp, one of her neighbours had leaned over the fence, taking a break from watering the garden to dole out life advice to a stranger. “You don't want to get involved with that girl.”

“Why not?”

“She has a garage sale every week.” She covered her mouth and whispered, “Stolen goods.”

“I don't steal,” Casey called from across the yard in a calm, factual tone. “I find stuff.”

The eight people who had been browsing the garage sale looked in Zeke's direction. The neighbour retreated into her house, where a yappy poodle watched through a gap in her closed

blinds. The conflict left his palms sweaty. He felt a flutter in his chest, and he coughed until it passed. Even if Casey never noticed these things, he felt embarrassed for her.

Zeke took in the whole yard in a sweeping glance. It looked less like the site of a weekly garage sale and more like a dump that had recently received the contents of an entire house. She had everything from appliances to children's toys. “You found all this?”

Casey muttered an acknowledgement, finished counting out change to a man with an armful of books, and rejoined Zeke beside the fence. “I treasure-hunt.”

“That's perfect,” Zeke had said. His scalp tingled when she came close; it was the same relaxing sensation he got when someone massaged his temples. “Hey, I just bought my parents' old place. I was thinking of giving it a pass with a metal detector before I started tearing up the lot. Maybe see if there's any old family treasure. If you aren't busy, you should come by and lend me your expertise?”

“I don't think you understand what I do.”

But it was easy enough to convince her. After all, she couldn't recognize a lie.

#

“It's hard to explain,” Casey said. “They're like leftover bits, outlines that linger when something falls apart. Ties that bind lost things to the places where they belong.”

They were back on the lot, up to their ankles in soupy mud. With hot chocolate warming him from within and the shiny bike out of view, Zeke was already doubting what he had seen.

“Like magic?”

“You don't believe me.”

“Well...”

“Don't worry. I wouldn't, either.”

Zeke rubbed his beard. “Show me?”

“That's the best way of knowing.” Casey flashed him another one of those smiles that lit up her face. Even with a few grey hairs and crow's feet, she looked so much like the girl he remembered.

She dug until she struck something hard, and then scraped soil with the shovel's blade. A finger-sized bone emerged from the dirt.

“What the Hell?” Zeke blurted. “I don't think--”

But she had already bent over to tug on her find. The cat pulled free without a sound, and Casey lay it on the grass, whole, wide-eyed, and stiff. It had all its joints, skin, and fur; everything a pet needed except life itself.

“Minou?” Zeke choked.

Casey beamed. “Your childhood pet, right? You can hold it, if you want.”

“That's...” Zeke stared. The cat's rigid body looked like it had been stuffed. “That's something.”

“I'll show you something better.”

“No, thanks, that's more than enough,” said Zeke, but she was already in motion, carving out chunks of the house's former foundations, her shovel slicing through concrete at if it were cake. When he stood in front of her, she seemed to look past him. “Casey?”

He put his hand on her shoulder, and was hit by a wave of vertigo.

The ground had gone flat. It was blurry, near-featureless, like the textures of old video game terrain, and he could see through the surfaces of the world to forms beyond them. The soil teemed with unfinished things: segments of worms, dented cans, the sole of a boot. Severed roots sprouted into twisting trunks of lines, like drawing plans of trees, but every one the same. They were not individual trees, but trees in the abstract sense. Concepts given shape.

Below the spot where Casey had been digging, a toy robot was buried in two separate pieces, connected by waving lines that straightened as he squinted. Her shovel uncovered it, and when she reached to retrieve the robot, she tugged it by the lines that tethered the pieces to each other. In her hands, the toy knitted back together, became whole, and faded from view. Soon, it was as insubstantial as the earth under their feet.

It was then that Casey turned to face him. She covered her mouth with both hands. “You followed me.”

Zeke tried to speak, but his voice came out in a croak. His hand still clenched the fabric of her shirt.

“I didn't think anyone could. I thought I was the only one.” Tears welled in her eyes, but he could hardly see them. His vision slipped through her cheek to the outlines of her missing wisdom teeth, more solid than any other thing about her.

Choking back nausea, Zeke looked away. Across the lot, a diagram of his parents' old shed materialized out of a few weathered boards. From the rusty pipes that had been connected to his house, threads stretched into the distance, pulled taut like rubber bands.

“Zeke. Are you okay?” Casey reached out to take his hand.

“Don't touch me!” He threw up, and watched his vomit divide itself into distinct food shapes.

“Just don't let go. Don't let go. Please.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

He broke free, and then the world was right again. Zeke was on his knees, gasping, studying the texture of his own skin. The heel of his palm had slipped into his vomit, and mud had crusted onto his pants. The sky was cloudless, and much darker than it should have been.

Zeke searched the whole lot, tamping the grass flat, but Casey was gone. Even Minou was missing, though the earth was freshly turned where she had dug him up. Zeke couldn't bring himself to check if there was a skeleton in his cat's grave.

He stumbled to the truck and sat with his head resting against the steering wheel for a long time, until his pulse slowed and he could think clearly again. He'd lost touch with reality. When he got back to the hotel, he'd google the symptoms to see if he needed to see a doctor. But as he reversed, he heard a metallic crunch. And there it was, wedged under his back bumper: a blue bike with Pokemon stickers on its seat.

#

The lights were on at Casey's house. From its front step, he could hear canned laughter and music from a TV inside. Blue light flickered on the blinds. He took a deep breath, and then pounded on the door until Casey opened it a crack, keeping the security chain latched.

“Can I help you?”

He pushed on the door, but the chain held. “What the hell happened back there?”

“You'll have to be more specific.”

“Don't pull that crap. You don't have the memory of a goldfish. It's me.”

“Who?”

“Zeke.”

Casey peered through the crack. Her eyes were red-rimmed, bloodshot, and her face was puffy like it always was when she cried. “No, you aren't.”

“What are you talking about?”

“He was different. I have no idea who you are.”

Zeke lunged, grazing her face with his fingertip before she could pull it back. But the world didn't change as it had before.

She muttered something under her breath, and then clasped his finger in her hand. And he caught a glimpse through the door, as it faded into lines. Her house was a hoarder's den, piled high with broken things, their lines as tangled as loose yarn.

Zeke felt a flutter in his chest and glanced down, looking through his own ribcage to the heart that stuttered within, unravelling with each beat. He doubled over against the railing.

Casey sighed. “I should have known.” In a blink, she was standing on the front step beside him, with his pinky finger still caught in her vice-grip. She tugged at the loose strings that dangled from his chest, squeezing his ribcage like a shoe laced too tight.

“Stop,” he mouthed.

“Keep still.”

He wriggled his hand free, and pushed her against the door.

And then it was dawn, and he woke on his hands and knees before a silent house. He knocked until his fists were raw, though he knew somehow that she wouldn't come.

The nosey neighbour came out to investigate, dressed in a robe and slippers. She shot him a lemon-sucking look that said 'I told you so,' before disappearing back inside, and Zeke figured it'd be a good idea to leave before the police showed up. His heart pounded, steady, regular.

On the hood of his truck, a toy robot had been positioned so that it was giving a salute. Unlike the toy of his memory, there was no battle damage gouged into its armour, and its grey arms were free of the yellow tint that his parents' smoking had left on so many of this things. It stood, whole and clean, as if it had just been torn out of a plastic wrapper.

December 2013

Prompt: With a deadline of only one week write a fantasy story of 300 words or less.

Winner: David Babcock

Tick, Tock, Shoot the Clock

"Ten."

Cold Grey eyes stared at me from behind the sights of the pistol.

"Nine."

This was quite the mess I had gotten myself into. I watched as the air shimmered around the man, pulsing in time with his heart beat, as he continued to count.

"Eight."

The muzzle dipped towards the table before his hand drifted down to rest on the white and red checkered tablecloth draped over it.

"Seven."

Edgar took his hand off the gun. He'd placed it in the center of the table.

"When I get to one we both go for it. I've always wondered which of us was faster. Four."

That was nice of him. For a professional killer Edgar wasn't that bad.

"Three."

Too bad he hadn't started at five.

"Two."

I exhaled calmly. Settling my nerves. Edgar shifted in his seat.

"One."

Silver flashed in the low light of the room, stabbing the tablecloth where my hand would've been if I had reached for the gun.

Unfortunately for Edgar I'm not an idiot. I'd pulled the edge of the table cloth instead and the gun dropped into my waiting hand. The look on his face when I pulled the trigger was almost worth this whole mess. The round caught him just below his left eye. Blood and brain matter spraying the back wall as he fell backwards to the floor.

Edgar had always seemed like a smart guy. Sure he was an asshole but you don't survive ten years in his line of work by being an idiot.

Or maybe you do, since only an idiot would play quick draw on a table cloth.

The shimmering air pulsed around him one more time before disappearing as I sighed.

Cleaning this up was going to be a pain.

January 2014

Prompt: In 2,000 words or less, write a funny short story where magic goes horribly wrong (or horribly right).

Winner: B Lynch

No One Else

"This isn't going to work, Terry," Mitchell grumbled to his brother, as he adjusted a generous yellow spandex miniskirt. Accompanying the constricting miniskirt were a bedazzled yellow tank top, poorly applied bright green lipstick, and a voluminous blue wig, slightly askew. If pop stars were manufactured to perfection, as Terry often thought aloud, Mitchell resembled a factory reject. "And your girlfriend's going to kill me."

"Dude," Terry said, holding his makeshift Batman mask, reassured him. Mitchell's reluctance had little chance against him; his brother was a steamroller of enthusiasm. And he always got crushed. "It will work. Trust me. Even if it goes around the school, that's like a thousand people. That's way stronger than just drawing it once and having her see it."

"But it's only supposed to be drawn once," Mitchell said. "Just once. For her. And that's it."

"Nah. That's gonna take too long. Think bigger, Mitch. Why wait?" Terry put his makeshift mask on. "Do the thing, bro."

Mitchell winced as he looked over at the computer - where "Roar" was cued up. "I don't know if it's worth it."

"Ashley or dignity, bro? Which's it going to be?" Terry asked, from behind his mask, his hockey pads, and his cape made from their little brother's Batman pull-over.

Mitchell hesitated, and took a breath. He knew which one it was going to be, and already, he was beginning to regret it. "Let's do it," he said. "Ready, Dave?"

"On it," their friend Dave said, as he clicked 'play' on the music, and then, 'record' on his phone. "Start in three...two...one..."

At first, Mitchell was mortified--his lips barely moved. But then, he warmed up to the lip-syncing; his stilted, jerky movements smoothed, and his discomfort waned. After ten seconds, Terry spoke.

"You got your cup on?" he asked, through the foam and wire. Mitch didn't understand him at first. Then he heard "cup".

"Cup?" What cu-" Mitchell felt the thud of his brother's foot making contact, and his groin exploded in horrific pain. Mitchell whimpered a string of high-pitched curses as he dropped to the floor.

"Boom!" Terry yelled triumphant, gloved fists high in the air. "I AM THE NIGHT!" He danced around Mitchell's body, and ignored his brother's cries.

"Tell me you got that," Terry said to Dave, who was cackling like a hyena.

"Hell yeah I got it," Dave said. "Oh my god, dude. That was crazy!"

Mitchell wept openly and clutched at his bruised balls, and reminded himself it'd all be worth it--for her. The sigil had been on the wall behind him, the entire time.

#

Her name was Ashley Morris. She wasn't the hottest girl in school. Not by any measure—especially the Terry Jankowicz scale. That was Sarah-Jane Taylor—not the new girl, Derris-something, who Terry said was a close second. Sarah's parents were expecting twins, and instead received a fetal Highlander. Nor was Ashley the smartest, compared to Helen Choi-Wayland--resident anarchist, high honors student, and published author of YA dystopian were-marmoset novels.

But they couldn't touch Ashley Morris. Not in Mitch's eyes. She had a smile that lit up his world, and that was all that mattered.

He wanted to live in that smile. He wanted to wake up every morning and see it before anybody else did—even the sun. He wanted her smile to be for him, and him alone. He wanted to find his way into those doodles in her book - those weird, intricate designs that always caught his eyes.

He also wanted to touch her boobs. But only if she let him, as per the shittiest birds-and-the-bees talk ever given, dated October 20th, 2010, 4:32:22 PM EST, in his father's garage: Girls are... something else. Only touch their boobs if they say "okay". Don't let 'em pay for dinner, but if they say come back to their place, piston intake camshaft valve cylinder four-stroke engine exhaust camshaft (the only time anyone ever tried to explain the act of sexual intercourse through the interaction of automotive parts—something totally inaccessible to anyone but Mitch's father, hence the sub-par ranking)...

And, uh, wear a fucking rubber. Yeah.

That was why Mitchell was fine with the plan. He figured everybody got shitty advice from their parents, and, at one time or another, got kicked in the nuts for love. He just wanted the latter over quickly.

#

Poor Mitchell was still walking bow-legged the next morning when Dave had texted him a link to the channel, the password, and the words LOG IN NOW to his phone. He waited until he managed to get down the long flight of stairs from his bedroom first; that was a trial in itself, and every breath included cursing his brother's existence. Once he'd rested, and found his way to the kitchen, Mitchell plugged in the info into the tiny password prompt, and bugged out when the screen finished loading. Terry was already at the table, eating his bagel.

"Holy shit," Mitchell gagged as he saw the totals. Half a million views. Six thousand shares. Two thousand invisible thumbs approving of his testicular trauma. Eighty disapproving. And yet he didn't want to show Terry, because that meant Terry was right. Like usual.

"What?" Terry leaned over the table, and tried to grab the phone out of his brother's hand. "Let me see."

"No." Mitchell's voice trembled, and he looked over at his brother with a mix of fright and awe.

"it worked? It worked!?" Terry said, his eyes wide.

"Yeah... half a million views. Six thousand shares."

"Holy shit," Terry said--at first stunned, then excited. "Holy SHIT! HALF A MILLION! HALF-A-FUCKING-MILLION-PEOPLE!"

"We did it," Mitchell said, awed.

"WE FUCKING DID IT! HOLY SHIT! SHE'S GOING TO FUCKING LOVE YOU, MAN!" Terry shook him harder than a snow-globe before Christmas.

"What's going on now?" their mom asked from upstairs.

"Mitchell's got a date!" Terry said, whispering to his brother, "in-take camshaft valve cylinder four-stroke enginnnneeeeee, yeaaah boyyeeeeeee!"

Mitchell blushed. He wasn't sure Ashley would let him go that far. Yet.

The love sigil would help, though. His brother found it one late night on 4Chan, saved it, and never found the thread again. But the instructions were specific about how to draw each letter of the alphabet into the symbol, until they made a name. Once the whole design was finished, and written on something—or a couple of somethings—it'd work. It was Terry's idea to make it a video. He swore it'd be the perfect way to fix Mitchell's lack-of-action problem... and Mitchell knew his brother was right. Fortune favored the brave. But the internet favored the stupid, and the stupid went viral.

Judging by the tags on Mitchell's Facebook feed, "viral" wasn't the word to describe it: the video'd spread through Carpenter High like ebola on bath salts.

"Fuck," Mitchell said, dread filling the pit of his stomach. "I have to go to school now."

"Of course, fucktard," Terry replied casually, through bites of his cinnamon raisin bagel. "We all do. Especially you. Nut up. She's going to be watching."

"Shit," Mitchell said. "shit, shit, shit, shit -"

He didn't finish breakfast, and he stared out the window of their mom's massive land-whale of a minivan like a pig being led to the slaughter. It wasn't as bad as he thought it was, though.

It was worse.

#

For starters, there was the laughing--expected. There were chants of "I AM THE NIGHT!", fake-out nutshots, giant nut pillows—how they got those on short notice, Mitch didn't know—not altogether unexpected, but unwelcome. And then there were the guys who dressed up like broke pop stars and pretended to get hit in the balls when he walked by. That was pretty shitty. Mitchell remembered reading somewhere that imitation was flattery, but he was also pretty sure that was bullshit. There was a bright side, however.

He was sighing at a crude stick-figure reenactment of the video—permanent marker, of course--off his locker when he heard Ashley Morris's voice. "What was with that video?" she asked, lightly giggling.

His head whipped around. She was there. She. Her. And her smile. Talking to him. Not just giggling, or clutching one of her sketched-on notebooks while she talked to somebody else about him in earshot, or about anything else, like Calculus or European History or nail wraps. She was right next to him, looking him in the eyes, asking him, What was with that video? with that amazing world-making smile of hers.

"Which video?" He was so nervous, it almost came off cool.

"The one with the Katy Perry thing, and your brother kicking you in the junk dressed like Batman?" she laughed. It was a braying laugh. A magical braying laugh, like a donkey had sex with a unicorn and slathered it in leprechauns and rainbows. "That was crazy."

"Yeah," he said. Aching, but for different reasons. He was so close. She was talking with him.

"Why'd you do it?" she asked, shaking her head, slightly smiling at him. And it

Mitchell thought for a second - but didn't say what he really, really wanted to say. He looked down at her notebook, and thought the design glowed for a second.

"I just... I thought it'd be cool," he said, instead. Still not over the fact that Ashley fucking Morris was smiling at him, and nobody else. Still unable of making it to that next step, where he got his bruised balls up and said, "Hey, want to hang out on Saturday and spend the entire time attached at the face?"

She smiled, brushed a strand of hair out of her face, and said, "Hey, so... I'm not doing anything after school today. Want to hang out later?"

The bell rang. The real bell, not the one in his head. What. Was. Happening. She wanted to—uh—Ashley and him—him and Ashley—in-takecamshaftvalvecylinderfour-stroke, in-takecamshaftvalvecylinderfour-stroke—"Yeah," he said. "Meet you out front at three?"

"Sure," she said. That smile returned. "See you then." She walked away, and he stood there, stunned worse than when he got hit in the nuts for love.

Mitch couldn't believe it. The video worked. He didn't care how; it did.

He didn't notice that Ashley Morris wasn't the only one smiling at him.

#

After floating through his Chem class, Mitchell pulled out his phone and checked the video's views. Part out of dread, part out of morbid curiosity. It seemed even the teachers had seen it, not to mention the freshmen who were sitting in on the class. To his horror, the hit count'd gone up. Way up. Two million hits way up.

"Oh shit," he said. Sudden footsteps nearby startled him, and he looked up. He dropped his phone.

"Let me get that," the brown-haired girl said, picking it up before he had a chance to react. "Here," she said, looking up at him. Smiling. Why, he didn't know. She wasn't just holy crap hot. She was "bow and avert your eyes, filthy peasant" hot. The pinnacle of the Terry Jankowicz scale: supermodel good looks, uber-supermodel figure, impossibly white teeth. (Why teeth were so important to his brother, Mitchell never knew).

"Thanks," Mitchell said, sheepish, as his shaking hands accepted the phone. "I should probably get a case for it." And she laughed. She laughed the way his mother did at any one of his jokes. All of them. Especially the unfunny ones. Just like the girl was laughing now.

Mitchell was certain that another nutshot was lying in wait. But she distracted him. "You're so funny," she said, before squinting in recognition, "...aren't you the guy who did the, uh...?"

"Yeah," Mitchell said. "That was me. And my brother was the, uh, other guy. Batman."

"Ouch. Ashley," she said, holding her perfectly manicured hand out. "Ashley Derris." It was her. The only one who could possibly out-hot Sarah-Jane...and Terry clearly didn't know his head from his ass if he thought Sarah-Jane was hotter. She wasn't Ashley Morris who made his heart sing like goddamn Freddy Mercury; there could be only one Ashley for him. Maybe.

"Mitchell," Mitchell said, taking the extremely pretty not-his-Ashley's hand and shaking it. He had a strange, lingering sensation of weirdness. Familiar, yet otherworldly weirdness.

Like that time his grandma called him up and asked if his dog was okay, because she had a dream, and he thought she sounded ridiculous, but she insisted, go check on the dog, and then Terry came in and said that Paczki got hit by a fucking Toyota 4x4 and Mitchell's face went powder-sugar white with Grandma's voice crackling out of the phone, asking hello? Mitchell, are you there Mitchell?

That kind of weirdness.

Mitchell saw three other women smiling at him from behind Ashley Derris, with that deep, hopeless look he knew from his own reflection - from every time he thought about Ashley

Morris. The lingering weirdness grew worse when he recognized them: Ashley Chang, Ashley Sims, and Ashley Bhattacharjee. More Ashleys. Not good.

"I have to go," he said to Ashley Derris, "I've got a... a thing."

"I'm not doing anything right now," she said, leaning in towards him, "How about I go with you?"

The other Ashleys were making their approach - and he saw another cluster of women down the hall. Ashley Derris squeezed his hand, and drew his attention back to her hazel eyes. "Hey," she said, with a smile. "Let's go check out your thing." Then he realized she meant something very specific. He turned a shade of red that fire trucks envied.

"No, it's, uh - I'll talk to you later, okay?" he said, pulling his hand away with alarm. It wasn't a smooth exit; he stumbled away, and looked for a door. He needed to get outside. Immediately.

"Why don't we talk now?" she said, grinning wide as she walked after him. Then, the bell went off. People flooded the halls, and it was as if an invisible scent was wafting through the halls. Heads turned in unison, towards him. They began to weave through the crowd. More Ashleys.

"Sorry," he told Ashley Derris. He ran away, fast as he could, to find the only person who could help him.

#

Terry was doing lighter tricks out at the back gate with the smokers and Helen Choi-Weyland when Mitchell grabbed him by the jacket and dragged him away, leaving the lighter and a Terry-shaped gap in their lives.

"Mitch, what the fuck!" Terry said, shoving him. "What's your problem?"

"It worked," Mitchell said. "She came up to me!"

"I told you! I fucking told you--dude, why are you freaked out? Calm down."

Mitch jabbed a thumb behind him. Terry squinted, and tilted his head; he saw a crowd gathering outside the exit. Then, they picked up pace. His eyes widened. "What the fucking fuck?"

He saw the following Ashleys, walking towards them: Derris, Franks, and Fritz; Gomez with a z and Gomes with an s; Kim, Snyder, Byrd, Bhattacharjee, Chang, and Nolan; Richard Ashley, the guidance counselor; and twenty other girls not named Ashley, which confused him. "Why the hell are they following you?" Terry asked. "That's Jane Solensky, Selene Rodriguez, Eva Scott...And Manda?" He marveled at seeing his own girlfriend there. "What the fuck?"

"Yeah. Manda. Manda Ashley Richards." Mitchell corrected him. In a flash of recognition, he realized why. "Dude, we should've added Ashley's last name. And her middle name. That's what went wrong. We only had one fucking name."

"Shit, shit, shit, shit..." Terry muttered.

"What do we do?"

"We? Fuck that," Terry said, frightened. "That's your problem, bro." He clapped Mitchell on the shoulder, and then ran like hell, leaving Mitchell at the mercy of the Ashlegion. Mitchell was almost paralyzed by fear. But instead of running away, he stopped - struck by something in the distance.

He saw Ashley Morris, off by the side of the school, in the shade of the back entrance. There was a new design on her notebook; it looked just like the one he and Terry made, but different in an enchanting way. His eyes were fixed on it, the same way they wanted to be on Ashley whenever she was around. But the feeling he got—the feeling was the same. A living live wire. Everything around him narrowed, and suddenly, none of the other Ashleys mattered. No one else existed.

He walked toward her slowly, his nerves crackling with energy and hope and promise. This was it; it was her all along. He felt like it was always her, but now he was sure. He just wanted to feel her touch, her kiss, to just forget he was himself and just be part of whatever he and her would be, together, inseparable. He could starve to death and waste away as long as she had him.

Then he saw the horror on her face, and felt the hands upon his body. Mitchell panicked. This wasn't supposed to be the way. No—he wasn't theirs. He was hers. He tried to fight them off, but the hands never stopped, the mouths were on him, kisses becoming bites becoming agony, clawing caresses tearing at his body.

None of them were her. If they had been her, he would have been happy—beyond happy. Electric. But she wasn't. He screamed, not just because of the pain. She wasn't watching anymore. Ashley was running. Leaving him under the tangle of hungry death, alone.

It occurred to him in his last moments that, between dying and losing Ashley, losing Ashley was worse—but dying still sucked. Even more so when he realized that it was Manda taking those last bites out of his jugular, and howling about how good he looked in her miniskirt.

The fucking irony.

February 2014

Prompt: In honor of Valentine's Day, this month's challenge is about romance. Competitors are invited to write a fantasy story of 1,500 words or less that centers around a romance.

Winner: Louise Stanley

The Mesmerist

Our lips meet, his moustache soft against my nose. I squeeze his belly against mine; I can feel his heart beating. He ruffles my hair with his hand.

It's the first time I've been with a gentleman. I don't think I'll ever forget the way it feels to be in a relationship with an equal. It's not easy to submit to one of your own kind when you're used to being in command.

I bend down and open the buttons of his trousers.

"Keeping you up are we, Lieutenant?" the magician rasped.

Guffaws came from the gaggle of tanked-up men in the front row of the Paszynsko barracks auditorium, and Jerzy Zakowski felt his cheeks burst with shame at his private fantasy. The heaviness of his head reminded him that he'd also nearly fallen asleep, giving evidently giving grave offence to the performer engaged to entertain the troops. This wiry little man wore a suit stained with flash-powder and a malevolent smile that revealed crooked teeth. His tricks had been sleight of hand, of which it was easy to divine the methods.

"Lisak's tail, these nobs, eh? In a world of their own and no mistake. Now this, lads, is a trick that doesn't use sleight of hand."

Jerzy raised an eyebrow. Sceptical mutterings came from other members of the audience.

The entertainer pulled a silver watch from his pocket. "I promise you, this is genuine magic. I don't do this for everyone, but, seeing as it's your lieutenant's birthday" – he winked at Jerzy – "an' he's prob'ly spending it pretty far away from his Mamma, let me conjure up summat for him..."

Jerzy slunk down inside his uniform, desperately wanting to get back to his private quarters and go to bed. He'd come here to lift his spirits and forget himself.

Gerald and I are together, naked, on my bed. He lies on his front and I give him a rub-down. The door is locked, but everyone knows that, be it a man or a woman with me, an officer is allowed his privacy. We can explore each other's bodies to our hearts' content. He calls me "George" - I've tried to coach him on how to pronounce "Jerzy", to no avail.

He turns me over to massage my back. "You must get so bored with only the peasants and their disapproval for company."

"Well, I was at the lyceum in Krovt only two years ago," I say. "We had plenty of opportunities for satisfaction there, but not much for love."

Jerzy had expected the conjurer to be about to produce a bouquet of roses or a rabbit from his hat as an inappropriate gift for him. The watch began to flick backwards and forwards, glinting in the gaslight. The room quietened all of a sudden, the men at the front having done most of the heckling each falling quiet in turn.

He took a deep breath as he too felt first giddy, and then calm detachment from the mortal world. This was certainly no conjuring trick; this wasn't even a conventional séance, where a shaman might call spirits forward to speak with a conscious audience. Instead, he felt his spirit pulled from his body into what must be the Beyond: the realm of the spirits themselves.

"I've been sent up the Kila," Gerald says, taking a drag on his cigarillo. "Von Hipplersdorf ordered us to find a safe route through the hills towards Mogilyovka. They've put a POW camp right on top of the peasants' charnel house there and it's my job to sweep the place for beetles."

He means the Lenks – the enemy. "When will you be back?"

"Not until we can see the perimeter fence there and report back," Gerald snorts. "Like me and a few clodhoppers are going to overpower a whole division of maniacs who crucify children."

He laughs so hard I can see his tonsils.

He found himself standing in a mountain village, downstream along the Kila. Around him were the ruins of houses, their brick stoves standing up through collapsed, charred walls, pointing accusingly at the sky. Remains of soldiers' tents, also burned, littered the road. From the trees hung several figures – a female priest, the wise-man and probably the starosta or village elder and his wife. They were not long dead, but as they twisted in the breeze, Jerzy knew there was no way to save them.

He'd seen this before in villages left by the retreating enemy. They herded captives back towards the cities after executing any local dignitaries and remaining soldiery.

Gerald.

He reached for his pistol and moved cautiously up the street.

The coward can't even look at me when he's talking.

When I demand to know how Gerald died, Corporal Solinski just shrugs. "I didn't see it. We were ambushed and we couldn't have defended Vassilinsk properly – there weren't enough of us left to fall back there."

I tell myself to take hold of myself and not pursue the matter. A relationship such as mine is not forbidden unless it would be fraternisation between the ranks, though I know a number of men take lovers from the ranks and make them their batmen in order to disguise what they're doing. But even so, I don't want salacious rumours going round my company that their commander lost his boyfriend. I have to remain firm. Death is around every corner – it was Gerald the other day; it could be me tomorrow.

Solinski lost his brother-in-law out there too. There are rumours that the Lenks distracted them with a terrible apparition – sorcery? – and so no-one has been punished for deserting their commanding officer. Solinski would have been shot in the early days of this war.

If I let myself go to pieces, I'll let everyone else down too.

Jerzy wandered around the ruined township, trying to suppress the anger and pity he felt for the dead and focus on why the magician had sent him here. When he put his hand out to anything within the area, he realised he was closing his hand around thin air. He could only look, not touch.

He came to a cottage that had a stronger structure than the peasant huts and was not so easily destroyed by fire. Although he could not open the door by normal means, he found he could simply float through the walls. It appeared to be a small stavka; from the décor, it had been located in the starosta's dwelling, the officer in charge bunking with the elder and his family.

Groans came from beneath an overturned bookcase. Jerzy quickly sped round to the far side and found Gerald lying on the floor, his face contorted in pain and his throat choking and spluttering. Blood seeped out from beneath the solid oak dresser.

He couldn't even mop his lover's brow or hold his hand during his last moments. Determined to feel like he was doing something, he folded his incorporeal hand around Gerald's outstretched palm, its fingers twitching as the muscles went into spasm.

"You came to me," he said, groaning. "Are you dead too? Have they taken Paszynsko? How did they kill you?" He choked and his head rolled to one side, but Jerzy could see that he was still conscious.

"I'm alive. I was granted this vision by one of those mesmerist chaps. Vassilinsk fell a week ago, but Paszynsko hasn't fallen – it doesn't look like they've got the men to attack us."

Gerald tried to speak, but nothing more came out. He jerked his head back in the last throes of death. Jerzy stood up to leave his body in peace, but as he turned to leave the cottage, he saw a spectral figure get up from the floor and come towards him.

"It's a bit more than a vision, George."

Jerzy embraced him, hugging and kissing. As they began to get more intimate with each other, Gerald's form dissipated slowly but surely, until he was consumed by light.

This was goodbye.

As his lover left him, Vassilinsk itself faded. Jerzy found himself back into the room where he had begun his journey, biting his lip and wondering whether he had overstepped the boundaries spirit had set for him; whether Gerald would have lasted longer in his embrace if he hadn't started to fool around. The other men were less vocal now, each looking furtive and restless, as if they had seen similar visions.

"I thought that'd get your attention," the mesmerist said. "You ain't alone when you're with your brothers-in-arms. Everyone has someone they need to say goodbye to. Whatever you would have done with him, his time was up."

Jerzy rubbed his eyes and stood up to leave. "Thank you. If you'd excuse me – it's been a long day and I've got to get an early start tomorrow. Thank you."

April 2014

Prompt: Write a back cover blurb for a fantasy story. This could be for a story that they have written, one they plan to write, or one they just came up with an idea about. There was no explicit word count, but if it can't fit on the back cover of a book then it's too long.

Winner: G. T. Holmes

G. T. Holmes is the author of exactly zero books but writes with the hope that he will one day be published. He spends most of his creative time outlining and writing. G. T. Holmes currently resides in California and is studying to become a biochemist.

Blurb for 'Hexileon'

Counterfeiting means death.

But she doesn't care.

Nira Malian is among the few criminals brave, or foolish, enough to cheat Udani's system. The federal government has executed many who have played the counterfeiting game and lost but Nira has managed to survive by playing her crew off as insignificant.

But things begin to spiral out of control when an assassin stumbles upon Nira's counterfeiting operation and a new investigator starts tracing a series of murders that could lead to her doorstep. Now, Nira must make decisions that will change her life forever. One thing is for certain: make one wrong move and her hand won't be the only thing she loses.

April 2014

Prompt: Write a back cover blurb for a fantasy story. This could be for a story that they have written, one they plan to write, or one they just came up with an idea about. There was no explicit word count, but if it can't fit on the back cover of a book then it's too long.

Winner: C. C. Lewer

I am a part-time writer living in New Zealand. I hope my fantasy stories draw the reader into an exciting world of adventure, populated with compelling characters, intriguing plots and unusual creatures. If they laugh, cry, or fall in love along the way, then I've done my job. I hope you enjoy this short fantasy story featuring Derek, Warrior-for- Hire, in The Legless Lizards of Little Nobbynook, by C. C. Lewer

Editor's Note: Given the unusual nature of this month's challenge C.C. Lewer kindly offered another story in place of the winning blurb.

The Legless Lizard of Little Nobbynook

1.

A horde of fire-breathing creatures swarmed over the crest and surrounded the spot where I'd just emptied my bladder. A fierce spurt of flame dried the damp dirt with a puff of steam. I froze; flies half undone and a curse caught in my throat.

Stopping to pee on the long, dry road from Cornerstone to Turnabout no longer seemed the smartest idea. I'd been warned about the dangerous creatures I could meet along the way and these little Dragon-ants were top of everyone's list. I'd laughed of course, hardly believing a tiny little ant would be a problem for me - might, great, warrior-for-hire that I was. By the time I stopped to relieve myself, I'd forgotten all about them and that they breathed fire.

I hastily fixed my pants and leapt back on Lefty, my noble and trusty steed. I prodded his flanks with my battered boot heels.

"Come on, you old bag of bones, there are fire-breathing ants after us." He gave a snort. "They'll get to you first, Lefty!"

That seemed to spur him on, as he picked up the pace and moved from slow, to slightly less slow. I cast a quick glance behind us and noticed the black mass of ants, trailing smoke and spraying fire, was singeing his fetlocks.

"Faster, Lefty! I don't fancy becoming a char-grilled dinner for an army of ants, do you?" Lefty finally found some speed I'm not sure he knew he had and took off at a gallop.

"Waahoo!" I yelled, hanging on for dear life.

I wasn't joking about being a warrior-for-hire. I was heading down this road to take a job at Little Nobbynook; a small town about half-way between my home of Cornerstone and the larger city of Turnabout. Not that I'd visited either, having spent most of my life in Cornerstone. I knew nothing about the job and even less about being a warrior-for-hire. In fact, it was my first time out warrioring, and may well be my last at the rate I was going.

A good ways up the road, no sign of the ants behind us, I pulled back Lefty's reins and he slowed to an almost stop. His flanks were heaving, so I slid off to give the poor fella a break. I was hoping by now we were pretty close to Little Nobbynook, as he looked like he might not make it that far. I was pretty sure we'd outrun the ants. So while we might die of exhaustion, we'd not be cooked in the process.

I gave him an affectionate pat and he looked at me as if he had the strength to bite me, he would. So we trudged along the road in unhappy silence, a nose-biting length apart. I took stock, thinking that's what a good warrior-for-hire might do.

The landscape out here was not what I'd expected. Never mind the dangerous creatures all around me was a land of dry, open vistas, nothing like the scrubby rolling hills I was used to. Which weren't even that fat behind. The Cornerstone locals had also warned me about that. They said along this road the countryside changed quickly and dramatically, as if by magic. They'd whispered it actually, looking about shiftily, making funny signs with their hands and spitting. I wasn't sure the spitting was entirely necessary, but indeed, before I'd really noticed, a dry, dusty land stretched to each horizon. A pale land, dotted about with lots of fat-armed, green Jerrym Trees which passed for forest around here.

The day was moving on and the sun was setting the horizon aglow in a gloriously beautiful flaming line of gold, which just made me think of the Dragon-ants. Then my stomach reminded me I'd only packed enough food for one meal, which I'd scoffed well before we'd come across the ants.

I tried to reassure it with a pat, which worked just about as well as it did with Lefty, as it grumbled again. I tugged down my leather jerkin in a vain attempt to shut it up. It was a tight fit, as the complaining stomach was pretty well-rounded. In truth, I was rather well-rounded all over. If I had to describe myself I'd say I was broad and robust-looking, my beard was not that scruffy and my mud-coloured hair was very nearly, neatly tied back. I was taller than average, so had something going for me.

I'd borrowed the vest from my cousin Chester. I'd thought it looked appropriately warrior-like, mostly because it had a dragon quilted on the front. He'd just laughed.

You see, Chester was the actual, local warrior-for-hire, but currently had a broken arm and a leg, so was not up to warrioring. Sadly, he had not done the damage delving into some dangerous ruin for ancient artefacts, or climbing mountains to fight dragons, or even dispatching a troop of nasty bandits in their dents. No, he'd fallen off the Cornerstone Inn roof. Someone had dared him to climb up there after a night of enjoyably heavy drinking. And now you know how I came to be here, because that someone was me, and that's why he insisted I take on his next job.

Didn't include lending me his horse. He'd laughed at that too. Firewind was a huge black stallion of impressive speed and also looked at me like I was joking. The horse didn't actually laugh, but I swear it frowned. Probably just as well, as that horse gives me the willies. I bet even Dragon-ants would be afraid of that horse.

So I borrowed Lefty from the blacksmith. She owed me a favour, but wasn't too happy I'd come to collect. I'd put in a good word when she was courting Francis the baker and they were due to marry next spring. So she owed me big, in my mind. And it wasn't like I was asking them to name their first-born after me, though that would've been nice.

Chester hadn't sent me away completely unequipped. He'd been so good as to lend me his third best sword which was bumping along on my hip. Quite frankly it was annoying and I'd taken a good while to work out where to stick it when I'd first hopped on Lefty. That was back home, before we'd left town, almost a day away now.

As lefty and I reached the top of a dusty rise, horizon aglow like a mage's magicbox, night pulled across the sky like a pitch-coloured blanked sprinkled with gemstone stars; I realised by butt hurt, my feet ached, I was tired and hungry, my horse disliked me and my sword belt was chafing. But the good news was, we'd found the town.

2.

The Stuffed Goose was the local Inn at Little Nobbynook. The only Inn, as a matter of fact and 'stuffed' was a good word for it. Not in a good, 'stuffed with onions, herbs and yummy things' kind of way, either. A 'so stuffed it might fall down if you breathed on it' kind of way. And the Gods only knew when anyone hereabouts had last seen a goose. I'd thought I'd seen running across the village 'green' as we entered the town, but it turned out they were weird, rolling balls of twigs, or weeds, or some sort of twiggy weeds. And calling it a 'green' was being a bit generous. The only green to be seen was more Jerrym trees as everything else was pale brown, or tan, or a pale, browny tan. A day away from Cornerstone and I felt like I was much, much further away from home.

I packed Lefty off to the falling down stable, attended by a falling down stablewoman. She pinched my bum on the way out and I all but ran into the goose, where I received the obligatory, 'oh by the Gods, a stranger!' looks, as I came in. But they failed to attack me, so I relaxed a bit. I asked about rooms, ordered an ale, and sat down on a bench that creaked loudly.

The ale tasted like nectar as it washed the road dust from my throat, but the next swallow tasted like the opposite of nectar, so I thought the dust may have improved the flavour. I chugged it down anyway as there was a lingering whiff of alcohol. I sat on my creaking bench and considered my next move.

Chester had said his business in Little Nobbynook concerned a local land owner and some trouble she was having on her farm. I figured maybe it was wolves and Chester had said, yeah that was likely. It worried me a tiny bit he didn't know what exactly, but he happily explained that was the nature of warrioring. He said it was never quite what you expect, so he usually waited until he arrived to asses the situation and plan a strategy.

So I assessed my ale, decided I didn't want another one and planned a strategy on how to get out of Little Nobbynook as soon as possible. Or before the Inn fell down on my head, at least. Then I realised I was so tired I didn't mind the idea of being flattened in the night, so I would see if I survived and make a new plan in the morning.

The stablewoman had added an overnight invitation with the pinch, but her gap-toothed grin had not persuaded me. As I climbed to my room I nearly changed my mind as the stairs shuddered beneath me. Sleeping next to a dentally challenged companion in a warm cot was definitely preferable to death by collapsing building. Oh well, when your time is up, your time is up.

3.

Morning broke in Little Nobbynook with the sound of pouring rain in my room. Inside my room. Thatching skills hereabouts obviously a bit wanting. Along with carpentry skills. But I was pleased to see the gaps in the floorboards were being put to good use.

I got dressed and wandered off downstairs to see what food might be on offer. The same locals from last night were gathered around the windows, looking out at the rain.

"Well, I've not seen a fall like this for a donkey's age," one of the said.

"Aye, 'tis worse than the rains of afore."

Afore what, I wondered. I stood behind them and also watched the rain, so heavy it was a wall of wet grey.

"Well, it'll put the Dragon-ants out," I sensibly said.

"Ach, boy! Don't you sneak up on folks like that?" One elderly gentleman clutched his hand dramatically to his chest. "You near scared the beat from my heart."

"Oh I'm sorry, I..."

"I saw you last night an' dint like the look of you." The ancient townsperson peered at me. "You brought that rain here along with your foreign ways, dint ya?"

"I'm from Cornerstone, it's a day away."

"Stranger! Outsider! Be gone! Off with your strange self, and take your wicked rain with you!" Then they all started yelling and frankly began scaring the beat right out of my own heart.

"Alright, alright, I'm going!" I adjusted my sword and hurriedly left the Inn, prepared to be doused by the pouring rain. Damned superstitious idiots, was the polite version of what I was thinking. And as I stepped out onto the dusty green, the rain stopped. Didn't think that was going to help me win friends and influence people.

4.

I sloshed along in the mud, which was already drying and steaming in the heat, on my way to the stables. I wondered if the stablewoman's warm welcome had lasted the night, or if she would also be a loony local blaming me for the rain.

Walking in, I saw Lefty was being brushed and he was resting his chin on her shoulder. If he'd been a cat I would have said he was purring. Then he noticed me and didn't look half so happy.

"What's the matter, love?" The stablewoman said to Lefty.

"Hello," I said, feeling a bit awkward.

"Oh, it's you. Hello, Mister. This is a lovely horse you've got. What do you want for him?"

"What? Oh no, he's not for sale."

"Oh, go on now, everything's for sale." She battered her eyelids and gave me a glimpse of that smile. Actually, if not for the missing teeth, she was quite attractive. And she obviously had a way with horses, so I had to admire her fr that. Plus she didn't seem to blame me for the rain so all sorts of things were going in her favour.

"No, I mean, he's not mine."

She put her arms around Lefty's neck.

"Come on now, surely. I can go a good few coin, how about a hundred coppers?"

"No, really I can't. Like I said, he's not..."

Oh well, I guess I could stretch to three hundred."

"No, I can't. I really can't."

Lefty nuzzled her and she giggled. Now I was beginning to feel uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry, but he's not mine and I need him to get back home," I said as forcibly as I could.

"You drive a hard bargain," she said, throwing her hands in the air and giving even Lefty a fright. "My final offer, one thousand coppers. That's it. Cash, now. Take it or leave it."

I was about to say no I couldn't, when I realised she was offering me a thousand coppers for a horse barely worth two hundred.

"Well, right." I tugged my beard. "I live in Cornerstone, a day's ride from here, how would I get back?"

"You can get the Turnabout coach. It goes through here twice a week. There's one due at noon."

"Okay, I guess I could do that." I wondered at the ethics of warrioring via coach and if it might get in trouble with the Warrior Guild. And then I wondered if there was a Warrior Guild.

"Wonderful." She rushed over and hugged me. It was a warm hug and quite nice. I was beginning to see why Lefty looked so happy.

"Um, Miss, are you sure you can afford it?" I belatedly said. The stable was rather battered and I didn't fancy bankrupting the poor woman. I was pretty sure the Guild, existent or not, would not approve of that.

"Don't worry about my chummy. What's money for but spending on horses? And don't be deceived by the state of the stable, I've just inherited a gold mine, so I'm planning a big renovation. You pop by when you're ready and I'll have bagged up your coin." Then she went back to brushing Lefty, muttering what sounded suspiciously like sweet nothings in his ear. I made a discreet exit.

5.

Well, that was interesting. I just hoped Belinda, the blacksmith, would be happy I sold her horse. I decided to give her at least half the coin as it seemed only fair. All I had to do now was sort out the landowner's problem, if I had any idea where to find her, now I had no horse to take me there, even if I did.

"Oi, you!" a voice accosted me from behind. I gripped my sword hilt and reluctantly turned around. I was a bit worried the locals had decamped from the Inn, pitchforks at the ready. Instead, I was greeted by a young woman on a horse. She was dressed in breeches, a linen shirt and had on a wide brimmed flat hat of a kind I'd not seen before. She was sitting on a spotted horse, also of a kind I'd not seen before. She was beautiful. The woman, not the horse, though I have to admit, with its long eyelashes and dappled skin, that was one pretty horse.

"Are you the warrior-for-hire?" the woman said.

"Um, yes, no, sort of."

Her pretty horse looked down at me, much as the pretty woman was also looking down at me. Her long, very fair, hair fell from her head like a swath of the finest linen and her eyes were the exact blue of the sky above. You didn't see that every day in Cornerstone.

"Sort of?" she interrupted my thoughts on horses and women. "How can you 'sort of' be a warrior-for-hire? Either you are, or you are not."

"Well my cousin is and I'm filling in for him."

"You are filling in for your cousin, who is the warrior-for-hire." I didn't think it so complicated that it required repeating. Maybe she was pretty, but a bit dim.

"Yes, he's um, injured."

"The warrior-for-hire is injured and his cousin is filling in for him," she repeated again. Perhaps there was something in the water. I reminded myself not to drink any of it.

"Yes, that's me, his cousin, Derek." For some reason she smiled at that, but at least she didn't repeat it. Her horse stretched its neck and sniffed me.

"Right then, Derek, 'sort of' warrior-for-hire, I am Annabelle and this is Beauty." The horse nodded as if saying hello. "Follow me. We have a 'sort of' problem in our back paddock. I hope you can fix it, or as your ad in the Turnabout Gazette said, die trying."

This was obviously the landowner I was looking for, which was a nice surprise, the 'die trying' being the other kind of surprise. Chester and I were going to have words if I ever made it out of Little Nobbynook. I wasn't happy, plus I'd not eaten.

"I don't suppose it comes with breakfast?" I said.

I wasn't sure who snorted louder, the woman or the horse.

6.

I plodded along behind them and we meandered across town, down a dusty track, past a few tatty looking houses and up to a gap in a twisted wire fence. The fence trailed off into the distance on either side and a wooden gate breached the gap with a high sign above that said, Lucky Bar B Q Ranch.

"Get the gate, Derek," Annabelle called down from Beauty. I looked ahead but couldn't see any buildings. By now I was really hungry and wondering just how far away that back paddock was.

"Look, um, this is your farm, right?"

"We call it a ranch out here in Little Nobbynook, Derek."

"It looks big."

"Two thousand acres, roughly, give or take a mountain or three."

"Oh, and where is the back paddock?"

"Well, Derek, this is the front paddock, so where do you think the back

paddock might be?"

I didn't want to think about it, but I did think about going back to town and reneging on my deal to sell Lefty.

"I don't suppose you could lend me a horse?"

Annabelle went very quiet for a moment. I was really glad she had stopped repeating everything I said, but wasn't sure this sort of silence was an improvement.

"I'm sure we could find a 'sort of' horse for you, Derek," she finally said.

"And I really do need to eat something."

This time, only her horse snorted.

"Get the gate, Derek."

7.

I found out the cook at the Lucky Bar B Q Ranch did a really good line in fried flat bread, sausages, eggs and tomatoes. After scoffing the lot, I tried not to let the thought of this being the last meal of a condemned man enter my head. I also tried to not think about Dragon-ants, a thing called a Rustle Wolf, which the cook kept muttering about being much bigger than an ordinary wolf, which were quite sweet really - according to the cook.

Annabelle had packed me off to the kitchen and said she was going to sort out a horse for me. She also, ever so slightly sarcastically, asked if there was anything else I needed, like weapons, armour or basic warrior-for-hire skills. I assured her I was adequately armed, not mentioning I had Chester's third best sword. I was getting the impression she wasn't very impressed with me. I couldn't blame her, I wasn't very impressed with me, but at least I wasn't hungry anymore.

I used the facilities at the back of the kitchen and then headed out to an area behind the ranch house they called the corral.

Annabelle was there already on Beauty with a saddled animal I hesitated to call a horse, because I wasn't quite sure it was a horse. It had all the requisite bits, but still looked not quite like a horse.

"Here is your 'sort of' horse, Derek," she said.

"Um, what is it?"

"We call it a mule. Her name is Daisy. Daisy met Derek."

Daisy looked about as impressed to meet me as everyone else.

"Miss Annabelle, I'm thinking perhaps I need to know a bit more about the problem in the back paddock before we leave the nice, comfy, what do you call it - corral."

Annabelle adjusted her seat on Beauty, who seemed to be looking me up and down and finding me wanting. I pulled in my stomach and pulled down the vest again. It was an even tighter fit.

"It is sort of hard to explain, Derek. But don't worry; it will be obvious when we get there. I'm sure you'll be fine, the advertisement also said, 'satisfaction guaranteed'."

I was definitely having words with Chester.

"It's not Dragon-ants is it?"

"Oh no, Derek, it's not Dragon-ants. If only."

8.

Daisy was quite a bit lower to the ground than Lefty, but generally moved at a faster pace, which for some reason made me bounce. She was also very sure-footed, which I appreciated as we moved down a narrow path that wove between dry hillocks, passed lots more Jerrym trees, ever larger rocks and then followed along beside a fast moving river. In the way, far ahead distance was a wide range of very tall mountains. They even had snow on them.

Every now and then we paused for a drink, for ourselves and the horses if they wanted. Any attempt I made at conversation was basically ignored by Annabelle and I had the delightful view of the back of her head and the rounded backside of Beauty. So I gave up trying and spent the time contemplating how stupid I actually was. It filled up the time.

As we trotted along, I began to notice the land up here behind Little Nobbynook was quite beautiful. I was getting used to the strange pale colours and lack of anything that resembled grass or proper trees. I was just thinking about how blue the sky was when Annabelle and Beauty stopped. Daisy also jerked to a halt.

"See that outcrop ahead, Derek?" Annabelle said, pointing.

"Um."

"The one that looks like a rabbit?"

"Oh, yeah." It really did look like a rabbit.

"Well, just beyond that, is our 'sort of' problem. I'll wait here for you." She turned Beauty around and they walked back past us.

"Okay."

"Just scream if you need help." She was smiling as she said this.

"Okay."

I surprised myself and nudged Daisy on. I'd come here to fill in for Chester and I guess if I died trying at least something interesting could be said about my life. I vaguely wondered if they'd write songs or poems about me. And then I hoped they didn't mention the robustness of my physique.

Daisy and I reached the outcrop and carried on up the path that disappeared around behind. The mule slowed and my heart sped up. The path opened out on to a shallow ridge. Beyond that the land spread out flat, before running on towards low hills and those snowy, distant mountains.

I was praying there wasn't a dragon waiting there for us. There wasn't. They had no wings or legs and were long and skinny, so couldn't be dragons. That was lucky. There were hundreds

of them, which wasn't. They were all curled up and looked like they were fast asleep, which was lucky. I had no idea how to kill them, which wasn't. And at that point I wondered why I had taken Chester up on this job. Not like he could have chased me if I'd refused, on account of all his broken bits. And then I was wondering how I could get very, very lucky, very, very fast.

9.

I went back to where Annabelle and Beauty were waiting. They both looked surprised to see me. I hopped off Daisy to stretch my legs.

"So, have you killed them already?" Annabelle asked.

"Um, no."

"Okay. Do you plan to kill them?"

"Miss Annabelle, I have a question."

"Yes."

"What are they?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"Nope."

"So then, I don't suppose you have any idea how to kill them?"

"Well if I did, I don't imagine I would have hired a warrior, sort of or otherwise, for the job, now would I?"

"Perhaps not. Maybe we could just leave them there? They look pretty harmless." I was exaggerating a little, they scared the breeches off me.

"We have no eggs," she said.

"I beg your pardon?" I wondered again about the water.

"Once they warm up, they travel to our chicken coops and steal all the eggs. And then the chickens go completely berserk and fail to lay any more eggs, compounding the problem. We supply eggs to the whole of the Southern Kingdom. Our eggs go to the Royal family. Do you want to tell the King he has to make do with toast for breakfast?"

I surely didn't. The King was notorious for chopping off heads if you looked at him funny and I liked my head just where it was. I rubbed my chin. I hoped this would create an amazing plan to get rid of the mass of strange creatures, all happily curled up and sleeping across the plain. It didn't. I paced about a bit. And then the strangest thing happened - I had an idea, an idea that might even work.

10.

"Over there, look!" Annabelle pointed to a tall mound of what looked like piled dirt, still a little dark and damp from the rain. I'd told her my plan and expected derision, disbelief or downright hysterical laughter. For a moment she looked like she was contemplating all three and then quietly said it just might work.

She took off on Beauty while I urged Daisy into a fast trot behind her. We stopped by the mound, which cast a shadow taller than I was.

"That's it?" I said.

"Yes, that's it."

We both stared at it. Beauty snickered and Annabelle gave her a reassuring pat.

"You think this will work?" She said.

"No idea."

"Okay." She pushed her hat back from her brow.

"I'll need your horse."

Beauty shifted about and stomped a food.

"Okay." Annabelle sighed.

11.

We swapped mounts. Beauty didn't look very happy at the idea, but Annabelle whispered something in her ear and so far she was co-operating. Then I waited until she had trotted far enough away on Daisy to be hopefully out of any danger.

"Okay, Beauty, it's just you and me," I said to the spotted horse. "The fate of the Ranch is in our hands, erm, and hooves." Her ears perked up at that. "Are you up for it?" She snorted a bit and I decided she meant, go for it, oh wonderful, mighty, handsome, warrior-for-hire. Though why I thought it important the horse thought I was handsome, I didn't want to think too deeply about. I glanced over to Annabelle to check she was watching, at least.

I turned Beauty around carefully, lining up on the path that lead straight into the middle of the mass of curled up legless lizards with the dirt tower directly behind us. I picked up the reins and leant forward slightly. "Now, Beauty!" The horse kicked a leg back into the Dragon-ants nest, I squeezed her flanks and we took off.

Racing up the path, I hoped the kick had knocked over the nest releasing a tide of tiny, furious, fire-breathing creatures, but I daren't turn my head to check. At that speed I couldn't risk Beauty thinking it meant a turn, slowing down, or worse still, a stop. So we sped past the

outcrop with the pile of the egg-stealing creatures dead ahead. I noticed they had started to wake and slowly move about. Beauty ploughed into them and then took a massive leap right over the top.

"Yeahaw!" I couldn't help but yell.

With great grace and strength she sailed over the top of all them all, landed and then carried on, keeping up her speed. I managed to stay on her back and thanks to the flat land around us we soon left them behind in a streaky cloud of dust

A few minutes later I hoped it was safe and pulled her to a halt. Turning around, we looked back. All I could see was billowing smoke rising into the blue sky, so I encouraged Beauty onto a nearby hillock. I shaded my eyes from the high noon sun and checked out the situation.

It seemed the ants had duly followed us and then met the legless lizards, which they started setting on fire. The lizards sensibly took off at speed, heading away from the Ranch and towards the mountains. I wouldn't have believed a creature with no arms, legs or wings, could move so fast. The unfortunate few who were still half asleep, or took too long to realise what was happening, were now looking a little crispy. I decided Beauty and I would take the long way back, skirting the ants and lizards' ferocious little battle.

12.

Beauty and I eventually came back to where Annabelle was standing beside Daisy. I rode up and hopped off her horse. I felt a tiny bit shaky and rather surprised that I'd had an idea that actually worked. I wasn't used to the experience and wasn't sure if I should try to have more ideas that might work. Annabelle was looking at me strangely, even more strangely than she had previously.

"Well, I think they are sorted," I said, trying to stand up straight and manly on my quivering legs.

"Yes, it seems so."

""You saw it then?"

"I did."

"Right."

She came over, pushed back her hat, reached up and kissed me. I was figuratively and literally, gobsmacked.

"Well done Derek, sort of warrior," she said, smiling widely. "Well done. Very, very, well done."

13.

"Where the hell have you been?" Were the first words out of Chester's mouth when I walked into the Cornerstone Inn about a month later.

I went to answer, but he carried on regardless. "I've had Belinda constantly on at me about you not returning Lefty, to the point I had to lend her Firewind. Now he's gotten fat and lazy as she feeds him premium horse feed and lets him stay in the paddock with all the town mares. He's so loved up when I went to borrow him back for a job, he wouldn't move. The damn horse just stood there, nothing would make him shift!" He waved his hands about and I noticed something odd.

"Chester, didn't you have the other arm bandaged when I left and the other leg in a splint? And have you put on weight?"

"Oh, and that's the other thing." He tottered closer on his crutch and pointed a bandaged hand at me. I saw he also had a broken nose. "Thanks to you, yes I'm blaming you, I got a bit depressed. What with no horse, no work and no mates, I started drinking a bit too much. I readily admit that. Then that damned baker, Francis, well okay, I could have ignored his dare to climb on the roof again, I should have learned from the first time with you, I know. What can I say? It seemed like a good idea at the time."

I backed away a little. Chester was rambling and I had chores in town.

"Here's your jerkin, Ches," I said, putting down my parcel. "And your third best sword. I really appreciate the loan."

Chester ignored them and hobbled closer, prodding my new vest. "What's that you're wearing, Derek? What's that made of?"

"Snakeskin, Chester. We decided to call them 'snakes'." I smoothed down the new vest which fitted nicely over my, now naturally flat, stomach.

"'Snake'? What's a snake?"

"Long, skinny, crawly thing they have out in Little Nobbynook. I'm getting very good at keeping them away from the Ranch."

Chester looked sad. "The Ranch? Snakes and a ranch? You've been hunting strange new creatures, haven't you Derek?" I thought he might cry.

"Yes, Ches, I have." I patted his left shoulder, one of the few parts that didn't look damaged. "Got to go now buddy, got some coin to pass on. Also came to invite everyone to a wedding, but I see you're a bit incapacitated. Don't worry, we'll come by and see you later."

"Wedding?" There were actual tears in his eyes.

"Yes, Ches, wedding." I nodded and slipped out of the Inn, hopping back on Lightning, my new horse.

Chester followed me out. "Snakes, Derek?"

"Yes, Ches, snakes. Let's go Lightning, the blacksmith is that way." I turned the horse away from the Inn.

"I like your horse," I heard Chester call out behind us. "Snakes, Derek? Snakes?" he repeated. I wondered if Chester had cracked his head falling off the roof for a second time.

"Yes, Ches, snakes, a couple of thousand of them. Catch you later, Ches!" I urged Lightning on. I had chores to do and Annabelle was waiting for me back in Little Nobbynook. Now wasn't the time to reminisce about snakes on a plain, no matter how strange or unusual they were.

The End

May 2014

Prompt: Write a fantasy story of 1,700 words or less that takes place ten years or more in Earth's past.

Winner: Ryan Hampton

Historical Forward

The Unity of Heaven and Earth depicts a famous moment in Japanese history in which Emperor Kammu, the 50th emperor of Japan, moved the capital from current day Nara to current day Kyoto, where it stayed until moving to Edo (Tokyo) at the dawn of the Tokugawa Shogunate. It is important to note that at this point in Japanese history, the Japanese court emulated the great courts of the ancient Chinese and the Tang Dynasty to be specific. It is from the Chinese capital Chang'an that Kammu models his new capital, down to the willows lining the main avenue, and the situation of mountains, rivers, and ponds in their respective cardinal directions. It is also from the Chinese that the idea of the Four Points and the Four Holy Beasts originate, though the Japanese integrated this into Shinto, their native religion/mythology. The ritual of combining Heaven and Earth is actually said to have occurred on the path to the capital, in a small temple near current day Hirakatashi which is why in the story the ceremony shifts from a public event to a very private struggle. Lastly is the presence of the Fujiwara, a clan that made themselves very powerful in this time and following by marrying daughters into the Imperial line, since Japan was historically a matriarchical society.

The Unity of Heaven and Earth

Year Thirteen of Enryaku, First day of the Eleventh Month (November 26, 794), current day Kyoto, Japan

The capital is peace, life

Life in reflection of the heavenly Four Points

From the center, harmony

To the East, South, West, North, guidance in the Sun's light

Like blossoms, they fall

Ephemeral

It is an auspicious day, the dedication of a new capital. Balance is as essential as the air that breathes through the willow trees. In order for unity to be achieved, all must become as one.

"It is the spirit of the city, this day." A hand shuffled from within heavy robes and rose to the sky, feeling the stillness in the air. "Peaceful, serene. I feel the Great Spirits flow from the Four Points." He stared up at the tall vermilion gate leading into the center of the city, acknowledging the sacred rite of leaving the palace.

"It is a splendid name, Heian-kyo, the Capital of Peace. Everything is as it should be Tenno-sama." Fujiwara Korekimi, Minister of the Right, stood east of the one called Tenno, messenger of the Heavens, Emperor.

As they passed beneath the towering gate from the palace, crowds of men, women, and children erupted in zealous revelry. Emperor Kammu smiled to himself, assured of his decision in every bright smile and loving cheer he received from his people.

The willow trees danced over the cheering throng, celebrating as emissaries of the Earth for this moment of confluence. Beyond the heads of the willows were the forests, alight with the colors of the fall maples. They flowed in seas of reds, yellows, oranges, studded with stubborn greens that refused to relinquish their pubescent hue. These rolled across the mountains as far as he could see and further. The leaves in the distant wind reminded him of a flickering fire in the south, a benevolent sign.

Kammu tugged his beard and looked up to the heavens where the mother of his forefathers, Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess, watched over the proceedings. The day's cloudless sky was an omen which provided his greatest assurance.

"The Fujiwara Clan has made quite an appearance. It will be an honor to have them in the West to welcome the Spring." At Korekimi's words he gazed to his left and slightly behind him, expecting, or possibly hoping, to see the form of a woman. Instead, the long banners of the wysteria wreath, symbol of the Fujiwara writhed in the festive winds.

"Wherever your spirit has gone, my love, it will find peace here always." Kammu felt it a beautiful balance, to feel such elation at the dedication of this, the new capital of Japan, and yet know the sorrow of loss in his wife, Fujiwara Otomuro, so recently passed. It could be no other way.

"We are ever your dedicated servants, Tenno-sama, as was the honorable Empress. I am sure her spirit serves you still. As the dawn, there is also dusk." Minister Korekimi raised his hand first to the East, then to the West, reciting some verse that brought no condolence to the heavy-hearted Emperor.

The procession marched south on the central avenue of the city, as there must be for a proper capital. The crowds followed them, though they did not encroach on the roadway, but rather stayed under the protection of the lazy willows.

Soon, the great gate Rashomon came into sight, tall like a slumbering giant that guarded the entrance to this place of peace.

"Have we reached the zenith?" Korekimi spoke again, withdrawing quickly in realization that he had spoken out of turn.

Kammu ignored this breach of tradition; he would not be so troubled on such a day, not when his mind must be sharp though his soul remained swollen. To perform the ritual of Heaven and Earth as the Tang prescribed was both a lofty privilege and an arduous task. He journeyed through his memories for the greatest moments of his life; becoming Emperor, his marriage, and the birth of his noble sons. But he must also recall the lowest points to join those above with those below; the death of his father Emperor Konin and the early passing of his wife. Joy and sorrow were the elements, the yin and the yang, and in balance they formed unity.

"It is the place and the time. Listen." Kammu closed his eyes and lowered his hands to his side. The clamor of the crowds was gone, replaced by the soft sound of the wind as it swelled around him. The lulling melody of a flute drifted through his ears with the strumming staccato of strings in accompaniment.

"This is the moment, Korekimi. Embrace it. Let it flow through you. And become one with the Four Points." He felt for the man's shoulder but his fingers slipped through the nothingness that surrounded him. He opened his eyes and the capital was empty, deserted.

Deserted, that is, of the people, though overflowing with the Great Spirits' energy. Kammu inhaled the four seasons in a single breath and grinned ear to ear.

"Yes. I am one with the Four Points." He let the flow of energy move his limbs and began to dance to the sound of the flute and the strings. The placements of his feet were precise, the winding path of his arms and hands guiding the Great Spirits through Heian-kyo, welcoming them. He ducked down low and turned, his palms facing up and level with one another, then he stood straight.

He felt the 'here' of the Earth.

His hands turned, palms facing down, and rose to the sky as he leapt over sun and stars.

He relished the 'there' of the Heavens.

In his trance-like state he heard the words of the Sutra flitter through his consciousness.

"Oh-Noh-Shiku-Bai-Yuu-Ho-Oh-Raku-Raku-Kyuu-Yoh..." The chant fled from his lips in elongated syllables, turning from mere sound to the spirit of all. "Kyu-Yaku-Noh-Roh-Shaku-Shaku-Yuu-Roku..." He found himself at the center of a golden cross that spread across the city from East to West and North to South. "Yon-Yoh-Gen-Wuu-Hoku-Shiki-Noh-Kyuu." He stopped suddenly.

The Four Points had converged.

"To the East! Seiryuu!" His voice boomed with the force of the holy; his left hand outstretched to the East. From the great river in the East, where it must reside, a shrill whistle split the calm. Kammu's eyes lit cool blue and he saw the form of Seiryuu, the Azure Dragon, rise from the East and snake through the sky like sand towards him. As it closed it bowed its head, descending from above to wrap itself around Kammu's left arm. His wild eyes and jagged horns shifted this way and that.

"To the South! Suzaku!" The summons bade forth a piercing caw that could have severed a mountain from its base. Kammu turned his eyes, glowing vermilion, to the mountains and the great pond in the South, where they must reside. In a blaze of glorious fire Suzaku, the Phoenix, burst forth from behind the hills and called out its triumph. It bowed its head in acknowledgment of the Emperor and flew to nest at his feet, surrounding Kammu in a ring of yellow flames.

"To the West! Byakko!" The roar of no beast could ever match the strength, ferocity, and sublime power of that which emanated from the mountains and the rivers in the West, where they must reside. Bounding from mountain top to mountain top pounced Byakko, the White Tiger, painting the scene white in the Emperor's eyes which were luminous with the same coloring. Byakko too bowed its head and moved to Kammu's right, its long tail whipping back and forth behind him.

"And to the North!" The Protector, The Guardian, the Savior of Life. But why, then, had he not saved his wife from death's premature embrace?

His concentration faltered. He felt himself slipping from balance.

"Gen..." He struggled to speak the name but the words would not come. Seiryuu constricted around his right arm, Byakko bit tenderly into his left, and his feet grew hot with irritated flames. The sun turned red, bathing them in thick crimson. The willows burst into flames and almost instantly turned to ash.

"No! My capital! This is the place for power, I know it to be true! Only the deceivers remain in Hiejo!" He pleaded with the darkening sky, his mind vacillated out of control, erratically shifting from seething hatred to desperate hope for forgiveness.

"Please! Amaterasu! Mother of my fathers! Goddess of the Sun! Guide me!" He screamed, falling to his knees, deeper into the fire. How had the Tang Emperor maintained such serenity of heart in the demanding turbulence of the ceremony?

He must be both Heaven and Earth. His capital, Heian-kyo, must be the bridge. But how? He had lost touch with the Great Spirits!

The Rashomon crumbled into dust before him, the mountains fell away. His heart raced, beating like the drums of war. He looked to the three Spirits he had managed to conjure, but they looked upon him with scorn. Their vices closed on him, threatening to consume his very being. He, the divine, the messenger of Heaven...what could he do?

"He is also known as The Wise, son of my sons. And he is the one who sacrifices." A calming voice like summer rain came down upon him. It was a woman's voice, though it echoed in the voices of all the Gods. Kammu looked up to the sun glowing tender, delicate orange and he smiled. He felt the light and knew the balance.

He was one with the Four Points.

"Genbu." He spoke the word calmly, knowing that the role of Emperor was that of protector, of sacrificer. Behind him, the great mountain to the North, where it must reside, sprouted legs and lifted itself from the Earth. Kammu turned to face Genbu, the Black Tortoise, with eyes of spring grass born anew from the winter cold. It lowered its massive head and moved to Kammu, sitting upon his head.

The cheers resumed for only a moment as Kammu returned to his capital. Then, a hush of awe overcame the onlookers. They stared with wonder at the glowing figure with the right arm of Seiryuu, Suzaku postured at his feet, Byakko roaring his dominance to his left, and the wise Genbu worn as a crown.

"It is finished." Emperor Kammu's words were law, unchallenged. And so the capital flourished for nearly a thousand years, opening the Golden Age for the folk of the rising sun.

June 2014

Prompt: Write from the perspective of a non-human animal. Competitors are invited to write a fantasy story of 3,000 words or less from an animal's perspective.

Winner: Anthony Pinggera

Anthony Pinggera has been writing stories for as long as he can remember, but only recently started asking people to read them. A longtime fantasy and science-fiction reader, he was bitten by the fantasy writing bug while living in San Francisco after college and working perhaps the strangest collection of jobs ever, including hospital clown, tour guide, and baby fitness instructor. He currently lives in Los Angeles with his girlfriend and their cat. When he isn't buried in law school textbooks, he is working on a full-length science-fiction novel.

This particular story was created as part of the "Animal Fantasy" competition, when he got to wondering if certain animals have even higher opinions of humans than we do of ourselves...

The Gods of the Lake

The Preacher was at Rock Bottom today, and Bernard happened to pass by on his morning swim. He didn't normally go that way, past the old gathering place in the center of the lake, but the beavers on the eastern side had blocked his usual route. At the time, he considered it an annoyance; looking back on that day, he knew that it was the will of the gods.

As he swam past the entrance, marked by a loose pile of stones, he heard a voice coming from within. He couldn't make out what it said – sound traveled poorly this deep down – but he could tell that it was strong, and full of passion. For a moment, he was confused; the lake fish didn't often gather this early, when the sun was barely out over the Surface. Then he remembered that the Preacher had sent out a Call to Prayer the day before. The Preacher – or the Mad Salmon, as some of his detractors called him – had been making his evangelical rounds in the lake for the last several weeks, since he and the other salmon had returned upstream from the Great Sea Beyond. Bernard had yet to hear him speak. Now seemed to be as good a time as any other, so Bernard swam through the pile of stones and down into Rock Bottom.

When he swam into the main meeting hall, a great natural bowl formed by chance from the rock, he was struck by the great number of lake fish in attendance. Half the lake, it seemed, had come to hear the Preacher. There were trout, crappies, walleyes, some of his fellow bass,

and of course a great many salmon. He even spotted a few huge pike, those Great Elders of the Lake, swimming about in the crowd.

The Preacher himself was in the center of the hall, speaking with great verve and pacing in the water. His red scales glinted, and his eyes rolled in his head, scanning his audience. A large silver hook hung from his beaked mouth.

“Friends,” he said, “I have seen the gods, yes I have. They're a-comin' just as sure as me and mine came back from the Great Sea Beyond. I've seen 'em, and I bear their mark.” He flipped a fin, indicating the hook in his mouth. “They chose me then, just as they choose me now, just as they choose me every day, to bear witness and preach their gospel.”

“Tell it!” shouted one of the other salmon. A few of the other fish murmured in agreement.

“Friends,” the Preacher continued, “I wasn't always a believer. I wasn't always the holy messenger you see before you. I used to be lost. Directionless. Swimming without end in that vast and dark Great Sea out there. But then, boom!” He slapped the rock below him with his tail. “I was chosen. I was pulled straight out of the water and up past the Surface, where I hung in waterless space. I couldn't see, couldn't breathe, and my whole face felt like it was fixin' to rip off. I figured that I was one dead son of a guppy. But then all of a sudden, I could see. Yes, my friends, I could see and I was looking right at the gods. I felt them hold me in their giant fins, then cast me back into the water. But not before they left me with this.” He pointed again at the hook. “Ladies and gentlemen, I have been to the other side. I have seen the gods with my own eyes. And I am here to tell you: there is love there.”

“Yes, preach!” said a trout. Bernard himself was transfixed.

“Now you may be askin' yourself: how is there love in so much pain? How can you know love from pain, Preacher?”

Bernard's jaw dropped; it was as if the Preacher had read his thoughts.

“Well, I'm going to tell you how. When we feel pain, when we suffer, we are suffering for their love. We are proving ourselves worthy of the gods' love. When I was chosen, I felt pain beyond anything I had ever felt. But when I was returned, I felt more alive, and more loved, than I ever had. I knew that I was only alive by the gods' mercy. And it is that mercy, friends, that love, that each and every one of you should be striving for each and every day! Push through that pain, that sorrow that suffering, until you can feel the love. Now let me ask you something: do you feel the love?” There was a small cheer, mostly from the salmon. “Well, now that didn't sound too convincing. I'll ask again, do you feel the love?!”

The fish let out a rousing cry of joy, Bernard included.

“Can I get an 'amen' in here today?” shouted the Preacher.

“Amen!” came the response from the fish.

“Can I get another 'amen'?”

“Amen!” Bernard was screaming so loud that he thought his gills would rip. This Preacher, this crazy salmon from the sea, seemed to have unlocked the great secret of life. He wanted to know more; he had to know more. Was love only achievable through pain? Did suffering only exist as a test for the faithful?

“You've all been so kind since I came to this humble lake,” the Preacher said. “Real salt of the sea folks, here.” There were smiles and pleasant murmurs all around at this. The lake fish were proud of their community here, and the old salmon flattered them. “Swim with me any time, and we can talk of love, the gods, the tides, or even the algae. My heart is always open to you all, just as you have all opened your hearts to me.” There was a final cheer, and the Preacher ducked his head in a piscine bow. He began to swim towards the exit as the lake fish gathered around him, jabbering away. The other salmon swam along the edges of the ever-expanding group with watchful eyes.

Bernard found himself swept up in the passing wave of fish, and tumbled about end over end until he found himself right side up and, as luck would have it, swimming next to the Preacher. He was so close to him that he could almost touch the hook dangling from his mouth. The Preacher noticed him swimming beside him and leaned over. “Quite a lot of hubbub, huh?”

Bernard wanted to laugh easily and agree with the salmon, then make some witty joke about fish swimming in schools for their education. Then the Preacher would laugh, and they would talk about important things like love and pain and the gods. But up close, those big eyes which showed such passion before were dark and expressionless. Combined with his large, beaked mouth, The Preacher's face reminded Bernard of the Roc, the legendary creature who would swoop down into the lake from beyond the Surface and carry away fish to their doom. The mental image cowed him. So instead, he just stared, his big bass mouth agape. No two words could string themselves together in his head. And the longer he went without saying anything, the more desperate he became to speak. The more desperate he became, the less he could think of to say. Slowly, humiliatingly slowly, a bubble eased out of Bernard's mouth and floated up towards the surface.

The whole display made the Preacher giggle. Finally he spoke, taking pity on the poor young fish. “Shut your mouth boy, you ain't a cod. Or are you?”

Bernard's gills flushed red. “No sir, I'm a bass.”

“Of course you are. Do you have a name, son?”

The young bass gulped. “Bernard.”

“Well, Bernard, why did you come to see me today?”

“I wanted to know...I wanted to know how you were chosen.” Bernard's answer surprised even himself. Now that he had said it, it seemed rude, vulgar to even have asked such a personal question. “I mean, I'm sorry,” he stammered, “I shouldn't have said that, I should have --”

The Preacher held up a fin, his beaked face still smiling. “Don't worry, you're not the first fish to ask that.” The two fish, surrounded by a babbling swarm of others, swam out through the entrance to Rock Bottom and into the lake at large. The other fish began to swim off in their own directions in little knots of three or four. Only the other salmon remained, keeping a respectful distance from Bernard and the Preacher, watching them closely.

“Truth be told,” the old fish continued, “I can't very well say how I was chosen, just that I was.”

“But surely there must have been a sign,” Bernard pressed. “ Something that drew you from the water, out past the Surface.”

“Oh, I was drawn, all right.” The Preacher chuckled, and the hook wiggled in his mouth. “But beyond that, there's not much to tell. You seem like a nice young fish,” he said, putting a fatherly fin on Bernard's back. “You seem to be interested in creating a personal relationship with the gods.”

Bernard had never thought about that before, but now that he said it, it seemed right. “Yes...I suppose I am.”

“That's admirable. But I can't give you a direct line to the gods, son; I don't have all the answers. Only the gods do, and their ways are not our ways. What I can do is help share their love and their message with you, and all the other fish as well. Tell you what: I'll be leading a meeting tomorrow at Lake-Grass Hollow. If you care to, you can come, and we can talk more about this then. How's that sound?”

Bernard smiled, a look made comical by his large mouth. “I'd like that.”

“Glad to hear it. You take care, Bernard. We'll see you tomorrow.” And with that, the Preacher swam off, his other salmon in tow.

Bernard was elated. The Preacher had invited him to a meeting! He felt recognized, he felt special, he felt –

“Look for where the worm swims, impaled on silver.”

Bernard spun around in the water. Behind him was a large, old salmon, one of the Preacher's entourage, whom Bernard hadn't noticed there before. His scales were bright red, and his bulging eyes looked tired. Like the Preacher, he had a hook dangling from his mouth.

Bernard was taken aback. “What?”

“Look for where the worm swims, impaled on silver,” said the old fish again. “Silver in the water below, gods on the Surface above. Swim close to the surface, and you will find the gods.” Then he swam away without another word, leaving Bernard confused and alone at the bottom of the lake.

#

Later that day, Bernard was swimming near the Surface on the western side of the lake, still thinking about the old salmon's words. Swim close to the Surface, and you will find the gods, he thought. What does that mean? What about the worm impaled on silver? He brushed past some strands of lake-grass, lost in thought. If there actually is a path to being chosen, why didn't the Preacher tell me?

Perhaps the gods of the Great Sea were different in some way from the gods of the lake. Most fish never left the confines of the lake, so the worldly wisdom of the salmon was often venerated. But like all religious figures that had come through the lake over the years, the Preacher was a divisive figure. Not all fish shared the salmon's optimistic view of the gods.

Bernard himself had, until recently, mostly thought of them as indifferent beings, uninterested in the lives of the lake fish. His conversion, at present, was tenuous. The Preacher was certainly a charismatic and persuasive figure, and Bernard liked him, but he still wasn't sure that he believed in him. Part of him yearned for proof before he could believe, and he knew that that part of him would be difficult to satisfy.

Bernard was so engrossed in contemplation that he had stopped looking where he was swimming. He was abruptly brought back to reality when he crashed into the back of another fish.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't looking where I was going and I..." He trailed off, and a cold knot formed in his stomach as he realized just who he had disturbed.

It was a pike.

They were the biggest fish in the lake, and the oldest, and they were known to be ornery, temperamental creatures. Bernard had always tried to keep a safe distance from them. The fish turned around slowly, a low hiss coming from its long snout.

"You..." it said, glaring. Then it looked closer at Bernard, and broke out in a large grin full of sharp teeth. "You were at the meeting at Rock Bottom this morning, weren't you? Quite a rousing speech, wasn't it?"

Bernard breathed a shuddering sigh of relief. Color began to return to his gills. "Yes, yes it was."

"That Preacher sure has a way with words," said the pike. "I'm not sure that I'm sold on all of that 'love through pain' stuff yet, but he certainly knows how to put on a show."

"I was just thinking about that, actually."

"And is that why you bumped into me?" the piked laughed. "You cast your thoughts towards the Surface, and stopped paying attention to what's going on in front of you."

"I guess I was." Bernard's gills flushed. "One of the salmon told me to 'swim near the Surface, and I will find the gods.'"

"Well, here you are near the Surface," said the pike, "so where are the gods?" He laughed again.

Something small dropped into the water off to their left.

Bernard looked, and his mouth dropped open.

It was a worm. It hung there in the water by itself, wiggling. There was a silver glint alongside it. Bernard swam a little closer, and he could see that the worm was stuck with some sort of hook.

"Look for where the worm swims, impaled on silver," he said to himself.

"I wouldn't touch that!" the pike called after him. "You don't know what that thing is!" Bernard ignored him. He was entranced, the shining silver hook drawing him closer, the salmon's words urging him along in his mind. Swim near the surface, and you will find the gods.

All doubts fled. Any thoughts about proof and belief were gone from his head. Here hung the proof in front of him: the proof of the gods' choosing. He was right next to the worm and the hook now. He nudged it with his snout; it bobbed in the water. Then, slowly, as if in a trance, he opened his mouth and bit down hard on the hook.

There was a moment of surprise at himself as the hook pierced his upper lip. Then the pain came.

It was as if someone was trying to cut his face in two, like beavers were chewing on his head. It was such agony. All of the doubts returned unbidden. Why had he done this? This was foolish. This was pain. He tried to swim away, down deep into the lake, but he was stuck. Somehow, the hook was pulling him towards the Surface. He pushed with his tail, paddling as hard as he could, but the pain was growing worse. He hoped that the hook would break, or rip through his lip and set him free, but it wouldn't budge. It was stuck too fast, built too well.

It was hopeless, he knew then. So he gave up.

And in that moment of surrender, he understood the enormity of his situation. He had been chosen. The Preacher had been right all along. This pain, this suffering was his trial. If he had been able to escape somehow, he would have been left with only pain. If, on the other hand, he endured the pain, he would find the love of the gods. He must embrace the pain with love, and be embraced in return. Now that he had surrendered to the pain, he was being pulled towards the Surface, faster and faster.

There was still pain, but there was no fear any more. There was more pain to come, yes, but there was also more love. And in his heart, Bernard was happy. He knew, as he breached the Surface and was pulled into that bright and suffocating light, that he was going to meet his gods.

August 2014

Prompt: Write a letter, diary entry, speech, lecture, magazine or newspaper article from your world.

Winner: penumbralchild

Editor's Note: As part of her submission for this challenge penumbralchild created some images of actual diary entries along with diagrams. It really adds an extra dimension to the story so if you have the chance I highly recommend you take a look: here is a link to the album

Veinblight

From the private notes of Xanedae Firesong nee Sunshadow, taken into possession by the Knights of Armaiti after her death.

Veinblight

A most heinous pathogen known to all manner of life as we know it.

Life Cycle

Sporulation - Spores are released into the air via a fruiting body. The spores infect living tissue; wounds are especially vulnerable. They can breathed in as well, or absorbed by any mucous membranes.

Infection - Infection via wounds and open sores is characterised by black edges to the wound and delayed healing. It can be mistaken for gangrene. Blackened edges will appear immediately in the event of spore infection. If left untreated, the spore will reproduce and spread through the body creating black racing lines following the blood paths.

Infection via breath is much more subtle and insidious. Spores must cross membranes in the lungs and enter the bloodstream. Highly infected individuals display a webbing of black where their blood travels.

Systemic Infection - One systemic, the spore will target major organs, especially the brain. Once it reaches the brain, host behavior is significantly altered, I posit due to a reaction between host tissue and infection. The host becomes increasingly violent and sporadic in their behavior. The spore is pervasive at this point and organ failure is imminent. Nodes develop along the host body which further mature into the fruiting bodies. These fruiting bodies are incredibly delicate and contained by only a thin layer of host skin, which, when broken, release the spores for the cycle to start anew.

If the skin remains undamaged, it will instead rot away, guaranteeing spore release. The host will also develop sores and chancres that are highly touch infectious.

Host Degradation

Should the host continue to live, the fungus will take over entirely until nothing remains of the host and it collapses into spore dust and one large fungal organism not unlike a mushroom. This mushroom will continue to release spore dust into the environment.

Susceptibility

All plant and animal life I have tested thus far can be infected*

This includes but is not limited to:

Rabbits, dogs, humans, elves, kobolds, birds, oak, pine, maple, horses, karkadanns, flowering plants and bushes

*Daemons do not get HOWEVER they can be vectors of infections and carry spore on their being.

Observations of Veinblight in the wild have seen entire forests infected (Observation: Helene)

TREATMENT AND PREVENTION

Infection of forests can be treated with fire. However, unless the soil is turned to reveal the mycelial system, it will return. No large scale magic from the Mancer Guilds has yet been revealed.

Note: Helene claims none is known.

Heat slows the spread of Veinblight, fire will burn it away. The spores quickly take to the air so a thickly woven cloth is good protection but better to have a Svalamancer or Odlamancer near to purge.

Early infection can be purged magically by those versed in Nature and the Body. Once an infection has gone systemic death is inevitable.

Powerful enough Mancers have been known to remain systemic yet functional far longer than untrained or weaker individuals (or Nulls) by remaining in a constant state of purge. They still do not achieve a normal lifespan and do eventually burn out, leaving the fungus to take over in an explosion of growth.

Geography

Veinblight grows best in cooler climates and is quite prevalent in Kaltesland with seasonal forays south.

Herbal Cures

Ragweed

Rose Oil

Firebloom

Thistle

Further Research

Find cyclops and manticore specimens

Insects??

Can Veinblight be distilled into a poison?

Ask Helene how she controls the spread specifically

Notes

Nulls have no cure option

September 2014

Prompt: For this challenge competitors were invited to write a piece in which a normally non-living object has sentience.

Winner: Eric Lange

Eric Lange is a native of Atlanta, Georgia where he spends his time engineering household goods for children. When he's not getting baby furniture ready for manufacturing, he spends his time hammering away at short stories and blog posts. He recently finished a self-prescribed challenge of writing a short fantasy story every day for a year under the moniker of 30 Second Fantasy.

You can find all of his public writings, along with other content, on his blog 30secfantasy.com.

Peanut

Life as a peanut was rather unfulfilling, Marvin the peanut realized a few moments after becoming self-aware. It was rather dark, Marvin couldn't tell if that was because he was buried under several inches of dirt, or because he didn't have eyes. Either way, the scenery was very dull.

Marvin wondered what a peanut was anyway, he had only been sentient for a quarter of an hour. He decided that peanuts were most likely a warrior race, based on his armored exoskeleton. Perhaps he came from a long line of heroic legumes that served king and country with duty and valor, or, perhaps, his family were of noble blood and sent combatants to their death. Marvin quite preferred the latter, so he went with that assumption.

He called out to his kin. Unfortunately, Marvin also lacked a mouth so his vocalizations went unheard. Marvin couldn’t see, he couldn’t talk, and he still didn’t know what a peanut was. He cursed his existence.

After a few minutes of internalized complaints and whining, Marvin slowly grew accustomed to life as a peanut. It wasn’t too bad after all, he didn’t have to file expense reports or spend money on getting his car repaired. Marvin wondered how he knew these things, but he settled on them being crucial things a peanut should know. Life for Marvin was looking up.

Marvin felt vibrations; something exciting and new was happening! The ground around Marvin fell away from his shell and he felt as though he was flying. This was surely a great feat for a peanut to accomplish, perhaps he was destined for great things?

Marvin was loaded with a few thousand other peanuts in the back of a green tractor. Moments later he realized his true purpose as a sentient peanut. He tried to communicate this to the rest of the world as he tumbled into a machine that shelled him and ground him into peanut butter.

October 2014

Prompt: In honour of Halloween, write a fantastical murder mystery of 4,000 words or less.

Winner: Devon Young

Across Alysidas: Eulija
A Flash of Life

The room stank of death. After almost a decade of Enforcing, the stench still turned his stomach. But this time was different. Behind his copper mask, the blood drained from his face. Breath caught in his throat. Hands clenched into fists, only to hang loose when he realised its futility. He gazed at the scene before him. The room, stone tiles covered with scattered papers soaked red. The body, isle of flesh in a sea of blood. The wound, chest gouged open like the savaged spoils of a monstrous hunt. Yet these were not what made this time different. It was her face, her lost eyes; eyes he knew so well, but would never know again.

"The scene is secure. The Soul, Věstec?"

The voice of his partner shattered the spell of shock, jolting him back to reality. He turned to answer, but his words wavered, caught in his throat. Silently, he drew his quartz wand and walked towards the death, turning his gaze beyond. The dusky candlelit room and undisturbed corpse melted back from his vision to leave only strands of silver, waving softly across his view. With her face hidden, Věstec felt grief begin to lift, as if waking from a nightmare to realise its deception. He held onto the sliver of comfort.

Come on, Věstec, he thought to himself, *you've done this a hundred times before.*

He examined the remains of the Soul. Once a writhing mass of life, its strands now lay static, the structure fraying as it slowly unravelled.

It was lucky we arrived so quickly, it must have been only an hour or so since she was... He pushed the thoughts from his mind, desperate to focus on the task ahead.

"It's still reasonably intact." He informed Zrádce, his partner, steeling the emotion from his voice. "I'm going to extract as much as I can. Bear with me."

He raised his wand to the remains of the Soul. To outsiders, the stick of rock would seem like a mere trinket, but looking beyond revealed the tools true form, a thin blade ending in a curved hook, made with woven soul strands and bound within the lattice structure of the rock. He worked with speed and precision, slicing back the dispersing strands and using the hook to send them drifting away, carefully, as to not disturb the parts of the Soul left intact. Finally, he took those parts and bound it onto a frame, fastening them with soul-infused thread. Like a

spiders web, what remained of her Soul lay stretched across the hollow casing; fragile, gaunt and cold, it was a mere skeleton of its past form.

While he had been working, Zrádce had been examining the empty shell of her body. Now he turned to Věstec. "The victim's name was 'Láska'."

The sound of her name bought a lump to his Věstec's throat. Swallowing, he nodded firmly.

"A stabbing," his partner continued. "The dagger was her own, so no lead there. I'll ask around the district, in case anyone saw anything. See if you collect anything useful and we'll meet back at the bureau at dawn."

As Věstec walked towards the doorway, a stark realisation ruptured his thoughts.

"What about the victim's son?" He called back to his partner. "What will happen to him?"

"I'll have the toddler collected from the nursery at noon tomorrow. If no one picks up his funding in the next week, he'll lose his place at the academy and be moved to one of the workhouses in the lower levels." Zrádce smiled. "Pity, such potential can be left to rot away in those filthy pits."

Věstec left the room, leaving his world lying in a pool of her own blood. Under his breath, he thanked the gods that it was him who would solve this case. He would avenge her.

Hidden by a copper veil, a soundless tear crept down his cheek.

#

It wasn't until he reached his apartment that Věstec broke down. The tears flooded free as his anger seeped out into hollow howls and heavy punches, the thick stone walls thudding under his blows until his knuckles were raw and bloodied and the walls were smeared scarlet. Eventually, the energy and anger that had filled him were gone. He sank to the floor.

I wasn't there for her when she needed me. He thought to himself, cradling his face in his hands. *It's my job to protect a city of people, yet I couldn't even protect her.*

By the time he could bring himself to rise, the sunrise was forming over the horizon, tinting the room a dark amber. He had work to do, and dawn was fast approaching. Quickly, he prepared his desk, mounting the frame of soul onto a stand. Sitting down, he looked beyond, using his wand to carefully separate the mass of strands into their individual braids, as a fisherman would a tangled line. When he was finished, he chose one of the braids, hooking it from the frame.

He was ready to begin the reading.

He moved the braid of soul against side of his face, letting it pass through his skin. And the room was gone. And so was he.

#

Láska stood in line with the other kids. It was the first time she had been outside the nursery since before she could remember and everything seemed so big, tables and chairs towering over as she quietly waited. Seeing her friend further up the line, she slipped forward to join him. As he noticed her, a beaming grin stretched across his face.

"Věstec!" She exclaimed... loudly. After a sharp glare from one of her teachers, she lowered her voice. "I was waiting for you at the door."

"Oh, sorry. This place is awesome!" Věstec said, quickly changing the subject. "I can't wait for the Choosing. I'm going to be an Enforcer. My daddy said so in his letter, just like him and grandfather. I'll spend every day fighting bad people."

"Sounds fun." Láska replied, trying to sound excited and ignore the swarm of butterflies plaguing her stomach.

"What about you? What do you want to be?"

Láska had never really thought about it like that. "Well... a ambassador would be alright... I guess... at least I could travel outside the city. It doesn't really matter what I want, it's the gods who decide anyway."

"I'm sure the gods would listen to you if you really, really wanted to be something. You could be an Enforcer with me, although if you wanted to be my partner, you'd have to be one of those creepy Enforcers, those ones with the metal mask and the wand. That's how it goes, the one that does the fighting and the creepy masked one who does the Soul stuff."

Láska smiled sadly, her friend's naivety helping to subside her worries. *I don't think girls can be Enforcers,* she thought to herself, *at least, I've never seen one.* "Maybe." She said to him, reassuringly.

"I'd like that a lot." He smiled back. Deep inside her, Láska felt a strange tingling. It was nice.

All of a sudden, they'd reached the front of the line. "See you afterwards." She called to Věstec as they were separated. A tall monk led her to one of the many small doors that lined the corridor. The door swung open and, gingerly, she stepped inside.

As Láska passed through the doorway, the fear returned. The scented candles that lines the walls revealed a robed figure, motionless amongst the wisps of smoke that clouded the room.

"Kneel." A voice said.

She knelt down, lowering her gaze and focusing on the patterns that lined the embroidered rug beneath her, trying to take her mind away from the situation. For what seemed like an eternity, the robed priest was silent. Finally, he spoke.

"The gods have spoken. You will be a Physician of the Soul."

As he spoke, a wrinkled hand emerged from the folds of the robe, holding a silver disk with the insignia of the physicians inscribed onto it, placing it down on the floor in front of her.

A physician... The thought twisted her stomach. *Is that really what the gods had chosen for me? A physician? That's it? Every day spent inside a medical ward. Never leaving the city,*

never making a meaningful change. Is that really all there is? Since before she could remember, she'd obeyed the gods, prayed every day, followed the curfew, even given one of her books to the Inquisitors when she found out it was on the banned list. *This must be a mistake...*

"No!" Láska blurted out. "I don't want to."

"The gods have spoken." The voice repeated. "Now leave."

So she left. For what else could she do?

#

The memory ended and the present returned. Věstec sullenly placed the braid of soul back onto the frame. Going into the kitchen, he filled a goblet of spiced wine and downed it, pouring another to take back to his desk. The memory had brought him no closer to the truth, only more grief and pain.

This is going to be a long night. He thought, as he chose another.

#

"And remember, today we've been asked to perform the Enforcer Enhancement Ceremony, so at noon we'll be relocating to the Western Operation Suite."

Láska listened to the supervisor's words, although she knew their meaning well. It was all that Věstec had been speaking of the night before as they'd walked through the academy gardens; the Enhancement Ceremony, where the masked Enforcers were purged of weakness. He was terrified. She wished that there was some way that she could help him, but earlier that week she had sneaked a look at the supervisor's paperwork; Věstec had been assigned to another of the physicians.

There was nothing she could do. She turned her attention back to her patient, looking beyond to study the pattern of his Soul. The foreign fragments had taken, incorporated into the flow. Content, she sent him on his way.

"Láska," The supervisor called to her, as she crossed the room to collect her next patient. "Could you collect my wand from my office? This memory isn't taking, I need to make some additional binds."

Nodding, she hurried away, through winding corridors until she reached the supervisor' office. Collecting the wand, she turned to the door, but stopped as something caught her eye. The paperwork for the afternoon's ceremony lay out on the desk, a quill and ink just beside. The writing was already messy, Věstec's name was written next to one already crossed out, and the paper blotched with ink. One more change would go unnoticed.

I shouldn't. She thought. *I could get in a huge amount of trouble. But if I don't...*

She thought of Věstec, his smiling face, his kind words. She thought of the masked Enforcers, cold and silent. She made up her mind.

Later that afternoon, as the supervisor read off the Enforcers that the physicians had been assigned to, her heart pounded against her chest, the fear petrifying her, but his name was read out like all the others, the changes she had made unnoticed.

"You've done this operation before." The supervisor announced as the Enforcers began to enter the room. "Removing the fear, the greed and the desire. Begin whenever you're ready."

As Věstec approached her operating table, Láska smiled comfortingly. Confusion flashed across his face, but he remained silent.

"Everything will be alright." She whispered into his ear as he lay down onto the operating table. He managed a feeble smile, which she returned.

After the sedative took effect, Láska picked up her tools and looked beyond, the silvery mass of Věstec's Soul revealed before her. Over the course of the next hour, she worked, carefully removing the fear and the greed. The desire, she left untouched. She would make him stronger, nicer, but she would not take away his humanity. *No one deserves that.*

After the operation, when the physicians were dismissed, Láska returned to Věstec as he lay in the recovery ward, the sedative slowly wearing off. She sat beside him, waiting for him to wake from his slumber. After about an hour passed, the sound of footsteps emanated behind her. She turned to see a young man of about fifteen years, a similar age to her, approaching. The insignia of the Enforcers shone from the metal disk pinned to his armoured chest.

"Láska?" He said.

"Yes..." She replied, warily.

"I'm Zrádce, Věstec's partner. He's mentioned you before. How is he?"

"Recovering well." Láska answered. "Once he wakes, he should be ready to leave."

Zrádce pulled up a chair next to her. He glanced at Věstec, a troubled look on his face.

"I'm just glad it wasn't me who was chosen to wear the mask." He looked up at her. "I know that to truly understand the emotion of the Soul, you must disconnect yourself from it, but to never love a woman, to never see true beauty. That is a curse that none should be burdened with."

Láska returned Zrádce's look. His eyes glimmered with an unusual passion. Something exciting, something daring, something dangerous. Something more.

"I agree." She said.

#

As the amber light of his room returned to his vision, the grief hit him again, gut wrenching, like a punch in the stomach. He grabbed at an ornate vase, but was too late. Vomit erupted onto the floor. He was too tired to clean up now, not with more work needing to be done.

He hooked another braid of soul.

#

The sharp knock on the door broke the silence of the room. Láska placed the goblet back onto the low table and slowly got up. The door creaked as she let her visitor in.

"What's wrong?" Věstec asked as he closed the door behind him.

Láska reached up, detaching the copper mask from his face. The metal fell away, revealing a expression lined with concern.

"You know I hate it when you wear that mask." She said, softly. She needed to see his face for this. It made him feel human.

"Blame the gods." He replied. "It wasn't my choice to wear it."

"Gods or no gods, everyone has a choice." Láska took his hands in hers. There was no point putting it off any longer. "I'm with child." She announced.

Věstec stared back, blankly. Six years after the Enhancement Ceremony, Láska had come to know this look well. Fear can be removed, but it cannot be replaced.

"What will you do?" He asked.

"I don't know..." Her voice cracked, tears beginning to run down her face. "If I take it to the nursery, they'll want to know who the father is. If they ever find out about you, about us, they'll wipe us both and send us down to work in the lower levels, farming, mining, maybe worse, for the rest of our lives. The baby will grow up in one of the workhouses. It might never know sunlight on its skin."

"Don't worry." Věstec soothed, rubbing his hand along her arm. "We'll work something out. We always do."

"But what if we don't!" She pulled away, viciously. "You just don't get it, do you! Up until now, we've got lucky. What happens when that luck runs out?" She bit back her lip. She knew what she had to do. "We need to stop."

"Stop?"

"Stop this. The two of us. This secret lover, kissing in dark alleyway, creeping around in the dead of night, childish romance bullshit. Every day, we put the life of my child at risk. It can't continue."

Věstec's eyes began to fill with tears. "Láska, please..."

She was angry. She let the words run free. “Oh, I see, now you get all emotional. A child’s future is fine, but now you can’t fuck me every night, it’s the end of the fucking world!”

He took a step back, shocked and silenced.

My words struck deep. She prepared to apologise, but stopped herself. *No, not this time. He needs this.*

Grabbing his mask, Věstec turned away. “If you ever need my help, know that I still, and will always, love you.” With a swirl of cloth and a slamming door, he left.

Láska sank to the floor, warm tears and cold stone pressing into her cheek. For a while, she lay there, against the firmness of the floor, sliding her hands along the uneven texture, lost in empty thoughts. When she felt ready, she grabbed her cloak and exited her apartment, making her way along the narrow streets, clinging to the shadows of the high stone walls that stretched across the city in the evening glow. Reaching her destination, she unlocked the door and let herself in.

“Láska?” Zrádce’s voice called out. She found him in his bedroom, polishing a his armour. “What happened?” He enquired.

“I told him about the baby,” She explained. “Then I ended it.”

Zrádce put down the armour and took her into his arms.

“I just couldn’t stand it.” She continued. “It was the way he looked at me, when he couldn’t feel what I felt. It was like I wasn’t human.”

“And you’re sure the baby wasn’t mine?” Zrádce asked.

“Yes. It was before... this, us, began.” She twisted round, resting her hands on his shoulders. “Věstec mustn’t know about us. Even now.”

“Of course.” He said. “You know, my father is the chief chancellor of the nursery. He’s not popular, but he’s powerful. I could see if there would be a way for one of the intakes to slip through, without both parents on record.”

“You’d do that?” Láska asked.

Zrádce rolled her onto the bed, idly untying the laces on her tunic. “For you...” He said. “...anything.”

#

Věstec lowered his goblet, the last of the wine gone. His eyes felt as dry as his throat, no more tears left to fall. More pieces of the puzzle uncovered. Still none had brought him a trace of bliss. He had to keep digging.

He lifted another memory from the frame.

#

Her fists echoed loudly against the thick wooden door.

"Věstec!" She shouted again, her voice tinted with hoarseness. "I know you're in there."

There was still no reply. Doubt crept into her mind. *Maybe he's not here.* She wondered.

Out of the corner of her eye, she spied figure moving. She swung round. It was Věstec, his brown Enforcer robes and copper mask showing he was returning from work.

She advanced towards him, shouting venomously. "I know what you've done. You have no right! Málo is my child, I birthed him, I raised him and I fund him."

Věstec began to back away. As Láska reached him, he turned and started to walk back down the corridor.

"Don't you turn your back on me. Look at me!" She clawed at the mask, wrenching it off of his face. "Věstec..." A strangers face stared back, confused.

"I... I'm sorry." She apologised, giving the Enforcer back his mask and hurrying away. She left the corridor, returning back to her apartment, still fuming with anger, slamming the door shut behind her as she stormed in. *When I get my hands on that bastard...*

She stopped. Something was wrong. The sheets of paper previously stacked on her table had been scattered across the floor. Someone was in the apartment. Drawing the dagger from her belt, she crept further into the room, her fingers shifting nervously on the weapon's leather-bound handle. Movement behind her caused a scream to rise in her throat, but it quickly vanished as she recognised the figure.

"Zrádce?"

Láska ran to him, dropping the dagger onto the table and burying herself in his embrace.

"Láska..."

She cut him off. "It's Věstec. He's done something with Málo. First I stopped receiving his letters, then the funding I sent was returned because that expense was already paid. He's trying to take Málo's custody! Why would he do that?"

"Maybe he's angry at you? Trying to provoke you?" Zrádce suggested.

"But why? Those emotions were removed. I removed them myself!"

"Who knows? A mind as broken as his, maybe he believes this way you'll love him again."

"Maybe..." The red mist was beginning to clear, anger dissolving, replaced with calmness. A thought occurred to her. "Why are you here?" She asked.

Zrádce looked flustered. "Well... I was just checking you were alright..."

"But I told you that I wouldn't be in tonight." Láska peered behind him. On her desk, she could see more sheets of paper. The letters from the nursery. On top was the letter about the paid expenses. A cold clarity began to dawn upon her.

“I thought... just in case...” His words drifted into silence as he followed her gaze to the letter.

“It was you. You took custody.” She hadn’t meant to speak her realisation aloud. She looked back to Zrádce.

“Don’t say that Láska.” He said, softly shaking his head.

“It was.” She persevered. “When you enrolled Málo at the nursery, you said you were the father. And you used my letters to copy the writing. That’s how you were able to change the custody.” She tried to step back, but Zrádce grabbed her hand.

“Please Láska. Don’t say such things.”

She struggled, trying to pull away. Frustrated, Zrádce threw her down, cracking her head against the stone tiles. Through the white pain, Láska watched him approach to the table, taking her dagger from where she had left it.

“Why?” She managed.

Zrádce paused for a second, deliberating. “Love.” He said, sliding the blade up into her chest. “The love between a father and a son.” He twisted the dagger.

#

For the last time, Věstec returned, replacing the memory back onto the frame. The search was over, the puzzle complete. He was tired, so very tired, but he couldn’t stop yet. It was time to end this, once and for all.

Strapping his sword to his belt, he left his apartment. The walk to the bureau was deserted, the city still under curfew. On arrival, he was met with an empty room. He continued through an archway, leading to a small balcony clinging to the outside of the city walls. Zrádce was waiting, staring out. In the distance, the sun kissed the horizon one last time before beginning its flight across the sky.

“Why?” Věstec asked.

“So you found answers in the memories.” Zrádce sounded tired. It had been a long night for the them both. “I had hoped otherwise. Well, you weren’t alone. I’ve just had a very interesting talk with a masked Enforcer who ran into our mutual friend last night.” He wiped his hands with a small cloth before dropping it over the railing, scarlet stains shining as it fluttered out of sight. “It’s a good thing he won’t talk again.”

“Why did she have to die?” Věstec repeated.

“It was originally supposed to be me who wore the mask,” Zrádce said, “Although no doubt you’ve worked that out by now. It makes sense, from where they’re sitting. Strong willed, determined, a little quicker to anger than most, and infertile. From a line of chancellors, I’m not the type that they want to give power too. So they make me an Enforcer, with the intention of giving me the mask and neutering the insurgency within me. But they underestimated my resolve.”

Věstec didn't want to entertain Zrádce's ego, but curiosity got the better of him. "They?"

"Oh, Věstec." He smirked, "You always were a little slow. It doesn't matter who they are. The government, the gods, the puppeteers that control this city. They look inside and decide your destiny."

His pause was met with silence, so he continued.

"Not mine though. I would not let my family's name slip into history. So I changed it. Broke into the sanatorium the night before the Enhancement Ceremony, and changed my name to yours. Without me, your life would have been nothing, becoming an Unmasked Enforcer, marrying Láska, having children, paying your taxes, doing your hours, keeping their order, fulfilling their bidding, never asking why, never thinking otherwise. Mindless and forgotten. Really, I saved you-"

"Why did you kill her?" Věstec said loudly, impatience shattering Zrádce's flow.

"Very well." Zrádce took a deep breath, his voice tinged with emotion. "The forbidden romance between you and Láska was the golden opportunity that I was looking for. A child with no father. I enrolled him into the nursery, under my name. My legacy could continue, not in blood, but still in name and honour. And then Láska worked out the truth." He looked over to Věstec. "I had no choice."

"No choice?"

"It was the future of my family."

"It was the life of an innocent!" Věstec shouted. "Of my lover."

"Your lover?" Zrádce smirked. "I gave her more love than you ever could. You still don't understand why she left you. It's because you're broken. There's a reason why they remove desire during the Enhancement. Your Soul... well, it's a mistake."

"I'll tell the authorities. You'll be punished for your crimes."

"If you were going to tell them, you wouldn't be here talking to me. If you do, they'll find out about your little secret. You'll be wiped, every memory of Láska gone, and poor little Málo will spend the rest of his life in the lower levels. Kill me; his funding will stop and the same will happen."

Zrádce was telling the truth and he knew it. He turned back to the sunrise, the smirk still lining his face.

Věstec said nothing. No meaningful truth or heroic phrase. As he slid the blade of his sword into Zrádce's neck, only one word filled his head.

Láska.

The sickly sweet scent of fresh blood filled the morning air.

#

As Věstec rode away from the city, the bells ringing behind him, he felt nothing. With two Enforcers dead and the city angry, maybe fear should have filled the void, but he could never know. Not that that mattered now.

He spurred forward, conscious that his pursuers were closing in. If they reached him, not even the blooded sword at his side could hold them back.

“Why must I go?” Asked the young boy, still in his nursery nightgown, clinging to his chest.

“Because, Málo,” Věstec said, “Gods or no gods, everyone has a choice.”

November 2014

Prompt: As a celebration of the subreddit gaining 10,000 subscribers writers were invited to write a story including 10,000 fantasy somethings.

Winner: Andrew Meyer

Andrew is a technologist and writer of speculative fiction working in the Twin Cities, MN. In spite of this, he is not a successful blogger.

Any professional inquiries can be sent to andrew@eissturm.com

Decemilia Verba

The murmurs in the hall died down as he stepped out from behind the rich green curtain, each hollow thud of foot against wooden stage echoing to the back of the theater. He could not count the faces that stared out of the dark, but he had been assured by the theater's owner Marinus that the five hundred seats were filled, waiting for him to begin. Two bright lights kicked on in the back of the theater, the flash blinding him.

For just a moment, he felt the nerves come over him. Nerves were to be expected from any normal man about to perform in front of five hundred people, but Ademeo was no ordinary man. To sing the Decemilia perfectly took years of practice and dedication, each of the ten thousand words requiring the most exact tone and voicing to produce the intended effect. It was said that the number of singers who could perform the Decemilia could be counted on one hand, but he knew of only one other. But the goldenrod robe he wore had been a gift from the Margrave of Ousenia for a perfect recitation, and he had performed the feat nearly fifty times before. No, Ademeo was a master of his art, and his art was what they had paid to see.

He cleared his throat. It was a soft sound that bounced off the pouredstone walls so it could be heard as clearly in the balcony as in the front row. The Grand City of Terinu had dressed its best to see him, the ladies in jewels and brightly colored glittersilk dresses, the men in their three-layered suits, with earth tones beneath coats of bright primary colors, and all of them held their breath. Ademeo waited for the tomb-like silence in the Plaza Theater to ripen before he began, his voice ringing out in a bright, clear tenor trained with age.

"Eldu mar rhemeun thu..."

#

"Oh man," said Gunthan, the dishwasher at Varino's Fine Eatery. "It's already started."

"What started?" asked the dryer, Dit.

Gunthan dropped the plate he was scrubbing back into the tub. "Weren't you listening? Ademeo stupid. He's performing the Decemilia Verba over at the Plaza right now."

It's not like Gunthan had been talking about anything else all night. The Ten Thousand Words was the most beautiful and ancient pieces ever composed, and probably the most difficult. In an old language nobody understood, and was exactly ten thousand words long. To perform it perfectly was a matter of matching pitch and tone, volume and pronunciation, sweeping from high to low and back, taking someone years of study to learn each word to its perfection. It was a legend among the singers and minstrels of Terinu, but none of them knew it.

But that night, hardly half way across town, a master was performing. Ademeo the legendary bard had just returned from a five year tour of the great cities of the east, and would soon be leaving again to grace the palaces of the west shore. Gunthan didn't know when he'd ever have another chance to actually hear it. Especially not here in Varino's kitchen.

"Sheesh," said Dit. "You talk lots. To fast sometimes, so I don't listen."

Gunthan glared at the dark skinned boy. Wherever he was from, they grew big. Dit and his family had moved to the city two years ago with a wave of refugees from the south, hardly speaking the language at all. Dit and his brothers and sisters all had jobs around the city, and there had never been a day Gunthan arrived at Varino's and didn't see the big guy. They had become friends over the past year, if you could call someone who barely understood half of what you said 'a friend'.

"But what so important?" Dit continued. "He sings good? Big deal, you sings good."

"Well," said Gunthan. "I sing well. And not like Ademeo. He sings for kings and has a patron that sends him all over the world, and I only play for a few half asleep drunks and a handful of coppers."

The older boy shrugged.

"He's right though, kleiner," chimed Hein from the stove. Varino's cook was an older man, maybe twice Gunthan's fifteen years. Everything about him was thick, from his arms to his gut to his head. He had grown up in the old Thukish enclave like Gunthan's parents, and was one of the only people who he knew who still called him the old Thukish word for 'boy'. "You're a good singer. I always like it when Varino let's ya up there. Lot's better than the usual mess we get."

"Thanks Hein," said Gunthan. When he had first come to Varino's, it had been to try to convince the old man to let him play. Varino had agreed, and made him promise to wash dishes when he wasn't playing. The greedy bastard let Gunthan sing one night in every fifteen of washing dishes, and made him pay for stage time.

He noticed Dit waiting for him without a dish in his hand, and hurried up with his load. There weren't many more left, just a few plates, cups and bowls. The kitchen door swung open and slammed against the wall with a wooden clack. Meria, Varino's career server backed in

with another large tray of soiled dinnerware and sat it down right next to the last few dishes of his last load. Gunthan sighed.

"What's wrong with him?" Meria asked, lifting herself up to sit on one of the countertops, smoothing out the skirt of her brown and blue dress.

"He wants to see some singer," said Dit.

"Oh!" her brown-green eyes lit up. "Is Erilla back in town?"

"No," Gunthan blushed and shook his head. He started on the new pile of dishes. She had come with him a few times to see Erilla around town, and loved making a point of his fascination with the golden haired siren. "You know she's gone south to Voren for the season. No, I was talking about Ademeo over at the Plaza."

"Ademeo?" she teased. "Some stuffy old guy has got you all mopey? I think my parents took me to see him when I was a kid."

"I'm not mopey," said Gunthan.

"Morose is more like it," said Heim. Meria and Dit laughed.

"It's not him I'm sad about. He's doing the Decemilia tonight. I've never even heard it, let alone heard a master perform it."

By now he was washing the dishes so quickly he was burying Dit, who dried them and then put them away one at a time. It wasn't a very efficient way to do the job, but it was easier not to try to correct him, language barrier and all. He backed away from the tub for a moment and looked around. This was his life, and probably would be until the day he died.

"What are you still doing here?" he asked Meria as he wiped his hands off on his apron.

"Yeah, how does it look out there?" added Heim.

She shrugged. "There's nothing to do out there, nobody's come in since the last bell." As if watching them work was helpful. If it wasn't for her, he might have been able to sneak out and catch the back end of Ademeo's performance.

"Good," said Heim. "You should take over for kleiner there, he's looking sick."

"I'm not..." said Gunthan.

"I agree," said Dit. "Meria would be better."

"What do ya say girl? Help a kid in need?"

She shrugged and lept off the counter, pulling back her sleeves. "I suppose I can." She moved in and shoved Gunthan out of the way. "Go."

He stood there a for a bewildered moment. "But..."

"Go! Get out of here before you get the rest of us sick." Heim winked at him, and Gunthan understood.

He grabbed his old grey coat from the rack and slipped out the alley door into the night. He wrapped it tightly around himself to protect from the foggy Terinu night. If he was willing to

jump one of the canals and cut through the new cathedral's construction site, he could be at the Plaza in seven minutes flat. And so he ran.

#

Mother was right. Lillena had known it the second she heard Ademeo's angelic voice from where she was crouched at the back of the theater. She'd snuck past the usher during the seating rush, and hid as quickly as she could. Even though he sang alone, it sounded as though a whole symphony accompanied him. Was he just that good, or was it the Words themselves? Either way, it was the most beautiful thing the little girl had ever heard, just like Mother had said it would be.

She remembered the day two years ago when her mother laid on the quarantine cot, every cough violently racking her. Her skin was pale and clammy cold, and pocked with purple splotches. The monks had taken her three days before, and Lillena had not been allowed to see her until then. They made her wear a mask, gloves, and a heavy burlap sack that smelled like mildew and sweat.

"Mother," she said. Her voice was muffled through the mask, and sweat was stinging her eyes. Her mother let out a groan and blinked..

"Lillena?" her mother coughed. "Is that you?"

Lillena took her mother's hand in hers, holding it steady while the older woman coughed. "It's me mother, it's me. I'm here."

Somewhere on the other side of the old cistern a patient cried out in pain. "She's been given papaver," said the masked monk who had led her in. "Excuse me, I will return shortly, it seems some other soul is in need of me."

Lillena didn't pay any attention to him as he walked away, leaning close to hear her mother's strained words. "How, how have you been little flower? Is everything well?"

"Of course," she lied. Ulnelo's men had been by late last night. Nothing but a whack to one of their faces with a broomstick had saved their home from more than a broken window. She hadn't slept since then, and she counted nine bells last.

"Good..." her mother started humming. "It's been coming to me, in bits and pieces."

"What's that?" Lillena had heard her mother singing many times, but she didn't recognize it. "I've never heard that before."

"You haven't? No, how could you..." Mother was staring up at the ceiling, not looking at her. "The last time I heard the Decemilia was with your father. It's so wonderful."

"You never told me about that," said Lillena. Her mother hadn't told her about a lot of things, she wasn't even eight back then. "What's the Desimela?"

"The Ten Thousand Words. To hear Ademeo sing them you'd think they were magic."

So when Lillena overheard two of the guildsmen on the Worker's Bridge chatting excitedly about Ademeo's performance that evening, she couldn't help herself from following them instead of heading to the looms. She arrived for work that morning almost a quarter hour late, but she endured her flogging knowing she would be making the trip across the city to the Plaza Theater after work.

And his voice really was magic. The whole theater had closed their eyes, so Lillena did the same and listened. She didn't understand the Words, but a scene began to form behind her eyelids. She could see the Hero with his armor and his long golden mane, catching sunlight as he rode across green fields and over rocky hills to the King's Castle. The King told the Hero of Ma'as, the black lion monster that had been terrorizing his lands and enslaving his people, promising half his wealth to the man that slayed the beast. It was there that the Hero first met the Princess, a beautiful slender young woman with long, dark hair, just like Mother's.

Ever since Lillena was a little girl, she had loved to hear the performers on the cobbled streets of Terinu making music and singing lovely songs. The music was one of the few things that could sometimes make her forget about how hungry she was, about her debt to Ulnelo and how she was going to pay it. But none of those performers were like Ademeo. She had been transported away to a world where men were heroes, the women princesses, and a girl always had her mother and father. She felt a warm, salty tear running down her cheek and realized that no singer had ever made her cry before.

She tried to scream when one strong hand grabbed her arm and the other closed around her mouth. "Shh," a man whispered behind her, pulling the ten year old girl out from her hiding spot in the corner behind the last row. He practically carried her out of the theater and into the parlor outside, her feet only brushing at the ground as they went. No! she thought. No, it's not over yet! When the doors had shut behind them and the Word's enchantment faded, he let her go and shoved her to the ground.

"Thought you could sneak into my theater without a ticket, eh?" his voice was high and nasally for a man's, but the way he said the words and the look in his eyes scared her plenty. It was that same look some of the guilders got when they were trying to figure out how expendable you were. He wiped his hands off on his legs, as though they had gotten dirty just from touching her. "The shows aren't free, and you watched. You'll have to pay for a ticket."

She didn't need to ask 'or what?'. The street children all had stories about some friend who was caught up in some mischief and sent out of the city to the work camps. She wasn't afraid of a work camp, it couldn't be worse than the looms were. Some kids never made it back from the camps, but what scared Lillena was that some never made it there at all. She looked up at the man, with his fine silk green-and-yellow suit under a red coat, his bald spot and greying black hair, and tried to decide whether or not he was one of those guilders.

#

"Is this your first time to hear it?" asked the young man in the purple suit and too-blue coat.

"It is," said Yulia, pushing back her beautiful black hair. "Have you heard it before?"

Silia thought her friend was giving the man in the seat next to her far too much attention. It would only encourage the wrong kind of things.

"Fate had it I did when was a guest of the king of Moetz," said the man. He had introduced himself earlier, but Silia had quickly forgotten it. "You're in for a treat."

"That sounds wonderful," said Yulia. "Doesn't it Silia?"

"Yes," said Silia. She had certainly hoped it would be. She had come to the city tonight at Yulia's insistence, promising it would be good for her, help take her mind off of things. But her friend had spent the entire evening chatting with various friends, acquaintances, and now the handsome young man, and Silia had been left wishing she'd never left home.

Well that wasn't entirely true. Seven years ago she left the city with her new husband to move to his estate in the country. At first it had been a relief, and Tomazio's business kept him in the city for at least a few days each week, so she was never without some comfort or fancy for too long. But that was years ago, and she could not have anticipated how excited she would be to see the city again.

"So how do you two know each other?" asked the man.

Yulia grabbed her arm and pulled Silia close, "We've been best friends since we were girls. We're practically sisters."

Silia might have agreed with that once, but she had rarely seen her friend over the past seven years. Before Tomazio though, they had been thick as thieves, going everywhere, doing everything together, and while Silia now had three daughters, Yulia had somehow managed to avoid children and marriage altogether, an impressive feat for a woman at twenty six.

"And it's just the two of you?" he asked. "Where are your husbands? There don't seem to be any seats left for them."

"You'd have to have a husband to need a seat for him," Yulia giggled.

"I find that hard to believe," he laughed. "Surely two beautiful ladies like yourselves would be married already?"

If Silia ever found her husband again she'd make herself a widow. That's what most were already calling her anyways. But they didn't know that when Tomazio disappeared, he left her with most of their savings wiped out, and she was only weeks away from losing the estate to one of her husband's creditors, a man called Ulnelo. She hoped they didn't know anyway, and she wasn't going to be the one to tell them.

"Ooh ooh, it's starting!" said Yulia as the lights went out and a hush fell over the crowd.

An old, bald grey man with an enormous belly walked onto the stage and two beam lights focused on him, leaving everyone else in the dark. He cleared his throat and waited. And waited. Come on already, thought Silla.

His tenor was the most beautiful thing she'd ever heard. In the dark, things began to flash before her eyes. Bright swirls greens and blues and yellows played in the corners of her vision. They would disappear for a moment if she blinked hard enough, but when she looked at Yulia she noticed her friends eyes were shut closed. It seemed that the only people whose eyes

weren't closed were her, a little girl on the lower level, and the man dragging her out of the theater.

She closed her eyes and felt herself swept up in the song, that for this if nothing else, she had to thank Yulia. The man in the too-blue coat stood and made his way out of their box. Finally. Silia sat back and relaxed, keeping her eyes closed and for a moment tried not to think about Tomazio, or the mountain of debt he had left her, or Ulnelo's wolves prowling around her house at night scaring her girls. No, she let herself do nothing else but enjoy the music.

But she couldn't help her thoughts from turning to Tomazio when, after the Hero saved the Kingdom from Ma'as and married the Princess, he left her again in search of another quest. Captured for ten years, the Princess set out to save her husband. Not me, Silia thought. I'd have left that castle with armor, a sword, and a horse and found my husband sure, but I wouldn't be saving him.

As the Hero wasted away in his cell, he was woke by a vision of his princess at the door. "Come with me, my love," she said, and he did. She fought their way out of the Red King's castle, and once they were finally safe, they spoke.

"Thank you for saving me, my dear," the Hero said. "But how did you find me?"

She said "I grew sick of waiting for you my love. A question has been burning in me ever since you left, and I could not let you die in that dungeon not knowing its answer."

He grasped at her hand, firm yet weakened, and asked, "What is this question my love?"

"Why did you leave me?" A tear rolled down Silia's cheek "What did he have that I do not? Was I so awful to you that you had to leave and not return?"

"I didn't think..." the Hero said.

"That's what I thought," said the Princess. She drew her sword, and an arrow pierced her husband's gut. "You didn't think about me at all..." she wept.

#

"But I don't have any money sir," the dirty girl pleaded.

"Of course you don't," said Marinus. These plague orphans were a worse infestation than the rats, always begging for money while the others pick your pockets. The ones who did manage to find some legitimate wage wasted it away on sweets and trinkets then spent the next six days begging like the rest of them. It was hard enough to draw crowds to the theater without dirty children coming in and messing up the place.

"You're not going to send me to the camps are you?" asked the girl. Now there's an idea! He grinned.

"We'll just have to see what the vigils say about it." Marinus looked down his long nose at the little girl on her knees. She had been crying when he found her, but now it had escalated into full-on bawling.

"Please!" she begged. "No! Not that, I only wanted to hear the Words, I didn't want to miss my chance!"

"You should have thought about that and paid for a ticket like everyone else."

"But," she grabbed the front of his pants, and looked up at him. "Please, I can work, I can pay you back..."

He stopped listening to her when he heard the creak and squish footsteps coming down the staircase to the private boxes. Though the whole parlor was expensively furnished to suit the tastes of Terinu's finest, it had cost him almost a year's profits to pay for the rich ruby red carpet that lined the staircase. Marinus turned to see a young man, wearing a suit of violet and a coat of azure that billowed out and flashed brightly against the carpet as he descended.

"Ah, Marinus, wonderful," the young man said. His dark brown eyes had flecks of green and gold and his chestnut hair was cut to a thumb's length. "I was just coming to see you."

"Master Kaius," said Marinus, bowing. Kaius' father was patron of the Scriptor's guild, the artisans who provided the quartz crystal glyphlamps that lit the Terinu's streets by night. And Marinus' stage. And a thousand other useful implements. Ignoring the dirty girl still limply clinging to the fabric of his leg, he feigned graciousness. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I hope you won't find it impolite of me to ask, but I was dearly hoping you'd be able to arrange a meeting with mister Ademeo after the show?" said Kaius, leaning in close using conspiratorial tones.

"I'm sure that most certainly can be arranged." Rich kids always were asking to see the talent. Kaius was better than most, never rude or ungracious, but Marius couldn't help resenting someone who would never have to work a day in his life. He was just grateful the Senator's son hadn't seemed to notice the dirty street girl limply clinging to his pant leg.

Only then Kaius looked down, and the look on his face went from amusement to anger. "What are you doing here?" the merchant's son shouted, and Marinus almost stepped back from the girl, afraid he had offended Kaius in some way.

It took the little girl a confused moment to realize he was speaking to her. "Oh... I... uh..." she stammered. "I... I just wanted to hear." Her crying began again.

"You know her?" asked Marinus.

"Yes, yes," said Kaius, waving his hand as if the question were dander on his shoulder. "She's one of my new girls. She was supposed to have stayed with with the carriage."

"I..." she looked at him, dumb.

"You? You're sorry? Not yet you're not. Just wait until we return home."

"I caught her in the theater," said Marinus. "She'll have to pay for her ticket."

"One moment," Kaius sighed, carefully undoing the buttons to an inner pocket in his coat. He pulled out a small purse, and stretched it open with his little finger. "How much."

"Six silvers," said Marinus. He watched as Kaius counted them out one by one, and slid six silver coins into his hand. "Very good, sir."

"I hope it is," said Kaius. "I'm sorry she troubled you. I still hope I can meet with the star after the show?"

"Of course, of course. I promise to arrange it."

"Come along," Kaius said to the girl. "Get up. I've paid for your ticket, and now you going to have to stay to see the end."

The girl followed up the stairs after her master in a mixture of meekness and excitement, and Marinus was left alone in his parlor. After forty years, the Plaza was more a home to him than anywhere else had ever been. It had cost him his fortune twice over, but in that time he had played host to princes and senators, and he would never allow anyone, not even a little orphan girl to jeopardize it a third time.

"..the rum melai vru alla meen..."

He quietly slipped back into the theater. Marinus didn't usually watch the performances on his stage. As long as it filled seats he didn't much care to see the show. Most of the time, he heard the troubadours rehearsing enough times to grow bored with even the most novel acts, but Ademeo had never performed so much as a warm up in the week preparing for this night. He was pleasantly surprised when the old bard had started singing, before he had noticed the little girl hiding.

This time, nothing stopped him from simply listening, and experiencing the song for what it was. He let his eyelids close, and the music took him away to an epic battle between the long nosed, dark haired Hero and thralls of the black lion Ma'as. He was a glorious flash as he cut through wretch after wretch, through a hundred wretches until he finally came to the beast itself on its horde of wealth. He wasted no time and charged.

#

"Th.. Thank you," said the little girl softly. He would have said she was eight or nine, maybe older, but you'd have to give a street child a good scrubbing to be really be able to tell. Kaius knelt down.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Lillena," she said. He could tell by the way she kept avoiding his eyes that she was nervous.

"Lillena," he said. "What a pretty name, Lillena. You're welcome Lillena."

"Why do you keep saying my name?" she asked.

He grinned. "It was something my grandfather taught me. Say someone's name three times while looking at their face, and you'll never forget them. It seems to work pretty well for me." His own experience had taught him that people liked nothing more than the sound of their own name, and was a great way to get someone to warm up to you.

"Okay," she said. "What's your name?"

"Kaius," he said. "Kaius Faradus, at your service Miss Lillena."

"Nice to meet you Kaius. Thank you for helping me Kaius. Why did you help me Kaius?"

He ruffled her hair and stood. "Good, you get it. I will answer your question after the show, we're missing it, and I don't want to waste two tickets."

"Oh, right!"

Together they walked briskly back to his box, where he let her take his aisle seat while he sat on the step. The woman he had been seated next to, Yulia and her friend had closed their eyes and didn't even seem to notice. He too closed his eyes and exhaled, quietly catching himself in the music.

The Decemilia was still the most beautiful thing he had ever heard the second time. He watched as the Hero and the Princess fought their way out of the Red King's castle, and found himself reliving boyhood fancies. Even as a child, Kaius had wanted to travel the world, to rescue maidens, to have songs sung about him, but he knew now those would never be more than fantasies.

As the only son of Senator Rhemius Faradus, his lot in life was to follow his father in all things. He too would be senator, patron of the Scriptors, and perhaps even serve as prince a few years, but he'd never be a hero. Sure, he'd traveled a few places visiting the guild's branches and calling on clients, but the world had been little more than backdrop between port and palace. There were no great beasts left to slay, and the age of heroes had passed long before him.

So he simply listened, and enjoyed. Even though he had heard it before, teared up as the Hero and Princess said their goodbyes after the Red King's hunter put an arrow through the Hero's chest. Swearing revenge, the princess set out to repay the Red King his kindness.

Ademeo's last verse told of how the Princess marched into the Red King's court and the duel between them. Theirs was an epic battle that lasted from dusk to dawn, neither of the cut and bloody duelers willing to surrender to anyone but Death Himself. Her foot slipped and the Red King thought he had his chance, he gashed her shoulder but overextended, and her recovery slashed through his throat. And as she died there, the world safe from the Red King's conquest, the whole theater rejoiced with her in the knowledge that she would soon be with her Hero again.

"...rumar aldule fara, eldu mathin riin."

As the last notes faded to silence and the lights began to come back up, the audience opened their eyes and erupted in thunderous applause. Kaius found himself standing in the aisle whistling and clapping vigorously, shouting "Bravo!" down at the stage.

"So," he turned to his young companion. "What did you think? Did you like it?"

Both the girl Lillena and the woman Yulia turned to him and made to speak.

"It was-" said Lillena

"I simply lov... Where did she come from?" said Yulia.

Kaius laughed and Lillena seemed confused. "Miss Yulia, may I introduce miss Lillena, my companion for the evening."

It was hard to anything but flattering. For her part, Lillena curtsied graciously. Whoever her parents had been, they were at least good enough to teach her proper manners.

"It's nice to meet you miss Yulia," said the little girl.

"And you, miss Lillena," said Yulia. The girl's manners almost offset how dirty she is, he thought. While he was watching the two of them he noticed Yulia's companion seemed to have relaxed quite a bit since the beginning of the performance. People began to file out of the theater, and the four of them soon followed suit.

"You were right though," said Yulia as they walked to the stairs. "Ademeo was simply magnificent, didn't you think so Silia?"

The lighter haired woman smiled, the first time Kaius had seen all night. "A voice like an angel. I really have to thank you again for making me come with you tonight."

At the foot of the stairs, Yulia turned to him. "I'm going to see you again sometime, right?"

"Oh of course," he said. He was sure she was clever enough to find him even if he was trying not to be found. "The city is much smaller than you think."

They made their way through the crowded parlor. He noticed Marinus, the theater's owner yelling at some young employee of his. He held the door open to allow Yulia and her friend out into the night. "Farewell, fair ladies."

Lillena made to follow them out the door, but Kaius stopped her. "You can't leave yet. You still have to come with me to meet the great Ademeo."

"But," she said.

"But?" he echoed.

"I need to return home, they'll be looking for me if I'm not back soon."

"Who will?"

She looked at her dirty feet. "The other children."

"Ah," he said. "You all look out for each other. That's good. But it is late, and I won't have you walking home alone in the dark. Come meet Ademeo with me, then we will drop you off in my carriage."

#

"...rumar aldule fara, eldu mathin riin."

Gunthan stood slack-jawed at the roaring crowd. He couldn't blame them, even from the parlor, just the last few stanzas had been beautiful. That a lone voice could be as rich as a symphony defied everything he knew about the art he had dedicated the past two years of his life to. That they were cheering so much for a singer... In that moment there was nothing else in the world he wanted more.

A quick look around the room helped him find a door that might lead backstage. It was an old wooden thing, warped and swollen in the constant humidity. It didn't budge until his third try, and even then it only opened a few inches with a loud creak and scrape against the stone floor.

"What are you doing?" someone shouted in an angry, nasally voice. He turned to see an old, balding man rushing toward him from the theater. "Get away from there. Where do you think you're going?"

"I..." the man moved faster than Gunthan would have believed. "I was just looking for the restroom sir. I'd hoped to find it and be out before anyone noticed. I'm sorry."

"Well they're not there, get away from there," barked the man. Gunthan stepped away. He'd learned it was better not to antagonize these guilder types, and the owner of the Plaza had a notorious reputation among the singers and musicians of Terinu for his temper. "Besides. Restrooms are for guests. I'm sure you can find some rat to go piss on, get out of here."

"I will," said Gunthan, turning and walking away. "I'm sorry sir." Oh well, he thought. There are always other ways backstage.

Some guy in a bright blue coat brushed past him, "Marinus, Marinus! Can we see him now?"

"Of course, master Kaius, right this way," said the theater's owner.

And so Gunthan waited in the alley behind the theater for almost an hour with only a hitched horse for company. The back door opened and the great bard himself stepped out. Though he was as tall as the great Ademeo, Gunthan was fifty years younger and over a hundred pounds smaller.

"Excuse me, sir," said Gunthan, stopping Ademeo as he dragged a trunk to a waiting cart nearby. Gunthan rushed over and grabbed the other end. "Here, let me help you with that."

With a grunt and a heave the trunk was in the cart. "Thank you, young man," said Ademeo. His voice surprised Gunthan with how low and quiet it was, a stark contrast from the voice he had heard from the back of the theater hall. "What is your name son?"

"Gunthan," he said.

"Tell me Gunthan, what brings you to this back alley so late at night?" the bard gave him a skeptical look.

Gunthan blushed. He had felt a little suspicious waiting around back there. "I didn't scare you did I? I was waiting for you actually. I didn't get the chance to meet you backstage earlier."

"Ah, a fan. Well Gunthan, tell me, did you hear me sing tonight? How did I do?"

"I wish I'd heard the whole thing. I only caught the very end while standing in the parlour. Amazing though."

"That's a shame." Ademeo was checking the straps on the horse's harness.

"Not truly. I'd never heard the Words before, only of them. To see the reaction of the crowd, to hear the perfection in every note... It must have taken you years to learn it."

Ademeo laughed. “Decades.”

“And it was worth it. I’ve never seen a crowd so moved like that... When I’m done playing they usually shout for more beer.”

“I remember those days. Do they still call out for The Dragon’s Treasure during every song?”

“Sometimes. More often it’s The Maiden’s Kiss.”

“That’s the one that goes, ‘La da dee, da du, da dee tidee’?” Gunthan nodded. “I hate that one. No artistry in it at all, just three chords and some ribald puns.”

“But the drunks seem to like it,” said Gunthan.

“Say, how old are you boy?”

“Fifteen.”

Without warning, Ademeo pulled himself into the back of the cart and opened his trunk. “I know it’s in here somewhere,” he said. “Ah! Here it is.” He produced out an old book, and handed it to Gunthan.

The writing on the cover was faded and he could hardly make it out in the dim light of the alleyway, but turning the pages he could see the bars and dots of musical score. “Your song book?” asked Gunthan.

“Take it,” said the old bard, sealing his trunk up again. “There’s a few good ones in there your drunks probably haven’t heard yet.”

“I... I can’t take this.” Gunthan tried to hand the book back to Ademeo.

“Nonsense,” said Ademeo. “It’s yours.”

“No, really. I can’t keep it.”

“Fine then. Consider it a loan. You’ll repay it to me when I return to the city next summer and you show me you’ve learned every song in it.”

Gunthan didn’t know what to say to that. He looked at the book, then at the jolly old bard. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.” Ademeo climbed into the front of his cart, and grabbed the reigns of his horse. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I must be off.” He lashed the reigns and as the wagon clopped and creaked away, Ademeo turned and shouted behind him, “Keep practicing, and one day they’ll cheer for you like they cheered for me. Remember, I’m coming back for that book Gunthan.”

Alone in that alleyway, Gunthan could see himself step out from behind the green curtain on the Plaza’s stage. The house lights were out and five hundred faces stared at him from the dark. He had no lute, no clavier, only himself spotlit in silence. He wasn’t nervous, because he was a master of his art and Terinu, his city, loved him. He broke the tomb like silence with his voice, the clear bright tenor trained through the years.

"Eldu mar rhemeun thu..."

December 2014

Prompt: Write a story about someone who was away from home on the holiest day of the year.

Winner: a_retrophrenologist

Opul

Ani Wrenshaw lounged in a pile of cushions and lowered another cube of lokum into her mouth. From her fingers, particles of sugar dust turned in the air, catching candlelight like dandelion fluff in summer. With her sari pouring green over her dark skin, she looked like she belonged in some oil painting with a title like The Mystique of the Desert, or Opulence in Opul.

"These are good. Sure you don't want one?" asked Ani as she tilted the tray of lokum to Loren, who wobbled on a pile of suitcases, leaning her ear into a hole in the wall. "They've got pistachios in."

"No, ta," said Loren as a breeze flowed from the hole and chilled the beads of sweat on her face. "I can't hear anything mechanical. No ticking or clunking or rattling. But—" she pushed her hand into the vent and ran her fingers over grooves and furrows in the red rock, "—it's been carved out by tools."

"Good for them." Ani licked her lips. She wiggled her toes and her sandal danced.

"How old is this city? Three, four thousand years?"

"At least."

Loren hopped down to the rug on the floor, into the oily heat of the room. "And when was the ventilation system installed? Is it purely convection? Are there valves, or thermostats? I mean, it could still be mechanical, but the fan is so far away. Or so quiet..." She clicked her tongue, making a sound like a dripping tap.

"Maybe they have a pamphlet you could read. A Tourist's Guide to Ancient Air Convection or something." She popped another cube of lokum into her mouth and picked up her notebook and inkpen.

"You are ribbing me for asking questions?" With a roll of her eyes Loren turned to the carved drinks cabinet. "You want some wine?" She sloshed the half-full bottle of spiced red they opened last night.

"Loren, it's—" Ani pulled out her fob watch. "—not even ten o'clock in the morning."

"Right. Yeah." As it swirled inside the bottle, the red tinkled like the gilded chain of Ani's watch. "Some white?"

Ani eased her lips into her feline smile, eyes still on her notebook. "All right then."

Loren poured and passed the wine to Ani's free hand. "What's the headline then?"

"World's Largest Celebration Ignored In Favour of Vent ," said Ani, lifting her pen. "In a recent visit to Opul, at the behest of its Kelifar, and after travelling for tens of thousands of miles in ridiculous footwear—"

"Those rubber boots saved me from countless leech bites."

"— Entrepreneur and erstwhile Minister for Technology Loren Falkner arrived at the ancient city. While in the excavated city, a central holy site for innumerable world religions, Loren ignored dignitaries and sacred customs in favour of sticking her head in a hole she found in the wall of her chamber."

"You know, you didn't need to go halfway around the world just to smear me. But thanks for not referring to me as known poisoner Loren 'The Centipede' Falkner this time."

"I made a note to include it when it goes to print." Ani sniffed her wine. "Seriously, though. Hundreds of national, cultural, religious leaders are here. This is the first time anyone from the Mawlands has been invited to Opul and last night you spent the whole party drunk, talking about piped hot water and alloys. You're not interested in doing some mingling?"

"Meet one politician, you've met them all. Let me know when the dragon riders get here, then I'll do some mingling." A tasselled cushion hugged Loren's rear as she sat down. "Besides, the water pipes are made of an alloy I've never seen before. Where did it come from? Is there a foundry somewhere down here, or was it imported?"

"The mysteries of life." Ani sipped wine and scratched words into her book, now and then consulting the scattering of loose-leaf notes at her feet. She wrote names of key dignitaries and drew arrows from one to another with labels like affair, War b/w, threat to M'lnds?, and other such speculations – ever the journo. Ever the Wrenshaw.

"So what's your angle? Trying to find a way to paint our little lord as a hero?" The sharp wine rolled down her throat and clung with an aftertaste of lemons.

"That's the dream. With luck, he won't be a total arsehole and I can write something about him being witty and charming."

"You'll need more than luck – he's too much like his father. I've not met a man who could preen and posture more, while still having so little substance to do it with. Like a –" Loren finished her wine while she fished for a simile. "—Like a beige peacock."

A knock at the door – a crotchet and two quavers. "Are you ladies decent?" It was Hedley. He entered without waiting for a response, and a wave of dry heat spilled into the room.

Like Loren, he wore loose-fitting cotton tied with a sash, but he looked naked without his sword. Streams of sweat trickled through the cracks in his sunburnt skin.

"Good morning, Captain," said Loren, raising her wineglass.

"How are you?" asked Ani.

"You two ready?" He lifted an eyebrow that said enough. The Potentor was dressed and ready to strut about with his retinue in tow.

Ani pursed her mouth, sighed and asked, "Where are we going?"

He straightened his back and clenched a meaty fist level with his sash, where the pommel of his sword would have been. "Up and over. The dragon riders are coming."

The journey from their chamber to the surface took them up the helical walkways carved into the red stone walls of the pit cave that gaped at the centre of Opul. High above the city, the Sun blazed white at the eastern lip of the cave mouth. If it was any hotter, Loren would sizzle.

Under her robe, her skin prickled with sweat that lubricated her scarred shoulder. She rolled it back and forth as she passed by carved pillars, between bars of shadow and blankets of light. The joint hadn't moved so easily in decades.

Potentor Hieronymus Veersten swaggered ahead of them, his coat tails swishing about his thin legs in time with the clomp of his riding boots. In his wake, a wash of lavender oil mixed with his sweat. Hedley, Ani and Loren formed a wedge like a flock of geese in the hopes of avoiding the brunt of his smell.

"Aren't you baking in those clothes, Ronny?" Asked Loren. When he bristled at the name, she suppressed a smile. "It's only going to be hotter on the surface."

"No Miss Falkner. I am representing the Mawlands." As he smoothed his hair with a dainty hand, a frothing concoction of oil and sweat squeezed over his neck, into his high starched collar. "And as such, it behoves me to dress and groom myself in a way that befits my position."

Loren lifted an eyebrow and mouthed behoves to Ani.

Ani flapped a hand by her cheek and mouthed back, It's the heat.

"A bottle of wine says he faints before noon."

"All right." Ani and Loren tapped hands.

"What are you two whispering about?" Veersten's clothes squelched as he turned his head.

"We're saying that if you keep this up, you'll have heatstroke by lunchtime," said Loren, loud enough to catch the attention of some bald notables with their heads and necks studded with gold.

"Would you like some water, Potentor?" asked Ani.

"No, thank you Anila," said Veersten dismissively as he halted and rounded on Loren. "Miss Falkner, this is not the time for your unhelpful comments, or your disrespectful attitude. I am the Potentor of our nation. See that you alter your behaviour and treat me with some respect."

"Listen, Ronny," said Loren as she leaned her hand against a pillar, her face pushing into the boy's odour. "I don't respect you because you've not done anything worth respecting. You see, Ani's uncovered more conspiracies than I could ever hope to be involved in; our good captain here is very good at making holes in people, speaks dozens of languages, and cooks a delicious leek and potato pie. By the time I was your age, I'd invented—"

“By the time you were my age, you were a convicted poisoner and a violent political agitator who then nearly bankrupted the ministry with your ridiculous magnet nonsense. Oh – and didn’t you condemn your boyfriend to death for a pat on the head from those warmongering chums of yours?

For a moment, the air didn’t seem so hot. Her skin tight about her throat like a noose, Loren stepped back and took a breath to speak.

Veersten continued and a blood vessel thumped at his temple. “So you will forgive me, Miss Falkner, if I do not take advice from you.” He half-turned to walk away, turned back. “In fact, why are you actually here? You’re no longer a minister, you’re a PR disaster... What purpose do you think you are serving by being here? Enlighten me.”

“Gathering intelligence.” She strained to unclench her jaw and pushed a smile at him. “Maybe I’ll get some for you while I’m at it.”

“This is, uh, a very public arena,” said Ani, guiding Loren by the shoulder. “Can you two play nicely before we get kicked out?”

Veersten wiped a stream of sweat from his pallid face and joined the growing throng of bodies in its ascent to the surface, to the dragons. Hedley and Ani exchanged exasperated looks as they fell in behind their Potentor.

From the worn battlements of Opul, the world reached in all directions in red crags and plateaus. A sun-bleached sky dripped into the shimmering horizon and, in a ragged column, the dragon riders approached.

Five quadrupedal reptiles lumbered over the desert, casting shadows the size of lakes. Now and then, a rock would buckle and crack under the weight of the beasts. The lead dragon swayed its head with its curved crest and a couple of buzzards took flight from its shade. It champed its beak as it tested the reigns that ran like cables into the muddle of wood and canvas on its back – a press of towers and turrets. Between gaps in the wood and flapping canvas, people scurried to and fro, throwing and tying ropes. The four subsequent dragons bore similar structures that rocked on their backs like ships on waves.

“You see those suspension coils?” asked Loren, leaning to Ani and pointing at the base of a structure. “We could probably fit two of our motorcars inside one of them. Just think of the size of the machines they use to make them – ah, look though. See that broken one? Issues with their tempering process. I wouldn’t want to be on the back of that one – Imagine getting seasick in the middle of the desert! Still... impressive.”

Ani stared with glittering eyes. Her mouth opened and closed as she tried to start a sentence. “Fucking dragons,” she said.

Seeing Ani’s face, Loren decided not to tell her about the hydroponic garden that hung on the side of the second dragon. About her stood people from all over the world; a gaggle of pale women in shifts of feathers squinted against the light, a short man with curly hair and dark eyeglasses craned to see the dragons, and a regal couple in white robes held regal children on their shoulders and waved at the dragon riders.

“There’s a lot of them,” said Hedley with his hand resting on the pommel of his re-acquired sword.

Loren clicked her tongue, then said, "Each dragon holds what – five, six hundred people. Some pilgrimage."

With a tilt of his head, Captain Hedley flexed his shoulders. "Or some show of force."

"Don't be paranoid," said Loren. "This is a sacred event for these people. When you go to pray you don't go looking for a fight."

"No, but you do wear your best dress so you can show off to everyone else," said Ani as a row of catapults rocked on the back of a lumbering dragon.

Loren said, "These are some interesting ingredients: hundreds of cultures from around the world, a handful of monsters the size of islands, and an ancient city with a technological infrastructure almost in advance of our own."

"Stuff them all into a hole in the ground and add a dash of Loren Falkner. Disaster is served." Ani flashed her teeth at Loren.

"Quiet, both of you," said Veersten, his words faint between long breaths. "Come on, we're going to join the welcome ceremony. Make our presence known."

"So soon?" asked Loren. "Hedley's only worn his sword for half an hour and you want to strip him of it already?"

"Enough." Ronny swayed.

"You need to drink something, Hieronymus." Ani looped her arm through his. "Come on – let's get you in the shade."

Bioluminescent fungus glowed like stars on water from the ceiling and dappled the reception cavern with electric blue light. In carved channels, streams of water trickled through the moss-covered floor and drained at the base of the sweeping altar. On a plinth stood a gilded statue of some god or other – a mish-mash of human, snake, goat and vulture. Loren lost count of its heads and rolled her eyes.

Any cooling effect the streams offered was countered by the heat of the crowds that lined the walk from the cavern mouth to the altar. Religion seemed to mostly consist of standing and watching people in silly hats promenade from one place to another. In the crowd, a few feet away, Veersten had stopped sweating and now shivered between Ani and Hedley – Loren was well on her way to winning that bottle of wine.

The dragon riders advanced on the altar in a column, adorned with polished horns and embroidered reptile hides. When they reached the base of the statue, the man with the longest horns roared something in a language that was mostly vowels. He raised his hand which dangled a string of clattering teeth.

"His name is Poliun. He's got an offering," said Hedley, translating. "For the gods."

The cavern fell silent, except for the trickling of water. Then, from behind the statue stepped a representative of the Kelifar. He wore tumbling robes of silk fastened by threaded gold chains, and on his head swayed a jewelled cone. It had no chin-strap, so he held his head with ceremonial stillness.

The Kelif boomed a sentence of vowels.

As the echo faded, Hedley said, "He says if the gift pleases the gods, he'll be welcomed."

"And if it doesn't?" asked Ani.

Hedley shrugged. "Punishment."

"Come on, that's a bit ungrateful," said Loren. "It's the thought that counts."

Poliun called forward a chest, which thumped as a servant placed it at the feet of the Kelif. With the clasps undone, the lid was eased open and the dragon rider hefted a glittering snake from the chest. The light from the fungus turned purple in the amethysts that sat in its eye-sockets, and as the snake slithered towards the altar, gems gleamed a spectrum down its thick body.

The dragon rider spoke, Hedley translated. "It represents some old story in their mythology. A snake made of jewels once came to a prophet. So they've made a jewel-encrusted snake."

"Made," said Ani. "Here to mean: gouged out its eyes."

From its eye-sockets, tears of pus oozed from a cluster of abscesses. It flicked its tongue in a desperate fight against its blindness as Poliun took a knee and lugged the snake into the air before the altar.

Rumbling deep from the walls of the cavern came another voice. The bass rattled through Loren's chest. It must have come through some kind of amplifier, but there were no visible speakers. She would have to investigate later.

"They're not happy," said Hedley. He ran his hand along his sash where his sword was an hour ago. "This is some sort of blasphemy. An affront to the gods."

As Hedley finished, Poliun buckled. With sweaty, sizzling hands, he clawed at his reptile hide robe, which smoked. He screamed. A bolt of lightning leapt from the statue into him. Light drenched the cavern white.

Vision returned and a shower of sparks settled in the moss around Poliun's charred corpse. Loren, Hedley and Ani were the only ones in the crowd not kneeling. The Kelif shot them a look and they crouched down.

"I think we need to leave now," said Loren as the dragon rider's body was carried away with the carcass of the snake. The pus-covered amethysts disappeared into a servant's pocket.

"What, so we can be electrocuted too?" Ani wet her lips, then asked, "How did they do that?"

In dribs and drabs, the congregation returned to their feet. Another dragon rider with smaller horns and a shorter string of teeth presented his gift of a drinking horn as tall as himself, bound in snakeskin and carpeted with gems. The Kelif raised his arms and welcomed him to the city.

Loren clicked her tongue. "He screamed before the electricity hit – something else was fired before the shock. They could have killed him without all the fireworks, but that..."

"That wouldn't be a show of power," said Ani. The eyes of the many-faced statue glinted in the electric blue light.

Ani and Hedley carried Veersten as Loren led the way through the gnarled tunnels of Opul. They passed through shadow and candlelight, through bioluminescence and gaslight until they plodded out into the daylight of the central shaft.

"I mean, back home it's experimental." Loren's hands jigged and waved as she spoke. "We can heat up a gas into a plasma in a controlled environment. But to do it in a beam through the air?" She leaned over a red hewn parapet. A pool at the city's floor glimmered and rippled in the shade as streams and waterfalls pumped into it. "No wonder these people believe in gods."

"I'll sort out Veersten," said Hedley as he hoisted the Potentor onto his back. "You two should get ready for the banquet."

Loren ran a hand over her face. "I still think we should leave."

"We are..." said Veersten between shivers, "honoured... guests."

"I'd better put on some sensible shoes, then." In her chamber, she burrowed through her luggage for her rubber boots. Just in case.

There was still a few hours until the banquet started, so while Ani went to the pools to bathe, Loren set off to the stables. In her boots she clomped along the red rock walkways to a lift, which lowered her into the cool depths of the city. The lift flowed with a grace absent in the grinding. gnashing cogwork of the brass boxes back home.

Once at the bottom, she reached a junction. Left led to the Great Hall which bustled with servants as they laid goat skin throw-rugs and set candles in sticks. Right, to the lowing of dragons and the chatter of their riders. She clomped right and questioned the hygiene standards that allowed the stabling of castle-sized monsters so close to a dining area.

The stables yawned wider than any hangar she had ever seen. From its gaping mouth streamed desert dust and sunlight which played on the trees and bushes that clung to the cave wall. It was like being inside the unwashed mouth of a giant.

With a rippling wattle, the nearest dragon swallowed a beakful of trees and rock while a team of dragon riders hosed the dust from its skin and polished the horns of its crest. Another team swung the broken suspension coil from under the towers and set about fitting a spare.

Loren raised her eyebrows at a nearby dragon rider. "Our suspension took a beating, as well. But I'm glad we got some gas charged shock absorbers installed. Saints – you wouldn't believe how temperamental the old two-tube..."

He didn't understand what she was saying, so he walked away.

Tucked away in the corner, no larger than a dragon's toenail, squatted the shed that housed Loren's vehicles. Within, the amphibious truck, the motorcycle, and the boat – none her own design, but she cared for them nonetheless.

She ran a finger through the dents and scrapes the truck earned in jungles and tundra, in crumbled towns and towering cities. The tank on its back held the diesel for all three vehicles and, when she hit it, gonged half-full. At the end of the truck's bed, Loren straddled the hitch that gripped the boat, and fished in the truck for a clipboard and pencil – the only disguise she'd ever needed.

Boots clomping, she worked her way back to the reception hall with the golden statue and the moss on the ground. Within, a handful of worshippers laid offerings of tools and gems about the feet of the god. Loren strode as well as she could in the boots, squelching on the sodden moss towards the statue. Acting like she belonged, she clomped behind it, clipboard in hand, other hand searching for an opening. The Kelif must have come from somewhere.

Her hand hit the smooth, carved stone of an archway – no door. She slipped through.

After a moment of wriggling she halted in the buzz of harsh electric light. It filled a corridor that darted to the left after fifty yards. Then it snaked a jagged line left, right, down, up. On and on – until, from the end an insistent thrum emanated, deep and churning – a familiar thrum. She turned a corner onto a gantry that overlooked great pipes as they shot down hundreds of feet, pumping water into the turbines below. If the stables were the giant's mouth, this was its heart.

The gantry ended at a steel door in the red wall, which opened under Loren's hand. Inside, banks of machines span tape, stacks of cams adjusted and readjusted in response to inputs. No one about.

Loren crept to one of the computing machines and pinched a loose length of tape. Bumps riddled it in dots and squiggles – a numeral system she didn't understand.

"You should not be here."

Adrenaline jolted through her as she swung to face the source of the voice. Her shaking hands clutched the clipboard.

As he sauntered towards her, the Kelif passed a smile across his lips while his eyes calculated. "Should you, Centipede?"

Even on the other side of the world, the name still clung, still stung. "You –" she swiped a fall of hair from her face "—have me at a disadvantage, Mr...?"

"Of course I do." He held his hands behind his back, his robe swished as his stepped. "Loren Falkner: The Centipede." His mouth stretched the vowels of Loren's language. "A political dissenter in your youth, made famous by a series of poisonings and mysterious deaths, each one a rung on a ladder; each poisoning, each death climbing you higher and higher. Now, having bound a nation with steel and lightning, you are to be found here, among the steel and lightning of my city."

"You read the newspapers, I see." Would he try to kill her? She might be able to trip him and shove his hand in the teeth of the computing machines. That would give her time to escape...

"It always pays to do one's research."

"That might depend," said Loren through a gritted smile. "What's the cost of my current little bit of research."

Electric reflections bounced off his bald head and he toyed with the braids in his moustache. "You come from a land with no gods – not like our gods, at least. I, and the rest of the Kelifar, expected you to be curious. So far, you have caused no trouble. All you have done is drink a lot of our wine."

"Yeah, you're not the first to complain about that." There was probably some veiled threat in the Kelif's words – Ani was always good at reading between the lines, finding the truth among the pleasantries. But Ani wasn't there. "So, you just caught me sneaking about behind the scenes of your execution chamber –"

He chuckled. "I do not call guards and have you killed on the spot. Why not?"

"Because I wouldn't be serving as an example."

He placed a hand on the small of her back, guiding her to another door. "Because only the gods can take life here."

"Your gods are powered by hydroelectric turbines. Some diverted underground river?"

"Ah," said the Kelif, raising a finger between them. An amethyst gleamed in a gold ring shaped like a snake. "But they are not my gods."

"So, what, this is all just an elaborate extortion job? Give me your stuff or I'll electrocute you? This is disappointing." Loren outgrew extortion when she was sixteen.

"The gods are also generous." He pushed open the door and led the way down a sweeping staircase that spilled into a marbled hall. "Subjects whose offerings please the gods might find themselves profiting from beneficial trade routes, or bountiful harvests from our city."

"So you're not just extortionists, you're also mercenaries – and... fruit vendors?" In the hall stood plinths and cases that displayed a spectrum of technology throughout history – Crossbows next to clockwork, vacuum tubes among diesel engines. "I have to say, I never thought organised crime could pay so well."

"Is it a crime to unite these scattered people?"

"United in fear—"

"But united. Our gods bring order."

"I prefer chaos. Order is too easily manipulated, but the rules of chaos can't be broken."

The Kelif faced her, a loaded crossbow in his hand. "The order I serve prevents me from shooting you in the throat. The chaos you bring would leave me with no choice but to shoot you."

"Are you asking me for something, or are you just making a point?"

"Oh," said the Kelif, brushing dust from the crossbow, "an offering has already been made from your nation. The gods are weighing it."

"Right." Loren kept her eyes on him. "Would you look at the time, I really must be off."

"Quite." He slid to a panel on the wall and pulled a handle. A servant appeared, a young girl with a shaved head. "She will guide you back to the stables. I am sure you wish to return your wooden board."

"Remember," said the Kelif as Loren left, "the gods are always watching."

Their seat in the Great Hall lay at the foot of another gold statue, this one towering high into the shadows of the distant ceiling. A few yards away, the Kelifar oversaw the event from four

high-backed thrones which shimmered blue and gold in light from fungus and gas lamps. Now and then, the rumbling of a dragon reverberated through the chamber from the cavern next door.

Between Loren and Ani ran a blockade of fruit, nuts, dead cooked animals and carafes of wine. Veersten had resumed his place between Ani and Hedley, sweating and smelling like blue cheese between bread.

"How is your lordship feeling?" asked a nearby sultan to Veersten.

Loren, finishing her first carafe of wine, leaned over to the sultan. "He's not a lord. He only got the job because his dad bought it for him."

"That's, uh, sort of how lords work," said Ani as she popped another olive into her mouth.

"Goat?" asked the sultan as he passed a platter of shredded flesh to Loren.

The scar on her shoulder ran with pain where bones had burst through meat. As blood raced to her stomach, Loren's hands trembled and she fumbled to refill her wineglass. "No thank you," she managed. "I'm a vegetarian."

She drained her glass, turned to the tsarina at her left and asked if she would like to hear a fairy tale from the Mawlands. So she told the story of Meena and the Goblin King. The tsarina curled her plump lips and batted her eyelashes as Loren traipsed through the story – "so she snuck into the Goblin King's chamber and skinned him, then she wore his skin and ordered the goblins to attack the city. But they didn't know that she'd already tied a line of the Goblin King's hair across where they'd be running. So as soon as they hit it –pop—their heads came off."

Before Loren could explain that the Goblin King's hair was stronger than steel, the tsarina made an excuse and left.

Her second carafe of wine washed down her throat between mouthfuls of cheese and olives. She hunched over the platter like a vulture and ate until the only thing left was her own reflection, clear as a mirror, in the polished silver.

A scream erupted a few tables away. With purple skin and a frothing mouth, a dragon rider convulsed onto the floor. A woman with flooded eyes screamed something that might have been his name as she kneeled over him. In less than a minute he lay silent, except for the final breath which bubbled out of him.

In the following silence, the members of the Kelifar rose to their feet and scrutinised the banquet hall. They exchanged terse words with the weeping woman, and then turned their eyes on Loren.

She didn't need a translator to understand their meaning: A known poisoner dwelt in their midst. A foreigner with no gods.

Feet sweaty in her rubber boots, Loren pushed to stand at the centre of a widening circle of onlookers. Veersten sneered from the edge – so he got to the Kelifar before she did. At his side, Ani chewed her lip.

"Did you know about this, too?" Loren asked her.

Ani shook her head.

"You'd better be taking notes. This could get you a few decent column inches."

His face framed by a gilded headdress, a stocky Kelif strode forward on the dais. He spoke in that vowel-heavy language, casting his hands in ostentatious disdain. Loren shrugged her shoulders and turned to Hedley. "You're accused of poisoning that man," he said.

"Yeah, I gathered." She stalked close to the table, close to the mirrored platter. "Am I on trial? If so, what is the evidence against me?"

Hedley translated the question for the Kelif, listened to the response, translated back. "You're known to them as a poisoner. The man died from eating poisoned meat, and you have not touched any meat all night."

"Yeah, I've been a vegetarian more than twenty years." She kneaded the scarred ridges of her shoulder. "What's my motive?"

"That is immaterial," said the bald Kelif with the braided moustache. "You have been offered before the Gods of Opul." He ran his tongue over his lips. "And they find you wanting."

"Right," said Loren. She turned to Veersten. "What did they offer you?"

Veersten straightened, his cotton robe swirling at his ankles. "They are taking you off my hands. All they want in return are the deeds to your businesses and the patents on your toys. A humble tribute to their gods."

The wine in Loren's veins became magma. "You are selling me. You frame me for the murder of that poor man—" she turned to the stocky Kelif, "—an enemy of yours? Veersten, look at me. You sell me to these people for, what, juicy trade agreements, a handful of fancy trinkets? Your own pet dragon? I wouldn't even expect this of your father."

"You have served your purpose, Miss Falkner. If you bear any loyalty to the Mawlands—"

"Oh, fuck you! Don't talk to me about loyalty. You're the one selling people. We built our country – people like Ani, and me, and your dad, and people with far more integrity than us, they united the Mawlands under the belief that we, that people, are worth more than their utility."

Ani stepped forward, still wearing her sandals. "Loren—"

"Stay back. We built our nation diametrically opposed to this farce of a system." Her heart boiled blood into lava. She jabbed a finger at the Kelif. "Arseholes like this: kings, lords, tsars, whatever. They do not belong. This is our world now – the people! Any system of government that relies on killing people to make a point is a bad government." She swallowed to fight the hoarseness spreading in her throat. "And it deserves to be overthrown."

"You are obnoxious!" said Veersten, flushing red. "You're a drunk, and all you do is snark and snipe and sneer. I am trying to expand our borders, put us on the map. If that means sacrificing one washed-up hag, so be it."

Loren sank her teeth into her cheek. Through the cloud of wine she fought to focus on the Kelifar, on the platter, on her boots.

"We shall see what the gods have to say," said the Kelif.

The rumbling echoed out through the chamber in shuddering bass. From the ceiling, a fall of dust streamed to the floor between her and Veersten, who chuckled. "You are not being sold."

As a circle of heat formed and burned in her clothes, she snatched up the mirrored platter and raised it like a shield. She curled her toes inside her rubber boots, and tensed.

An arc of electric energy leapt from a crevice in the wall and ricocheted off the platter in a snaking stream. The beam of plasma landed in the ankle of the gold statue and closed the circuit in an eruption of smoke and sparks.

Squinting her eyes against the burning light, Loren guided the stream through the legs of the statue, up the rock and back on itself, into its own source. An explosion of sparks and fire burst from the crevice, blanketing the cavern in light. Loren clenched her eyes and squatted on her haunches until the current died with a crackling fizzle.

She peered over the rim of the platter. Tendrils of smoke curled from the gash in the red rock and disappeared into the shadowed ceiling. In the leg of the statue, where the knee once flexed in sculpted muscle, a whorl of molten gold gaped like a dribbling mouth, with only the wall of the cavern behind it.

About her, in a circle, a thousand dignitaries, politicians, and religious leaders prostrated themselves – It was a dream come true. She reached for a goblet of wine, which tickled her with a static shock. Her scalp tingled as she loaded her mouth with wine. When she looked in the polished silver platter, a woman with a mane like a lion glared back.

"Your gods have blown a fuse," said Loren before another sip of wine.

She prowled through the kneeling congregation to the Kelif who spoke her language. He was shorter than he seemed a while ago. When she reached him, she planted a hand on his shaking shoulder. "I think this is the end of your reign, pal."

"Lor," said Ani, eyebrows creased. "I think we should leave now."

"B-but – her crimes!" Veersten flapped his arms like a beige peacock.

"Come on, Ronny. Don't push it." Loren turned to the Kelifar. "We'll be taking him with us. He needs to stand trial for this. A proper trial, with evidence and questioning – no lighting guns." With a deep breath of cool cave air, Loren moved among the kneeling people, towards the stables. "I'll leave you in the capable hands of this lot. The ones you've been murdering and threatening and stealing from all their lives. The ones who ride around on those great big monsters.

"Hedley, would you mind escorting our potentor next door—" A deep metallic whine interrupted her.

The molten statue groaned and buckled under its vaporised knee. In a sweeping arc, its head crashed into the cavern wall. Rubble rained as the wall collapsed in a sound like the roll of thunder. Screams died with wet crunches. A cloud of dust flurried into the cavern, thick and red.

Through the dust, a roar thundered in a frantic bass. A beak clamped about the fallen god and yanked it through the hole in the cavern wall. Another roar. Head down, a dragon sprawled into the room, its broken ribs wrapped around the skull of the one behind it. Splinters of timber and ragged canvas tore from its back.

"Time to leave!" said Ani as she grabbed Loren by the arm and pulled her into the madness.

Loren's boots galumphed over the ground slick with spilled wine, blood and olives. Hedley hustled Veersten behind them as they dodged tables and bodies and stamping feet like living pillars. A pale woman disappeared in a fall of feathers, a spray of blood as a dragon foot crushed her.

They scrambled over the debris into the gaping hole in the cavern wall. The cave beyond soaked in the orange light of the setting sun that peeked behind the rim of a distant canyon. In the dusk, vast shadows rolled as panicked dragons fought their masters. There, not two hundred yards away, squatted the shed with the motor vehicles.

"The truck!" said Loren. It had enough fuel to drive them to the coast, where they could catch a ship home. She burst through the door, climbed behind the steering wheel, and reached down for the –

"Where's the ignition lever?"

"I took it," said Veersten, staring up at her.

"Where is it?"

"Locked in my chamber. I didn't know you would do something so foolish."

Loren swung out of the cab and paced about the crippled truck, clicking her tongue between curses. Accompanied by the roiling chaos, she drummed her fingers on the dented fender. The motorcycle wouldn't hold all of them, let alone enough fuel and supplies to last the journey, there was no water for the boat.

"Can we use the lever from the motorcycle or the boat?" asked Ani.

"No, unless you've got a lathe handy." She advanced on the boy. "Thanks Veersten, you really know how to make things easy."

"You're not going anywhere. Turn yourself in, Miss Falkner."

"Turn myself in, to who? Maybe you didn't notice, Ronny, but there are massive fucking dragons –" She scrunched her eyes and clenched her fists. Fighting was a distraction.

"So you're going to ride the boat on a river of blood?" Veersten spread his arms and raised his voice in proclamation. "Loren Falkner wants a river. Bleed for her, damn you all!"

Human blood would not be enough, nor would dragon blood. But the blood of the gods...

"Hedley, grab a weapon and come with me. Ani, Veersten, get the boat ready to go." She strode to the back of the truck and pulled out her toolbox.

"Where are you going?" Ani pulled her blood-spattered sari close about her.

"To make my own dam river." Fuelled by wine, the pun made her chuckle more than it should have.

As they raced through electric light, Hedley clutched his hunting rifle, his knife bouncing in its sheath at his waist. Loren lugged her toolbox around jagged corners, up ironwork gantries as she retraced her steps back to the turbine hall.

When they barrelled into the hall, Hedley fired his rifle into the ceiling. The shot cracked through the thrum of the turbines and caught the attention of the workers. He shouted something in vowels and they backed away.

"Do it quickly, Loren. They're raising the alarm."

She worked from one turbine to another, opening valves and tightening nuts until their thrums ground into whines and groans. A rivet tinkled onto the floor, followed by the patter of water from the new leak high above. Then two more, firing into the cave wall like bullets in sprays of water.

"Time to go," said Loren, snatching up her toolbox.

They fought through a tide of people fleeing the Great Hall for the safety of the higher levels. Wounded leaned on the shocked, limping on broken limbs through puddles of blood. Upon the cracked crest of a dead dragon, its rider lay shuddering with ragged sobs.

Ani and Veersten untied the final rope on the boat as Loren heaved open the shed door. She clambered into the cab and released the handbrake. "We need to get the truck out into the open. Now!"

With all four of them pushing, the truck crawled forward inch by inch. Trickles of water swirled around Loren's boots. "Faster!"

Ani clambered under the fuel tank and opened the valve. The tank vomited diesel, swirling rainbows in the water. The truck, losing weight, rolled easier out of the shed and into the rising water.

With a crash, a wall of water burst into the Great Hall, washed over the dragon carcass and spilled into the stable. Loren shouted and everyone scrambled to climb into the boat.

"Hold on tight."

The wave jolted into the truck, rattling Loren's head. Her teeth clamped shut through the flesh of her mouth. The boat turned and rocked on the tumbling waves. Loren dribbled blood from her chin and staggered to the wheelhouse.

The water rushed the boat through channels and dips in the cave floor, past panicked dragons that lumbered from the flood. Under the force of the wave, trees snapped and rocks tumbled out of the cave mouth.

Fighting the current, Loren hefted the wheel to face the boat forward. Just in time to plunge into a gully filled with swirling, churning water. The little boat raced bow-first into the surface of the water like a tern chasing fish. Loren clenched her eyes and braced against the wheel.

A crash of water slammed into her back as the boat lurched and bucked to right itself on the surface. They rattled through the gully on the swelling current until it spilled into a wide canyon and joined the river that coursed through its base.

When the boat bobbed on the swelling river, Loren turned to check on the others. Hedley lay sodden on the deck as Ani tended to a wound on his head, and a dripping Veersten released the rope he clutched and glared at Loren.

"Is everyone all right? How's Hedley?" she asked.

"What," said Veersten, "have you done?"

"We had to escape somehow."

Something burned behind Veersten's eyes as he spat through clenched teeth. "Do you know how many hundreds of people died today because of you?"

"You put me in that pos—"

"No! You chose your actions. All your life, you've endangered people; you have manipulated and threatened." He advanced on the wheelhouse, blocking her exit. "And today you destroyed a city. You drowned it, and the people inside it. And what did you do before you raced off to drown people? You made a pun, and you laughed."

"Veersten—"

"This is all a game to you isn't it? You don't care what damage you do, as long as you're the centre of attention, as long as you can fill yourself with wine and make stupid jokes."

Breathing heavily, Loren turned back to the wheel, focused on steering.

"You are a murderer, Miss Falkner."

The current threaded the boat through arches and around rocks. Above, the sky faded to indigo.

"What do you think's going to happen when we get back?" Veersten continued, distant under the sloshing of the water. "You think you'll go back to your trains and your computing machines? No – you have committed an act of war. Not just on Opul, but on all the hundreds of..." She shut out his voice and drifted with the river as it pulled ever onwards.

Maybe he was right. This was what she had become with power – just another desperate animal scrabbling to keep control, whatever the cost. It wasn't plucky young political agitator Loren Falkner who fought the gods in Opul; it was the calculating Centipede weighing its own life against a thousand others. She had pumped her venom into the city and devoured it.

Stars punctured the darkening sky like burst rivets. Night fell. She grew cold.

January 2015

Prompt: Write a short piece (less than 1,000 words) from the perspective of a mundane character encountering your hero or villain in an unremarkable location i.e. the villain can't be using this person to flex their villainous muscle.

Winner: JeniusGuy

When A Hero Strolls into Town

Lucia nudged Maille, pulling her out of a rather pleasant daydream.

"Look," she hissed, pointing to a man sitting at the bar.

He was tall, intimidating yet also with an aura of friendliness. Silver armor covered him from head to toe but failed to conceal his toned frame. A shock of luscious blond hair sprouted from his head and fell just short of his hypnotic blue eyes, accenting his rugged face. Maille's heart skipped a beat.

Unlike the others, he wasn't partaking in the drunken debaucheries the regulars often found themselves in. His gaze was instead transfixed on something else – something she didn't realize until her friend caught her attention.

He was looking straight at her.

"He's had his eyes on you all night. Go talk to him!"

"Surely it's not me," Maille said, blushing. "Perhaps he fancies you instead."

Maille was the man's opposite. Plain-faced, short, and with fussy brown hair, only her courting clothes gave her any semblance of attractiveness. Her spirits lowered by the day as all her friends married off while she remained single.

Meanwhile, Lucia was the definition of a sex goddess – her perky chest and rose-stained lips driving many a man crazy. She had several opportunities to be betrothed but always rejected her suitors because she didn't feel "the spark". Maille knew she did it because they were good friends. But despite all her endeavors, she could never compete.

"Just do it."

Lucia shoved her friend with a surprising amount of force, catching her off guard. Propelled towards the man, Maille couldn't hide in her obliviousness any longer. He saw her nearing him – whether voluntarily or not – and turning back would be a clear sign of rejection. She had to face her fears and speak to him.

Maille curtsied to avoid the man's icy glare. "Um, hello," she mumbled. "My friend had the crazy notion you were watching me. I tried to tell her she was what caught your eye, but she's as stubborn as an alleycat."

"I was looking at you."

His voice was sonorous, smoother than sweetened milk. Maille could listen to him for hours as he lulled her to sleep with sweet promises of nothing. His eyes sealed the deal. Northerners loathed blue eyes but his were particularly striking. Like two clear pools, she wanted to explore their endless depths.

"Me?" A nervous chuckle escaped her lips. "Why me?"

"Is it not enough to find you attractive? Never has a woman bewitched me more than you."

"T-thank you," she stammered, her brain working twice as hard to keep the conversation flowing. "Are you a soldier? I haven't seen you around here before."

Of course he is you dolt, she scolded herself. Why else would he be wearing the armor?

The man smiled. "I am indeed. I hail from Forsule and am on a quest to stop a mad king to the north."

A hero? How romantic! I'd have never imagined someone so noble would fall for me!

"Are you quite alright?" Concern was plastered on his face.

"Yes, of course!" Maille blushed. He may be her one and only chance of leaving the boring city of Sulten once and for all. She couldn't afford to mess it up.

"How rude of me," he smacked the heel of his palm against his head. "Striking up a conversation with a lady and not asking for her name. Your beauty scrambles my mind."

"Maille." She gave another shallow curtesy. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Maille," the man said slowly, as if enjoying the way her name rolled off his tongue. "I hope to be seeing you again if the gods bless my journey. I enjoyed our time together."

The man rose from the bar, giving her a final wink before making his way out of the door. Maille's heart fluttered, drunk in love. There was no doubt in her mind.

He was the one.

"How did it go?" Lucia crept to her side in a flash, interrogating her for every last drop of the brief conversation.

"He was amazing." Maille sighed, a wave of euphoria running down her body.

"That's wonderful! What's his name?"

Ashes, Maille cursed. I forgot to ask for his name. Maybe I can still track him down before he gets too far. After all, he only left a moment ago.

"Um, hold on."

She raced out of the door, hiking up her dress. The pungent smell of sulfur and smoke hit her as she exited the decrepit pub.

Smells like the cook burned someone's meal again. I'll never know how he still has a job.

Maille rounded the corner, hopeful to see the soldier on the other side. She had to rely on her intuition if she intended to find him. And to her surprise, it worked.

"Sir!" She called out, her voice ringing in the still night air.

The man turned to her, his handsome smile even more enchanting in the fading moonlight. A queer flickering casted over it but she ignored it, focusing on his bountiful eyes. She stopped in front of him, taking in deep breaths from the acrid air.

Why is it so hot tonight?

"I'm sorry but I didn't get your name."

And then she noticed.

Behind him an inferno raged, devouring the entirety of the northern ward in its wake. Tentacles of orange and red lashed outwards towards anything burnable, seeking more destruction. But amongst them were more colors – hues of purple, blue, and more – clinging to the stone without any sign of extinguishing. A fool could recognize wizard's flame.

How did it grow so large before someone took notice? Even stranger, wizards weren't allowed this far north. They'd have to be under disguise to pass the sentries but it would never work.

Unless...

"My apologies," the man said, his kind smile turning into a wicked sneer. Maille shuddered as a sudden gust of magic swept over her like a monsoon rain. "My name is Rinard, the Destroyer."

February 2015

Prompt: Choose a song and write a fantasy story inspired by it.

Winner: A.M. Adams

A.M. Adams (known in the r/fantasywriters community as MusicLvr) spends the daylight hours commuting and slaving away in the design field and the after hours wrangling a family and attempting to solve the world's problems—well, at least the ones that require a bandage. During the time spent staring at traffic bumpers the beginnings of a story took shape, then several more. The word processor was opened, some keys were struck and a budding hobby writer was born.

A.M. Adams has written several short stories, numerous pieces of bad poetry and is currently working on a novel with a completion date that could've been met if it weren't for reddit.

Neitherabouts

I leaned over the rail to stare into the water. The waves rose and fell to the sway of whatever forces move the sea: the spinning of the earth, the wind, the movement of creatures known and unknown swimming beneath, a maniacal god. I thought I knew the answers once, but not anymore. Out here the world was not what it seemed.

Clouds gathered overhead. Another storm.

A gust of wind caught the sails with a loud snap and Glen shouted for someone to batten down. I grabbed a tarpaulin and set to work covering the hatchways so water wouldn't get into the cabin. The sea would not wait, nor would she hesitate to claim another victim as she did two nights ago, when a rogue wave hit the starboard and sent Conroy down to greet the kings. It was chance we all took when out on the ropes.

“The sea's a bein' a greedy whore!” Captain Lamar shouted beside me. His West Benican accent was as thick as butter and as smooth as honey whiskey. The wind caught the edge of my tarpaulin and snapped it against his salt-stained boot. It boasted polished brass buckles and concealed twice as many knives, or so I was told. He took no notice. “We're not givin' her another man's soul tonight, are we mates?”

“Or woman's!” Stella's voice rose above the chorus of “no” around me. She was the only female on The Zingara, though some would argue it. The tall, proud woman was many things, but lady-like was not among them. Glen swore her beard would be thicker than his if she would just let it grow.

Captain Lamar laughed—a sound to match thunder. It rolled through the deck under my feet and set my ribs to rattling. “Stella, the sea is a mighty bitch and she don't be wantin' competition. You're da last thing she be takin'.”

The crew laughed and I with them.

Stella gave the captain a rude hand gesture and went back to the ropes.

The captain turned to look down at me. “Aaron, how long it been since we left port?” Deep lines etched the ebony skin of his brow, but they were from years of wind and sun, not worry.

“Forty-three days, Captain.”

“Get on da crow and tell me what ya see.”

“Yes, Captain.” I tied down the last corner of the tarpaulin and scrambled up the masthead to look out over the rising, gray water.

Everyday it was the same question. How long it been since we left port? I don't know why he kept asking me. Perhaps he didn't want to forget. Or perhaps he just wanted me to remember. Either way there was nothing. Up here the world was endless, made entirely of sky, wind and saltwater. We were no more than a speck of floating wood—forgotten and easily discarded.

At first I blamed the storms for steering us off course, but not anymore. Last night the stars covered the sky, bright and as familiar to me as loving faces. Our course held true. The charts and compass confirmed it when I snuck a peek at them as they lay forgotten upon the mess-table. The captain had fallen into what Glen called a divine trance, but I had seen it before. It was the falling sickness.

According to the charts, we should have caught sight of the Red Isle twenty-two days ago, but no one mentioned the delay, nor did they worry over the food and water supply. My bowl held the same amount of fish soup as it had the day I stepped on-board and the wine continued to flow. The cards kept falling on the table with a calm only possessed by those who had faith in the winds.

“Nothin' but gray, Captain!” I shouted over the crack-whip sound of the sails.

The darkening clouds above began to pour and he motioned for me to come down from my perch. I obeyed, grateful that I wasn't going to have to ride out the storm like a baited worm on a pendulous hook.

I hurried to join half the crew below deck, where Griff was telling a story around the mess-table. He stopped mid-sentence when he saw me and the others turned to see what gave him pause. Forty-three days on this ship and I was still an outsider. I never knew a crew to have so many secrets, but then again The Zingara was a legend. I thought her a bedtime story until I laid eyes on her myself, a ghost off the shore of Morland, white-sailed and beautiful in the morning mist.

I grabbed someone's used towel from the bench seat and rubbed my hair as I settled in next to Stella, daring them to kick me out. I scrubbed and sweated along with the rest of them, they could suffer to let me join in on their soiree for one night.

"Go on," I said. "Don't stop on my account."

"Who's on the crow?" Glen asked.

"No one."

The ship creaked and dipped. The shadows danced. Jasper's contraption bubbled in the room down the hall. I threw the towel on the table's surface and took my shirt off, wringing it out over the floorboards before putting it back on. Old Jasper sized me up with rheumy eyes across the table, a tankard of sour wine in his spotted hand.

"What do you do with all those glass pipes you got back there?" I asked him, crossing my arms over my chest to warm myself.

His bottom lip tucked under his red, squash of a nose. Folds of skin dangled at the corners of his mouth like a frowning bass, and quivered when he talked. "You asked me that before."

"And you didn't give me a suitable answer."

A rush of air left his toothless mouth, a sound resembling hot air being released from a pressure vent. "Suitable answer, he says. Should I give him one?"

A groan went around the table.

"He takes da salt outta da water," the captain said as he and two others came down the ladder to join us. "Dat's da short of it. Ya don't want da long of it."

"You can do that?" I asked, turning back to Jasper.

"Well, it took me about a hundred years . . . but yeah, I can do it."

A hundred years? He had to be joking.

Captain Lamar laughed as he took a seat at the table and patted his neck with the towel. "Slow down now, Jasper. The boy's eyes will fall out his head. I needs dem eyes."

Boy? I was a thirty-three year old man with a receding hairline, not much younger than the captain, himself. I might be a lowly lookout—a sad vagrant and a dreamer at that—but I was no greenhorn. I'd been sailing since I was twelve. I could read and write and speak three languages. I could sail this bloody ship to the Red Isle in the allotted twenty-one days, that's for damn sure.

I looked at the faces around me, the crew of an infamous ship, and realized I knew nothing about them but a handful of cock and bull stories told over tavern tables. Jasper liked to write in his books when he wasn't locked away in his compartments; Stella occasionally went for a dive and came back empty-handed; Griff strummed his lute and sung his songs, only venturing on deck when it was a calm, clear night; and the captain had seizures. I'd spent most of my time on the crow watching them, trying to put together their tight-lipped stories while The Zingara sailed the same spot of sea day after day for no apparent reason.

"I heard you were one of the few men taught by the Great Lu Noing," I said, now they were stuck with me. Jasper cocked his head like a spaniel. "That you know the secrets of the

universe and can stop time." I put my elbows on the table and rested my chin on my clasped hands, smiling as I awaited his response—a parent daring their child to flesh out a lie.

"Heard that, did you?"

"Sounds pretty ridiculous, doesn't it?" I said. "The Great Lu lived what . . . two-hundred years ago?"

Jasper scratched his bald head.

I turned to Stella. "And I heard that you can hold your breath longer than a drunk man can sing three rounds of Maid Minnie and bed a whore. That you found the Holy Trident of Rothby in the caves of Belacker's Bay forty-some years ago . . . which would make you what? Sixty-years-old? You don't look a day over thirty-five."

"You've seen me dive," she said, her voice too sweet for a face so hard and angular. "Do I really hold my breath as long as that?"

I held up two fingers. "Two-and-a-half rounds of Maid Minnie. Unnaturally long. How do you do it?"

Glen waved his hand before my face. "Whadya hear about me?"

I held Stella's dark eyes a moment before turning to Glen, the only person on this ship more normal than me. He was grinning like a nine-year-old boy. "Nothing. But the captain here's not a real man. Only half. Apparently, the rest of him's a fish and he has a mermaid for a wife."

The whole cabin burst into raucous laughter.

"So finish with your story, Griff. I'm sure it's not half as outrageous as all the fluff told on shore. And if it is, I'll give you a shill." I put my coin on the table for good measure. We're all gamblers before we're seamen. It's why we're drawn to this profession.

All eyes fell on the coin, as I knew they would. It wasn't a goodly amount, but it was an open challenge.

Griff glanced up at Captain Lamar, who gave an almost imperceptible nod. "What if I told you that things are not as they appear?"

"You wouldn't be telling me anything that I don't know already. We should've landed on the Red Isle long before now. We haven't strayed and the winds are with us. There's no reason for it." I looked around the table, meeting everyone's eye. "And none of you seem worried about it. I know the wine never runs out and the food doesn't spoil. I've seen the barrels and stores. We shouldn't have as much as we do. The water . . . " I said, shaking my finger at Jasper, "makes sense now, but I haven't been able to piece the rest of it. Like you," I said turning back to Griff. "You're a poet . . . a musician. What are you doing on a ship like this, searching for lost artifacts? It doesn't seem like your sort of gig."

"There are other things to find out on these waters besides treasure," he answered.

I frowned. "So what are you looking for?"

"A song."

"Okay . . ." Leave it to a bloody poet to be dramatic and metaphorical.

“Song is a powerful tang,” the captain said. “It can end wars or start dem. It can make a woman fall in love and give an old man hope. Ease grief, or sharpen it.”

Silence settled over us, a small moment to remember Conroy whom I didn't know. Griff nodded his head and folded his long fingers together over the table. They were a musician’s hands, strong and nimble, not rough and calloused like the rest of ours. “Some songs come to you like a dream, swift and easy. Others need to be found.”

He held out his hand and Glen put a tankard in it before passing one to me as well.

“I wasn't telling a story,” he continued. “I heard them last night.”

“What did you hear?” I asked, for I thought I heard something too—the sound of a lover's voice on the wind, bringing to mind the face of the woman I was trying to forget.

“The mermaids.”

I choked on my wine. “Come now, Griff. I ain't no greenhorn. It's the wind in the hatchways.” I didn't want to admit it sounded too human for that—that I'd seen curious shapes moving in the water at times, when the moon was bright and low.

“No. It's da mermaids,” the captain said. “Dat part of da story you heard is true. My wife is a mermaid. Well, ex-wife.” He laughed his low, rolling laugh. “Ya see, she gets mad when I cross into her waters and I have ta make amends afore The Mary will come to guide us out. Only I never know what she be wantin'.”

“Mermaids?” I said, taking my tankard and coming to a stand. “That's what you got for a story? Mermaids?” I took my coin off the table and pocketed it. “Fine. Tell your fish-stories and play me a fool . . . bloody bastards.” I mumbled the last part as I stomped off to the sleeping quarters, feeling overly tired as I finished my wine and changed into dry clothes. I should've expected no less, being the newcomer. I thought I would hear laughter as I lay down to sleep in my small bunk, but all I heard were muffled whispers. The ship dropped and climbed. Jasper's contraption bubbled.

When I awoke I was up on the crow. My legs dangled over the small platform and a rope bound me around the waist to the mast. The storm had blown over and the waters were eerily calm. The light of a full moon danced on the glassy surface, a bright jewel in the black night.

I rubbed a hand over my face and tried to remember how I had gotten there. Those jokers probably slipped something into my drink and tied me up for a laugh. Only I couldn't see how they managed it without dropping me. My hand went to my head, checking for lumps.

“Ha ha, you bloody scoundrels,” I called out. My fingers worked at the rope's knot, trying to loosen it enough to escape.

The soft singing of a woman drifted up to me.

Stella.

I looked down at the deck but saw no one. Dark shadows lurked in the corners. She could easily be hiding in them. More feminine voices accompanied her sweet soprano.

No. Not Stella. I looked out over the water and saw movement—those same strange shapes, but this time they were much closer.

The voices blended into a harmony unlike anything I had ever heard and a hollow longing filled my chest. Lillian's face came unbidden to my mind, more vivid than life. Her brown eyes were wide and luminous, filled with all the hurt I had caused her those many years ago when I was young and stupid. I wanted nothing more than to rip my heart out. It hurt too much to allow it to beat in my worthless chest. Peace undulated below me—dark and soothing.

My hand worried at the knot, scratching and pulling until it came loose at last. I scrambled down the ratway and rushed to the rail. A flash of silver broke the surface and then a splash—a large fish of some sort. It gleamed beneath the water, beckoning. If I stayed on this deck I should never see land again. I knew it like a mother knows her infant's cry. It would be better to see what lay beneath, where there was safety. Peace.

My foot found the rail.

"Be careful now." A hand stayed my shoulder as the captain's baritone whispered in my ear. "Dey can be deceivin' bitches when dey want to." He flashed his white grin and I saw he was naked. Without another word he dove into the water. Then there was silence.

I looked down after him, not knowing whether to shout for help or wait and see what happened. I waited, at a loss for words. Everything was still. No splashing, no shouting, no flash of scale or skin. No song. The hollowness in my chest dissipated into panic and confusion.

"Captain?" I called out after a few heavy breaths.

I tossed over the life ring and ran below deck. "The captain's overboard!" I shouted as I rushed down the hall.

Glen peeked his head around the door as a few others stirred. "Is not the first time," he said before disappearing into his bunk.

"But . . . there was something in the water." I pressed my body in the narrow doorway of the sleeping quarters.

"He'll come back. He always does," Stella said from the covers of the topmost bunk. "Go wait for him if it makes you feel better, but sometimes he's gone for days."

"Days!" My voice rose to that of an adolescent.

"No longer than three weeks," Griff added.

My mouth hung open. It was madness. Another elaborate joke.

"What's this shouting about?" Jasper asked, peering at me from the doorway of his private sleeping quarters. "You'll wake the kings of old from their watery graves."

"The whole ship's gone mad," I spat. "The captain's gone overboard and these bloody sots are just lying about."

"Come with me, boy." He curled the fingers of his outstretched hand toward himself, beckoning me to follow. He pointed to his narrow bunk when I entered the threshold. "Now take a seat and calm yourself. It's like we tried to tell you before."

I sat down at the edge of his bed as he took a seat opposite me, near his contraption. It hissed and dripped, the pipes heavy with condensation. It was overly warm in here, though I didn't know why. There had to be some unseen force at work, something that warmed the pipes and caused the water to bubble with the smell of salt and steam. Sweat trickled down my back, adhering my shirt to my skin.

"The mermaids are real," I said, not knowing if I was making a statement or asking a question.

"Of course they're real. Just cause you've never seen them before doesn't mean they're not." He took a kerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his forehead. "I guess we should've explained things to you better. But you see, sometimes it's better for people to discover things on their own. Makes it easier on the rest of us, you see. A bit selfish on our part, I know."

I fiddled with my hands. "Did you tie me in the crow's nest so I'd see them?"

"I didn't personally, but yes."

I waited for him to continue.

"You see, we're in a stretch of sea known as the Neitherbouts, because it's neither here nor there."

"I heard about it. It's a place where ships get lost. But I thought it was further north."

"It is . . . and isn't." He saw the expression on my face and waved a hand. "No use explaining it really. I've been trying to figure it out for years. It just is what it is. It's several places all at once and sometimes nowhere. There are no rules, see."

"So we have been floating in the same place for days now. Like being wind bound, but with favorable wind."

"Yes. And no."

I sighed.

"It's a full moon out." He looked at me, white eyebrows raised, expectant.

"Yeah . . . so?" Then it dawned on me. It had been a full moon three nights ago when I had looked at the charts. It hadn't been full last night, but then it had been cloudy. Was it full six nights ago? Seven? I was certain that it wasn't. I know I had seen a half moon at some point. How did I loose track?

My mind whirred. "Are you saying time has stopped?"

He grinned. "Not stopped necessarily. Repeated, maybe. Will start again, definitely. No rules, you see."

"This can't be real. What did you dolts put in my drink?" I was beginning to feel light-headed.

"Nothing much more that isn't in ours . . . grapes, yeast, a sleeping aid . . . but that was for getting you on the mast."

"But we could be stuck here for years!" I nearly flew off the edge of the bed.

“Aye. And we have, but don't dwell on it overmuch. We don't age in the Neitherbouts. When we come ashore the world will think us gone but for only a moment, except for those few times when it was all backwards. There's always exceptions.” He shrugged his shoulders and fiddled with a valve on his apparatus.

“But won't we starve?”

“There's fish in the sea,” Jasper said. “Do yourself a favor. Make a mark near your bed and see if it's there tomorrow. If it isn't, no worries. It's like the day never happened although your mind will remember. The food will be fresh and the wine will be plentiful.”

“What? It just comes back?”

“Something like that. I'm still looking for the answers to this mystery myself.”

I looked him over: a fat, bald man with spotted skin and too many wrinkles.

“Knowledge,” he said, pointing a finger at his sweaty temple. “The greatest tool in all the world. What better place for a man of science to be, especially when he can live some days over again?”

“Why did nobody tell me? I might not have taken this job if I had known.”

He turned from his tinkering and looked at me. “Would you have believed us?”

I frowned. “Probably not, but then I would've known what I was gambling with. My options could've weighed out better. Loons and a potential for fortune, or sanity and a simple life?” I held my hands up like a balance for emphasis.

Jasper grinned his toothless grin. “But you're not seeking fortune. Not really. You had other reasons for coming on this ship, just like the rest of us.”

I sat back down on the bed and put my face in my hands. How could he know when even I was unsure as to what I was doing here? “So . . . years?” I asked, still not quite believing.

“It all depends on the captain's ex-wife. If he can give her what she wants she'll send The Mary to guide us out of the Neitherbouts.”

Weariness settled upon me. “The Mary? Is that the ghost ship? The one the queen . . .”

“Aye. The same. I get a tear every time I see her. You don't have family do you, Aaron?”

I shook my head. “No.” The word weighed heavy on my tongue and hollowness took up the spaces in my body once more. “Not anymore.”

The old man chewed his gums and looked at his pipes. “Good, that. It'll be easier for you then.”

“Aaron, how long it been since we left port?” the captain asked as I nodded off on my perch. True to their word, he came back. Twelve nights gone and he emerged from the water with a wide grin and a golden trinket he kept close to his heart. When I told him I thought him dead he said his time for greeting the kings was a long way to come, though he liked to visit them

from time to time. The stories were right—he was only half a man, though I couldn't say what the other half was.

"One-hundred even, Captain," I answered as I rubbed my eyes stared out at the long expanse of black water. It looked the same. No land. No Mary. I thought if I should see either one I would weep for joy.

"Come down then, mon. The time approaches."

I scrambled down the ropes and brushed my sweaty palms on my pants. "The time for what?" I asked, standing beside him.

"What do ya see?" he asked, pointing at the full moon.

"Another full moon," I said. "It seems to be stuck again."

His torso shook with a silent laugh and I found myself smiling. "A hundred days she said." He took the trinket he kept in his vest pocket, the one from the sea, and held it up to the crisp, white light. I'd seen him at this action on several occasions, sometimes putting his eye to it like a looking glass, but I never had the opportunity to see the item up close. It was a miniature figure of a golden apple with a small lens embedded in its center. I took a step back, remembering several stories involving golden apples and none of them particularly pleasant. I had never been a superstitious man but time on The Zingara had changed me. "Now what do ya see?" He moved to the side, holding the apple before my eye.

I gave him a curious look before peering through the lens. I expected to see a larger version of the white moon hanging low in the sky. I expected to see the craters more closely defined or a halo of yellow, hazy light around it. What I saw must have been a trick.

I snatched the apple from his hand and turned it over, examining it closely. There was nothing painted on the lens, inside or out, as far as I could tell in the dim light of the moon. I held it once more to my eye and turned about the ship, looking at the various blurred and unremarkable shapes it revealed to me. I looked back out at sea, towards the moon but not directly at it. "Is that. . . The Mary?" I asked, my hand shaking slightly.

"Oh, no. Dat be The Ugly Maiden's Request for Revenge." He took the apple from me and placed it to his eye, giving his head a reaffirming nod. His wide, white grin glowed against his dark skin. "Heard any stories about her?"

"No." My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth as I stared out over the empty sea. The lens had revealed a warship, three times the size of The Zingara, with sails as red as blood and as abandoned as a pirate ship luring in prey. We would be within boarding distance in the next five minutes.

Captain Lamar smacked my shoulder. "Well, boy, we're about to make one. Dat der has somethin' my former wife wants . . . and she's about to get it."

April 2015

Prompt: In 2,000 words or less, write a fantasy short story inspired by the image 'The Summoning' by Balaskas on deviantart.

Winner: Andrea Stewart

Andrea Stewart was born in Canada and raised in a number of places across the United States. She spent her childhood immersed in Star Trek and odd-smelling library books. When her dreams of becoming a dragon slayer didn't pan out, she instead turned to writing. Her work has appeared in Galaxy's Edge, Beneath Ceaseless Skies, and Daily Science Fiction.

Editor's Note: A decision was made not to link to the original image as most readers would not be able to access it easily whilst reading. However, the cover for this anthology was chosen due to its similarities to this month's prompt. And we have added it here to show you in its full glory.

The Summoning

The streets of Mionne stank of dust and smoke, and Tylus resisted the urge to cover his mouth. He'd called this city home, once, but years had bent his back the same way they had bent the thatched roofs. Time had humbled him, as it humbled all men. His gaze locked onto his goal—the jagged peak of the mountain leaning over the city, so close yet so far. It wasn't time that galled him now, it was the lack of it. He leaned on his staff as he walked across the cracked cobblestones, and passers-by hurried to remove themselves from his path.

"Your Excellency," a few muttered, eyes averted, as they flattened against building walls, as they hopped the gutters.

Tylus wondered if any of them remembered him. Did any watch his back as he passed and think: Mother's Grace, he looks familiar? Or did he blend into the endless line of pilgrimaging mages, seeking power in the mountain's peak? He still remembered the scent of baking bread in the back of his shop, the dough yielding beneath his fingertips, puffs of flour glittering in the sunlight in a modest facsimile of magic.

He brushed the images from his mind, sought the blank concentration once more. Nostalgia was turning him weak, useless. If he wanted to summon Charios, keeper of the dead, he couldn't afford any lapses. He'd spent five years in the Citadel, working his fingers to the bone as the eldest apprentice the school had ever accepted. Ten years as a journeyman mage. And twenty as a master, leaving baking and the city of Mionne behind, trading in the stink of horse and mildewed thatch for the cold stone and old-paper smell of a tower study.

If he could summon Charios, it would all be worth it. So, like so many mages before him, he trod the path to the mountain like a peasant, saving all his magic for the summoning.

"Good morrow." A shoulder brushed against his. Another, younger mage walked the street next to him, her back un-bent, chestnut hair pooling in the hood of her robe. "Come to summon Charios too, old man?" She had a face like a bird—long, thin nose, bright black eyes.

"To try," he corrected her. His voice sounded withered to his own ears.

She shrugged, her head canting to the side like a sparrow. "Aye, maybe for you. I plan to succeed. Not my day to die, not today." Her jaunty step carried her past, and she turned a little to face him. "I'll ask Charios to bring forth Byron."

Tylus didn't comment, only focused on putting his staff in front of him and making his feet follow.

"Everyone seems to want the essence of powerful mages," she said. "But think of inhaling blademaster Byron's essence—you'd still have your magic, and you'd gain some skill with the sword, too." She fell into step with him again. "Who do you plan to ask for?"

"It's my own damned business," Tylus said. But he felt, reflexively, for the vial in his pocket. Still there.

She tilted her head back and laughed. "You," she said, pounding her staff on the stones for emphasis. "You're a right grumpy old man, aren't you?"

"I am now," he said.

"I'll walk with you," she said. "Name's Litana. I've been told I'm a cheering presence, by some."

Irritation buzzed in Tylus' breast, his hard-won concentration gone. "And what do the rest tell you? To stick your head down a well and good riddance?"

"Nah. I'm the youngest mage who's ever made master. They wouldn't dare say that to my face." She flicked a finger and a ghostly blue butterfly rolled off the end, fluttering toward the mountain. They both watched its passage as they walked. "So they keep their silence."

To Tylus' surprise, she kept her word and walked with him, though she could have made better time alone. Despite the cloudy day, sweat trickled down Tylus' neck and between his shoulder blades as they left the city behind and began the climb.

Litana barely stopped her chatter to breathe. "When I was five, I called a bird down from the sky, and my da said: 'She'll make a right powerful mage, she will!' and he was right. Da's not wrong about much."

Some emotion, long-buried, twinged in Tylus' chest. She looked so young. "Most mages die trying to summon Charios," Tylus said.

She blinked, as if startled to hear him interject. "Aye," she said. She used her staff to knock a stone from their path. For a moment, she seemed sobered, but then she grinned. "But I'm not most mages, am I?" She nodded at him. "What's your story? Late bloomer?"

He shook his head. "No. Always had the gift. Just didn't see the purpose and didn't want to leave my family behind to study. I was past my prime when I went to the Citadel."

He remembered his daughter, Kassie, tugging at one of his floured hands. Please, Da, do the trick with the dandelion again?

Him, pushing her gently and firmly away. No. It's silly. Don't have time for that.

"What could be better than being a mage?" Litana breathed in deep, as if the air itself contained magic. "Good thing you changed your mind."

Good thing. The words swirled around in his head, bitter as the dregs in the bottom of a teacup. But all he said was: "Yes."

"Promised my da I'd do him proud," Litana said.

Tylus forced his body up another step. Gravel slipped beneath his heel. She reached out and caught his arm, helped him back upright.

"Do you see your da much?" he asked.

Litana's gaze focused on the peak, thin lips pressing together. Her hand left his arm. "Been eight years. I write him, some. He writes me back, when he can."

"Let's say you summon Charios," Tylus said. He wasn't sure why he was letting her bother him. "You ask for Byron and inhale his essence. Then what?"

"Then I'm the best mage the world has ever had, see? I could defeat kings and demons." She brushed a stray bit of hair from her face. "Can you imagine what my da would say when I wrote him about that?"

"I never met your da," Tylus said dryly.

"Well he'd say, 'That's my girl! That's my Litty!' It'd give him a right thrill."

Tylus grunted. "How old did you say you were? Twelve?"

"Twenty-three," she said, unruffled. "I'll figure out the rest as I get there."

"We'd best hurry then. Before the sun sets."

Some darkness flitted across Litana's face, a passing shadow. She stopped. "I thought we could spend an evening on the mountainside, do our summonings in the morning."

Tylus shook his head. "No." He set his staff into the path. He heard her scrambling after him, boots freeing loose stones.

"No? That's all you've got to say?"

"Yes." Never enough time. Best to make of it what he could, while he could.

She didn't argue with him further, only hurried to catch up before falling into step beside him again. The wind picked up, howling through hollows between boulders, tugging at Tylus' robes. Mionne, far below, was a haze of smoke rising from chimneys—just a smudge of brown and gray against the landscape.

The cave appeared ahead of them, a gaping mouth in the mountain's side, sucking all air and light into its maw. Litana wrapped her arms around herself, her face gone suddenly pale. "Well that's it, isn't it?"

Tylus gestured for her to enter first, and she did.

Both of them lit their staffs as soon as they ducked inside. The path was clear, the cave's sides worn smooth from the fingers of past mages. Litana drew closer, her shoulder brushing his, as they ventured into the heart of the mountain.

"You've memorized the summoning?" Tylus said as they drew near to the center.

"Aye," she said. "I've said it in my mind, a thousand times."

"And the runes?"

"Aye."

The path evened out into an enormous cavern, vast as a cathedral. Their way ended abruptly, the path dropping off into darkness.

"I must do my summoning alone," Tylus said. "You may go before me."

Litana hesitated before stepping away. "Aren't you afraid he'll be angry, being summoned twice in so short a time?"

Tylus said nothing, though the thought of watching her die made his stomach clench.

She went to the end, dropped five handfuls of sand onto the stony ledge, and began to draw the runes. Tylus couldn't see what she drew from his vantage point, but he could tell from her swift strokes, her steady arm, that she drew them true. She might have been a braggart, but she was an honest one.

She took a deep breath, and then halted, silent.

Tylus' heart pounded, his breath caught in his throat. Not his place to say anything, to stop her. He spoke anyways. "You don't have to do this."

His words seemed to break her. She let out her breath in a sob, and then folded, her knees carrying her to the ground.

Tylus didn't think, just acted—he went to her, as he'd done with his daughter Kassie, so long ago. He held Litana as she wept. "I can't. I'm not ready," she choked out.

"That's all right," he said. "There will be another time for this."

"My da," she said, her face streaked with tears. "I wanted to make him proud."

Tylus took her hands, helped her to his feet. "Trust me, your da will still be proud. Go see him. Return when you're ready. When dying doesn't scare you."

She dried her eyes, took her staff, and lifted her chin. "I'll be back."

"Yes. You've talent enough to summon Charios a hundred times over."

Litana gave a little laugh, an echo of her former bravado, and then retreated. "Thank you," she whispered. "You're a right nice old man." Her form disappeared into the darkness.

Tylus took her place at the end of the path.

He smoothed the sand and re-drew the runes, slowly. He did not have Litana's raw talent. When he was done, he took a step back, flung his staff wide, and spoke the words. His tongue ran over them easily—like notes in a song he'd been taught in infancy. Thirty-five long years, all preparing him for this day. One false pronunciation, one smudged letter of his runes, and he'd be dead. But this was right, oh so right; he felt it in his bones.

The cavern ceiling became the night sky. A figure appeared, tall as twenty men. Darkness lay inside his hood; two twisted horns sprung from the sides of his head.

"Tylus," Charios said, his voice filling the cavern. "Which of the dead do you wish to see? A legendary mage, perhaps?"

"No," Tylus said. He could have shouted and it would have sounded a whisper in the god's presence. "Only Kassie." Always Kassie.

Charios was silent for a moment. And then he breathed out a mist. The mist formed into a girl, ten years of age, hair curling around her ears. "Da?" she said.

Tylus drew forth his vial, a dandelion gone to seed inside. He tugged it out. "You always wanted me to show you. I said I didn't have the time." He took a breath, careful not to inhale her essence, and then blew.

The dandelion seeds scattered, and as they did, each glowed as bright as the moon.

Kassie whirled in delight, her ghost-form trying to catch each seed as it passed. “Oh Da,” she said. “Da...” She faded into the darkness of the cave, too soon, along with Charios. Tylus was left alone, the sound of his breathing echoing from the stone walls, his chest aching. Never enough time.

Never enough.

May 2015

Prompt: Write, in 2,000 words or less, an anachronistic fantasy story doing something similarly anachronistic in a pseudo-historical setting. A monthly challenge inspired by this quote from reddit user CMWright89: The beauty of fantasy, of course, is that it's an alternate history. If in your world, the smiths wear baseball caps and call each other 'bro' then who is anyone else to argue with it?

Winner: theclumsyninja

The Exam

In the morning Nigel would stand before his teacher and uncle, Tasser, and next to him would be the man who determined whether or not Nigel would pass his exam and become a full-fledged—and licensed—wizard. Becoming a licensed wizard meant that Nigel could practice freely, without his uncle around. All his friends had already passed their exams, and whenever Nigel hung out with them, they would show off the spells they'd just learned or talk about what specialty they were planning on going into.

It wasn't like consuming alcohol, where even if you were underage, you could still drink if you wanted to. There wasn't any magical lock that kept the liquid from entering your system, no invisible barrier that would make the booze spill out all over your face and clothes.

But there was a lock on magic. A wizard who had yet to earn a license was physically incapable of performing without his or hers teacher around. No matter how perfect the incantation, no matter how precise the movements were, nothing would happen if Nigel tried to cast magic. It would be as if he wasn't a wizard at all. All because of the silver bracelet around his right wrist—his dominant hand. While it was on, his abilities were sealed. The only way he could get it removed was for his uncle to release it.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and smiled. "Don't worry, Nigel," Serena said as she moved her hand down his back, wrapping her arm around his waist until she could pull him against her. "You'll do well tomorrow. You'll pass your exam effortlessly."

She turned her head and put her lips to his ear. "And when you pass, you and I can practice together. There are some spells that I've saved just for you."

Nigel blushed so hard his cheeks turned as red as tomatoes, which roused a bout of laughter from his friends that sat around the fire. They all had their licenses already, the plain silver bracelet replaced with a gold one. Only Markus, Nigel's older brother, had one that wasn't blank. His bracelet not only had the etching of his specialty—Elemental Manipulation—carved into the surface, but additionally sported two streaks of trystine down the center of it, denoting his rank.

"I can't wait to see what your mount looks like," Aelux said over the crackling of the fire.

"No matter how hard to try to imagine it, your mount is never what you pictured it would be," Markus said. He looked at his cup of wine, which he swirled as he recalled his exam day. "I thought mine would be all black with silver streaks. But it ended up being a dark red with bright orange, instead. It was sleeker and more toned then what I'd pictured. But I loved it all the same."

"I'm just glad mine wasn't pink!" Serena said, making everyone laugh.

"I wonder if mine will be like Father's," Nigel said to his older brother.

Markus took his cup away from his lips and his gaze turned distant. "There'll never be a horse quite like Father's. That was the most beautiful stallion I've ever laid my eyes on."

The group fell silent for a moment, and it was Nigel who finally broke it.

"I best be going to bed. Big day tomorrow, after all."

"I'll walk you back, little brother."

He stood up and everyone else joined him. They all walked over and wished him good luck before returning to their seats around the fire. Serena was the last to say goodbye. She gave him a quick kiss on his cheek. Nigel couldn't help but smile. He loved the way the firelight reflected in her green eyes.

He felt a heavy hand on his shoulder. "Come on, Brother. You know how pissed Uncle would be if you didn't get enough sleep." Then he turned and walked off with his brother.

The streets were empty. Markus looked up and stared at the night sky, taking in the sea of stars that shined down on them. There was a gentle, cool breeze this summer's night. Nigel's eyes found his brother's bracelet. He stared at it for a moment before lifting his arm and staring down at his.

"You have nothing to be afraid of, little brother," Markus said. He snapped his fingers and a tongue of fire the size of an apple appeared in his gloved palm. "Uncle Tasser has told me about your training. He may be a strict teacher, but he has nothing but good intentions for you."

"I know," Nigel said, turning his plain, silver bracelet. "I just wish it were Father teaching me. Like how he taught you."

Markus stopped and the fire in his hand vanished. "I know. I wish he were here to teach you, as well. I know Mother would be glad to have him back. But you know what? I'm going to tell you a secret. Something Father told me when he was training me."

Nigel turned back to Markus. His older brother was once again looking up at the stars. This time, his eyes were wet and glittering in the pale moonlight, Nigel saw a tear streak down Markus' chin. Markus wiped it away and composed himself before telling the secret.

"Father was... Father was a terrible teacher. It was very difficult, in the beginning. I wasn't ready for it, and he started off with techniques that were far too advanced. You have to walk before you can run, and father had me sprinting before I could barely even crawl. I often stumbled and failed, and I just barely passed my exam. If it wasn't for Uncle Tasser, I wouldn't

have made it. Even though he couldn't remove the bracelet from my wrist, he still found a way to teach me the fundamentals. I took what I learned from him and combined it with what Father taught me. Only then was I able to keep up."

"Is that why you studied under Uncle for your specialty?"

Markus nodded. "So you see, you are already so much better than I was at your age. Father may have been the higher-ranked wizard, but his older brother was more skilled."

Markus slapped Nigel on the back so hard he almost fell forward. This was followed by boisterous laughter. "Gods, if father were alive today, he'd burn me to a crisp if he heard me say that. Even though they loved each other, Tasser and Father were still brothers. They had something of a sibling rivalry."

"That means—"

"Only in your dreams, brother. You've still got a ways to go before you're as good as our sister. But with plenty of practice, I'm sure you'll get to where you can challenge me. And I look forward to that day."

Markus fell silent, and he remained that way until they reached their uncle's house where Nigel stayed while he was studying.

"I'll be there tomorrow to watch and cheer you on. So will Mother, and I'm sure even Maya will be there. So sleep well, and don't worry about what tomorrow will bring. Just remember what you've been taught and you'll pass easily."

Nigel said nothing. He simply nodded and hugged his brother. When they separated, both were crying, thinking about their father. They parted in silence and Nigel watched Markus summon another ball of fire before closing the door.

Uncle Tasser's eyes focused hard on Nigel. He knew he wasn't allowed to say anything. He couldn't help his student—and nephew—in any way during the test. He was only allowed to coach him before the exam started, and once it began, only the proctor could speak to Nigel.

He wasn't particularly fond of this proctor, a man by the name of Tymanus. Tymanus had a reputation for being overly critical and had a tendency for failing students over things that other proctors would consider trivial. Tasser tensed up as Nigel completed the spell and he took his eyes off of his student to watch Tymanus' reaction to it.

The old, bent man narrowed his eyes as he looked Nigel up and down. He turned to Tasser and looked at him in the same scrutinizing way. Nigel glanced back at his brother, mother, and sister, who watched from a distance. Markus nodded approvingly, and Nigel turned back to his proctor.

The old man took a deep, slow breath and let out a sigh. Nigel's face drooped, and he looked to his uncle for both reassurance and answers. Tasser opened his mouth to speak, but Tymanus raised his hand faster than Nigel thought possible for a man his age.

Tymanus' voice, however, sounded as old as he looked, as though each word could have been his last. "To pass your exam, you must summon your mount."

Nigel's eyes widened and he looked back and forth between his uncle and his proctor. He opened his mouth to speak, but closed it immediately. During the test, he couldn't utter a word that wasn't part of a spell or incantation, except to answer when spoken to by the proctor. To do otherwise would prompt an immediate end to the test and a failing grade.

Which meant Nigel would have to wait another month for his license.

"That isn't part of the test!" Tasser said.

"What's going on here?" Nigel turned back to see Markus approach. His brother walked past him and stood next to his uncle.

"Tymanus demands the summoning be a part of Nigel's exam," Tasser said.

"You can't do that!"

"I can do as I please," Tymanus declared. "I am the senior proctor. I can alter the exam as I see fit." He turned to Tasser. "And today, that means your student must summon his mount in order to become a licensed wizard. Further interruption will nullify the exam and the student will fail. You have one minute to prepare."

Tasser and Markus scowled at Tymanus and they both approached Nigel.

"You remember the words and the movements?" Tasser asked.

Nigel nodded.

"Don't worry, Brother. You only have to do this spell once. It's difficult, sure, but I know you can pull it off."

"Time's up. The student must now successfully summon his mount, or fail the test. In all my years of proctoring, only one other student summoned theirs on the first try."

Tasser and Markus both put reassuring hands on Nigel's shoulders before backing away. Markus winked, and Nigel smiled in reply. He knew he could do this. Nigel closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and began. He kept his eyes closed as he spoke the words and did the movements. He knew that Tymanus was focusing hard on him, waiting for the slightest slip-up.

Instead, almost two minutes later, Nigel completed the spell, his voice getting louder as he spoke the final words. There was a bright flash of light and a sound like a roll of thunder.

"It cannot be!" he heard Tymanus shout before opening his eyes. "That's impossible!"

There on the ground between him and his proctor was Nigel's mount: a shiny black motorcycle with silver and jade trim. Its engine roared, silencing everything around him.

Nigel smiled. It was his father's bike.

June 2015

Prompt: Write a action short story or capsule fight scene set in typical fantasy tavern with a limit of 1,000 words.

Winner: Paul Nabil Matthis

Paul Nabil Matthis is a half-Syrian writer and musician living in Los Angeles. He received his M.F.A. in music composition from CalArts in 2013. He was born near the prison where Lead Belly first met the Lomaxes in the year Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five released The Message. His award-winning works for dance, theater, and film have received international acclaim. He currently sings and writes songs for his band, Madapple, and is putting the finishing touches on the first novel of an epic fantasy series. In his spare time, he does beatbox covers on YouTube and waxes far too poetically about tea.

Cleaver Learns A Lesson

"Oy, Cleaver."

"Oy."

"You ever seen a sight like I'm seein'?"

"Wossat, then, Vardin?"

"That bloke over there."

The man called Cleaver leaned over the wooden table, which creaked. Everything in the Stinking Goat creaked. Cleaver squinted. "Thassa bloke, Vardin?"

"Reckon so, Cleaver."

Cleaver squinted, then scowled. He swallowed a gulp of ale the color of ripe lemons and continued to scowl while he did it. When he set the mug down, he licked his porcupine beard with a tongue that was just a bit too long.

"I don't believe you," he said finally.

"Bet you a chit," Vardin said.

"Bet you two chits," said Cleaver, "and an ale at that."

"You're on."

Cleaver stood — which was impressive due to both his size and level of intoxication — and adjusted his hat, which had horns on it. He waded through the crowd, casually making his way toward the stranger like an avalanche casually makes its way toward lower elevations.

"Oy," said Cleaver.

No answer.

"Oy, I said 'oy'," Cleaver said again, tapping the stranger's shoulder. "Wossat then?"

The stranger turned. There was a certain dangerous light in the eyes beneath the pink bonnet. "Excuse me?"

"I said, 'Oy'," said Cleaver, "and then I said, 'Wossat then', bein' in regards to this 'ere manner o' garments."

The stranger stared calmly.

"They's lady's such, is what I'm asking," said Cleaver.

"That isn't a question, friend," the stranger said.

"Leave him alone, Cleav," said May. She was engaged in that timeless trade of barkeeps across the many worlds, which was toweling off a pint glass. What made May special is that she made it seem threatening.

"'Him' she says!" said Cleaver. "Haw! Then what's with this 'ere frilly garment, dress-like they call 'em, like wot my ma' used to wear on Farthing Night? Woss your name then, eh?"

The stranger turned toward Cleaver. There was something of May's toweling in his turning.

"My name," said the stranger, "is Fenn-Sloan McKinray."

The temperature of the bar dropped several degrees. The name cut through the cottony haze of the ale and pricked the specific bit of Cleaver's mind that makes the eyes go wide, though sadly only half of the bit called 'fight or flight.'

"You're lying," said Cleaver, poking Fenn's lacy frills. "There's two chits and an ale says you're a sissy, dress-wearin' woman what's uglier'n sin and suck men's cocks for all your—"

Ask the others of this moment, and to this day they'll swear it all the same. Fenn grabbed Cleaver's finger, snapped it backward, then threw the enormous man three paces without leaving the stool.

Cleaver screamed. Vardin didn't. He charged silently, but to his misfortune the floorboards creaked.

Fenn leapt from his stool while simultaneously kicking it toward Vardin. It flew threw the air, but Vardin bashed at it with the cudgel. It cracked and flew into the crowd of locals, who scattered.

Even as the stool became splinters Fenn was already upon Vardin. Magenta skirts — accordioned in what any noble lady would agree was the fashion of the times — spun as Fenn brought a knee up into Vardin's ribcage. Vardin was the speed and savvy to Cleaver's notable single-mindedness, yet Fenn moved about him like a blur. The edge of a hand connected with

a wrist. Vardin yelped as the cudgel dropped to the floor. Fenn punched the taller man in the jaw, then the nose, blood spraying onto the delicate white lace of Fenn's bodice. Vardin yelped, his eyes watering as he was suddenly lifted into the air and thrown onto a table, which toppled.

Half the crowd descended upon Fenn-Sloan McKinray while May shouted for order. The flurry of fists and leather boots fell into a mad tumble of dirt and splinters, at the center of which was Cleaver, who despite his broken fingers finally managed to get Fenn into a choke-hold.

Those who had not already fled the Stinking Goat were too close to the source when the thunder hit. Ask May, however, and she'll tell you the whole thing, glass and towel in hand. She'll tell you that it suddenly seemed as if the space around Fenn became glass, then shattered as if struck by a hammer. She'll swear on her husband's grave that she saw the cracks split black and jagged and explode with a sound like a thunderclap. It broke bottles and blew out windows.

The crowd of brawlers lay on the floor moaning, hands clasped over their ears... All save Fenn. They would later speak of strange dreams that night — of great serpents large as mountains that wove in and out of time, countless stars and colored clouds their backdrop. They would speak of dreams in which trees with leaves of flame held up the heavens, and black suns whispered of demons in shadows.

May set down the glass. She said, "As I told you last time, World Walker, you—"

"—Had better pay to clean up this mess. I remember, Lady Meilian. I have been sent to ask that you return. Your father—"

She made a sound somewhere between haha and harrumph, cutting him off. "You know I can't."

He nodded as if expecting the answer. He produced a leather pouch from the bodice of his dress, now ripped in several places, revealing an intricate network of brown scars upon darker brown skin. He threw it onto the bartop. It went 'clink'.

"That should about cover the damages," he said.

She opened it carefully, using a dagger she'd produced from somewhere. When nothing dramatic happened, she peered inside. "This will cover my daughters and I until Ragnarris comes."

"It will cover you until next I see you, at least," said the World Walker.

"Maybe next time don't ruin my bloody bar before moving on, eh?"

He smiled exactly like a gambler who knows the dice are weighted. "Ah, Meilian. But where would be the fun in that?" He curtsied elaborately, stepped over Cleaver groaning on the floor, and strode out of the tavern, skirts dancing lightly upon the breeze.

July 2015

Prompt: Write a fantasy story, with no word limit, that incorporates these three elements:

1. There must be vampires of some kind.

2. There must be some kind of romantic element.

3. Something must sparkle (it is highly recommended that this is not the vampires).

Winner: Eamon Brenner

Marie

He made one of those noises they make when they're trying, but not quite getting the results they want. It wasn't a grunt. Grunts were not attractive. Grunts were all 'uh' and 'uhn' and 'uhmph', and this was more of a 'hrnngh', a put-your-back-in-it-and-give-it-a-go sort of sound, starting in the throat and working up a plea through the nose. That was the separation, that she could close her eyes and in the dark in the back of her mind all that would reach were those final threads of supplication. That he was trying. And trying well. She moved, adjusting herself in the old doorway, shoulder to the stone and readying herself to work along with each push he took.

"In broad daylight..." he said, managing between pushes. "Won't someone see us?"

"Shh, Kevin," she cooed, though there would be neither grunt nor plea from her to punctuate any words. "No one's around. Keep going. Just a little more. Almost there..."

It was definitely a grunt that escaped him next, and she would have met it with sneer and scorn if something hadn't snapped, and settled, her – admittedly – petty little qualms dissolving as the resistance washed away. She gasped, and the air rushed in, swirling about them as the hot summer day met the cooler night kept trapped behind the door. The door itself stopped short of a full swing, grinding to a noisome halt as stone scraped against stone.

"Shit!" Kevin panicked, twisting around with wide eyes. "What if-"

But she was there, ready to calm him, teetering up to wrap her arms about his neck and bring him down into a kiss. His shoulders eased, and when she let go, dropping back down to the grass, his knees buckled, only for a moment. Whether it was her doing, or the bulk of the work breaking open the door finally catching up, she'd let him wonder.

She snatched up her tools and went in.

The afternoon light flooded into the crypt, splashing off the ground and filling the corners. MASTERSON, in big block letters, was etched into the far wall. The Mastersons were gone,

long moved west to leave the family dregs to wither and die. The walls were lined with tarnished urns in cobwebbed niches with tarnished plagues to mark them. Amid the old there was the stink of fresh earth. A coffin, new, but already well-abused, splintered on the sides, scratched all over the lips of lid, carrying the scuffs and dents of a long, slow, dragging, lay upon a table in the center of the room.

She grinned. “Come on, Kevin. Day's a-wasting.”

Kevin appeared at the doorway and warily followed her into the chamber, half-tripping over the remains of a plank that, set across the crypt door from within, had made their entry so difficult. It wasn't very high quality wood, but it was thick enough to serve and could have held out longer. Kevin was stronger than he looked. That's how she liked them.

“Is that?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said proudly. “Just where I said it'd be.”

“Jesus...” Kevin murmured.

“Jesus ain't looking our way.” With a gleam in her eye, she reared up and jammed her crowbar into the coffin. One quick jerk and the front lid popped up, hovering half open with a bit of a creak. Kevin jumped back. His elbow slipped into one of the old niches, and there was the smell of dead ashes as an urn toppled and spilled. He turned and cursed, then whipped his gaze back to the coffin and cursed again.

“Relax,” she said, keeping her eyes on the coffin. “This is the easy part. Come over here and learn a few things.” When his warm shadow settled next to her, she continued. “There's four good tests to tell a sleeping vampire from a fresh body. Any idea what they might be?”

“Uh... smell?”

“That's one,” she said. “Least useful, though. Hygiene can take second fiddle until a vampire's old enough to hide in plain sight, and a corpse can go through all sorts of treatments these days to smell like roses well after they're in the ground. What else?”

“Fangs.”

She worked a finger under the body's lip and pulled it back. “Fangs are good, if you know what you're looking for. These look weird to you?”

Kevin peered hesitantly at the exposed teeth. “Yes?” he suggested.

“Mhm. But it's often hard to tell. The younger they are, the less the fangs have grown out, and if you're thinking to find what Hollywood'll show you, you'll never see them coming. But yeah, these are a little long. Two more tests.”

“I don't know,” Kevin said.

“First,” she said, letting the lip drop and moving upwards, “eyes. No milky eyes on a vampire.” She hesitated. “Well, unless he had cataracts, I guess.” Finger and thumb, she opened up the body's eyelids, revealing the eye, stark green and clear. It rolled in its socket, settling straight towards them.

“Jesus Christ!” Kevin screamed, roaring away.

“Hush,” she said, rolling her eyes. “He can't see us.” She frowned. “I don't think he can.” She shrugged. “It's never been a problem.”

“So this is a vampire?” Kevin asked.

“Of course.” She curled a lip and tapped on the coffin. “That was obvious as soon as we broke into an abandoned crypt and found a recently-unearthed coffin that looked like someone opened it from the inside. I mean, otherwise I would have had to find a shovel, bring it up myself and hide it here just to make a little puzzle for you. Wouldn't that be silly?

“It's a teachable moment, darling. We're learning. If you ever need to dig one up yourself, now you'll know what to look for. Which brings us to the fourth test.” Leaning against the coffin, she held out the crowbar for him. “Pop the bottom.”

He eased it open, prodding carefully until the hinges kicked in and the bottom lid lifted away. “Huh”, he said, the crowbar lax at his side, his face turning red.

“No one expects that.” She nodded thoughtfully. “Repressed old men used to call it 'wild signs', Stoker refused to mention it completely, but let's not mince words. That is one serious hard-on, and that is perfectly normal. Well, 'expected'. Like the rest of these tests, the point is these things aren't very normal.

“You can tell he's been rising in the night long enough to keep his pants off through the day. They seem to learn that right quick. Must be uncomfortable, but it doesn't last. The older ones can keep it down during the day, which I imagine is a bit helpful if they're up and walking about. If you ever find a vampire wearing pants, and you haven't dug the lout up yourself, run. He's not asleep; he's faking it.” She sighed. “But none of the tests are perfect. What's wrong with this one?”

Kevin regained his composure. “Not all vampires are men?” he suggested.

“Not all vampires are men.” she repeated. “More than most, though. Here, help me lift this. We'll want him in brighter light for the next part.” She slipped past him to the back of the coffin, shutting both sections as she did.

Kevin got to his end and lifted. Huffing with the weight, they took the coffin off the table and dropped it in the slice of day cutting into the crypt. She nudged it with her feet, and both parts swung up again, revealing the vampire in the sun.

Nothing happened. Kevin stared. “Shouldn't it be burning, or something?”

“That's Hollywood, dear. And stupid. They're creatures of the night. So are bats. Bats don't scream across the sky like bolts of hellfire if they see the Sun.”

“Then why move him?” Kevin was crouching low, trying to catch something in the vampire's face, some sign of discomfort he wouldn't find. They always looked for it. It wasn't there.

“The first rule of hunting vampires is 'better safe than sorry'. They don't like the sunlight. It makes them weak, and slow, and the closer you put your face to his fangs the less important that is. Here, take these,” she said, as Kevin jumped back.

He looked at the mallet and tent stake he found in his hands. “But don't use them,” she continued. “The second rule of vampire hunting is it can pay the bills.” She pulled out the knife. “If you aren't squeamish.”

“Marie?” he asked.

“Yes?” She squinted at the edge of the knife, checking that the silver sheen stopped short of the curved edge of iron. It did, of course. She took good care of it.

“Am I going insane?”

She stopped, laying the knife on the floor. “Oh, darling. Kevin, dear, no. You're fine. We're fine. It's the world, that's what's gone mad. All of them. All of them that walk out there in the sun, engrossed in their petty little dramas, with their greed and their envy and lust and wrath. That's why you're so precious to me. The world is falling to pieces all around us, and they can't see. They won't see. You'll see, please? Please tell me you'll see.” She held his hand in hers, feeling his tense grip on the stake ease as he breathed in and out.

“I will,” Kevin said, faint, but with the edge of determination.

She beamed. “Good. Now pay close attention. This is where it gets tricky. Do you remember what I showed you?”

Kevin nodded. He took up his tent stake and mallet, holding them hovering over the vampire's chest.

“More to the center,” she said. “Now, higher. No, not that high. And now just a smidgeon back left. Alright. Raise it up a bit. There's only a few ways to break such a young vampire out of a deep sleep, and breaking the skin anywhere near its heart is one. Opening a vein is another, so always be careful with your knives. I'm going to demonstrate another.”

Kevin gulped, a bead of sweat breaking out from his hairline.

“I'm going to count to three. On three, not after three, I need you to pound your stake hard in there. I'm going to be cutting between two and three. Don't hit it when I move. Don't pay attention to what I'm doing. Just focus on the sound of my voice, and when you hear the word, kill it. Are you ready?”

“I think so,” Kevin said.

“Good. Then let's start. One...” She wrapped a hand around the vampire's exposed penis.

“Two...” She let the number roll out, and breathing in she began to slice. Not slow, lest the silver coating on the knife begin a burn and mar her work, but not too quick, or it wouldn't work its magic and seal the wound.

It came free in her hand. “Three”, she said. For the slightest fraction of the second, the vampire tensed, eyes and mouth springing open, fangs ablaze. But down came the hammer, with a delightful crunch, and the scream died before it began, all the muscles falling slack and dead.

Kevin looked positively horrified. She dropped her prize in a little brown bag lined with wax paper. “See? Nothing to it.”

#

The little bell above the door ringed. The old man behind the counter looked up, and in she walked, Kevin at heel. She passed by the shelves of New Age tonics, the displays of little smooth-cut crystals that sparkled through backlit tackiness, the racks of vitamins and oils and supplements in their little plastic jars. She walked up to the counter, with its fine-polished shine, and dropped her brown paper bag smack-dab in the middle.

"Get out," the old man said.

"That's rude." she said. "Morley, this is Kevin. He's my lover and new assistant. Kevin, this is Morley. He's a rude old man who is going to buy our fresh swollen vampire penis and sell it powdered to people with too much money and not enough adventure beneath the sheets. Isn't that grand?"

"Get out, Marie."

"Was I intruding?" She looked around at the empty store. "No, but it's not the season for tourists, and it's a bit early for most of your clientele. Why, some of them might be seen walking in off the street."

"This is my last warning, Marie." From beneath the counter there was the unmistakable sound of a rather large firearm being readied.

Kevin stepped forward, stopping when she raised a hand to warn him off. "Morley's a little shy today, darling."

"But he's got a gun."

"That's sweet, Kevin. Very thoughtful. But like I said, Morley's a bit shy today, and we wouldn't want for him to get nervous and behave like a lout. Why don't you go take a browse in the knickknacks and leave the two of us to talk in a more comfortable and familiar setting?"

"But-"

"Knickknacks, Kevin. I think I can handle one old friend having a bad day."

Kevin slunk off, though the way he held himself at the edges of her sight told her he was ready to leap heroically to a rescue she didn't need.

"What's your fucking problem, old man?" she whispered.

Morley gritted his teeth. "Three of my best customers hospitalized in as many months. Care to guess what they had in common?"

"Numbers at the end of their names?" she suggested.

"Dead blood, Marie. You gave me a damn cock full of dead blood."

"'Full' is a bit of an exaggeration, I think."

“And you knew? You sold me tainted product. Dammit, Marie. It was a lucky thing none of them knew the others shopped here. They could have put two and two together, and then where would I be?”

“There was only a tiny bit,” she continued, ignoring the question. “Half a second's flow, at most. My assistant was nervous, quick with the stake, but it was fine. There was a chance there wasn't even any contamination.”

“Three hospitalized.” Morley seemed displeased.

“Yes, obviously, looking back, there clearly was. But I assume the rest of the batch worked out well enough. And I have a new one for you, nice and fresh and absolutely free of such poisons.”

“How do I know your assistant didn't screw it up again?”

“Oh! Different assistant. Did I never introduce you to the last one? His name was Dave.”

“No, never.”

“He mishandled a mandragora last month. Not seriously, of course, but do you remember the day that entire city block mysteriously came down with food poisoning? It was embarrassing. I had to let him go.”

“And this new one?” As the conversation turned lighter, there was another unmistakable sound, this time of some similar sort of firearm being returned to a more friendly arrangement. She supposed guns taped to the bottom of tables could be friendly, at great need, and Morley was the needy sort.

“Kevin is superb. Oh, Morley, he listens and he learns. He's brave, after he adjusts to the peculiar oddness of some of the things I have him do. I'm sure you can tell he's easy on the eyes. And damn, I have to admit, there is something refreshing about a man who can look at a vampire's hard-on and worry about himself, who doesn't get bothered and jealous when you grab it as part of the job, who can keep it up the next time you want it, not fearing the knife may turn to him. We, uh, may not have come directly here.

“I thought we were talking about assistants.” The old man was smiling.

“Shut up, Morley. Let me have this. Let a girl dream.” She sighed, noticing the look on his face, and stiffened. “I believe I was selling you something.”

“So you said,” came his response. “Mind if I check the goods?”

“Go ahead,” she said. She waved at Kevin, more relaxed and earnestly looking at the trinkets, though he was stuck among the useless, overpriced rubbish meant for tourists and random passersby. He still had a lot to learn.

“It looks fine,” Morley said, looking up from the brown bag. “You aren't going to fuss over the usual rate, are you?”

“I'm not the rude one here,” she accused. “Add in half a gram of the finished product and I'll even forget about you threatening to shoot me.”

“You can walk in here and buy it just like everyone else.”

“But I brought it to you in the first place,” she whined.

“Farmers still buy bread,” he said.

“Wheat kills you much slower,” she shot back.

“What do you even want it for? You aren't selling it out there, are you?”

She pouted. “I would never. It's for personal use, in a way. I'm going to give Kevin a learning experience.”

Morley took a long look at Kevin. “I wouldn't have guessed he needed it.”

“Need? Want? Will appreciate? They're all really the same thing, at the core.”

He snorted. “Don't break this one too quickly, Marie.”

“Please, Morley,” she said, affronted. “I like Kevin.”

“Next Tuesday,” he said. “Stop by at noon.”

“On the first toll of the bell.”

“Is there anything else I can do for you, Marie?”

She clapped her hands together. “No, Morley, I believe that is all. This has been delightful. I will see you on Tuesday.”

“Goodbye, Marie,” Morley tried, but she was already spun around, with Kevin by the arm, the bell ringing again as they left the shop.

“Is everything alright?” Kevin asked.

“Everything is wonderful,” she said, dragging him down the alley with the force of her walking, sun low and red behind them. “Tell me, Kevin, have you enjoyed these past few days?”

He nodded.

“You're going to love the nights.”

About the Editor

Alex S. Bradshaw is a publishing professional working in London in the UK with a passion for the speculative fiction genres and spends most of the time either reading or writing.

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