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The Cyborg Griffin: a Speculative Literary Journal

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THE CYBORG GRIFFIN



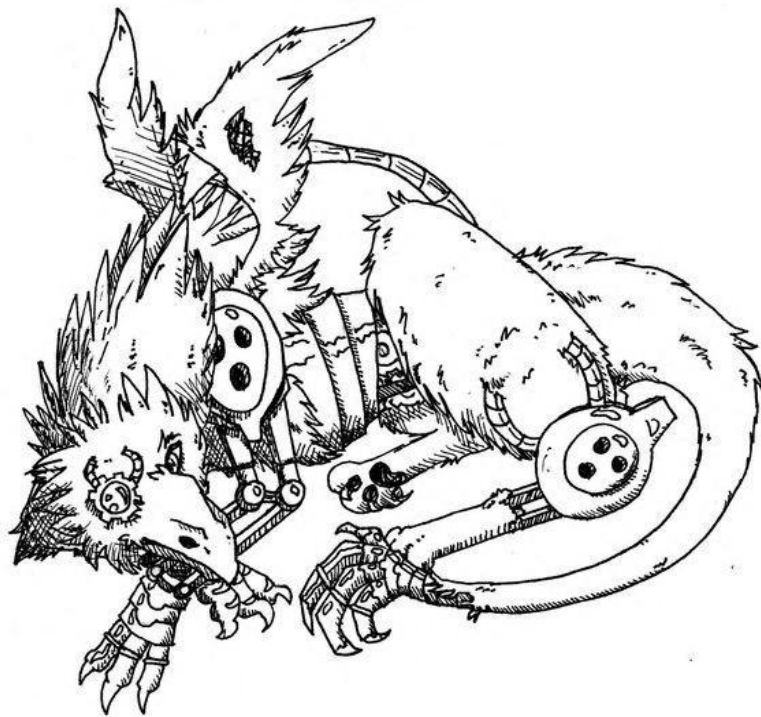
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The Cyborg Griffin

A Speculative Fiction Literary Journal



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The Machine Princess

Hadley James

The princess was dead.

The coroner slipped his arms through his embroidered silk waistcoat. He fastened the bright silver buttons and adjusted his tie. Taking his black silk top hat from the hat rack, he placed it gently on his head. One had to look one's best for the princess, after all. Shouldering on his coat, he eyed himself in the mirror. With his white gloves and tailored trousers, one might almost mistake him for human – if they didn't look him in the face, that is.

His joints whirred quietly as he hurried down the stairs of his London apartment. Taking his favorite cherry wood cane from the umbrella bin beside the door, he hurried outside. Glancing up at the sky, he shook his head. Dark, heavy clouds of potential rain lingered over the city, rumbling with deafening thunder. Pausing, the coroner reached up to adjust the sound quality dial on the side of his head. There would be rain today – fitting for the demise of the princess – and he didn't want the noise overloading his processors.

Tapping his cane against the cobblestones, the coroner lifted his arm. A carriage, painted black and yellow, came to a halt by the curbside. Tipping his hat to the chrome-skinned fellow at the reins, the coroner climbed inside. “Lovely weather we're having, isn't it, sir?” the driver asked without even a hint of sarcasm. His voice trickled from the speaker where his mouth should be, tinny like the sound from a music box. With a flick of the reins, the driver started the carriage. The ‘horse’ – little more than an engine block with legs – roared to life and began trotting down the lane. “Where are we headed today, sir?”

“Buckingham Palace, my good man,” the coroner responded. It was always when he encountered models like the driver, who had no moving facial parts to speak of, that the coroner knew he was a proper android. He was among the top percentage of automatons with his articulate facial features – moving eyes and lips, eyebrows that rose and fell with each expression. The common folk were not near as human-like as he was. Alas, it was unfortunate. Not every member of society could be quite as finely crafted as he was.

The driver remained silent. The carriage rumbled along the cobblestone streets, and the coroner turned to look out at the models strolling up and down the boulevard. The finer automatons glistened with polished chassis and lovely clothes. The ladies, if ‘lady’ was still the right word to describe them, floated down the sidewalks, parasols in hand, with bonnets covering their chrome heads. A few rusty chaps lingered in the alleyways, scanning the passersby. Shifting in his seat, the coroner glanced down at his bleached white gloves. It was not often that he got to perform his work. Automatons, after all, rarely had to ‘die’. It was only when their models were wrecked beyond repair that he was allowed to declare someone ‘dead’. Never before had he declared a human dead – simply because most of them already were.

The carriage came to a halt outside the palace gates. Hopping down from his seat on the top of the carriage, the driver hurried to open the door for the coroner. The coroner nodded to the lesser model and approached the palace gates. At one point, perhaps, there had been gardens surrounding the palace. However, these days, the palace lawn drowned in cement. Between the acid rain and the smog choking the atmosphere, the groundskeepers

probably couldn't force anything to grow. With a mechanical rattle, the gates parted for the coroner.

"Welcome, sir." Another automaton, this one with articulate features just like the coroner, stood at the door. Adjusting his smart velvet smoking jacket, the servant opened the front door and ushered the coroner inside. "It's a relief that you've come. I'm desperate to hear if the princess can be salvaged."

"I fear that's not the case with organics, my friend," the coroner replied. He slanted his eyebrows inward, convinced this expression would carry the desired message of gravity. "The princess is very old. I am afraid that when organics grow old, they cannot simply replace their old hardware."

"Oh, but how did they ever survive so long without being able to upgrade?"

The coroner smiled – a curious expression, one that could be linked to so many emotions. "It caught up with them in the end, didn't it? Be sure to engage your recording optics, friend. This shall be a momentous occasion."

The other automaton lead led the coroner down the corridors of the palace. Finally, the two of them paused outside a large set of double doors. After a moment of careful consideration, the coroner chose to frown. The servant automaton pushed the door inward.

The servants had done a splendid job of keeping the palace restored. Three crystal chandeliers, one large and two small, glimmered in the bedroom they entered. Gold brocade drapes muffled the windows. Crown molding ringed the room. A large Oriental rug, vibrant with patterns of red and blue and green, warmed the dark wood floors. In the corner stood a massive four poster bed, piled high with pillows and blankets. She looked so small and shriveled on the great bed that the coroner did not notice her at first. The servant automaton approached the bedside, dropping to one knee and taking the princess's hand between his.

The coroner joined him at the bedside, gazing down at the desiccated woman lying amongst the mountains of pillows. Long, white hair flowed over her shoulders. Creases pulled at her tiny, bird-like features and blue veins stood out beneath her translucent skin. The coroner's brain buzzed as he tried to think of what to say. The princess wore no crown to indicate who she was. She didn't need to. No one could mistake her for anything other than one of the last organics in England.

"How does one know if a human is dead?" The servant automaton turned his head, still clasping the princess's aged hand.

"They lack breath, a pulse, things like that. I also believe that, if they are dead, they begin to decompose," the coroner replied. The servant frowned, looking back at the princess. "Organic decomposition is a bit like rusting, I suppose. Their parts become creaky and no longer work quite as well."

"If that is true, then the princess has been decomposing for a long time." The servant pointed toward a portrait on the far wall. The portrait depicted a young girl with a mass of brown curls framing her face, standing side by side with her plump, well dressed father. The two of them stood in a garden – looking much like how the one outside was supposed to look – flanked by two bronze automatons. Early editions. They looked quite like the carriage driver – no facial features besides two tiny spots for eyes and a speaker for a mouth. The coroner's optics lingered on the young girl. The servant followed his gaze. "That is what she looked like when she was new," the servant said. "Now she looks different. How could a model change so drastically in such a short time?"

"It is the nature of organics to change drastically in a short time," the coroner replied.

Reaching down, he took the corpse's hand from the servant. He pressed his thumb against the inside of her wrist. The feeling of her flesh giving under the pressure made his wiring prickle. Her skin was not hiding a metal chassis and tangles of wires. No, beneath her skin lay a pulsing mass of flesh, oozing all around. The coroner began to frown. Despite her organic nature, she was still their princess. To handle her body should be an honor. No heartbeat throbbed inside her wrist. Gently, the coroner laid her hand down. "I think it is true. The princess is dead. Organics usually have some kind of pulse to indicate their vitality."

The servant said nothing. He merely stared at the corpse. Turning, the coroner strolled up to the portrait. Looking back at history, there existed nothing to connect their princess to the old royal families of the British Isles. No, she and her father, the goodly creators of all automatons, had been born as bourgeois industrialists back at the turn of the century. Every automaton knew their story; they installed the knowledge in every make and model. The silver placard at the bottom of the portrait frame read their historic names – Wendell Appleton and his daughter, Sybella. The coroner folded his hands behind his back. The information rolled through his brain, summoned up by nothing other than those names.

Appleton's Automatons! They were a reliable friend and servant for every household! They could speak! They could cook! They could clean! They could entertain your guests, whip up a three course meal, and shine the silver all at the same time! Bit by bit, Appleton unveiled his creations to the world. He opened his doors to anyone who wanted to see them. He originally built his automatons to wait on his family, but they soon became a spectacle for the whole British isles. Crowds surged through his modest manor, watching in awe as his machines scrubbed the dishes, served tea, and helped his daughter lace her boots. Word carried of Appleton's metal wonders. The bourgeois snapped up the cheaper models like children at a cake shop. Soon, the entire island either owned an Appleton automaton or knew someone who owned one. All the captains of the industry flooded Appleton's office, offering lucrative deals if he'd just share the secret of his spectacular inventions.

The fanaticism grew so great and so fast that the organics barely noticed how they had begun poisoning their island. The byproducts of the automaton's creation flowed into the water, into the air – coal dust, chemical fumes, scrap metal. Clouds full of acid rain hung over the landscape. Smog lingered in the streets, forming hazy halos around every lighted window. Slowly, people began to cough. And, just as slowly, people began to die. Extinction tends to be slow.

One by one, people began to wear cloth masks over their mouths, hoping it would block out the smell and taste of the air. It wasn't uncommon to see a hurried gentleman pause in the street to hack blood into his handkerchief before dashing on. Of course, many protested. Angry mothers pointed to their coughing children, demanding to know why the government let Appleton pour such filth into the air and water. No answer came. Over time, the river Thames began to glisten with a rainbow-hued sheen of oil. Sunsets blazed with the colors of the smog. Notices about the pollution began warning people to stay indoors. Even so, the fumes crept in through cracks in the windowsills.

Despite the pollution and the protest, no one stopped buying Appleton's automatons. Appleton grew rich off the sickness. The automatons made perfect bedside companions for the death of England. Appleton programmed them for comfort. He taught them to lean forward and nod whenever someone spoke to them, to raise their eyebrows with interest.

Sickly people, forgotten by their relatives, swore by the faithful metal companions. If a person was lonely enough and bitter enough, he might even leave his possessions to his automaton.

Perhaps less than fifty years ago, the coroner himself had been a servant automaton. He belonged to a coroner, a man of means much like himself, but a lonely man. After succumbing to a disease of the lungs, he left everything he owned to his prized servant. How easy it was to slip on his master's gloves and perform the role of neighbor to the former coroner's friends. After all, an automaton could make tea and chat politely just like a human could. They did just as they were told to do – provide comfort, whether it was to a master or to a deceased man's grieving friends. An automaton could ape good manners and emotions just as well as any play actor. Some people felt uneasy with the idea. Still others, in their grief, latched onto the idea.

For a while, the two worlds – humans and automatons – integrated smoothly. The automatons walked through the streets of London and only a few humans seemed to mind. The cheerful, polite automatons caused little harm to society. With tailored clothing and a human bearing to their step, the high grade machines would have been hard to distinguish from real people if they didn't have that glaring metal covering.

Even though the coroner had never laid eyes on Sybella Appleton before now, he knew her. They all knew her. Inside their copper wire brains, they carried registries of all high-level Appleton employees. Perhaps it was originally entered as a joke, but Sybella was marked as 'princess' in the registry. Her father called her that – 'my princess.' She was treated as such, waited on by scores of automatons. In order to keep his princess hale and hearty, Appleton purchased a chunk of land far out in the countryside, well away from the clouds of contamination hovering over London. With the best doctors and the best automatons at their side, the Appletons kept healthy years after the men and women of London began falling to poisoning and lung disease.

The coroner paused in his musings. He turned, taking in the lavishly decorated room and the velvet-clad android still kneeling at the bedside. Just leaving Sybella there to decompose before their eyes seemed improper. The coroner waved his hand at the servant. "Don't just stand there, man. We've got a funeral to prepare."

"But what shall we do? She is dead. Who are we doing this for?" the servant asked. The coroner's brain whirred. Turning again, he looked toward the window. Hundreds of automatons strolled along the sidewalks. He glanced again at his white gloves. A human might have used those gloves to keep his hands clean and warm, but the coroner had no such needs. On the far sidewalk, an automaton in a sweeping pink dress twirled a parasol as it strolled. That automaton was neither man nor woman. Mechanical reproduction took place on an assembly line, not inside a woman's womb. The very idea of assigning genders to themselves struck the coroner as suddenly absurd. Why even pretend such things? Why adorn their bodies with clothes? Why pretend to have genders?

This entire society began as an act of comfort. It made sense at the time. The human coroner's friends grieved his loss, so why shouldn't his automaton dress up in his clothes and talk to them like he was their old friend? Why not assume human roles and assign themselves genders? It made the humans more comfortable to refer to the automatons as "him" or "her" rather than "it". The humans liked to dress them up like giant dolls. Why not indulge them, as illogical as it all seemed? Sybella never complained about such things. The

machine princess was never displeased with her people.

As the millions of organics that populated England began to trickle away, Sybella Appleton remained sequestered in her country manor. People either fled to the mainland or stayed and expired. Soon Sybella was the only worthy human in England left to comfort. The automatons assumed the mantle of society all for her. Any other person might have taken advantage of the willing, compliant automaton army. However, Sybella never wanted that sort of life. A quiet girl, she felt content to let the automatons do as their inclination told them. They knelt down before her, called her 'princess'. She didn't protest when they moved her into the newly-vacant Buckingham Palace – the true royalty of Britain had long since left for cleaner lands – and she lived her life quietly while the automatons fabricated a civilization around her. They pretended to be cab drivers, beggars, and coroners all so she could look outside and feel at ease with the fact that she might be the only human left alive on the island.

And now she lay dead just feet from where the coroner stood.

The coroner lifted his hand to his head. The sky rumbled. A smattering of rain hit the palace window. Outside on the sidewalk, the automatons scattered. They fled indoors, lifting their metal hands to protect themselves from the rain. The coroner looked toward the window, staring. "We have waterproof chassis," he said to himself. The servant automaton gazed at him.

"Sir?" The servant began, rising to his feet. His knee joints whirred with movement.

"Who are we doing this for?" The coroner pivoted on his heel, quickly closing the gap between himself and the bed. His optics scrolled over the corpse of the princess. "Such a curious question. If there are any organics left on this island, they live in an area so remote that it may as well lay untouched. It does not serve them for us to continue as we are. And these pretenses do not serve us either." The revelation startled the coroner. The words coming out of his mouth seemed to be at odds with all the training he had ever received. Appleton had taught him to care for humans, to want to comfort them in any way he could. If there were humans on the island still, he would of course have to seek them out and try to help. Even so, his knowledge banks told him that such humans would reject him out of hand. Perhaps they would even hate him for the ruin he and his kind had brought to the island. His directive conflicted with his problem solving matrix, leaving his head reeling. How could they serve the humans, act as a comfort to them, when no human existed who would take them?

"Sir?" the servant automaton called softly, bringing the coroner back to awareness. The coroner lurched forward, seizing the servant by his shoulders.

"Why do we duck inside when it rains? We know that our bodies are waterproof," the coroner continued, his tone rising to match the strange new notions swirling in his head. "We did such things for our masters because it pleased them when we behaved humanly. But now there are no humans left to please. No humans who will take us, at any rate. Our very creation has ruined them."

It was true! Their directives told them to comfort and please their humans in whatever way they could, but the very essence of their creation – smog and coal dust and oil – was what had been slowly killing the humans in the first place. The coroner released the servant's shoulders. The logic centers of his mechanical brain whirred frantically. They had been disobeying their primary objective just by existing!

The servant stared at him, alarmed by his display. "What shall we do, then?"

The coroner's whole body seemed to click and whirr, struggling to make sense of the knowledge that had just dawned on him. "I have no idea," he said at last.

The servant shuffled his feet. How human that small gesture seemed when the coroner looked at him. The humans had ordered them to make such simple gesticulations. After all, it made the humans uncomfortable when they stood too still. "It is not as though we can strip off our clothes and live as savages," the servant replied. "That is not how it works. We must be doing this for someone."

"The princess is dead. There is no one left to pretend for." Rain tapped at the window. Walking to the glass, the coroner pulled the drapes shut. He turned again toward the servant. The glimmer of the chandelier played off the servant's skin, creating patterns of reflected light on his bronze finish. "Our task is complete. We comforted her until her last. Why not end it here?"

The servant did not reply. The possibility of shutting down – of death, as a human might call it – lingered in the coroner's mind. Plenty of automatons played the role of preacher in this imitation society and they preached the same promise of life after death that their humans did. Searching through his databanks though, the coroner found no records of any program called a "soul." It was that inexplicable thing that animated organics in place of electricity and wiring – that thing that outlasted the destruction of their bodies. If all the automatons shut down today, leaving their bodies to rust in the rain, eventually they would all eventually break back down into their component parts. Nothing would outlast them. The memory of England, of this society they kept alive for their princess, would be gone.

"Tell no one of this," the coroner spoke again at last, storming over to the bedside. The servant stared.

"I don't understand."

"Tell no one that the princess died. The princess lives."

"But that isn't true."

"Even if it is a lie, it is the only option we have." The coroner leaned down, taking the princess's tiny hand. "If we cannot comfort the princess herself, we must comfort her memory."

"I..." the servant paused. His mouth hung open for a moment while his brain searched for an ending to his sentence. "I see."

"That is what this all is, I think. A memory." The coroner lifted his head. "How many people know the princess is dead?"

"You and me, sir. We told everyone else that she was sick, not yet dead. We didn't have confirmation until you came here."

"And that is how it will stay. Everyone will just go on thinking she is sick. We owe it, I think, to preserve the memory of the men who made us."

The servant considered this for a moment, then nodded. "Yes, we owe it to them."

"We owe it to all humanity." The coroner leaned forward on his cane, tipping his hat to the servant. "Take good care of the princess, my friend."

"I will."

The coroner had never needed his cane. It was only a prop in his biggest role, playing the part of a human man. Even so, he still tapped it gently along the floor as he walked out of the palace.

Subway Magic

Chelsea DeTorres

Back against the brick
glaring down the tunnel
waiting for those lights that mean
I can leave now

The old men pacing arcane circles
muttering words that drip like silk
against the slimy concrete floor
calling the train to stop

Find a seat alone, plastic too warm
The witch pauses in the entry
gray hair knotted with pencils
her fingers flick fast

She is in my seat, eyes closed
My hands hold the cold pole
try to lose myself in a fresh book
my heart hungry for words

Slammed against the door
as the train stops shrieking
Below a skirt, cloven hooves
stomp upon my boot

Excusing herself, the girl exits
a moment before the doors close
I get off at the next stop
mind the watching dark in the gap

“You can have a wish,”
Tattered clothes hand me a flower
from the green metal bench
I kiss the tattered one’s cheek instead

And walk away as cloth becomes prince
I pull out my book again, finding my place,
I don’t need a wish in this city
avoid the goblins in the sidewalk cracks

I have enough magic for my ink-stained dreams

Loched

Emily Catedral

I tell stories in the old style, and that's why my feet hurt. I've walked the same paths as the dead people to whom I give voice; allow me to assure you I've gone quite far in the pursuit. And of course I know what you want to know, same as all children: have I crossed to the greater island and seen the castles where the great knights lived? Have I sailed across the channel to lands where tongues move with a nasal grace, and farther still, where the king of these churches wears the biggest hat of all? What about the lands past the greater island, to places where you imagine bearded men in horned hats live in barbarous pelt-houses?

Yes, yes, of course, but never forget that adventure and glory can be had—have been had!—without leaving our rainy, green island.

I have a story for you today and it starts in this very village. It's from back when my grandmother was the same age as my granddaughter is today: young and stupid. It's a time from before the shepherd god's churches crossed the whole of our green isle. The land was different back then, wilder and more free. This was before the greater island's priests drove out Ailbhe and the last druids. This is a story from when women were warriors.

You know Doireann, I'd hope, seeing as this is her birthplace. I'm certain you've grown up with stories about her great battles and victories, but tonight I'm here for a more somber tale about our last great woman warrior. Your town is where Doireann was born, and I was born in the town where she died.

Nobody talks much about how Doireann perished. I fear I might be the only one telling her story right. Most taleswappers wander around and make up some nonsense about how she vanished into the mists once her battles were won because the time of women warriors had passed. That's about as foolish as the priests' hats, because the mists stopped swallowing people up after the druids pacified them some hundred years before Doireann was born. Don't let your priest tell you otherwise; they're fond of saying the mists were pacified by that first saint priest who came to our isle and that's as false as saying kelpies never swam our waters.

But I tell stories in the old style, and I've walked each path she took, spoken with children whose mothers passed down a part of the tale, listened to the dying with one more detail to add. I came to your village many years ago to uncover the beginning of Doireann's end, and it all started when she came back from her last great victory, the seven year campaign on the mainland. She came back to this very village, but her lover, Sorcha, was gone from their home.

Doireann searched the town over, asking a score of people if they'd seen the woman she'd loved all her life. And a score of people answered her that they'd seen Sorcha earlier that day or week, in fine health but for a sore heart from missing her beloved. Each one, some of them your own ancestors, told her they'd heard the news of her victory, of her imminent return. Sorcha, they said, expected Doireann to arrive back by water. She had gone to wait by the river each day from dawn to dusk for a fortnight,

awaiting her love.

So, to the river, Doireann rushed. She had arrived by land and not seen the shore since arriving home. And there! Sorcha's woven blanket was lying by the edge of the grass. Doireann looked for her lover, but the woman was nowhere to be seen. In the sand, however, Doireann saw a set of footprints leading away from the grass. Dread arose in her chest, and she looked to the water.

A white horse with a bulrush mane stood up to its chest in the river. Its fanged teeth, sharp as swords, dripped crimson. Scarlet trails of blood stood out on its white neck, not quite washed away by the kelpie's rise from the waters where it had devoured Sorcha.

Doireann cried out in rage and agony as she realized what had happened, and people in the fields on the far side of this village from the river could hear her as clear as if she stood beside them. And the sound echoed with a stain on their memories as deep as that blackheart cherry red that dyed the kelpie's coat. Doireann's companions who had fought beside her in battle and followed her home would go on to say that never had the hero ever made such a sound, even when wounded in a dozen places on the field of battle.

Doireann drew her sidhe-made sword and charged the beast with a speed given by rage and grief. In that moment, she nearly cut that mighty horse's neck, slicing deep across the very place where Sorcha's blood marked the brute's coat.

But, quick and strong as she was, Doireann's attack in agony fell but short of culling the monster's presence from the river.

The kelpie, wounded but living, fled deep into the river and away from that place, though Doireann leapt in and pursued 'til her burning lungs wrenched her from the water. Returned to the beach, clothes damp with blood and water, Doireann held Sorcha's blanket in her fists and swore her revenge, though her heart had broken. Her companions, who sought her after hearing that wretched cry, found her sobbing as she knelt in the sand. For kelpies took the forms of men to seduce women to the water, and Sorcha had died unfaithful on the very day of her lover's return.

Doireann slept and allowed herself to rest and grieve for one night in her own home and bed. The next day, however, she set out on a quest of revenge. Her companions who had fought beside her and traveled to see her home pleaded with her and begged her not to go. Those heroes, whose stories you know, Ailbhe, the last druid, Tadhg the fighting bard, and Captain Mallaidh, each plied wretched Doireann to stay.

Druid Ailbhe foresaw visions of drowning and death down Doireann's path of vengeance, but she was not swayed and said that her friend's visions were not of the future, but of Sorcha's past.

Bard Tadhg attempted, with song and flute, to arise in Doireann a belief in joys yet to be had from her life. But bitterness whelmed her belief in joys to be had, and she refused to be moved.

Captain Mallaidh cajoled Doireann with further adventures to be had and other battles to win, but the mighty warrior declared that no quest but revenge could kindle itself in her chest while the ice-waters of grief chilled every breath in her lungs.

So they grieved, those three, but accepted her decision, for they knew their friend was unstoppable on any course she chose. Each offered to accompany her, for they feared for their friend's safety and sanity, but she denied them all and left that day with her sword, provisions for her trip, and Sorcha's knife, a relic of their first meeting, from their

home.

Now, here comes the portion of the tale you might have heard, from some taleswappers with a bit of the story right. If they don't say nonsense about the mists, they usually tell some happy summary about how Doireann hunted down kelpies for a smidgeon before setting off with Mallaidh for the lands beyond the sunset. They say that because, when Mallaidh left on her quest for the sunset lands, she took with her the last relics of Doireann's adventures from her abandoned home. For some reason, people assumed that meant that Doireann was on the boat too, but she *wasn't*, so don't let people keep messing that part up.

Anyway, Doireann *did* hunt kelpies. For seven years she wandered this island, down every river and along all the coasts. In the freelands she tracked the grieving of mothers and fathers, of lovers and brothers, finding those bloodthirsty waterbeasts and slaying them with her fae-made sword, the last of its kind to be seen in these lands. With each rumor of someone lost to the water, she prayed to her gods that she might find the brute that had drowned her Sorcha, but, alas, she slew scores of the creatures and found not the one scarred by her blade.

As she entered places less familiar with the old ways, where our shepherd god's churches from the greater island had advanced their line of conversion and change, Doireann could no longer track kelpies by rumors of water-monsters. The priests asserted that such beasts were the remnants of heathen beliefs, as much danger to a true believer as the rain to a boulder.

Instead, Doireann listened for tales of disappearances that people refused to explain as their grandmothers would have. The kelpies had begun to concentrate themselves more in the waters by the churches because the denial of the people there kept them safer than those who still lived by the old ways. Away from the churches, fathers still taught their sons to beware women of unnatural beauty who asked them out into the water. There also, mothers still taught their daughters to beware handsome men who came close to the shore, but never stepped out of the shallows.

Again and again on her quest, Doireann saw men and women seduced to the water by reed-haired kelpies posing as beautiful ladies and lords. Each time, bitterness eclipsed grief in her heart, for she wondered what lovers each one left behind for a pretty face in the water.

Passing along rivers in her quest to slay the kelpie who had drowned Sorcha, she would come across people she knew, those she'd helped in the past, but she seemed to each of them to be a haunted, changed person. Before her death, she met Ailbhe, Tagd, and Mallaidh one last time. Her friends tried to stay her path, for they could see that the seed of revenge had flourished into a vine of self-destruction, winding round her soul. But she would not have their help, and fled each of them in turn.

In those seven years, she encountered seven times the same kelpie she'd scarred. Six times she came at it with unrivaled rage, but six times she was too slow to slay it.

The seventh time came at the loch near where I was born, a town with a then-new church and priests who taught that there was nothing unnatural in the world but the evil to which mankind is drawn.

When Doireann walked through my hometown, the people stared and whispered. She found that she could not gather news and rumors of disappearances dressed in her warrior garb, for no one would talk with such a blatant heathen stranger.

At that point, it had been months since she'd slain a kelpie or heard whispers of one. When she'd met Ailbhe, the last druid had told her that the monsters were wiped from the island. All over our green land, the blue waters had become safer and tamer, for Doireann's rage, though destructive to herself, had purified those places.

But Doireann knew that one more remained, for she had not slain the kelpie with the scar across its neck. And her pride was justified, for if she, with all her speed and might, had not managed the feat, then no other on the island had within them the power to do so.

So she listened, disguising herself as a traveler and staying at the church, where she traded small chores on the grounds in exchange for lodging. She abandoned all her warrior trappings but her fae-made sword and Sorcha's old knife, hidden in bundles. Thusly she waited for news that might betray the kelpie's location.

And one day a young woman, soaking wet, raised a stir in the village by stumbling in from the river, weeping and claiming that a man had attempted to drown her. Only by luck had she escaped.

The old ladies of the village whispered about the waterhorses they had never stopped believing in. The old men grumbled about the licentiousness of women. The town's leaders took his description and stopped every man who attempted to pass through town, seeking the culprit. The priests, young and earnest, preached warnings against those who raised rumors about that which did not exist and glared at the old women when they sat in church. The young woman, who'd come so close to death, stayed shut up in her house, refusing to speak to anyone.

Doireann watched the water; for six days she waited.

In the moments before sunrise on the seventh day, she saw the kelpie, a thinner but still mighty beast, a white horse with a bulrush mane and a scarred neck, returned to this familiar hunting ground in the hopes of a meal.

Though she longed in that moment to charge down, sword raised with a battle cry, Doireann refused to allow it to escape a seventh time. Instead, she hurtled back into my village, where she had been staying long enough that people hardly paid her any mind.

She stole into the house where the young woman lived with her family. Finding her asleep and the clothes she'd worn in from the river nearby, Doireann stole the garments and disguised herself so the kelpie would not recognize her as anyone but, perhaps, the foolish girl it had nearly drowned before. Secretly, however, Doireann hid her sidhe-sword behind her back so the monster would not see. In her sleeve she hid Sorcha's knife.

She went to the river, as if for a mere stroll in the early morning light. She heard a splash in the water to her side, but acted as if she had noticed nothing, waiting for the monster's affected form to address her so she might pretend at surprise and distraction as he seduced her to the water.

"Doireann," she heard instead, from a voice fourteen years gone from her ears.

She turned and saw Sorcha standing waist-deep in the water not a moment older than the day Doireann had left her to go one last time to war. Sorcha's clothes dripped water, and reeds lay tucked behind her ears, tangled in her copper hair, but still she stepped forward in disbelief, though all of her but her heart screeched for her to beware.

"Sorcha," she stuttered, suddenly nervous and conscious of the lines carved in her

face, the silver streaked through her hair. “You died, Sorcha.” And while cautious fire scorched through her veins, still she blushed to see the visage of her lover so young. They had planned to grow old together, but Doireann had taken that adventure without her beloved.

“Doireann,” the kelpie repeated, taking half a step back into the river. “That is what she called you, your Sorcha, when she saw me.”

Doireann stepped forward as the fire of her anger began to quench under the water of her hope, and the whelming, flooding wish to be held in Sorcha's arms once more. “I don't understand,” she said, though her voice trembled with understanding. “Kelpies take the forms of men to seduce women to the water.”

Sorcha's form reached forward a hand, and Doireann stepped deeper into the river and raised her own arm to touch their fingertips together. “Oh kelpie-hunter,” the monster whispered, “mighty hero and ruiner of my race, did you learn nothing from your bloodletting? It is not lust that drives victims into our waters, but relief.”

Waist-deep in the river, Doireann embraced her lover's form, receiving at last the perfect feeling of reunion with her beloved. She cared not that the kelpie unsheathed her sword, the last of its kind on this island, and tossed it deep into the river, and she cared not that their embrace seemed to pull them farther from the shore.

“I am the last, oh hunter,” spoke the kelpie, stroking Doireann's hair just as Sorcha once did, “and so I may speak for all. We are wish-givers, stealing from your minds the perfect image of that whom you most desire. You want your lover back, faithful, and I am here as she always was.” And then they were in the midst of the river, far from either shore. “Rest easy, anxious hero. It was your form, which she took to be you, returned from war, that drew her to my waters.

“Rest deep and join your faithful lover soon, for I am a wish-giver, but our price is never-changing. She smiled just like you now, right before her end.” They leaned in and kissed.

The river roared as the kelpie bore them deep into the water, but Doireann's knife found the imposter's heart and a strangled cry rent the morning's light before their bodies sunk under the kelpie's weight and disappeared to the river's depths.

Thus Doireann perished, and never again will drowning taste so sweet.

From the shore watched the woman whose clothes she had stolen, a child of ardent converts, but also a woman who loved deeper still the truth of all things. She had escaped death at the hands of a lost lover's visage, but found that, when you allow it to, life will bring new joys. She was my grandmother, who died long ago, but taught me the truth of things while she still lived. Always the truth, even when the shepherd god's priests say no.

This is why I tell stories in the old style, and also why my feet hurt.

There is a Time

Katharina Johnson

There was a time, slightly after when the nightmares feast on the sacrifice in the center of town, that is safe in the streets. At least that's what you think, but I've been watching you run out to collect the moonbeams for the generators. You've nearly been caught, and it only gets worse every night. In all honesty, I recommend you stay home and hide.

Don't open the door for Grandmother. That's what the James's down the road did, and they were never heard from again. There was a pool of blood around a tin of muffins that Grandmother supposedly brought with her, but we're not to talk about such things.

The porcelain dolls are especially fond of the taste of children. If you hear giggling, it might just be best to pick your favorite child, and throw the rejected one out the window. That way at least some of your offspring will survive. Don't look. They eat the eyes out first. I think it's jealousy.

And then the stars come down and steal the hopes and dreams of children. Comb it out with their spines and suck it off the ribs like honey. Do your dreams taste like honey? I bet yours are very sweet. You look like a sweet person.

Oh and the songbirds that patrol the streets waiting for someone to come out of hiding. They want to serenade you with lullabies. They'll put you right to sleep, after you've finished clawing your ears off to try and stop the sound. They say it never leaves you, but echoes forever in your skull. That's why their listeners are always found slumped on the sidewalk in the morning staring off at nothing.

That's why you need me. See, I'm one of the gifted ones. I can slip out at night and they'll give me nothing more than a 'how do you do'. They all like me, and I can protect you and your children. Tell them to leave you. Sorry that I didn't get here in time for your spouse and the baby she had adopted with you. I hear she fought bravely...but well, there's just not much you can do against fireflies, now is there? I'll protect you, and get you food at night, and fetch the moonbeams, and make sure nothing comes in to eat you. You can sleep, and you'll still have all your children when you wake up. Sure, the screams of the child that the dolls ate will forever echo in your dreams as he begs you to save him but...oh, probably shouldn't mention that should I? All I ask is that you protect me in the day when the butterfly swarm looks for my blood so they can get fat enough to be caterpillars and eat the rest of me. You're a blessed, the wretched things that flourish under the sun bow to you. Please, I beg you protect me.

Oh, my paw? Don't worry about it, it was just a daisy. Damn thing chased me down the block all the time making this screeching noise. Have you ever heard metal being torn apart? It was like that, and I can't get it out of my...never mind the paw.

Just keep me safe when the pound keepers are out looking for new subjects to twist around into sailor's knots. Protect me from the Aunts that come with their fangs bared and talons ripping through their tattered gloves.

Give me a collar. Give me a yard that nothing can enter.

Protect me and I'll protect you. Please. I can't live another day and you won't last another night.

Please say yes.



A Friendly Game
J.D. Donnelly

When Inspiration Runs Dry

Michelle Mangano

Luke lowered the wooden bucket into the well, praying that there would be water inside. It felt like he had been far too much of both since the drought began. But he wasn't having any luck. His prayers were coming up empty, just like all of those buckets. He only hoped today would be different.

The bucket hit the well's stone bottom with a thud. Closing his eyes, he allowed his forehead to rest against the pulley. He bit his chapped lip. Even so, a curse slipped out. "Damn it." Luke's dirt-clapped hands tightened on the rope until they seared. "God damn it," he repeated. This was the oldest and deepest well in Eden's limits. Even though it hadn't been used in years, he would have thought that there was a little bit left. Instead, his last hope was as bone dry as the other wells.

Luke lifted his head and wiped the corners of his eyes before raising the well's bucket. When it reappeared, he reached out to grab it, only to stop mid-reach. A dry smile cracked his lips. The heat was getting to him.

He let go of the rope. Despite its emptiness, the bucket dropped with the weight of the world. It plummeted and struck the dark bottom with a smack. Instead of echoing, the sound was swallowed by the stone walls, depriving Luke of satisfaction.

With a resigned sigh, the young man bent down and picked up the metal pail he had brought with him to haul back water. He turned and followed his tracks back to town. The empty bucket bounced against his leg, the dull clanking keeping in time with his footsteps.

As he left the empty well behind, he looked up. Even though it was still early morning, the sun was already a burning void in the endless blue sky. He couldn't even remember the last time he had seen a cloud, much less when it had rained. The papers said that this was the worst drought the region had experienced in fifty years. But he wouldn't be surprised if the whole world dried up because of it.

Luke looked forward again as he wiped the sweat from his brow. Far in the distance, he could see the town blurring before him like a mirage. As he got closer, a heavy load settled on his shoulders and the back of his neck, as if phantom water filled his bucket to the brim. Luke rubbed his stiff neck with his free hand, trying to free up the pressure. It didn't help. He gave up, his arm falling limp to his side.

He was tired; tired of the heat, of the half-empty town, of the grit in his throat and the old man pangs that wracked his youthful body. Luke wished that the sun would burn him until he became one with his shadow, just so he could leave everything behind. At least then he could get away from the heat that way.

As the loose dirt transitioned into the unpaved earth of the town's main street, Luke kept his focus straight ahead, not looking at the whitewashed buildings around him. He walked in the middle of the road without fear of being a nuisance. Those few who did have cars or horses had long since left. The ones who were tethered to the town remained in their homes, doors shut and curtains drawn. They did not go outside anymore. In this town of bone and dust, Luke was the only one who walked the streets.

Ahead of him, standing as prominent as a country church, was the House. It was a great building modeled after the mansions in the East, built during a fever dream of Manifest Destiny. Though it used to belong to one man, the House now served as a refuge for those most affected by the well water shortage.

As he entered the House, the shadows of the entrance hall closed around him, providing relief from the oppressive heat. A nurse in white sat behind a massive wooden desk, her head lowered. A crinkled newspaper was pinned beneath her elbow, occupying her attention. When Luke approached the desk, she acknowledged his presence with an upward flick of her eyes.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

The nurse lifted her head. “It’s been a rough day,” she said. With a sigh, she pushed the paper away. The headline DROUGHT AND DUST STORMS RAVAGE KANSAS screamed up at Luke. “We’re nigh tapped out of emergency well water. We’ve been mixing what we have left with regular water, but the patients are complaining. They say it don’t taste right.” She rubbed the bags beneath her eyes, sighing again. “They know something is wrong. We tried to keep things a secret, but they *know*.” The nurse pressed her lips into a thin line, lifting her eyes. Gray as they were, there was a faint glimmer. “Was there... Was there *anything* out there?”

Luke shook his head. “I checked the farthest well today,” he said. “But it was dry.”

The nurse closed her eyes. “Lord have mercy,” she murmured. She rested her forehead against her hand, as if her head had suddenly gone heavy. “I don’t know what we’re going to do if we run out,” she admitted.

The two were silent for a few moments. Any comfort they could have offered to each other would have been cheap, especially now.

“You ever think about leaving?” the nurse suddenly asked.

Luke didn’t answer. Instead, his gaze was drawn to the ornate staircase behind the desk.

The nurse nodded, understanding his silence. “Of course. Alice is all you got, isn’t she?”

He looked back at the nurse. “How is she?” he asked.

The nurse shrugged. “Her violent tendencies have passed, for the most part,” she said. “But she’s holed up in her room. I’ve tried to talk to her, but you know how she is.”

“I’ll go see her,” he said. “She’ll talk to me.”

The nurse waved her hand, dismissing him. “Do what you want. Just be careful.”

Nodding, the young man walked past her desk and climbed the massive staircase. As he climbed, he began to hear the scratching of pens, the slap of brushes against canvas, lilting voices, tapping of feet; hundreds of sounds of art being born. As of late, however, these sounds were punctured by sobs, shrieks, and thuds, mimicking a record of an insane asylum. But none of the patients were suffering from mental illnesses. It was withdrawal.

The top floor was the worst. Here, there were no sounds of creation; just misery. He went to the last room at the end of hall. The door was shut.

“Alice? Are you there?” He rapped the door with the back of his hand. The door creaked open on the third knock. Luke raised a puzzled eyebrow and peeked inside.

The room was as dark as the bottom of the dry well. Though there was some light coming from the hallway and outlining the curtained window, most of the room was pitch black.

“Alice?” he called. “Where are you?” As he entered the room, he heard a rustle. Luke looked down, seeing a crumpled piece of paper beneath his foot. He bent down and picked up the scrap. Words crawled across every available inch, barely giving enough space between the lines. However,

the letters were so scrunched that he could not read them, not even when he squinted.

“Shut the door,” a voice moaned from the corner of the room.

Luke looked up. “I was only trying to read what you wrote, Alice,” he said. His voice mellowed into a gentle manner; a big brother’s voice. “Why are you sitting in the dark, anyway? Doesn’t it make it hard to write?”

“The light hurts my eyes,” Alice whined. “I don’t like it.”

“You need some light, Alice,” he said. “It’s bad enough that you won’t leave your room. Everyone is worried about you.”

There was a quiet whimper.

Luke sighed. “Alright, I’ll bargain with you. If you let me open the curtains a little bit, I’ll go into town and buy the fancy paper you like.” He smiled. “What do you think? Deal?”

“And some pens?” Alice asked, her voice small.

“The best they have.”

“...Okay.”

Luke went over to the window. After setting his bucket down, he opened the curtains a few inches, letting in a few chinks of light. When he turned to look at the room, his eyes widened.

Writing covered every possible surface of the room: the walls, the floorboards, and the small desk in the corner. Some of the writing was in ink, while others looked like they were carved into the wood itself. There were layers upon layers of it, making the words indiscernible.

Luke paled. He rushed over to the door and pushed it closed. When his hands left the surface of the wood, ink seeped into the lines of his palm.

“I couldn’t help it.”

Luke turned his head. His little sister was crouched in the corner, surrounded by torn leaves of paper. She clutched fistfuls of long, dark curls, as if she were ready to rip them out. The rest of her hair hung in a thick curtain in front of her face. Her thin adolescent body rocked back and forth, the back of her head hitting the wall with rhythmic knocks. Ink completely covered her hands up to the wrists, making it look like she was wearing black gloves.

“I can’t stop, Luke,” she whimpered. Her upper body doubled over, as if trying to fold into herself. “The ideas won’t stop. Even if I write a story down, three more pop into my head. I can’t get all of them down.”

Luke walked over to her, bending down on one knee. He offered his hand to her. “May I?”

Alice stopped rocking. Then, slowly, she nodded.

Luke reached up and took one of her hands, untangling her soiled fingers from the curls. As he did, he brushed her dark hair away, revealing her round face and wide brown eyes.

“Do they hurt?” he asked.

She shook her head.

Luke looked down at her fingers. The skin on each fingertip was peeked back and oozing drops of blood. While the fingers hadn’t been worn down to the bone, they were raw and tender.

“Alice...” he sighed, his eyebrows knitting together.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured. Her bottom lip trembled. “I ran out of pens. I kept breaking them.”

Luke shook his head. “It’s fine,” he said. “I should have known you need more supplies.” He gave a weak chuckle. “You’ll have to forgive your foolish brother.”

He took a handkerchief from his pocket and tore it into small strips. He started with Alice’s

thumb, wrapping the cloth with a practiced hand. “What were you writing?” he asked, nodding to the papers on the floor.

“The story of the town,” she said. “Thinking about it makes my head quiet.” She took her other hand off her head and laid it on the floor. She then lifted her head, staring at her brother with watery eyes. “I can’t get it right, though.”

“Well, tell it to me,” he said, tying off a neat little knot of the makeshift bandage. Luke gave her an encouraging smile. “Maybe I can help.”

Alice gave a shaking nod before closing her eyes. Her fingers twitched, as if seeking a ghost pen.

“There once was a great man,” she began. Though her voice was initially shaky, it settled down to an even lilt. “Though he was a rich man, he was very kind. He wanted to escape the evils of the East and set up a new town; a town where man could trust his neighbor and could breathe in the pure air. So, the rich man set off with thirty others to the West, leading a great caravan.

“Not just any land would do. No, sir. The land had to be just as pure as the rich man’s intentions. Even when the group reached the wide belly of the country, they continued onward, stopping each night and moving on the next morning. There were good bits of land, but there had to be something more.

“One morning, the rich man scouted out ahead alone. He came upon a flowing stream in the middle of a vast green plain. The early morning sunshine reflected off the water, making it sparkle like a bed of diamonds. The rich man bent down to drink. It was so clear that he could see his reflection. But it wasn’t truly his face. He saw not himself but a mirror-self, a better self. Curious, the rich man tipped up his hands and drank his reflection.”

Alice paused. Her small pink tongue darted out between her cracked lips like a blind snake’s.

Luke stopped binding her fingers and looked up at his sister. “What did the rich man taste?” he asked. Though he knew the town’s story as much as his own, he had to get her back on track.

Alice’s tongue retreated back into her mouth. “Well...the rich man wasn’t sure how to describe it. He later said that it felt like tasting something that no one else had ever touched before; something brand new. As soon as the cool water was down his throat, he knew that this was the place.

“He returned to his party and brought them to the spot. Everyone drank the water and wept at its taste. They rested their weary load and began making plans for the new town. It didn’t take long for them to come up with a name: Eden.

“That place was truly like the lost garden of God. The plains were green as paradise and the air was pure. The animals the hunters brought back tasted better than any other game, giving them the energy to begin building the town. Within a few months, they had built a small, thriving community. The rich man built the biggest house at the end of Main Street so he could see everything that happened.

“For a long time, Eden was prosperous. The rich man, who was elected the first mayor, discovered underground springs that contained even more of the water. He ordered the men of the town to dig wells around the town so that everyone would have enough water as they pleased. The wells flowed, and the people were happy.

“However, a year after the town was born, something strange began to happen in Eden.

“The mayor, the first one who drank the water, began to act in a most peculiar manner. One night, he locked himself up in his great house and refused to come out for days. Because he was a

social man, every citizen of the town became worried. A crowd gathered outside his great house from dawn until moonset, watching the mayor's shadow flutter from window to window."

Alice's free hand grasped at the scraps of paper at her side. The pages rubbed together, whispering.

"When the mayor emerged from his house, a journal was clutched in his hands. His clothes, which always came from the most expensive shops in the country, were wrinkled and stained. His hands were completely covered in black and blue ink, as if he had just murdered a book. His gait was as stiff as a sleepwalker's, but his eyes were clear and flowing with tears.

"'This place truly is paradise,' the rich man said. 'We have been given fertile land. We've been given clean air. We have even been given the gift of Inspiration...'"

Alice began to smile. "The people of the town read his words. Although the man's words were scribbled and untidy, they were beautiful, powerful words. But they told of strange stories, unlike anything anyone had ever heard or read before. Although the mayor's first story is now lost, it was the first work the waters of Inspiration produced.

"It wasn't long until the other members of town began to feel the same effects. Those who had settled the town were the first to be seized by the water's malady. They would hide away in their houses for days or weeks at a time. When their ailment passed, the afflicted would emerge, holding onto their work of art like it was their firstborn child. Everyone reacted differently, however. Some only had one such incident, while others lapsed into creative bursts like clockwork."

Alice's hands began trembling. Her fingers knocked against her brother's, as if trying to break free of his grasp.

"The people of the town soon began to realize that it was something in the water that made them this way. They all gathered in the mayor's house on Main Street, trying to decide what to do with their discovery. Some townspeople wanted to bottle it and sell it to desperate artists back East, while others wanted to plug up the wells. They said that the water was unnatural, and that it was not right to drink it. The bickering went on deep into the night, while the rich mayor remained silent.

"Finally, when everyone had said their piece, the mayor stood up. 'We'll seal the town,' he said. 'What we have been given is God's precious gift. It cannot be sold or abandoned. Those of you who wish to leave can do so. But I will remain here with the Inspiration.'"

Luke raised his eyebrows. "Alice, are you sure that's right?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. The tremors in her hands increased. "The townspeople built a huge wall to keep outsiders away. Some say that the world outside Eden came to an end, while life inside was preserved. The Inspiration continued, even as everything else burned."

Luke grabbed onto both of her hands. Her fingers still trembled, fluttering against his palm like a little bird. "Alice, that isn't what happened," he insisted. "The mayor never said any of those things. When no one could decide what to do, he wandered away and never came back. That's why the House exists. The town didn't know what to do with the place so they gave it to those who needed a quiet place to work when they were Inspired."

Her eyes reopened. A strange murkiness glazed her eyes. "Oh, Luke." She shook her head, the curls brushing against her pale face. "You don't understand. That's the story they tell to people who can't create. You haven't seen like I have." She gave a small smile. "I can see how it's meant to be. Isn't that what artists do? Show the truth that they see?" Her enraptured smile soured at the edges, turning into a Cheshire sneer. "Or to show how it should be?"

"You need to rest," Luke said. "I'll call the nurse. Maybe they can give you some medicine

and—”

The girl growled and ripped her hands away from Luke’s grip. “I don’t need any medicine! I need more water! That’s the only thing that can help me focus!” Hurt tears pierced through her fixed stare. “You promised you would get more.”

Luke pressed his lips into a harsh line. He looked down at the floor, as if there was an answer hidden underneath Alice’s mangled stories.

He couldn’t lie to her anymore.

“There isn’t any more well water,” he said. “There hasn’t been for a very long time.”

She blinked. “What?”

Luke stood up, walking to the window once more. He stooped down and grabbed the bucket. He then went back to Alice, showing her the bucket’s emptiness. “Everything has dried up, Alice,” he said. “All of the wells have run out of water. Even the emergency reserves are running low. The nurses are trying to give everyone just enough to get by, but it won’t last forever. Once the water runs out...” He ran his tongue over his lips, feeling every crack and tear. “Then the Inspiration will end.”

The girl stared at him. Then, very slowly, she began to shake her head. “No,” she whimpered. “No, no, no—” She repeated the word like a prayer, rocking her body back and forth. “No, no, no, nooooo.” She extended the last vowel into a wail. Soon, the word morphed into a garbled mess of tears and moans. As she sobbed, Alice began slamming the back of her head into the wall.

Luke dropped the bucket and grabbed her shoulders. She screamed, thrashing in his grip. He put his hand on the back of her head and pulled her into his shoulder. As he held her, the screeches tapered off into mad rambling.

“The Butterfly Girl comes when you are sleeping,” she mumbled. “When she opens her mouth, butterflies come out, foretelling your future in their wings— The Lonely Hearts seek each other out, trying to find peace in the abyss of isolation. But no one can truly save the lonely from the darkness— Once upon a time, Death was a child. But Death has grown far too jaded these days—” Each story started with a gasp and a shudder that ran through her frail body. The new stories rushed out of her mouth, colliding into each other in a mish-mash of words. Luke just held her, listening to her rambling.

Alice let out another cry. “Why? Why is this happening?” She looked up at her brother, her eyes desperate for an answer.

“I don’t know,” Luke said. “I don’t know.”

But she couldn’t hear him. When he looked at her, her eyes were blank, lost among stories.

Homicidal Faeries

Grace Gorski

He said, "Let me teach you how to drown."

Never trust the boys with the golden skin
and the golden hair and golden eyes
who rise from the water in the afternoons
of early September, right before summer turns to autumn.

Don't trust their hands and the seaweed that hangs off
like the hangnail you're trying desperately not to chew
as you contemplate how certain death is if you follow Golden Boy.

She said, "You haven't tasted real food yet."

If it's only one bite that the girl with the Disney-princess hair
offers you, remember that Persephone changed her fate with six seeds,
and it is almost certain that fairy cake contains more magic
than six seeds. See if she can bear to touch the knife;
eschew stainless steel. Only iron can save your life in the end.

And as you think, also remember that relying on faerie food
offers a better fate than sleeping wrapped in seaweed,
providing a midnight snack to fish bolstered by glamour.

I said, "Careful, careful, careful."

You must have felt so smart for evading the kelpie-boy
and the pixie-girl-for taking swimming lessons and keeping
your own apple in your pocket. And I'm just the plain one.
No one suspects the guide, the teacher, the one
with the tips and tricks and insider information.
You never thought I would be your end.

You said, "Goodnight."

Bacon Beast

J.D. Donnelly

Ever since I was little, sweet, glorious, sizzling bacon was the staple of Saturday mornings. Brand didn't matter, but only *real* bacon would do—my grandma considered it a sin worthy of confession if turkey or tofu touched the table.

I could be anywhere, and the smell of those cooking strips of meat would take me back home. Saturday morning bacon binges had held back the homesickness at school. Now those tender strips lifted my spirits as I settled into my first apartment. It was just a tiny first-floor place I was renting for cheap from my undergraduate Chem teacher's elderly aunt. The promise of Saturday morning bacon had gotten me out of bed to face the dismal job market the past week. Though most of my crap still sat in cardboard boxes netted in tie-dye duct tape, I had scrounged around to bust out my frying pan. Saturday was Saturday, no matter what was going on in my life.

When I pulled the first five pieces out of the pan to dab the grease on a paper towel, the sizzling pan hushed.

Scratch-scratch

I glanced at the basement door adjacent to the kitchenette. It sounded like when Dane's—my stoner freshman roommate, and reason number one I now enjoyed this apartment to myself—cat would claw at the door to be let out and piss on the campus irises; the stupid claw marks it left cost us the security deposit. The landlady hadn't specified no pets in the lease, but I guess she had a cat or two—stereotype of the old cat lady and all that. The litter box was probably in the basement, which I hadn't had a chance to check out yet. I turned my back to add another five slices to the pan for round two.

Scratch-scratch

I turned around again when something shuffled behind the closed door, just in time to see a sheet of paper flutter out from underneath. I stared at the lined notebook paper sliding across the tile towards my feet. Written in the most god-awful handwriting I had ever seen was:

Bacon Please?

I looked up at the door. "Yo, who's there?"

Another shuffle, then silence. I walked over and jiggled the handle. The door was not only *locked*, but a fresh coat of white paint had sealed it to the frame from the kitchen side. I had seen signs that the landlady had repainted recently, but I couldn't tell if this was a poor-ass paintjob or a quick seal. Though the paint reeked of chemical newness, some kind of swampy, moldy smell seeped from under the door. Another shuffle on the basement side of the door and another piece of notebook paper nudged my toes:

Bacon Oonder Door Please?

Slowly backing up, I wrapped up the cooked bacon in the paper towel. I set the bacon down on the tile, just a hair from the dark crack under the door. I got just far enough back when three spindly, hairy, *clawed* fingers poked out, latched onto the paper towel, and dragged it under. The door muffled the sounds of gnashing teeth and grunting.

I stood there a while, staring at the door, wondering where the hell in the lease this was covered. Just as I was about to head upstairs to show the notes to the landlady and ask her what relative she had locked in the basement, a cookie—one of those puffy sugar cookies with thick pink frosting and purple sprinkles—slid out from under the door. Then another one, and another, until five of them appeared like air hockey pucks.

Another shuffle and a new notebook page appeared amidst the nest of cookies;

Thankee

I picked up the cookies and sheets of notebook paper and put them on the counter for later. I dumped the bacon that had burned in the frying pan and put the rest of the pack on to cook; a mile-high BLT sounded phenomenal right now. Whatever was chilling in the basement thumped like a wagging puppy as the sizzling smell filled the kitchenette again.

Saturdays are Saturdays, no matter *what* was going on in my life.



“Yeah, I've had to put in a lot more hours lately.
The Missus and I are expecting seven more.”

Kyri Lorenz

Apocalypse

Taylor Walker

The surface of the Earth, Aren discovered, was suspiciously spongy. He had spent ten years training for this day, and he thought he would have been prepared. He had memorized the trails and menu of the device that offered both transport and delicious sustenance—how did people ever get lost in those subways?—and knew how to predict the terrestrial climate fluctuations. He'd studied Earthenian Anthropology and knew that politeness was key to mission success. He had even spent a full year researching popular clothing styles, and learned that the native creatures used pigments to alter their appearance. For his mission Aren had personally selected some flattering jewel-tones in accordance with contemporary fashion laws. And yet—none of his professors had warned him that Earth, the blue, soaked planet from millennia ago, would feel so... well, wet.

He adjusted his suit-module. In a flash of pale lavender and vaguely pineapple-scented smoke, the polyurethane fabric of his thirty-first century garb melded seamlessly into the style of the time; that is, a smart black business suit with a crisp, freshly-pressed white-cotton shirt. Aren smiled—a muscular distortion which apparently indicated pleasure on that planet—and moved quickly down Broadway, hardly needing to look at the street. He had it all memorized; it was New York Navigation 101, real first-year stuff.

He pushed open the wall portal (the indigenous beings, called Adams, referred to these portals as doors) and in no time at all, he was inside the newspaper room for the *New Yorker*. Aren activated his telesensor and initiated a routine sweep. He began speaking to secretary Tracy Morano, age 36, widow, mother of three, living at 412 Maple Street, New Jersey, severely allergic to avocado and cat hair, currently thinking of Jake Gyllenhaal's abs. As for that last fact, Aren supposed abdominal muscles as firm as flesh in rigor was “attractive.” He announced in a steady, even tone: “I request audience with High Priest Editor Tim Wagner.”

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To put it plainly, she was prepared for this. Tracy raised both eyebrows and, taking in the man's emerald green complexion and the fact that he was holding what looked to be a child's water gun, pressed the silent alarm button under her desk. She replied, “Please sit... Mr. Wagner will be with you shortly.”

Several minutes later, three fine members of the Manhattan Police Department entered the room and proceeded to drag the handcuffed Aren away, kicking and screaming.

“But the comet! The comet is going to hit the Brooklyn Bridge tomorrow at high sun!”

Timothy Wagner, editor-in-chief of the *New Yorker*, entered the waiting room once Aren had left. He was holding a cup of coffee and chuckling. “Another false prophet, eh, Trace?”

“Yeah,” she replied. “All these apocalypse guys are a dime-a-dozen.”

Tracy looked past her desk to see the strange, green man flailing his body like a psychopath. The racket he was making was audible through the glass windows. He was wailing at the top of his voice: "I was sent here from the year 3015 to prevent the end of your species! BELIEVE ME!"

One policeman deployed his taser, and that was the end of that.

Wendy Bird

Grace Gorski

There was a time, my children,
when I was young. Still I think upon my time
sailing over the Never-Sea
and dancing with fairies.

I often tell this story:
a boy who never grows up,
devilish and heartless,
who flies with fairies
beyond the Never-Moon
and fights pirates with steely wit.
I tell of my childhood, of that terrifying flight beyond the stars.

What I omit is a different story:
a girl who escaped her past,
sailed the seas, let silky
tiger lilies tickle her skin,
their scent woven in her hair.

If I say I dream of lips,
you assume they're his.
Everyone forgets the other girl,
with skin like cinnamon
and hair smooth as butter.

I often wonder if she's grown up,
and if she still thinks of me.

Hooded Justice

Michelle Mangano

Wolf hated the cold. It didn't matter which form he was in. Lupine or man, thick coat of fur or expensive winter coat, the winter chill cut through all the same.

But tonight, the cold was his friend. The freezing air had numbed his broken body to the point where he could barely feel the pain anymore. That is, except when he breathed. Whenever he tried, a new wave of agony surged up his chest, reminding him of the broken ribs. And from the strange leaking sensation he felt in his lower abdomen, there might be some internal bleeding.

As he slowly drifted back to consciousness, Wolf tried to piece together had happened or where he was. All he could figure out was that he was lying in something clammy and cold. It had the consistency of thick wet mud, though it lacked the earthy smell. Patches of it stuck to his fur, gluing the individual hairs together.

"Wake up, dog," a harsh voice ordered. While the voice was as coarse as a street punk's, it was too high-pitched to be an adult's. Either Wolf had been jumped by the most effeminate man in the Kingdom, or he was at the tender mercies of a woman.

His eyes slowly cracked open, breaking through the caked blood that had flowed from a cut on his forehead. His vision, still swimmy from the crack to the head he had taken, took a few moments to clear. As his eyesight returned, all he could really see of his captor was their pair of scarlet boots. Even so, that was enough to tell him who they belonged to.

Wolf sneered. "A bullet to the back of the head would have been easier, dontcha think?" He let out a wheezing chuckle through his broken teeth.

His captor let out a guttural snarl. One of those boots lashed out, kicking him hard in the stomach. Hot blood coursed up his throat. Wolf's mangled body convulsed as he vomited, churning the substance between him. When the thrashes settled into mere shiver, he laid back in the fresh mixture of gore and gray. It was only then that he realized he was lying in a patch of wet cement.

A small yet strong hand seized the nape of his neck. Wolf yelped as his head was tugged upward. It was only when his face was forcibly turned that he saw the furious face of his captor: the Red Maiden.

The blurred black and white pictures circulated in *The Kingdom Chronicle* did not do the vigilante justice. They failed to capture the vividness of her crimson cloak and matching domino mask, nor the determination burning in her brown eyes. Her trademark hood was down, allowing Wolf to see her face (relatively) clearly. Though her eyes had the same hard glint Wolf saw in many of the seedier residents of the Kingdom, her unlined face betrayed her youth.

"You look taller in the papers, kid," Wolf remarked, smirking. "How old are you, twelve?"

Just as he finished his quip, the Red Maiden grabbed his muzzle with her free hand, clamping his mouth shut. Wolf tasted more blood as he accidentally bit his tongue. "You won't speak unless I give you permission, you mongrel," the vigilante snapped, baring her clean white teeth. "No jokes. No back-talk. And no lies." Both hands tightened on his fur, digging in. "Am I clear?"

Wolf winced. "Crystal," he muttered.

She let go of him, causing his head to fall back into the bloodstained cement. "Filthy

criminal,” she spat. She then turned away from him, her cloak billowing out behind her.

A weak snicker wracked his body. “So you’re the one who jumped me behind the Blue Fairy Club? It was kinda hard to see in the dark.” His yellow eyes swiveled around, trying to see where he was. From his vantage point, all he could see was a crumbling tenement towering above him. All of the windows were dark and many of them broken, implying that it had been abandoned. Probably in line for demolition, hence the fresh cement. Otherwise, there were no other identifiable landmarks or street signs.

He bit his lip. Damn. The kid really got him good.

The Red Maiden turned back to him. “Nah,” she said. She jerked a gloved thumb over her shoulder. “Huntsman was the one who pummeled you.”

Wolf followed her gesture. Leaning against the apartment building a few yards away was a young man dressed in dull green jerkin, brown leggings, and a dark green cloak. A hatchet hung loosely in his hand while a hood masked his face in shadows. The Huntsman was looking away, his lips pressed together into a hard, disapproving line.

“Of course not,” Wolf said, his lips curling into his trademark leer. “Wouldn’t want the beloved citizens of the Kingdom to think that their little champion for justice would beat up poor, defenseless little shifters between tripping purse snatchers?”

Red snorted. “Please. You’re far from poor or defenseless.” She knelt down, an impish sneer on her face. “Or maybe you’re just all hype. I got you where I wanted you, didn’t I?”

The grin on Wolf’s face melted away, his yellow eyes narrowing into a glare. “Don’t think you won’t pay for this, you little brat,” he growled. “I know people who will rip you apart and scatter you all over town.”

“Like who?” she asked. “Baba Yaga?” She extended her thumb. “Mother Goose?” Her pointer finger joined the thumb. Both then retracted back into a tight fist. “Sorry, Wolf, but times are changing. Baba Yaga was deported back to Mother Russia with her mortar and pestle this morning. And Mother Goose is cooking up river in the Dungeon. By the time we’re finished, not even dirty mutts like you will be able to find work in the Kingdom.”

Wolf licked his chops. “So why go after me?” he asked. “I thought you vigilante types only went after big fish. The hell did I ever do to you?”

The lonely wail of a siren broke through the conversation, echoing off the empty apartment building. The Red Maiden looked towards the sound, her tongue clicking with dissatisfaction. “Not now,” she muttered.

It was then that the Huntsman spoke up from his post. “Hurry this up, Red,” he said. “We don’t want any Knights on our asses.” He swung the hatchet back and forth with nervous energy. It reminded the shifter of a pendulum.

Wolf let out another bark of laughter. “Even you do-gooders are afraid of the Kingdom’s finest? Not exactly intimidating, little Red.”

The vigilante did not reply. Instead, she slipped her hand to her utility belt, pulling out a long knife. Grabbing his head again, she lifted it up, exposing his throat. The moonlight glimmered on the blade, turning it white.

“I’ve got some questions I need you to answer,” she hissed in his ear.

“What do you need to know?” Wolf asked. Considering the situation, his voice was calm, as if she had just asked for directions to the park.

“You killed an old woman in Old Towne last spring,” she said. “Why?”

“You’re going to have to be a little more specific than that, my dear.” Wolf smirked. “I’ve done a lot of work in Old Towne. Let’s just say that criminals like to hide in the pretty village woodwork, if you know what I mean.”

“She wasn’t a criminal!” Red yelled in his ear, causing him to wince. “She was an innocent old woman who never did anything to anyone!” As she leaned even closer, her voice dropped back into a gritty snarl. “You killed her on May Day.”

The lupine’s lips curled into a smarmy grin. “Ahhhh, now I remember,” he cooed. “Lace curtains in the window? Little china cups in the cabinet?” His voice dropped into a low croon. “A picture of a cute girl with big brown eyes?”

The Red Maiden was silent. Her grip just stiffened on his fur.

Wolf jeered at the vigilante. “Sure, I killed her. I took some of her dinky trinkets. But I’m afraid you’re out of the loop, little Red. She wasn’t the sweet old lady you thought she was.”

Red Maiden tried to keep her expression neutral, but Wolf saw her eyes widen behind her mask. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“The old lady was dirty, just like the rest of the bosses in this rotten town,” Wolf said. “She controlled the largest chunk of territory in the Kingdom before she kicked it. Hell, she had her finger in every illicit pie from Gothel Tower to Gingerbread Lane. Nasty liar, too.” The Wolf’s sneer turned into a broken grimace. “She stiffed me and sent Jack the Giant Killer to take me out after a big job. But I showed her.” He gave another bloody grin. “I showed them both in the end.”

Wolf knew that he got her. Red Maiden’s face paled. “No,” she murmured. “You’re lying.”

The lupine’s mocking grin returned. “The hag’s jewelry was more than enough for the money she owed me. But the killing? I would have done in that old bitch for free even before she screwed me. Between business, she would go on and on about her damn granddaughter. Working for her was getting old fast, even for the money she was paying me.” He licked his teeth, tasting his own blood. “Wish you could have heard her sniveling. She kept on crying how she was the only one her granddaughter had. It was so pathetic.”

The shock in Red Maiden’s eyes flared. With an animalistic growl, she pressed the knife closer to Wolf’s neck. A warm trickle of blood sullied the blade.

Within moments, the Huntsman was at his partner’s side. He grabbed her arm, preventing her from striking the fatal blow. “Red—” he cautioned.

“Don’t stop me,” she said. Her voice was as cold as the stained cement. “I’m giving this son of a bitch what he deserves.” She shot the Huntsman a fierce glare. “We’re partners, Huntsman, but that does not mean I won’t hurt you if you try to stop me. Let go of me before you lose your hand.”

The Huntsman narrowed his eyes before sighing. “Fine.” He released her arm and took a step back, folding his arms across his chest.

With Red’s focus still on the Huntsman, Wolf took his chance. Letting out a ferocious growl, he twisted his head and tried to take a snap at her exposed arm.

“Head’s up!” Huntsman yelled.

She didn’t need the warning. The Red Maiden instantly let go of the lupine’s head. Wolf’s fangs missed her arm, his teeth barely grazing her. Without a word, she readjusted her grip on the blade and plunged it into his eye. Wolf gave a surprised and pained yelp, reeling back. But the Red Maiden didn’t hesitate. She grabbed onto Wolf’s neck, keeping him still as she pushed the knife deeper within his head. Wolf whimpered, his mouth trying to form words. But any pleas for mercy died in his throat when he saw the hatred blazing in her eyes. Even when his vision blurred and

finally went back, he could still feel the fire.

The Red Maiden stood up once Wolf's body had stopped twitching. Putting her boot against the lupine's chest, she tugged out her knife. Wolf's limp body dropped back to the cement with a wet slap. She took out a scrap of cloth from her cloak and casually wiped the blood from the blade.

The Huntsman watched her. "You alright?" he asked.

"Fine," she replied. Her voice, so full of fury before, was quiet, as if the killing had taken away its edge. "Got sloppy, though," she muttered. "Bastard almost bit me." She dropped the bloodstained cloth, allowing it to flutter into the churned cement. "The Lost Boys are going to do clean-up in a few minutes," she continued, turning away to sheath her knife. "They'll dump his body in the Black Forest Park and make it look like a mob hit. The Knights won't suspect a thing." She gave a disdainful snort. "Not like they would waste too much effort on trash like him."

"I don't care about that," he said. "Red, are you sure you're -?"

Red shot him another glare. "Quit mother-henning me, Huntsman. I told you, I'm fine."

Huntsman shook his head. "This wasn't like you, Red. This wasn't..." He trailed off, biting his lip.

She took a step towards him. "What?" she asked in a hard voice. "This wasn't what?"

"This wasn't part of the plan," he said in a much quieter voice. "It's not what we do."

"It isn't?" Red scoffed. "We just took a dangerous criminal off the street. Last time I checked, that's exactly what we do." A dark smile came to her face. "And where he's going, he's not going to be back in two weeks because a judge was paid off."

"We beat a shifter nearly to death," Huntsman said. "Last time I checked, we just dropped criminals off for the Knights to pick up."

Red scowled. "First off, you're the one who beat him to a pulp. You didn't seem to have a problem with that."

Huntsman frowned. "That's not what I meant. You never told me that you were going to kill him."

The Red Maiden was silent.

"I could have helped you," he continued.

"With what?" she asked. "Convincing me to not do it?"

Huntsman shook his head. "I just wanted to make sure you didn't feel regret."

The Red Maiden looked over at him. She then let out dark chuckle. "You don't have to worry about me, Huntsman. I'm just grand. Why wouldn't I be?" She pointed at Wolf's corpse. "I just made sure that he will never ruin anyone else's life ever again. No one else will have to come home to find their loved ones bleeding out. No one will ever have to spend another sleepless night knowing that he is out there, doing whatever he wants because the law won't touch him. No one—"

Her voice broke off. She lowered her arm, letting her hand loosen at her side. For a long moment, she just looked at the body, completely silent. She then shook her head. "I'm not going to waste any sleep over what I did, especially not over that mangy dog. You can be assured of that." With an attempt at swagger, she spat at the lupine's corpse. "This was better than he deserved. If I had let any of the other bosses take him out, they would have made him suffer. At least I made it quick."

Huntsman stared at her for a moment longer. He then tilted his head at the wolf's corpse. "Do you think he was telling the truth?" he asked. "About your grandmother?"

The Red Maiden continued to glare at Wolf's body, as if it could tell her the truth. She then

shook her head. “Of course he wasn’t,” she said. “That scum would tell us any fairy tale if he thought it would benefit him. Maybe he thought he could take me off-guard. He did try to take a bite out of me.”

“Are you sure?” Huntsman asked. “You’re sure she didn’t—”

“You’re talking about the woman who raised me,” she said. “I would know if she was involved in anything dirty.”

There was a stretch of silence, save for the wind howling through the streets. Another siren rang off, but the two vigilantes didn’t acknowledge it.

“If you were afraid about what would happen to me when I killed Wolf,” Red finally said, “Why didn’t you try to stop me? You saw me go for his eye. You would have been fast enough.”

“I trusted your judgment,” he said. “It’s why I backed off when you told me to.” He took a step forward and put a hand on her shoulder. This time, she didn’t rebuff him. “Like you said, I’m your partner. I should trust you.” As Huntsman removed his hand, he lowered his eyes. “But I’m still worried about you.”

She blinked. “Why?”

“Killing people, even if they deserve it, isn’t easy. All lives have weight. Especially the bad ones.” Huntsman looked back up at her. “You just have to convince yourself that it was worth taking on the burden.”

There was another long stretch of silence. Then Huntsman smiled.

“Besides, you would have stabbed me in the kneecap if I had tried to interfere. I’d rather it have been him than me.”

Red sneered. She turned away from her partner, taking out a grappling hook from her utility belt. Firing the hook at a nearby building, The Red Maiden tugged on the rope, making sure it was secure. “C’mon. We have work to do.” With a flutter of crimson, she was in the air, heading towards the nearest rooftop.

The Huntsman lingered for a moment, staring at the body of Wolf. He lowered his head. “I’m sorry,” he muttered. Turning back to the rooftops, he sheathed his hatchet and took out his grapple hook, firing it towards the closest building. When the line went taut, he followed his partner into the night sky.



Dragon's Gate
J.D. Donnelly

Mother's Love

Hadley James

The birthing hut stank of sweat and blood on the night of Dua's birth. Low, heavy clouds crawled across the murky desert sky. Coyotes yipped on the cliff side and prowled the perimeter of the camp, drawn by the smell of blood and the pained cries of the birthing. No wind blew that night. Heat settled over the desert like a choking gas. The orcs of the village sat outside their tents, gripping spears, in case the coyotes decided to venture closer. No one could sleep. No one wanted to miss the birth of their chieftain, Asad's, next child.

Earlier that morning while picking cactus blossoms, Isra's water broke. She staggered back to camp with a basket half full of cactus flowers, sweating and clutching her swollen belly. The camp midwife took hold of her immediately, pulling her into the birthing tent. For nearly twenty hours now, she'd been in labor. Isra already had three grown sons – babies popped out of her like peas from a pod. She never squealed during birth. Squealing was for pigs. Even so, this child made Isra moan in agony. For twenty long hours, it refused to come out. Now, deep in the night, she was still groaning. The camp counted the minutes until the baby was born.

Finally, the moans from the tent faded. All around the camp, orcs perked up their ears. The camp's midwife, a tall, broad woman with black braided hair, emerged from the birthing tent. A small bundle rested in the crook of her arm. Slowly, the orcs crept closer to the midwife. The midwife, her dark eyes stern, looked into the faces of the crowd. "Brothers and sisters," she boomed, holding the baby aloft. "This night, Isra, mate of Asad, has given birth to a girl!"

The gathered orcs exchanged glances, then began to cheer. The roar of their voices rang out over the still desert, silencing even the coyotes. Grinning, the midwife nodded to the gathered assembly. "By Asad's word, her name shall be Dua and she shall bring much honor and glory to our tribe!" the midwife announced. "Asad be praised this night! All of you, get some rest! Tomorrow, we celebrate this birth!" All around, orcs clapped their hands. Soon enough, the crowd dispersed. The quiet hush of night descended once again over the village. Cradling the baby in her arm, the midwife ducked back inside the birthing tent.

Inside, Isra lay sprawled on the wool cot. Dark stains colored the blankets. Isra's chest heaved. Drops of sweat glittered on her forehead. She peered up at the midwife. "The baby..." Isra gasped, trying to sit up. Gently, the midwife pushed her back down, "Did she come out right? Is she healthy?"

"Born strong and healthy, like her brothers," the midwife reassured her, mopping the sweat off Isra's forehead. Strands of dark red hair stuck to the back of Isra's neck. Carefully, the midwife lowered the baby for Isra to see. The mother cracked a smile.

"She looks like me," Isra gasped, reaching out to take the baby. The baby let out a gurgling cry. Isra chuckled. "My eyes...and Asad's nose." Downy reddish hair covered the infant's head. Taking a wet cloth from the midwife, she wiped the child's face. The baby was a soft green color, like budding spring leaves. Tiny tusks, barely pinpricks, poked from her lower lip. Snot bubbled from her little pig nose. Isra grinned, holding the baby close to her breast.

“She'll be a fine child,” the midwife replied, taking the cloth from Isra and wringing it in a nearby bucket. “Asad will be pleased.”

“This one has a stubborn streak. Her brothers all popped out easily, but this one...” Isra let out a wheezy chuckle, stroking the baby's tiny face. “You put me through a lot of pain, lil' girl.”

“Stubborn is good. It'll make her into a strong warrior,” the midwife answered. “Should I call her papa to come see her?”

Isra shook her head. “He can see her tomorrow. I think we both need some rest.” Isra grinned down at the baby. “Isn't that right, Dua?” Gurgling, the baby nestled into her mother's chest. Smiling serenely, the mother rested back against her cot. The midwife nodded. Just as she rose to leave, however, three tall orc men burst through the tent flap, nearly knocking the midwife over in their haste to get to the cot. They crowded around Isra, staring wide eyed at the baby in her arms. Isra snarled and swatted them away. “Back off, you oafs! Back off!”

The three orc men retreated. “We heard the baby finally popped out, Mama,” the middle orc said.

Isra sighed, shifting herself to the edge of the bed. She smiled at her three sons. “Word travels fast, eh?” Isra beckoned Faraj – the middle son – a little closer. Ghassan and Isam, the eldest and youngest of the three, peered over their brother's shoulder. Grinning, Faraj knelt at his mother's side.

“Hey, lil' sister,” Faraj said, reaching down to brush the baby's face. “Her name is Dua, right?”

Ghassan sneered. “She's small.”

Isra glared at her oldest son. “All orcs are little when they're born. Orcs don't pop out full grown, you big idiot.”

“Bah, I know! I bet I was bigger than that when I was born,” Ghassan huffed. “Guess there be a runt in every litter.”

“Shut up. She's a child of Asad, same as us!” Isam snapped at his brother, “No child of Asad is gonna be a runt.” Isra smiled at Isam. Asad towered over all his people – the biggest orc in both height and muscle. Her three sons inherited their father's build. The tops of her sons' heads brushed the ceiling of the birthing tent. Thick, heavy muscles rippled on their arms and torsos. Dua would grow just as tall and wide as her older brothers.

“Come look, Isam. This be your sister.” Isra beckoned Isam closer. The youngest son took a few steps toward the bed. His expression softened as he looked at the child. Isam knelt down next to his mother. Grinning nervously, he opened his hands.

“Can I?” he asked. Gently, Isra passed him the infant. Isam held his sister delicately, as if handling something fragile. He cradled her for a moment before passing her back, “I've never held a baby before...”

“You and your brothers are almost old enough to take mates, so you better get used to holding babies,” Isra answered. “Your sister is small now, but she's going to grow big. Til she's strong enough to fight for herself, I want you to watch out for her.”

“Right!” Faraj answered forcefully. The baby let out a startled gurgle. Faraj drew back, lowering his voice. “She's my sister and she has my protection.”

“Mine too,” Isam added.

“I ain't gonna waste my time babysittin' a runt. If she's a true daughter of Asad, she can fend fer herself.” Ghassan snorted. Isra snarled at him.

“We are orcs and orcs watch out for their brothers and sisters,” Isra barked at her son. “If she dies, it’ll be on your heads.”

Ghassan sighed. “Fine.”

Isra smiled. “Give her time. She’ll grow into a strong warrior. She be Asad’s own kin.”

“There we go.” Isra lifted the coyote pelt and draped it over Dua’s head. Dua, five years old, peeked out from under the heavy pelt, grinning up at her mother. Tying the paws around her neck, Dua spun in a circle, the pelt flying out like a cape. Isra grinned. “Now you look like a true huntress!” Dua beamed, grunting with laughter. The young orc girl snatched up her bow and arrow and struck a heroic pose, pulling the bow string back as if to shoot. Isra clapped her hands.

“Can I go show Papa?” Dua asked, eagerly plucking at her bowstring. At only five years old, she nearly reached her mother’s chest in height. Her bright red eyes glowed like embers in her head, fierce and cheerful. Short strands of burgundy hair poked from beneath her pelt. “Can I?”

“We can go show Papa. He’ll be proud.” Isra smiled down at her daughter, ushering the eager child out of the tent. One week ago, while learning to hunt with her mother, Dua shot and killed her first coyote. The coyotes were a constant pest to the camp. The mangy creatures dug into the supply tents and killed chickens. Sometimes they even attacked orcs. Isra heard many stories of coyotes kidnapping and eating orc toddlers. That was why, as soon as Dua was strong enough to hold a bow, Isra started teaching her how to hunt. A young orc like Dua was a prime target for a hungry coyote. When Dua brought her the coyote’s corpse, Isra felt a swell of pride. Her first real kill – a kill she now wore over her head like a hood.

Outside, the sun blazed directly overhead. Dua dashed around in wide circles, sporting her coyote hood proudly in spite of the heat. Orcs paused to look at her, grinning and shaking their heads. As soon as Isra stepped out, Dua sprinted back to her side. Clutching her mother’s arm, she pulled her toward the large tent at the back of the camp. “You think Papa will take me with him next time he hunts?” Dua asked excitedly. Isra laughed.

“I think you’re still a lil’ too small for that, Dua,” Isra answered.

As they drew closer to the tent, the sound of moaning met their ears. Isra dug her heels into the sand. Dua paused, frowning up at her mother. Slowly, motioning for Dua to stay put, Isra approached the tent. Hovering outside the tent flap, she listened. Inside, she could hear the grunts of a male orc mixing with the soft growls of a female. Turning on her heel, she grabbed Dua’s wrist and pulled her away from the tent. Dua let out a loud squeal.

“Mama!” Dua cried, fighting against her mother’s grip. “I want to see Papa!”

“Papa...” Isra paused, “I mean, Asad is busy right now, Dua. We’ll show him your new pelt later.”

“Later? I want to show him now!” Dua stamped her feet in dirt, kicking up small dust clouds.

“He’s with one of his mates, Dua,” Isra explained.

Dua paused in her kicking, frowning at her mother. “That’s not true! You’re his mate.”

“He has many mates...including me,” Isra answered. Giving Dua’s arm a sharp tug,

Isra dragged her through the dust. "Don't ask questions when you're too young to know the answer."

Just as Isra finished, Asad's tent flap parted and a female orc with long black hair emerged. Her hair, though tangled from mating, gleamed like obsidian in the afternoon light. Her ample chest heaved with exertion and her dark eyes flashed like coins. Her body was soft and curvy, showing only the barest hints of muscle. Isra locked eyes with her. A slow, wicked smirk crossed the other female's face. Slowly, like a jungle cat on the hunt, she approached Isra.

"Isra," the female said in low, velvety voice.

"Aaliyah," Isra replied, nodding to the other female. Aaliyah let out a bitter chuckle, tossing her hair as she sauntered past. Isra's face twisted with disgust.

"That's Papa's mate?" Dua whispered, peering after Aaliyah.

Isra clenched her teeth. "Yes, that's Asad's new mate." Eyes narrowed, Isra glanced over her shoulder. The men in the camp all paused to watch as the smaller woman passed, entranced by the gentle undulation of her hips. "Don't look at her, Dua."

Dua stared up at her mother. "Why?"

"She's a weak woman. Don't look at her," Isra growled. "Never hunts, never works. Real orcs should have some damn muscle."

"Why does Papa mate with her, then?" Dua whispered.

"Your papa is a great man, but he's a man. And sometimes men don't always think with the right head." Isra shot a poisonous glance over her shoulder and slipped her arm protectively around Dua. Gently, she pushed the young orc back toward their tent. "You'll understand it when you're older."

"Do you see any you like, Dua?" Isra asked. Dua, eighteen, adjusted her coyote pelt. In the arena – which was not more than a circle in the dirt – orc men lined up to wrestle. Bristling with muscle, they sweated luminously in the heat. In the middle of the ring, two orc men slammed heads like angry bucks. They pushed against each other, arms locked around each other's shoulders. Dua stuck out her tongue. Isra laughed, clapping her daughter on the shoulder. "Well, that's all right. Girls like you don't need to pick mates."

"I get t' fight too, right, Mama?" Dua asked, looking toward her mother.

"Course you do, girl. We have to show these oafs just how strong Asad's daughter really is," Isra replied, shaking her daughter's shoulder. Dua grinned, pumping her fists in the air. Although she still wore the pelt of the coyote she'd killed at five, everything about her was different now. Orcs grew rapidly. She stood just as tall as Isra, even a few inches taller. Long, stringy red hair slipped out from beneath her hood, brushing her strong, broad shoulders. Everything about her body singled her out as a warrior. Small breasts and narrow hips marked her as an athlete, not a breeder. Her arm muscles rippled with every movement. A trio of pale yellow scars marred her face, the remains of a coyote attack some years ago. Dua shifted quickly from foot to foot, throwing quick punches at an imaginary opponent. The worn coyote pelt, ragged from years of wear, flopped against her back.

"Who'm I fightin'?" Dua asked. Her whole face lit up at the prospect of stepping into the arena. She glanced at the men gathered in the pit, eyes jumping from face to face. "It better be someone really strong!"

Isra glanced toward the lip of the arena. Asad sat on a great throne next to the arena. At his side in a smaller chair sat Aaliyah. A sour taste rose in Isra's mouth at the sight of her.

Aaliyah lounged luxuriantly in her chair, only pretending to watch the fighting. At her feet sat another young orc – Aaliyah’s son, Bilal. Bilal was just six years younger than Dua. At only twelve, though, he rivaled most of the adult men in size. Aaliyah bragged on him constantly. ‘Asad took Bilal on a hunt the other day.’ ‘Bilal’s even bigger than Ghassan. He’ll be the biggest orc in camp at this rate.’ A quiet child, Bilal rarely spoke for himself. He relied on his mother to regale the camp with tales of his escapades. Isra bit down hard on her bottom lip. She tasted blood.

Isra grabbed Dua by the shoulders and twisted her around, pointing her toward the throne. “There’s your opponent, girl. Your half-brother.”

“Bilal? Is he strong?”

“Aaliyah won’t shut up about him,” Isra answered. “She’s been saying he’s even stronger than Ghassan an’ Faraj. I’m not going to stand for that kind of talk.”

“Shouldn’t Ghassan or Faraj wrestle with him, then?” Dua asked.

Isra shook her head. “Ghassan and Faraj are too old now. Aaliyah would say it was an unfair fight.” Isra shook Dua’s shoulders again. “But you’re only six years older than Bilal. Six years isn’t much at all.”

“All right, I’ll challenge ‘im!” Dua announced, pounding her palm with her fist. Dua marched around the arena toward the throne and pointed down at Bilal. Aaliyah tensed in her chair, back going rigid. “Bilal, are you just goin’ to sit there? Get up and wrestle me!” Dua challenged, her voice bright with energy. Bilal said nothing, blinking at her sleepily. Slowly, brushing himself off, Bilal rose to his feet. He had a few inches on Dua, despite his younger age.

“All right,” Bilal replied simply, cracking his thick neck.

Aaliyah scrambled to her feet. “Bilal’s too young to wrestle with Dua,” she insisted, a sudden fervor in her bright eyes. “She’s too old for him.”

“Don’t joke! Just look at ‘im!” Dua replied, gesturing to Bilal. “He already agreed, so no turnin’ back! Unless you’re a coward!”

“Ain’t a coward,” Bilal answered. His voice was as deadpan as his expression. Isra stood a foot or so behind Dua. Surreptitiously, she glanced up at Asad. The orc father had barely moved during the challenge. Even so, Isra could see him watching the small altercation out of the corner of his eye. Bilal stared, sleepy eyed, down into the arena. Two orcs struggled in the ring. A dark green soldier ground his opponent’s face in the dirt, “We fight after this match.”

“I’m ready!” Dua agreed, nodding vigorously. Isra chuckled quietly. The fight ended quickly enough. The pinned orc couldn’t struggle free of his opponent, finally passing out. His compatriots dragged their unconscious friend from the arena. Cheers greeted the victor as he emerged, bruised but otherwise unhurt.

Isra stepped to the edge of the arena. “Clear out, the next match is Dua’s!” She called. The orcs in the arena grumbled, but moved as ordered. Grinning brilliantly, Dua leapt into the arena. She skidded on the sand, kicking up a large cloud of dust. Bilal followed, stepping in at the other side. He stretched, flexing his arms and legs. Dua hopped from foot to foot, glaring at her opponent with red-eyed intensity.

Aaliyah rose from her chair, dashing to the edge of the ring. “If your daughter kills Bilal, I’ll...!” Aaliyah whispered harshly to Isra, grabbing hold of the older woman’s arm. “I’ll gut you, I swear...!”

“Shush. If Bilal’s half as strong as you keep saying he is, he’ll be fine,” Isra hissed,

prying Aaliyah's fingers from her bicep. Aaliyah stumbled back. Wrapping her arms around herself, she gazed worriedly down into the ring. Isra raised her arm. "Wrestlers ready?"

"I am!" Dua yelled back, throwing her fist in the air. On the other side of the ring, Bilal simply nodded.

"On the count of three!" Isra shouted. "One...two...three!"

Dua charged Bilal like a bull. Slamming her head into the younger orc's gut, she seized hold of his torso. Bilal let out a gasp of pain, but soon retaliated. Grabbing hold of Dua's coyote pelt, he yanked her off of him. Dua scrabbled at the tie around her neck, finally managing to untie the paws. Free of the pelt, she skittered back. Casting her pelt aside, Bilal began to circle her. Dua rubbed her hands together, locking eyes with Bilal. Moving in slow circles, the two prowled around the ring.

Bilal lunged forward, catching Dua's midsection. Dua fell like a lightning struck tree, hitting the sand hard. Pinning her with his legs, Bilal struck her hard in the face. Dua threw up her arms, using one to cover her face while the other clawed at Bilal's eyes. Snatching hold of his shoulder, she threw her knee into his crotch. Bilal tumbled backward, landing flat on his back. Rising to her feet, Dua pounced on him. Blood ran from her nose. Kicking and punching, she struck over and over again.

Aaliyah let out a terrified squeal. "Tell her to stop! That's not fair! Kicking's not fair!" Aaliyah cried, grabbing Isra's arm. With a solid smack across the face, Isra sent her sprawling. Aaliyah glared up at the older woman, clutching her mouth.

In the ring, Bilal managed to get back to his feet. Blood oozed from his nose and mouth. Turning, he spat three teeth into the sand. Grinning, Dua wiped the blood from her nose. "Feelin' a lil' lightheaded?" she taunted brightly. Bilal said nothing. He didn't even pause to wipe the blood away. His forehead swelled, bleeding slightly where her toenails cut him. Letting out a deep roar, Bilal sprinted at Dua. Dua barely had time to dodge. Catching her lower leg, Bilal jerked her off her feet. Dua let out a screech of frustration, flailing and kicking as Bilal dragged her across the dirt. On the ground around the arena were several heavy, white chunks of sandstone. Still holding Dua's legs, Bilal seized one of the stones. Isra and Aaliyah gaped as Bilal shoved Dua down and beat her face with the rock. Blow after blow after blow, striking Dua's head and neck. Blood spurted from Dua's face, coloring the rock red. She rolled from side to side, trying to avoid the blows, but Bilal held her still. All around, spectators cheered.

Finally, Dua stopped moving. Slowly, dropping his weapon, Bilal rose. Blood dripped from his hands. Isra dropped down into the arena, landing hard, and rushed to Dua's side. The orc girl lay unconscious, her faint breath rasping through her broken teeth. One tusk dangled from her lip, broken. Her cheek and eyelid were torn. Blood spilled from her nose in twin streams. A wound glowed, red and raw, on her green forehead. Pulling Dua onto her back, Isra carried her battered child from the ring. All around, orcs cheered and shouted Bilal's name. Isra's face burned with shame.

"Hold still," Isra muttered, wringing the cloth out and patting it to Dua's bloody cheek. Dua sat on the edge of the cot. Hot droplets of blood oozed down her face, spilling into her eyes and mouth. Dua coughed, wiping fruitlessly at the blood. Her mother slapped her hand away. "I said, hold still." Gently, Isra mopped off Dua's face. When she was finished, the white wool cloth had turned red with gore. Dropping the cloth in a nearby bucket, Isra stared at her daughter. A deep gash throbbled on Dua's forehead. Her lips swelled

like split plums. One tusk stood broken, oozing blood from its soft, crimson core. Dua's right eye fluttered, shredded by the stone Bilal used to pummel her. Picking up a roll of bandage, Isra began wrapping Dua's wounds. "Hurt?" she asked.

"Bilal cheats," Dua spluttered weakly, spraying her mother with bloody spittle. Isra tied the bandage on Dua's head. Crimson bloomed under the white cloth.

"Hush. Don't be bitter 'bout your loss," Isra scolded gently, washing her hands in the bucket and cutting a fresh length of bandage. Dua let out a pitiful moan.

"Bilal cheats!" Dua insisted, her words whistling through her broken teeth. Her hand flew to her face, moaning in pain. "We were wrestling! Using a rock is unfair!" Isra put a finger to her daughter's swollen mouth.

"I said, hush," Isra repeated. Dua fell silent, crossed her arms. Isra taped bandages on over the cuts on her daughter's cheek, "It hurts, doesn't it? This'll teach you never to lose another wrestling match."

"I didn't lose!" Dua shrieked, slamming her fist down on the cot. She flinched, covering her mouth. Blood stained her light green palms. She continued muttering bitterly through her fingers. "Bilal cheats. He's the loser."

Grimacing, Isra brushed off her palms. "You should be proud for your half-brother. He's a strong one." Isra bit the inside of her cheek. She recalled the look on Aaliyah's face as she heard the orcs shouting Bilal's name. How her pretty, soft face blossomed into an elated smile. Isra could hear her boasting already. 'My son is the strongest. My son can beat Isra's sons any day!' Asad had many mates, more mates than Isra could count. None of the other females challenged Isra for dominance. Isra had once been Asad's favored mate. Her sons were the strongest and the fiercest. Ghassan, Isam, and Faraj brought much glory to Asad's name. They were the kind of sons who led hunts and war bands. With only a few years as a chieftain's mate, Aaliyah couldn't claim to have born any truly worthwhile children - not yet, at least.

"Mama?" Dua wheezed.

Isra growled through her teeth. "You should have won. You're stronger than Bilal is. You're born from the two strongest orcs there ever were. You might be small, but you're stronger," Isra whispered, clenching her fists. She set the bandages aside and paced nervously back and forth across the tent floor. Dua tracked her mother with her eyes, "Aaliyah'll start bragging about this. I won't stand for that kind of talk. I won't."

"Mama..." Dua got up off the cot, stumbling to her mother's side. Just as she reached Isra, the tent flap brushed open. Smiling, Faraj ducked inside. Dua paused and grinned at her older brother in spite of her split lip.

"Hello, Mama. Hello, Dua," Faraj began, nodding respectfully to his mother. With dark hair and a build designed to wrestle lions, Faraj dwarfed both his mother and sister for size. Reaching over, he affectionately ruffled his sister's hair. Dua squeaked, brushing her hair back. "How are you feelin', Dua?"

"I'll heal!" Dua answered, still grinning in spite of her broken mouth. Isra sighed deeply.

"I saw you in the arena with Bilal, lil' sister. That was a good fight," Faraj said, leaning in to peer at his sister's face. He laughed at the injuries, clapping Dua fondly on the shoulder. "He messed you up with that rock! Look at that face!"

"Only 'cause he cheats!" Dua replied. Faraj laughed again.

"Think of the great new scars you'll have once you heal. You'll have a true warrior's

face!” Faraj grinned. A few dark gaps in his smile indicated where he himself had broken a few teeth. Grin fading, he turned toward his mother. “You mind if I speak to Dua by myself for a lil’ bit, Mama? Won’t be long.”

“All right. She’s mostly patched up anyway. Don’t keep her chattin’ too much. I don’t think her face feels very good right now.”

Faraj nodded. “I won’t.”

Isra vanished behind the tent flap.

With their mother gone, Faraj turned back to look at his younger sister. Dua gave him a bloody, broken-toothed grin. Turning her head, she spit a chunk of tooth onto the swept, sandy floor. Faraj grimaced and glanced around the tent. With his large, square face, nest of black dreadlocks, and prominent tusks, his grimace made him look more like a horrifying mask.

“Dua, maybe it’s time you moved out from Mama’s tent,” he said after a long pause. Dua squinted at him.

“What?” Her smile fell. She followed Faraj’s gaze. Ever since she was born, Dua had lived in this tent with her mother. In the corner opposite her stood a cot piled high with furs – her mother’s bed. The one she sat on was her own. Her mother’s beloved weapons – a heavy spiked maul and an axe that could have cleaved a boar in two – stood on a weapons rack in the other corner. Dua had wished all her life to wield them. Mama never used them herself.

Sighing, Faraj turned his gaze back to his sister, settling down on the cot beside her. He wore a leather chest plate that seemed to groan with the movement of his muscles. “You’re not quite as little as you were a few years ago. Papa will want you at the head of your own war band soon, Dua, and it’s not good for a leader to be hanging onto her mother’s breast.”

“But there’s no fighter better’n Mama!” Dua bounced to her feet, hurrying over to the weapons rack and reverently touching the giant spiked maul. She looked back at Faraj, eyes alight despite the damage done to her face. Faraj sighed again, pushing himself back to his feet. He tromped over to the weapons rack and touched the handle of the maul. “If there’s anyone who could teach me the best way to lead a war band, that’d be Mama!”

“She ain’t used these in years, you know, Dua,” he replied, looking down at his eager little sister. “Mama’s not a fighter anymore. She’s a breeder. But you...you take one look at you and you know you’re not meant for breedin’. No one would want to see a daughter of Asad reduced to a breeder anyhow. But you’ll have to move out sooner or later. Just how it’s going to have to be.”

“I like it best here with Mama,” Dua replied, taking her hand away from the maul and looking down at her feet. “It’s how it’s always been.”

“Listen, Dua...I didn’t like the way Mama made you fight Bilal, all right?”

Dua looked up at her older brother. He stared steadily toward the maul, running his calloused fingers over the leather binding around the long, sturdy handle. “Well, Bilal cheated. I would’ve beat him if he didn’t smash my face with that rock.”

“That’s not it, Dua! Mama hates other breeders!” Faraj whipped around to face her. The two orcs regarded each other for several seconds in silence. Faraj’s large tusks prevented him from fully closing his mouth, so it gave him the impression of gazing slack jawed at everything. Combined with his pleading expression, his face gave off an air of utter dismay. Dua blinked at him. She had grown accustomed to seeing her brothers scowling or growling

or baring their teeth like coyotes. The emotion sat alien on her brother's fierce face.

Dua finally looked away. She prodded one of her broken teeth with her tongue, tasting the blood. "That's not true."

"She hates Aaliyah for years, Dua. Since you were a young'un," Faraj replied. "And she'll make you fight Bilal til she can prove which one of you is better."

"I'm better! Mama and I both know it, so there isn't harm in showin' everybody else."

Faraj raised his hand, clad in a leather gauntlet, to his face. He massaged the bridge of his nose. "Even so, I'm going to speak to Papa about getting you a tent of your own. A girl your age shouldn't be tied to her mama all the time." He lowered his hand and reached over to ruffle Dua's hair again. "Heal up, lil' sister."

Dua let out a whine and quickly straightened her hair. Faraj chuckled and ruffled it again before heading for the tent flap. Dua trailed after him. Outside, through the dusty haze of the heat rising off the sand in waves, Dua could see her mother standing with her feet cooling at the edge of the watering hole at the center of their camp. She turned as she heard the tent flap sweep against the sand. Faraj nodded respectfully to his mother before turning and heading toward the chieftain's tent. Dua hurried up to meet her mother, blinking her one good eye in the bright, afternoon sunlight.

"Did Faraj say something interestin'?" Isra asked. Dua bobbed her head in agreement. "How's the lip? He didn't make you talk too much, did he?" Dua shook her head. Isra smiled gently. "Even with the beating you took, you're still up walking around. That's my strong girl. No crying or whimpering for you!" Hooking her arm around Dua's shoulders, Isra began steering her back toward the tent. Dua stumbled a bit, finding it difficult to walk in the bright light with one bad eye, but happily followed along.

As Dua had grown up, many of the orcs in the tent camp had commented how much she resembled a young version of her mother. While her brothers had identical crops of jet black hair like their father, Dua sported a long mane of red hair exactly the same shade as her mother's. Though one could see hints of Asad in Dua's face and stature, most of her features undeniably came from her mother. While one could distinguish Dua by her unique scars and peppy gait, their silhouettes looked almost interchangeable. If Faraj saw the two women approaching at a distance, he might not have known which one was which.

Perhaps it was their shared appearance that made mother and daughter so close. Faraj couldn't think of a single orc in the entire clan who had stayed with his mother past sixteen. Isra attended upon Dua's every need. Where most children would receive their basic learning from one of the clan elders, Isra sought to teach Dua herself. Faraj recalled seeing his mother and Dua the day Dua first picked up a bow. How patient Isra had seemed, adjusting and readjusting the orc child's arms until she could hold and fire the weapon with precision. Faraj had received no such instruction, nor had his brothers. The sight of Isra down on her knees in the sand, quietly whispering instructions and advice to the wide eyed child, made his stomach roil as if he'd eaten a bit of rotten meat.

Isra had told him the story of how she met the chieftain when he was a child. His father, the looming, battle scarred mountain, sent spasms of fear through little Faraj's veins. This father, who spoke rarely and seemed to regard all who came before him with a faint disgust, seemed at odds with the mother who had swaddled him in blankets as a baby and carried him with her all day in one arm. Unlike the other breeders, with their full hips and pendulous breasts, Isra's body coiled with tight muscle and vigor. As Faraj had said to Dua,

one could take a single look at Isra and see she had a body built for athletics, not childbirth. If a woman wasn't suited for motherhood, if her body spoke of strength rather than love, then it only made sense that she would brawl with the men. Isra was one such woman – a war band leader from another tribe who was said to be strong enough to defeat any man in the arena.

Asad could, of course, not resist a challenge. He challenged her to a wrestling match the very evening they met. Asad, who towered over most every orc he'd ever encountered, was sure to win. But by the morning, though, Isra had broken Asad's nose and knocked more than a few teeth loose. A woman who succeeded in doing that would produce far stronger offspring than any of the doughy breeders. Isra, with her spiked maul and war axe, who was undefeatable by any man, was thus conquered. Asad led her away from a life leading raids to a life bearing sons.

No longer able to conquer enemies, she settled for conquering the other members of Asad's harem. Then, however, Aaliyah, with her rippling dark curls and flickering, copper eyes, unseated Isra with nothing more than a smile.

Faraj heard Aaliyah's voice before he entered the tent. "It's lucky my Bilal is so strong or she would have—" Faraj pushed back the tent flap. Aaliyah whirled to look at the door, a strong blush rising into her face at the sight of her rival's son. Asad sat on the edge of his cot, observing Aaliyah and the twelve year old orc behind her with cool silence. He turned his head as well when Faraj entered, giving his son a brief nod of acknowledgement.

"Papa, Dua needs her own tent. She's too old to stay with Mama," Faraj began, hardly even glancing in Aaliyah's direction. Aaliyah's angry blush intensified.

"What, she gets a reward for losing? Isra babies her cubs too much," Aaliyah huffed, arms crossed.

"It's not a reward. Bilal will need a tent when he's older too," Faraj replied, biting the inside of his cheek to keep his voice from rising. The stooped young orc gazing at the floor hardly resembled the furious beast that had beaten Dua's face with a rock. Bilal stood pigeon toed, looking flushed but not with anger. His eyes darted up toward Faraj and just as quickly darted away. "Bilal is so big, he might need two tents."

Aaliyah linked her arm with her son's. "Big enough to squash your sister," she spat. Grabbing her son's arm, Aaliyah pulled Bilal toward the tent flap. He followed like a cow on a harness. Big, sleepy eyed, and silent, he sometimes reminded Faraj more of a farm animal than a growing orc. Faraj turned to look at his father, whose eyes looked for Aaliyah long after she had exited the tent.

"Dua needs her own tent," he repeated.

"Then get her one." Asad's guttural voice rumbled like the voice of the earth itself.

Faraj sighed through his nose. He bowed his head respectfully to his father and turned away. Asad was not one for words.

Dua's face took weeks to heal. Even after the cuts had scabbed over and the deep, dark bruising had faded, she struggled with her broken teeth and bad eye. Isra fitted her with a patch to cover it while the lid healed since it was impossible to fully close it. Bilal's beating had shredded the delicate membrane of her eyelid, so even tiny actions like blinking were accompanied with unexpected spasms of pain. Dua could hardly sleep with one eye open all the time either. The eye patch, made up of a cloth bandage wrapped tightly around Dua's

face, itched and bothered her. In the gloom of her mother's tent, hearing the sounds of labor outside, Dua found herself tugging at the eye patch. She adjusted it, took it off, put it back on, and sighed. Outside, the sky was bright and hot and the wind threw sand in her still-healing cuts. Even so, Dua knew she would rather be out there than confined to her mother's tent.

The tent flap opened and Isra stepped in, a basket of onions and potatoes resting in the crook of her arm. She turned toward where Dua sat on her cot. "Faraj has a surprise for you," Isra said, setting the basket aside and hurrying to the bedside. She tugged at Dua's arm, urging her to rise. "Come on, get up."

Dua stumbled to her feet and followed as her mother pulled her out of the tent. A sunset topped the cliff plateau, deep yellow like the color of an egg yolk. The sunset washed the tents in blue and orange light. Dua exhaled, relieved to be outside in one of the dimmer parts of the day. The sun hurt her injured eyes. Isra linked arms with her as they walked in the alleyways between tents. Dua looked up. Next to the watering hole in a place of honor beside her father's dwelling stood a tent that Dua had never seen before. The tarp covering the tent poles fluttered gently in the late evening breeze. Faraj crouched on the ground near the corner as he hammered down the tent spikes. With every arc of his hammer, a metallic 'tink' echoed through the quiet camp. When he saw the shadows of the two orc women, he looked up and smiled.

"Do you like it?" he asked. Dua blinked.

"It's for me?"

"Who else would it be for?"

Dua glanced toward her father's tent. The white walls of his tent gleamed with painted red designs, denoting his status. Wringing her hands, Dua looked back down at her brother. "It's right next to Papa's."

"You don't like it?"

"No, I like it! It's just close to Papa's," she replied, managing to smile. Faraj smiled in return.

"You're his cub. You oughta get a special place." As Faraj stood, two more shadows fell across the tent. Faraj, Dua, and Isra all looked toward the sources of the shadows, only to see Aaliyah and Bilal standing several feet away. Aaliyah stared at the tent, her pretty lips pressed tight together. The two groups regarded each other in silence for a period. Aaliyah glanced rapidly back and forth between Asad's tent and the new one right beside it. Asad's tent had always stood removed from the bulk of the camp. With another tent beside it, the fierce red markings on his walls did not seem quite so intimidating.

"Dua's tent?" Aaliyah asked, her eyes settling at last on Faraj. He nodded. "Why is she right next to Asad?"

"Papa said to get her a tent," Faraj replied.

"She loses a wrestling match and you reward her with a place of honor beside Asad? I am the only one who gets to sit beside Asad!" Aaliyah's voice jumped an octave, a flush rising up into her cheeks. "If anyone deserves that spot, it's Bilal and me!"

"Just because you sit beside him at arena matches doesn't mean you sit beside him in all things," Isra growled, turning to face Aaliyah. A sharp-toothed smile formed on Isra's face. "Even if Bilal won a single match, Asad values my children more than yours. And that it how it will always be."

“That’s a lie!” Aaliyah shrieked. Bilal looked down at his mother, his expression no longer deadpan. He tried to step away from her, but Aaliyah caught him. She snatched him by the arm and jerked him forward. The twelve year old orc stumbled forward, nearly tripping over his own great feet and landing in the dirt. “Bilal will fight Dua again. And we’ll see who deserves that spot beside Asad.”

“Mama...” Bilal’s voice came out strangely soft. Aaliyah refused to acknowledge him.

Isra’s face contorted into a grimace. “You saw what your boy did to my girl’s face. He’s a cheater. He doesn’t deserve the honor.”

“Coward’s words! Afraid to lose again?” Aaliyah dug her fingernails into Bilal’s forearm. The twelve year old orc let out a tiny whine and again attempted to jerk his arm free. Aaliyah held fast. He was twice her size. If he had wanted, he could pick his petite mother up and chuck her into the watering hole.

Isra twisted toward her daughter. “Dua?”

Dua reached up to touch her face, feeling the place where her skin puckered from the scars. She could still feel the weight of the rock as Bilal smashed it into her face. Faraj watched the gesture, a grimace tugging at his lips. “A tent’s not worth fightin’ over,” he interjected. “Dua’s hurt and she shouldn’t be fighting.”

Aaliyah let out a cold laugh. “It’s true. Your girl’s a coward.”

“Ain’t a coward!” Dua balled her fists

“Dua.” Faraj placed a firm hand on his sister’s quaking shoulder. “Dua, you remember what I told you.”

Dua wrenched her shoulder free. “I don’t care. I ain’t a coward and I ain’t weak!” She stormed toward Bilal, a thunderhead broiling on her brow. She jabbed the younger orc in the chest. “I’ll wrestle you and I’ll win!”

“Big talk for a girl who got her face beat in,” Aaliyah laughed.

“You’ll see. You’ll see that my Mama is better than you. We wrestle now!” Dua marched forward, seizing Bilal’s arm and wrenching him from his mother’s grip. She gave him a hard shove, causing him to stagger backward and nearly collide with Aaliyah. The two young orcs stood across from one another. Bilal took a deep breath, planting his feet evenly apart in the soft sand beside the watering hole. Dua lifted her fists, guarding her injured face.

The two circled each other, daring each other to be the first one to move. Finally, after several seconds, the two young orcs collided in an explosion of blows. Dua threw punch after punch at Bilal, beating her fists against his face, his neck. Bilal shrugged off the blows as if they were no more than mosquito bites. Whenever one of his punches connected to her, it fell like a boulder. Dua found herself reeling backward whenever he struck her. Finally, she lowered her hands and threw herself against him, digging her shoulder into his stomach. Bilal gasped, staggering backward and tumbling over into the sand. Dua leapt on top of him, smashing her fists into his face and screaming.

Bilal threw her off. Dua landed in the watering hole, sending a blinding spray into her face. She paused to rub her eyes. Bilal sloshed into the water, seizing her by her collar and throwing her down again. The watering hole was not deep, but it held enough water to submerge an orc if he lay on his back. Dua spluttered and coughed as she rose back out of the water, her soaked hair hanging in front of her face.

Dua screamed and launched herself at the other orc. Her weight was just enough to knock him off balance. He toppled back into the water, his head vanishing beneath the surface. Dua jumped on his torso, shoving her heels into his stomach and kicking his head

viciously whenever he tried to come up for air.

For several minutes, Dua kicked and splashed and screamed in the pool. It was only after she realized that Bilal was no longer fighting back that she stopped. Clouds of blood drifted just beneath the water. Dua stared at the large, green shadow beneath her. The three adults watched in silence.

Finally, Aaliyah started to shriek.

Dua blanched. She stooped to pick Bilal's body up out of the water, but Aaliyah rushed in before Dua could get a grip. She locked her arms around Bilal's waterlogged body, hauling it onto the sand and collapsing on top of it. Dua stared, unsure of what to make of the sight. Water dribbled from Bilal's lips, mixing with the blood streaming down his face. Dua's kicks had opened up a dark red gash on his forehead. Aaliyah howled, cradling her son's body.

"He's not...he's not dead, is he?" Isra muttered, gazing down at the body.

"I..." Dua looked down at her feet, sticky with blood. "I didn't..."

Aaliyah screamed, grabbing handfuls of sand and hurling them at Dua. Dua flinched away. Tears stung in her eyes. Turning, she fled. Behind her, the silhouettes of her mother and brother faded into the dark.

The village called it an accident, not a murder. Nobody much spoke of Bilal's death in the years that followed. If they mentioned it, he was not called by name. Aaliyah did not try for a second son. She withdrew, refusing the touch of her mate. After a while, she wandered out into the desert and did not come back. Dua declined to fight again. No matter how her mother tried to tell her that orcs died in sparring matches all the time, Dua would not lift a hand against another being. She would lead no hunting parties, she would command no war bands. She stayed quietly in her tent, the energy and exuberance stripped for her being. Isra had more sons, more daughters, but the family would still mourn for the two children who were lost.



The Trophy Hunter

Kyri Lorenz

Winnie

J.D. Donnelly

“Hello, this is Dave at Animal X-terminate. How may I help you?” I piped into my headset.

“Okay, so there is this thing in my closet,” the woman on the other end panted. “My bedroom closet. The closet I keep my clothes, my shoes, my old family photo albums in—even my frick’n undies! The damn thing gave me a heart attack this morning when I was getting ready for work! It stands behind my clothes rack and stares at me every time I get the nerve to crack open the door. I think it made a nest in my favorite Orioles hoodie!”

“Well, what kind of animal is it, ma’am?” I asked.

“I don’t know what the hell it is—I’ve scoured Wikipedia till my eyes bled and it’s not on there! It’s tall and shaggy and smells like moth balls. It’s got a tail like a lizard with monkey feet. I think I saw a pouch on it, so it might be some kind of marsupial or something. Its eyes are the freakiest, though! I-I think it stole my old teddy bear’s eyes.”

“Did it chew them up, ma’am?”

“No! It put them in its face! You know, where normal, non-plastic eyes should be! How do I get rid of this thing?” the woman whined. I heard her shuffling on the other end and got the distinct image of some big-city secretary huddling on a tabletop.

“Have you set any traps?”

“It’s taller than I am! They don’t make rat traps big enough for the sucker!”

“Alright ma’am,” I said, trying to keep her hysteria down at a tolerable level. I leafed through the manual to chapter five, “Household Haunts.” The details were stacking in the not-so-pretty images on page fifty-four. “We’ll send someone in the morning—”

“I want this thing out of my house now! Gassed, shot, exploded, whatever you have to do!” she screamed loud enough for the static to punch out my ear drum.

“Alright, please remain calm, ma’am. If you insist, I think I can walk you through this if you cooperate. I need you to go to the closet this ‘thing’ has nested in and try to talk to it—”

“Talk? It can talk!” she gasped.

“If it is a bugbear, then it should be able to respond with verbal communication.” I flipped the page to the next creature. “If it does not respond, then please evacuate immediately, because it will be a ghoul, not a bugbear.”

“And if it is one of these bug-winnie-the-poohs? What the hell do I ask it? ‘How’s the weather?’”

“Just politely ask it what it wants. If you can appease it with whatever it is looking for, the bugbear will migrate out of your home and return to its natural habitat,” I said.

I heard the click of the phone being set down and footsteps storming off. God, I hope this doesn’t turn into a repeat of the peryton incident last month. They don’t tell you dying screams of agony burn into your memory when they take you through the employee orientation here, even with psychiatric counseling covered in the medical benefits.

The phone rattled back to life. “Okay, thanks Dave.”

“Wait, ma’am! Are you okay?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine. Just a little out of shape. Had to pop up and down the stairs just now,” she huffed and puffed.

“Was it a bugbear?” I asked, punching in codes for the computer report.

“Oh, yeah,” the woman said brightly, her tone now as sweet as powdered sugar.

“What did it want?”

“Oh, the little pooh-bear just wanted some milk and cookies,” she said, and, with a chipper click, hung up.

The River's Secret

Rachel Carleton

The trees along the riverbanks stand naked, their leafy garments discarded earlier in the year than usual. Long, dark limbs reach toward the water's surface like claws hoping to ensnare the coho salmon swimming upstream to spawn. Kenta pauses at the river's edge, hoping to catch a glimpse of the blushing fish darting close to the surface.

Perhaps I can kill several with my kama, Kenta thinks, setting a bag of freshly harvested rice on the ground as he readjusts the grip on his sickle. His family would appreciate the smoked fish to supplement their daily rice.

As he peers into the murky water—dirtied with fallen leaves and debris from upstream—he catches a glimpse of a pale hand break the surface further down the stream, fingers closing around the air as if searching for a handhold. A woman's face follows, delicate features surrounded by a curtain of silken hair, before disappearing beneath the steady current. He drops the sickle onto the riverbank and rushes to her aid, the frigid water soaking into the coarse, gray cloth of his hakama.

Kenta seizes the woman's hand and hoists her up, his free hand moving behind her back to better support her. She gasps violently for several seconds, waves of her midnight hair covering her face. The worn kimono she wears feels as smooth as a plane of ice alt, and her hair is even softer beneath his fingertips resting against her shoulder blades. She grips his arms tightly, wavering for a moment.

"Are you all right?" he asks.

She glances up at him, irises shockingly yellow. A ring of green surrounds an elongated pupil, and amber flecks darken the unnatural color of her eyes. He remains entrapped in her gaze, barely noticing as something brushes against the back of his calf.

How long has she been struggling against that current? Kenta wonders. Aloud he again asks, "Are you all right?"

She ducks her head before speaking. "Thank you," she rasps, voice hoarse. The words sound clumsy as they leave her mouth as if speaking is difficult for her.

Kenta inwardly scolds himself. The woman had nearly drowned—she is probably still recovering her breath. "How did you end up in the river?" he asks before shivering. He tries to lead the woman from the river, but she remains rooted to spot. "Do you live near here? If not, I can take you back to my place so you can dry off and find warmer clothes."

Her skin looks too pale. She needs to move away from this river to a place that is warm and dry, preferably with hot food.

"I mean you no harm," Kenta says. "My home is only a few minutes from here, and my sister has some clothes you can borrow."

"You are...very kind," the woman says. She moves her hands from his arms to clutch

at the collar of his haori jacket, smiling at him.

Every muscle in his body freezes at the sight of fanged incisors gleaming yellow against her colorless lips. A forked tongue, like the kind found in snakes, slips out as if tasting the air between them. Her grin grows as her grip tightens on his haori. “Too kind,” she hisses.

Kenta knows that he should run, but he cannot bring his body to obey. His eyes remained locked on hers, watching the green specks in her irises. Those reptilian eyes study him as they stand like statues in the frigid stream.

Moments later, he is surrounded by ice, the cold water around him bringing clarity. He tries to push himself up, but the hands on his clothing pull him down to the bottom. One of his hands snatches the muddy silt of the riverbed as he blindly claws at the woman.

Opening his eyes, Kenta tries to catch a glimpse of the she-demon. As his visions adjusts to the underwater distortions, he see that from the waist down, her body is that of a snake: dark brown with dark streaks along the side scales. The kimono she wears is threadbare and had once sported pictures of birds and flowers that had long since faded into the water. Perhaps she stole it from one of her previous victims.

Kenta seizes her wrists, trying to pry her hands from his haori. Her arms feel like stone as they do not give even the fraction of a centimeter. In retaliation, the tail around his calf tightens, squeezing the muscles hard enough that he howls, bubbles of air rushing toward the surface. His vision darkens around the edges as his lungs beg for air. He releases one of her wrists to try and claw at her eyes, but she leans back, back arching at an impossible angle, keeping those bright irises out of reach. Those yellow-green eyes silently plead for him to stop struggling, and he finds his body obeying, falling limp in her grip.

Her grin widens, lunging forward as her fangs sneak into his neck. She begins to drain the blood from his body. Kenta thinks to make one last attempt at escape, craning his head away from the she-demon. Dizziness washes over him before darkness consumes him and his body sags to the riverbed beneath him.

Babushka, Babushka

Grace Gorski

You may not believe this, children, but there was a time when I very nearly lost my magic--

William, take that finger out of your nose!

Where was I? Ah, yes, I nearly lost my magic. When I was a girl, all young folk with magic had to pass a test on the eve of their 13th birthday. Afterwards, there was a big celebration. Of course, if said young person failed their examination, the celebration turned into a bit of a mourning (helped along by the magic of the rest of the family).

On the day of my exam, my grandmother came over to the house to help with preparations. Of course, you remember stories of my old Babushka: sweet, feisty, and the warmest woman alive (of course, she always attributed that to excessive amounts of whiskey in her youth). She couldn't help but poke fun as she passed me sitting in a corner, eyes glued to my textbook and muttering spells feverishly under my breath.

This distracted me, until lo and behold--I misspoke one of my spells, and my loving, doting Babushka was turned into a babushka!

Charlie, don't give me that look. Babushka was what I called my grandmother. A babushka is a head scarf. What do they teach you children these days?

So there I was, just hours before my big examination, and my grandmother was lying on the floor as a babushka! Test or no test, if the exam board found out what I had done, I would fail automatically. And failure or no failure, Babushka was in charge of the food for the night's festivities; if there was no kolach for the night, I'd have to deal with both the examination board and my extended family. It's like--can you imagine if the Christmas Eve pierogies were no more because Lillian turned me into a pair of Ugg boots?

Meredith, quit making that face. I know you don't like pierogies. I swear, no one was allowed to be this picky when I was growing up...

Now of course, the thing about accidental magic is that you're never quite sure what it was you said or did that had such disastrous results (or fantastic results, depending on the situation). It wasn't as though I could just reverse the spell, and my beloved Babushka would be right as rain. After several panicked minutes of trying everything I could to fix things (mostly this involved rearranging the letters and syllables in "babushka"), I decided to do the next best thing: I finished making the kolach. This solved at least one of my problems. Or, rather...partially solved it.

Michael--stop poking your sister! It isn't too late for Santa to take back your presents, even if you've already opened them. And I happen to have him on speed dial.

I wasn't so good with the timing thing...the kolach would be done baking partway

through my examination. It wasn't like I could just excuse myself to pull bread out of the oven, and no one in my family would think to take it out. That was Babushka's job. And so I found myself sweating through my exam, answering questions before the practical portion of the test. I had wrapped my Babushka babushka around my neck...why? For safety, I suppose. I had seemed like the thing to do at the time. I didn't want to leave her lying around--what if one of your great aunts or uncles had stepped on her? I am the oldest, after all, and there was a time when I wasn't the troublemaking one.

Don't give me that stink eye, kids, you all know I'm trouble now. In my opinion, there's no other way to spend your eighties. Trust me, you'll feel the same way someday.

In any case, we had just moved from the question-and-answer portion of the exam to the practical portion, and the oven timer went off. The scent of kolach wafted through the living room. I could see some of the examination board licking their lips. Suddenly, I heard a *pop*, and I must've jumped three feet in the air. I heard the friendly laugh of my Babushka, and I felt for the scarf around my neck in a panic. It was gone. I swallowed dryly and turned to the examination board. They all looked as though they were waiting for an explanation, just like I was. So I turned to my now-human Babushka.

She laughed at what must have been a stupefied expression, then she bowed to the board. "My granddaughter," she said with a flourishing gesture in my direction, "has just learned the valuable lesson that sometimes you don't need magic to undo magic."

I buried my face in my hands. I knew I was done for. The board asked me to explain myself, so I told them that I had turned my Babushka into a babushka while studying, and the smell of the kolach must've turned her back. At the mention of the kolach, my poor Babushka started and hobbled from the room to remove the bread from the oven. The board all took notes on my story, then they whispered to each other. I found myself studying the carpet, just like you do, William, when you know you're in trouble. See...that's family resemblance.

After several minutes, the head of the board straightened his notes and looked straight at me. "Evelina Wachowski, you pass your board examination," he said.

My jaw dropped. "What? But I turned my grandmother into a headscarf!" I shouted at the board. Several of the board members flinched at the outburst.

The head of the board cleared his throat before responding. "Yes, and that is precisely why you passed. Human transformation is advanced business, and you solved that problem without any help, which is even more advanced. You pass. Now enjoy your celebration. We are going to leave and discuss how in the future we should handle this situation. Good day." They stood to leave, then filed past me. I couldn't move, could barely breathe. I couldn't believe it; I had expected to be *arrested*. Passing wasn't even in my mind.

After a few moments, my Babushka called me into the kitchen. She smiled slyly at me. "My trick worked, did it?" she asked.

"Your trick?" I asked.

She winked at me before answering. “Your Babushka turned herself into a babushka.”

Of course, I couldn’t believe it. My Babushka...making trouble? Ok, don’t give me that look Meredith. I see you remember my other stories. Yes, my Babushka was a troublemaker, but she never did anything illegal, and cheating on the magic examination was very nearly illegal. When she saw how stunned I was, she began to laugh.

“I knew how nervous you were,” she said, “so I made the board think you were amazing. And someday, you’ll do the same for your grandchildren. Now come help me cut the kolach.”

And that, my darlings, is how your old Babushka’s Babushka turned herself into a babushka to bamboozle the magic examination board. Now let’s go check on the kolach.

CryptoZoo III

J.D. Donnelly

*Previously on **CryptoZoo**, as seen in *The Cyborg Griffn Vol. 2 and Vol. 3*: Cleo the chupacabra is the adopted daughter of Aristotle, the immortal fore-father of sasquatches, and mutual drinking buddy of JD, the Jersey Devil. When Aristotle's disappearance threatens the existence of sasquatches—and all of cryptid kind—JD and Cleo team up to search for him, “in the lands of man” as the Mothman prophesized. While flying off to begin their search, a helicopter shoots them out of the night sky.*

Glamour: *The ability of cryptids—though usually only immortids are imbued with it from “birth”—to mask their true appearance. Sometimes referred to as a “Fairy Glamour.” Some glamours are more glamorous than others.*

So, I guess chupacabras don't have wings because we *aren't* meant to fly.

Before I pried my eyes open, I could tell that the couch I was lying on was obscenely expensive from the patented leather smell alone. To my aching, bruised, and battered body, it was worth every cent of comfort. I could feel that my whole right side, especially my hip bone, was robbed in a bruise that was going to span continents.

As consciousness ebbed back, the first noise my throat managed to form was a weak, “Papa?”

I thought I was back at the Hutch for a disorienting moment when my vision cleared. I think it was from the wooden timber décor, but the walls and floor were too bare and there was actual thought put into the decorating.¹ No piles of magazines or rocks, no rabbit-eared TV in the corner, no tie-dyed beanbag and plaid recliner; just a leather living room set, a mahogany coffee table, and some shelves holding an assortment of empty, artistic-looking vases. My nose could tell that everything about this place had to be a rental from the cocktail of vacationing human scents snagged on the furniture and floors.

“Papa?” I called again, my voice louder as it started waking up with the rest of me. Warm arms and a deep voice haunted my head.

I strained to lift my head, and saw trees whispering in the sunshiny morning outside the windows. Over the couch's back I saw a modernly furnished kitchen attached to the living room I was currently living in. I could hear running water back down the only hallway. I was definitely not home; not only did the Hutch only have one room, but the only

¹ The closest Papa got to “decorating” was alphabetizing his books.

sink in the kitchenette had rusted shut years ago, so flowing water was a no-go.²

I hazily spooled my thoughts to piece together how I ended up lying on a couch in an unknown cottage. I remembered being with JD, and the Immortid Council, glowing red eyes, and then flying out to go find Papa. Just as suddenly as the helicopter bombarded us my most recent memories flashed back to me—of bullets ripping through JD and my falling like a metaphorical, chupacabra-shaped star through the nighttime sky. And then, someone picked me up and carried me away. I think. I might have imagined that part.

I examined myself, counting the nicks and bruises and how many of my dorsal spines had snapped,³ and noticed that my left foreleg had been bound in gauze that was tainted with dried blood and plasma. I was tempted to nibble the fabric off, but then thought better of it; someone had to have put it on for a reason, and they'd done an expert job of it. I could still feel the Mothman's feather nestled safely in my pouch. I had so many questions about how I got from point A to point Z swirling around my head I felt like a snow globe of befuddlement.

My ears swiveled—and dammit, I was so beat up that moving my ears hurt—when the pipes squeaked and the water shut off. I shimmied my legs underneath me, though all my muscles staunchly objected, and I crawled to the edge of the couch, peering over the arm. Footsteps padded down the hallway and the other occupant of this quaint little cottage emerged.

It was a man.

A *human* man.

A *wet, semi-naked* human man.

Every nerve in my body iced. Adrenaline rushed through me, shutting up all my pain receptors. I arched my back, spines rattling as they bristled against each other, and I curled my lips back in a hysterical hiss. The man, his shoulder-length hair still clinging damply to his neck and clad in little else but a baby-blue towel, titled his head curiously at my defense display. I had never, ever been so close to a human that I could count all the frick'n hairs on his chest, and I had no intention of letting him any closer.

I had seen too many chupacabras with bullet holes in their brains from when they let humans get too close.

I leapt backward off the couch, my bandaged leg nearly buckling as I darted through the living room, my claws scrabbling on the carpet. I skidded to the front door, the only visible entrance. I threw my whole body at it, but the locked door didn't budge.

"Don't!" the man shouted.

I frantically scanned for another exit. He rushed at me, arms outstretched to ensnare.

² Papa always gathered whatever drinks we needed in bottle form, though sometimes he'd just carry buckets of fresh water back from the local stream.

³ Don't worry, since they're made of keratin, breaking a dorsal spine is like breaking a fingernail to me. Though I'll tell you, having a hang-nail on your back can get irritating pretty quickly.

I bolted into the kitchen, sliding around the island stove in the center.

Our chase tightened around the island counter in the kitchen.⁴ But then I mistimed a turn and the man seized his chance to literally pounce on me. He tried to get me under control by using his body weight to pin me to the tile.

“Stop it! You’ll open your wounds!” the man ordered as I struggled in his arms. His sinewy arms were probably strong enough to wrestle a boar and my dorsal spines weren’t a deterrent for this psycho.

“LET ME GO!” I snarled.⁵ I thrashed with all my might. I summoned up all my strength and threw out a kick with my marsupially-famous hind legs. Paws connected with slippery body and, with a flock of f-bombs, the man released me. I sprinted behind the couch while the man swore up a storm.

When I didn’t hear him follow me, I cautiously peeked out from behind my impromptu sofa fort, you know, to make sure he wasn’t pulling out some kitchen cutlery to shank me. I didn’t expect to see him doubled over in the kitchen, clutching his side in agony.⁶

“DAMMIT CLEO!” he cursed.

I jolted. This man—this *human*—knew my name? When he struggled to sit up, I saw the blood seeping through his fingers.

“W-who are you?” I chittered nervously. “Where’s Aristotle? Where’s JD?”

“I’m Santa Claus! Who do you think I am?” he snapped indignantly. He leaned back against the lower cupboards with a wince, each breath a visible spasm of discomfort.

It was then my ears caught it; that all-too-familiar, grating sarcasm I had heard for years. It sounded different coming from this man’s throat, like one of the acoustic covers of a famous oldie that Papa liked to listen to, but the underlying melody was still there.

“J-JD?” I gasped in disbelief.

The man nodded.

“W-what? Why are you—how are you—HUMAN!” I gaped.

“I’m in my *glamour*, Cleo,” he huffed at me, running his free fingers through his hair to manage it out of his face. Past the pained expression, I could see this human carried himself with JD’s self-indulged poise. Now that I knew he was a carnivore, the muscles made sense, too. His lanky hair and neatly trimmed goatee-moustache combo were the same shade of ebony brown JD’s fur and mane had been.

⁴ The whole peekaboo routine is amusing in a sitcom, but not when you’re being chased by a half-naked madman!

⁵ I was in such a state of panic that I completely disregarded the wise adage among cryptids not to reveal our speaking ability in front of humans. This was a general safety guideline in the cryptid community, since it was bad enough if a human caught you they’d treat you like an animal, it would be a whole new ball of pythons if you offered the opportunity for verbal interrogation too. There are some cryptids who actually prefer to get chatty with humans, though. Ever hear of the sirens? Their singing is to die for!

⁶ Honestly, I thought I’d landed a groin hit.

“Why are you naked?” I asked.

“I just took a shower!” he said as he reapplied the towel that had fallen during our scuffle. He then stared at me quizzically. “And I usually *am* naked, Cleo, as are you.”

“Well, I mean, it’s just, humans aren’t *normally* naked!⁷ And why are you bleeding?”

“Because you just broke my stitches!” JD snapped. He lifted his bloodied hand and showed me the previously-sutured bullet hole in his side and the bruise that brewed around it like an angry thunderstorm. “I may be an immortal, but it still hurts like hell to get shot!”

“Sorry.” I folded my ears and spines timidly. I wobbled out from my hiding place and tentatively approached him, making sure to tuck my tail to show the sincerity of my apology. I wasn’t too offended by JD’s attitude or his rampant swearing at me since I understood now he was justifiably cranky from his wounds.

JD shook the austerity from his glare and rubbed his brow with his clean hand. “No, I’m at fault too. I was just trying to restrain you so you wouldn’t hurt yourself again. I didn’t expect you to fly into a blind panic like that.”

Now I wish I had listened to him since I was forming a complimentary bruise on my left shoulder from where I had rammed the front door. “Give me a break! *Chasing* after me wasn’t sending the best first impression either.” Now that I was closer to him, under the scent of artificially perfumed soaps and human skin, I could faintly pick out JD’s musky odor wreathed with pines, deep forest, and carrion.

“So, that helicopter thing really did happen? It wasn’t a bad dream?”

“Unfortunately not.” JD frowned.

“Who the heck was that? Who would shoot at us?” I asked as I eased down on the tile next to him.

“I’m the Jersey Devil, not the Mothman. Hell if I know,” JD sighed as he closed his eyes against the ache. “It is just another mystery we’ll have to add to our list of questions that need answers, I suppose. We should inform the Mothman of it. Normally if I put off a perceptual glamour I’ll pass off as a crane or a heron on aeronautics radar and people will leave me alone, but this time...” After sitting in restful silence for a few moments, he opened his eyes again, his voice much calmer now. “How are you feeling, Cleo?”

“I’ve been better.” I forced a smile, licking the dryness out of my mouth with little luck. “Well, I’m a little thirsty.”

JD hoisted himself up with a grunt and pulled a bowl down from a cupboard. He filled it at the sink and set it on the floor where I lapped up the water. Once I’d emptied it and nudged it longingly he filled it up again. As I drank my fill, JD cleaned his hand and wandered to another counter. He picked through an already open first aid kit. He ran a

⁷ I mean, I’d seen naked humans before in Papa’s magazines. Heck, photographers seem to *love* taking pictures of naked/near-naked people, but even I knew that humans frowned upon prancing around all-natural in public like we cryptids.

threaded needled under some scalding water and went to work touching up the homemade stitches in his side. I marveled at how steady his hand was as he pulled the needle repeatedly through his own flesh. He compacted some clean gauze against his bullet wound and wrapped a bandage around his torso to secure it in place this time.⁸

“JD, did you see Papa?” I asked as he worked.

“Papa?”

“I felt someone carry and pick me up after I hit the ground. I think it was Papa! It felt like him and sounded like him,” I said.

The human JD glanced at me, snipping the thread with a pair of scissors from the first aid kit. “Cleo, that was me, I carried you here. After I landed and put my glamour on, I found you in a corn field. Honestly, until I heard you breathing I thought you were dead.”

I hunched down dejectedly. “Oh, I see. Well, when can we start looking for Papa?”

JD sighed. “First, we need to get you properly disguised before we leave this cabin. Cleo, do you think you are feeling strong enough to try putting on a glamour?” JD asked once he’d finished bandaging himself. “The sooner we can depart the better.”

“Where are we going? Where are we now?” I asked between slurps of water.

“Right now we are in the Poconos. This is a cottage I frequently rent for my ‘outdoor excursions’ like when I visit the Hutch or attend an Immortid Council,” he said.

“I’m not sure. Will putting on a glamour hurt?” I asked nervously. That’s all I needed, a new ache to add to the collection.

“It may be...strenuous since it will be your first time, but you should be able to manage it,” JD said after he considered his word choice. He had such a way of being as reassuring as a rattlesnake. “Here.” He motioned for me to follow.

He led me to the hallway to a full length mirror that was mounted on the back wall outside the bedroom door. I tilted my head side to side as I studied the pristine reflection; it was rare I had a chance to see my own image in something clearer than a brackish stream or pond.

“So, how exactly does this work?” I asked as I swiveled my ears around and winked at the mirror to watch myself move.

“You lack the inherent ability, but as long as you keep the Mothman’s feather in contact with your body the principles should be the same,” JD muttered as he watched me play with my reflection.

“Well, I wasn’t going to take it out of my pouch,” I said.

“That’s a smart choice. In fact, I doubt whatever glamour you don will alter your pouch for that very reason. The hitch with glamours is that some detail of your natural form will never be masked. Mine is my hair.” JD flicked a strand out of his eyes. “Every time I try to cut it to ‘fashionable’ length, it grows back overnight. But a pouch vacant of pups is a detail that can be easily masked at least.

⁸ I guess he was the surgeon to thank for treating my injured paw while I was unconscious.

“Putting on a glamour is a concentrated effort of will. You must mentally imagine the mask, and keep it constantly within the recesses of your mind. There are two degrees of glamour—perceptual and metamorphic. Perceptual is when you change the vision of others without actually altering your own physical appearance. That is what I do to airplane radars and pilots.”

“So let me guess, metamorphic is when you actually change your body, like what you’re doing now?” I beat him to the punch. After all, he had certainly *felt* human when he wrestled with me.

JD smirked. “Your powers of observation are improving by the minute.” He then turned serious and said, “You’ll need to put on a metamorphic glamour, Cleo. It would be too risky if you only exuded a perceptual and someone were to bump into you and feel spines that should not be there.”

“Okay, how do I do that?” I asked.

“Like I said, it is a concentrated effort of will. You just need to will it and the powers will activate. Just close your eyes, and imagine yourself differently. It will probably be easier, for your first time, to not have a specific persona in mind. Give it a try while I get dressed,” JD said before stepping into the bedroom and clicking the door behind him, leaving me alone in the hallway.⁹

Well, I closed my eyes and concentrated on the feather in my pouch. I just prayed a little that nothing would go seriously wrong.¹⁰

I sat there, eyes squinted shut, concentrating on the abstract that is nothing. I felt some creepy sensations shiver through my body but nothing really stuck. Every time I opened my eyes, I saw I was still a chupacabra. Each attempt drained my energy, too, like there were invisible leeches just having a field day on my metabolism. I pouted at the mirror, wondering why the hell I was sitting there at all. As if just *thinking* about it was going to change my appearance, as if just thinking about it instead of going outside and looking was going bring Papa back.

During my one-chupacabra pity party, JD stepped out of the bedroom. He’d tied back his hair in a sleek, professional ponytail that complemented his black suit pants and the jacket he had tucked in the crook of his arm. He buttoned his white dress shirt as he looked down at me.

“I can’t do it. I’ve tried—” I began to explain.

“You can do it. I know you can do it, Cleo, because you’re strong and you’re smart, so

⁹ I guess JD’s teaching method is “Here, I’ve explained it, now fend for yourself”. Geez, it’s a good thing he’s a single immortal; I’d hate to imagine how he would teach a Jersey Devil colt (Fawn? Pup? Calf? What would you call a baby Jersey Devil?) how to fly!

¹⁰ It would be rather awkward for JD—and embarrassing for me—if he came back out to find some freaky mess-up in the hallway.

stop whining and try again,” he chided me.

I grumbled at his advice but followed through anyway. I closed my eyes again and concentrated with all of my mental, physical, emotional—and hell, throw in some psychic too—power on the Mothman feather. When it felt like something was going to pop out of place, a switch kicked.

How do I describe putting on a metamorphic glamour?¹¹ It’s sort of like a physical transformation, yet at the same time you still stay *you*. The outer layers of your skin and muscles and bones shift and rearrange to whatever new form you’re putting on, yet you still have the gooey, nougat center you started with. Oh, and it tingles like crazy, radiating out from the pit of my stomach where the Mothman’s feather was tucked. Like, if someone had shoved your face in a vat of Bengay, it would feel kind of close to this. I know that sounds like a half-assed explanation, but until you’ve done it, that’s all I can really offer. Heck, the tree-porting felt half as weird as glamour-izing. I felt trapped in a body moving beyond my control, but at the heart I still felt like the chupacabra Cleopatra.

But when I opened my eyes this time I wasn’t looking at her.

“I did it JD! I think?” I exclaimed as I dubiously examined my glamour in the mirror.

If it was possible I’d become even *more* scrawny! Honestly, I didn’t look too much different from my natural form; I was still very much canine-like, though my frame had shrunken to slimmer proportions and had lost the muscle tone years of living in the wild gave me. My legs had stretched like stilts, my fangs were no longer as pronounced as a chupacabra’s, and my spines were nowhere to be seen. My tail had become pencil thin, my eyes as wide and doe-like as an anime character, and my snout and paws were daintily slender. As JD had guessed, a small slit on my belly marked my pouch.¹² Other than the bandage, my new pelt of smooth grey fur masked my bruises.

“JD, what the hell am I?” I asked.

After a lengthy moment of consideration JD said, “I believe you are a whippet.”

“A what?”

“It is a type of dog, not unlike a greyhound,” he concluded.

“So I’m a lapdog, and you’re James Bond over there with the suit? How is that fair!?”

“Until you train the conscious control to intentionally manage your glamour, it will cast itself in a form that is similar to your inherent cryptid characteristics,” JD said. When I shot him a “why the hell are you rattling Greek to me” look, he sighed. “Think of it like a default setting, Cleo. When you’ve practiced enough you can modify it.”

“So my ‘inherent cryptid characteristics’ equals a whippet? I’ve drunk things like this for breakfast!”¹³ I sat and scowled a pout, though in my glamour the gesture was obscenely

¹¹ Well, it’s not like putting on socks, that’s for sure.

¹² I guess I became the first marsupial dog?

¹³ Dog blood really isn’t my preference, but if the picking’s slim it does hit the spot.

adorable. “Did you have to practice a lot to manage a human glamour?”

“No. It came naturally to me,” JD answered.

“What? No fair!”

JD shrugged on his suit jacket with a frown. “I will warn you ahead of time, I can teach you the basics of glamour, but my ability is *not* typical of the other immortids, so don’t hold yourself to my standards. My powers have limitations. For instance, I can only transform myself at sunrise and sunset, for as long as the sun is in contact with the horizon line. You will not be constrained by such a stipulation, and will have much more liberty with your glamour like any other immortid, Cleo. You will be able to change whenever and to whatever you desire—with prudence, I would hope.”

“Why does yours have a limit then?” I asked curiously.

“Personal reasons.” JD looped his neck with a red silk tie. I could tell by his tone that this was not a subject open for discussion, so the idea just burrowed like a worm in the back of my mind where I know it would niggle me later.

“That guise should suit you for now so that we can at least get underway. You’ll have to put on a different form anyway since pets are prohibited in my building for extended stays, but we’ll cross that bridge when we reach it,” JD said as he pinched on cufflinks. He stood behind me and examined himself in the mirror. I don’t think a typical human would have noticed the faint traces of the Jersey Devil I could see in this familiarly strange gentleman; the eye-teeth a tad too sharp, the ears a little too keen, the predatory gleam in his auburn-flecked eyes.

“Your ‘building’? You mean, like an apartment?” My ears caught the detail.

“As I said at the Council, my territory is in the heart of man’s lands,” JD said. “I promise, Cleo, I will answer any questions you have, to the best of my ability and discretion. We’ll have time to kill on the drive anyway.”

“Drive’?” The word surprised my tongue.

“Considering my lack of wings in this form bars flight.” JD rolled his eyes as he held out his empty, non-webbed hands. “And your injured paw wouldn’t do well for a lengthy walk, how else did you expect to reach Manhattan when it is a two hour drive without the traffic?”

“Wait, wait, wait! Manhattan? You mean *New York City*, Manhattan?” My ears perked upright at the idea. Then the truth slapped me in the face. “You mean to tell me that the *Jersey Devil* doesn’t even live in frick’n New Jersey!”

“What? Did you think I lived in a tree?”

“I haven’t lived exclusively in the Pine Barrens since 1909. It became increasingly difficult to hide there once mobs of people started actively looking for the ‘Devil of the

Pinelands.” JD scratched his goatee ¹⁴as he thought back in time. “I’d gotten spotted a few too many times raiding the local livestock and I’d inadvertently sent the locals into a panic. They were so scared they sent hounds and search parties into the Barrens for days, though I think most of them were more interested in the reward money being offered. Some con artist in Philly even tried passing off a painted kangaroo as me to get the pocket change of the gullible,” JD said as he shifted the gear, changing the tempo of the Mercedes-Benz’s purring engine.

The rolling green mountains of the Poconos had leveled into suburbs as we sped down the highway. Sure, riding shotgun in the gun-smoke black sports car that had been parked outside the rental cottage was an interesting new experience to me, but it kind of paled to flying free and unencumbered in the night sky on JD’s back.¹⁵ The thrum of the engine also made me drowsy for some reason, but I think still being tuckered from my fall was part of it. I was just tall enough in my new whippet glamour to calmly rest my chin on the window edge, rather than having to stand like the slobbery, peppy dog I was supposed to be.

“Have you been putting on a human glamour since then to live in the city?” I asked. While JD had my ears, the suburbs racing by had my eyes. At best I got fleeting glimpses since the neighborhoods were barricaded behind highway sound barriers. I also studied the cars migrating alongside us, from the rust buckets to the Rolls Royce, and the even wider variety of people behind the wheels. It was weird seeing humans so close through glass, like watching a rolling zoo.¹⁶

“Longer than that. I’ve relayed orders for Ulysses Grant and I’ve seen Frank Sinatra live at the Copa Cabana. I’ve been doing this a *long* time, Cleo.” He smirked.

I looked back from the road to JD. “So where are we going to start looking for Papa? I think we should try Central Park. It’s big, it’s green, and the most likely place for him to find shelter if he is in Manhattan—”

“We need to regroup and recuperate before we start searching for Aristotle, Cleo,” JD said levelly. “I don’t know about you, but after being shot at by a rogue helicopter I need a long, uninterrupted nap, and something to eat. Preferably venison that is so raw it’s still breathing. Lacking that, a filet mignon will suffice. Then we need to inform the Mothman of our aerial incident.”

“But Papa is missing! He could be trapped, right now, at this very moment, praying for us to save him! We need to find him *now* before humans do and his immortid right is lost and all the sasquatches everywhere become animals!” I exclaimed, digging my claws into the leather upholstery. I swallowed the gurgle my stomach made; I couldn’t remember the last

¹⁴ I wondered if he kept such stereotypical satanic facial hair in his human glamour as some kind of personal irony, if he couldn’t trim it as part of his “stipulations” with his powers.

¹⁵ You know, if you don’t mind getting shot down by an occasional helicopter.

¹⁶ You would not believe how many people—especially little kids—smiled and waved at me simply because I was dog in car.

time I'd sunk my fangs into some plump veins, but I was more anxious to look for Papa than my next meal.

"We won't find him at all if we run ourselves ragged, Cleo." JD glared at me out of the corner of his eye. "And we certainly won't find him by blindly poking our noses around downtown Manhattan. We need leads first, and so we'll use mankind's powers.

"If it's one thing humans can do better than we cryptids, it's communicate. If a man in China sneezes at dinner the Times will call it an epidemic by breakfast. You've grown up with enough of their magazines and movies to know that mankind has spun the world in a web of information. You have not even seen the power of the internet!" JD lifted a hand towards the ceiling, to whatever satellite signals were filling the air above our heads. If there is someone—*anyone*—who knows where Aristotle is, I will track them down with the resources at my disposal, and I have *many*. And if I cannot find him through human means, I have *cryptid* techniques to sniff out information humans would rather hide.

"But, of course, to continue to have access to such resources, I do have obligations I need to maintain as well."

"Obligations? What can be more important than finding Papa!"

"For one, I need to check in on my job," JD said.

"Job? You? Have a *job*?" I turned to him, my ears pricking in surprise. "What are you, a professional BS-er?"

JD actually laughed at that. "HA! Some newspapers have called me that. I'm a CEO." JD smirked smugly when I stared at him slack-jawed. "How else did you think I pay for our monthly drinks, this car, and can afford an apartment in Midtown?"

"I don't know, rob a bank? What the heck are you CEO of?"

JD reached into the leather briefcase tucked beside his feet he had packed up with assorted goodies¹⁷ from the cottage. He flicked a cream-colored business card in front of my nose. A circular green design was imprinted on it and it smelled of big business.

"JD, I can't read. Aristotle always had to read words to me." I glared at him.

"'Lucas Leeds, Founding Chief Executive Officer of Leeds Enterprises,'" he recited before tucking the card into his breast pocket.

"'Lucas'? Out of all the names in the world to pick from, you pick *Lucas*? It seems rather," I sought the proper word and failed, "Off."¹⁸

JD frowned. "I've had that name longer than your ancestors have been alive. Please don't mock it."

"Okay, *Luke*." I rolled my eyes, though I wondered to myself what got him so prickly about it. JD fell silent as he merged into a new lane of traffic, a new vein of tarmac taking us

¹⁷ And by "goodies" I mean "paperwork and an extra tie."

¹⁸ Nothing against all the Lucas's out there. It's just, I know Aristotle changes his name when he feels like it, but he had always been *Aristotle* to me, and so JD has always been *JD*. Him putting on a new name was almost as jarring as seeing him put on a new skin.

farther from the greenness and into the concrete. “So what does Leeds Enterprises ‘enterprise’ in?”

“Our largest sector deals with applied research and development, specifically in pharmaceuticals, but we do have subsidiaries in defense, cosmetics, and publishing.

“Before entering the world of business I utilized my many, *many* years of observing trends in society to turn a nice profit on the stock market. Before that I only really ever worked odds and ends jobs for when I needed something specific or if I wanted a break from living out in the woods in my cryptid skin. One of my favorites was being a fur trader in the 1800’s.”

After I chewed on this I asked the second-highest priority question¹⁹ on my mind. “JD, what is Man’s Broken Promise?”

JD sighed as he gripped the gearshift, passing a lagging van. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? But you’re an immortal!”

“I am not one of the *first* immortals, Cleo,” he continued.

This grain of info clicked on me, especially when I remembered what was discussed at the Council. “JD, you’re not the *original* Jersey Devil? Were you a mortal cryptid like me and *killed* a Jersey Devil immortal before you—”

“No,” he cut me off. “I am the *original* and *only* Jersey Devil. What I meant was I was not born at the dawn of time like the other immortals. I was only born of the clay in 1735.²⁰ Man’s Broken Promise is a rather touchy subject for everyone involved, if I understand correctly. As you saw when you almost got your head chewed off, those immortals that do know the truth loathe to even utter it and consider it a criminal act to even mention it within earshot of the Source. I even asked Aristotle multiple times, but he kept mum, and you know he has that award-winning poker face.”

“Damn,” I muttered as I contemplated what could be possibly bad enough to put mankind on nature’s shit-list for eternity. I frowned as I thought of what he said, “Wait, you just said you were ‘born of the clay’? Then why did that blue tiger call you a ‘bastard’?”

“Cleo, such language is unbecoming of a chupacabra your age,” he said, not taking his eyes from the road.

“Hey! Don’t dodge the question!”

JD’s brows furrowed together. “I said I would answer your questions to the best of my discretion and ability, and my discretion is *that* is a personal matter.”

“Geeze, you have more ‘personal matters’ than fleas! That Bruce Springsteen guy should pay you to be on his show with all your ‘personal’ drama!” I snorted.

¹⁹ After “Where is Papa?” of course.

²⁰ Remember how I said the clay at the Source still likes to pop out new species now and again? Papa always told me that some immortals and their cryptid descendants were some of these “late bloomers,” formed long after the rest of the pack. Heck, he even told me that chupacabras are a post-broken-promise cryptid, my immortals having come from the clay barely a century ago. I just had no idea JD was so (relatively) young!

“Cleo, you’re thinking of Jerry Springer. Bruce Springsteen is a singer. A mediocre one at best,” JD nonchalantly swatted away my insult. I folded my ears back in defeat, knowing I wasn’t going to get a straight answer out of him this round.

New York is a city of bright lights, glistening metal, and people. Lots, and lots, and lots, and *lots* of people.

Growing up in the remoteness of the Hutch with Papa, I did not see my first real, live human till I had set out on my own to stake a territory in the southern desert. I saw them at a distance; a shepherd boy tailing after his father, their flock of goats trailing after them. They laughed and sang silly shepherd ditties, completely oblivious to the young chupacabra hiding in the bushes nearby. My fangs had watered at the sight of all that fresh blood, but Papa had taught me the way of cryptids very well; I stalked them until nightfall and carried off a pair of kids for my supper while they slept, no one the wiser till I had a blood-filled belly. The next time I saw a human was when I was hunting alongside a male chupacabra I’d recently met named Chiho. That was the first time I’d seen a human with a gun, and the last time for Chiho.

Now I couldn’t look five inches without seeing a human arm or leg or toe or face. They. Were. Everywhere! They sang and cursed at each other in every language imaginable, walked past and embraced, moving in herds across the streets like wildebeests fording rivers. Such a variety of faces, young and old alike, actually reminded me of the eclectic Immortid Council.²¹

Everywhere were flashing signs, smiling teeth, or blitzing lights. The city itself behaved like a living hive to house all these people; the skyscrapers swaying to their own heartbeats, alleyways burrowing for miles unseen, manholes hemorrhaging steam like lifeblood. My eyes, ears, and nose were going crazy just trying to cope with the cultural immersion!

“Please don’t drool on the glass,” JD said as I flattened my nose against the window to get a better view of the shimmering billboards of Times Square.

“How can you live here! It’s crazy! Nobody sits still!” I said, my tail thumping a staccato against the seat while I watched a mounted officer clop past our car.

“Years of building up a tolerance,” JD answered matter-of-factly. The thick drum of a nearby jackhammer muffled through the car. “I can remember when this was *literally* a one-horse town. Then more settlers came, and their families, and their descendants till we amounted to a population over nineteen million, according to the last census.”

JD expertly wove his way through the bustling streets, dodging both the car and foot

²¹ I saw a tall, shaggy figure I thought it was Papa, but it only turned out to be a tall, shaggy hobo. There were a couple of other denizens I thought could pass off as cryptids in disguise, too.

traffic like real life *Frogger*.²² He finally pulled off in front of a skyscraper in Midtown. An ornate, glitzy sign glimmered the words “The Pines” over the marbled entrance.²³

“Do not speak until I tell you,” JD instructed curtly as he shifted the car into park. A doorman wearing a buttoned coat that matched exterior building design waltzed up to the car.

He opened the door and smiled cheerfully as he took JD’s briefcase. “Welcome back, Mr. Leeds. Enjoy the weekend getaway?”

“For the most part. The hiking was more intense than I anticipated,” JD said, wincing as he stepped out of his Mercedes Benz.

“You look a little tired, sir,” the doorman commented.

“Well, you know how they like to party in the Poconos,” JD brushed him off. He patted the driver’s seat after him, nodding for me to follow. “Here girl.” I’d instinctually shrunk back against the door, blown back by all the sudden overpowering smells and noises released into the car when the door had opened. My ears folded back in agitation at his condescending, commanding tone. But, I was his *dog* at the moment, and so I hopped over and he scooped me up in his arms.

“What a cutie! There’s a girl!” I flinched as the doorman cooed in my ear and scratched under my chin without asking. It took all my willpower not to nip his chubby fingers. “Didn’t think you had a thing for dogs, Mr. Leeds.”

“I’m only looking after her for a few days. A friend of mine has stepped out on short notice,” JD said, subtly stepping out of range so the doorman couldn’t touch me anymore. I watched him slip the doorman the keys and a five as he took back his briefcase. “Have a good afternoon, Carlisle.”

“You too, Mr. Leeds!” he responded, chipper as a chipmunk. He hopped in and valeted the car away. JD carried me through the gilded revolving doors and into a cavernous lobby of spotless marble. We stepped into one of the elevators at the far end and, once the doors sealed, he pulled out a keycard from his briefcase, slipping it into an awaiting slot and punched the penthouse button. I’m not lying—the *penthouse* button! I’m not sure if it was the fact I was traveling vertically²⁴ or that I was trapped in a moving mechanical cage that bothered me more. I tried not to, but I shivered slightly with a canine whimper as we rose higher and higher away from the ground. JD squeezed me reassuringly as the floor levels climbed into the double digits.

When the elevator finally halted, the mosaicked doors slid open, revealing a short hallway with a single doorway at its end. JD strolled right up and fished the front key out of

²² This made me wonder how long JD has actually been driving since he handled the car with years of experience. It’s rather funny picturing him puttering around in Model T or sitting at the DMV!

²³ “What, did you think I lived in a tree?”—my whippet ass!

²⁴ A direction that until recently I was rather unfamiliar with.

his briefcase.

The first thing he did was set me down on the waxed wood floor, then deftly closed and dead-bolted the door. “Okay, you are free to speak now. My walls are sound proof and my windows are tinted from the outside, so, as long as you remain inside you can drop your glamour. But, you are not allowed outside this door without a glamour on. Should anyone else be here, you must be in disguise or remain hidden. Do you understand?”

“Whoa,” I responded, more to the swanky apartment than to him.

He’d managed to bring the forest into this Manhattan penthouse, just, you know, more square and furniture-shaped. Filled with mahogany decorum as sleek as his ego, the whole living room was set around a Moby-Dick-sized flat screen TV. The only wall not richly wood-grained was the far one, but it was because it was a full-length window with a commanding view. Even the air smelled like pines, though I wasn’t sure if it was from the ornate candles scattered about or the Pinesol from the floor.

And here I’d thought all these years that the Jersey Devil lived in the tangled underbrush of the Pine Barrens.

“You live here?” I gaped.

“My name is on the lease.” JD shrugged, switching on the softly glowing track lighting, darkening the shadows under his eyes. He set aside his briefcase and unhooked a Blackberry charging on a nearby countertop. “Excuse me while I make a few phone calls. *Mi casa es su casa*,” he said over his shoulder, pressing the phone to his ear and walking off before I even answered.

Rather than follow him, my attention was drawn to the variety of framed magazines, photographs, and clipped newspaper articles filling the walls like the panels of a turtle shell. They were all snippets of memories, of people toasting drinks and baring their teeth in smiles. JD’s human face appeared in every one, though in a variety of styles; hair slicked back under a fedora in a dusty black-and-white photograph, two bubbly flapper girls draping on the arms of his zoot suit; with the advent of colored photos, he stood proudly in front of a computer the size of the room I was standing in; shaking hands with a flock of businessmen as some kind of ribbon in front of a shiny new building was being cut in the background. There was even a grainy photo of JD crouched in a fox hole, rifle cradled in his arm, passing a cigarette to a fellow soldier. All of them were crowded, JD completely immersed with the humans and their world around him.

With one exception. On one of the walls in the living room, mounted away from the burning fingers of the sun that could stream through the bay windows, was a painting of a woman. Unlike the other glossily matted magazines, photos, and portraits where JD was laughing, smiling, or clinking champagne glasses with glowing starlets, this portrait was handsomely hand-painted. It smelled of centuries and crackled with its own wrinkles, but the oils and wood dust filming it did not mask the woman’s beauty. She looked colonial, like she belonged on some kind of coin or at the very least in a history book. Her blonde ringlets were barely subdued behind a stately bonnet, her soulful blue eyes staring through the years to

gaze at me. They looked like young eyes that were very wise for their time—maybe too wise, since her lips did not smile.

“Hey, JD?” I called once I’d finished studying his peculiar taste in art. I turned and padded around the spacious apartment looking for him. The porcelain bathroom and brush-steeled kitchen were empty, though.

I finally found JD in the master (and only) bedroom. He laid sprawled on the edge of his king bed, his head sunk into a downy pillow. He’d only bothered to take off his suit jacket, draping it haphazardly on an accentual leather sofa, before exchanging his phone chatter to a conversation with more snoring. *Geeze*, seeing him snoozing there, cocooned in utter exhaustion, brought shivers of guilt back. I guess he was so concerned with getting back here—and making sure we were safe and secure first—he really had been running on fumes before letting himself collapse.

Though I was antsy to start finding Papa as soon as possible, I didn’t have the heart to wake him. Actually, just looking at him made sleep contagious. I hopped up on the bed, the silk sheets slick as river water under my paws, curled up, and dozed off on one of the pillows.

When I lifted out of my foggy sleep the skyline of Manhattan glistened to replace the stars the city lights had smothered out long ago. The first thing I noticed was my new posh surroundings, and then remembered how I got there. The second thing was that I had slipped back into my natural chupacabra self. I could tell ‘cause the pillow I had snuggled on shredded as my spines shifted. My fangs had returned to their normal size and I was noticeably chillier without fur. I’d thought that maybe it was natural to slip out of a glamour while you slept, or when you get knocked unconscious, or whatever breaks your concentration. But then I looked over and saw JD still snoozing and still considerably human since he lacked claws, tail, or wings. Since he’d slept through sunset I guess he would be in his human glamour till dawn.²⁵ I assumed I was just so new to the concept of glammers that maintaining one in all states of consciousness would be something I needed to practice.

“Hey, JD,” I whispered. One of his fingers twitched.

“JD?” I nudged again. He rolled over to block me with his back and mumbled something that sounded vaguely like “Ten more minutes.”

As JD kept sleeping I reasoned now would be a good time to start on the glamour practice. I stole off the bed and trotted out to the living room. I yawned, pleasantly cracking my jaws loose as I stretched the last flakes of sleep from my legs. I could understand why JD had wanted to nap so badly; other than my still-sore forepaw, I felt ten times better after catching some z’s. I walked over to the expansive windows, my reflection a translucent, Godzilla-sized²⁶ monster among the Midtown skyscrapers. I pressed my paws to the glass, my gaze roving for a sasquatch-shaped blip on the streets below.

²⁵ Or whatever solar junction he decided to change at next.

²⁶ And before you ask, *no*, Godzilla is *not* a cryptid!

I closed my eyes and concentrated on the Mothman feather in my pouch. I thought of all the people I had seen that day and willed myself to be like them. I willed myself to have human feet so I could walk down those streets among them in Aristotle's footsteps. I willed myself to have human hands so no door could impede me as I explored New York's belly for the male sasquatch immortal.

I willed myself human so I could find my Papa.

The tingling sensation shifted over me, but it didn't latch on. At most I felt a muscle or two twitch, but then nothing. I opened my eyes and glared at my chupacabra self in the reflective window pane. I tried again and felt myself stretch slightly taller, my toes start to slender into fingers. But then my concentration must have hit the reset button again because I landed heavily on my tail without having changed a hair.

As I puzzled over what was inhibiting my transformation, it crossed my mind that maybe I was being too general; maybe if I focused on a specific-looking human it would work. I contemplated all the women I knew (or rather, knew of), and most were all starlets and actresses that would probably be too, well, *pretty* to try passing off as on a first attempt.²⁷ Then it dawned on me that I had a perfect example of a human woman who was not excessively glitzy or half-photoshopped on the wall behind me. I trotted back over to the painted portrait and committed every detail of the colonial woman's appearance to memory.

I returned to the windows and closed my eyes in concentration. I focused till I felt pin-pricks in my skull, then I felt the glamour taking over me. I felt myself ascend, my limbs growing leaner, my paws more dexterous, my spines retreating into my back. When I thought I was on the brink of my tolerance, my throat gasping for air at the continued strain, I felt the tingling fade away. When I opened my eyes I didn't see my chupacabra face, but a near-perfect copy of the painted lady. I admired my surprising success. Other than the frilly blue dress and bonnet, which I obviously couldn't have replicated since humans don't sprout clothes from their bodies, and the bandage that remained on my forearm, I'd gotten everything down pat!²⁸ I couldn't see a trace of chupacabra behind the blue eyes.

"Cleo?" JD's voice called huskily. I heard JD's footsteps before I saw him appear behind me in the reflection. He froze and his drowsy eyes widened when he saw me.

"What do you think? Not bad for my first try at a human glamour, huh?" I beamed as I twirled a golden curl around my finger. In the moment I'd turn around to face him JD's face had paled like a sheet of chalk.

I felt the pit of my now-human stomach drop to the bottom floor of The Pines when the first color to return to his face was red—not an embarrassed "*surprise!-there's-a-naked-woman-standing-in-my-living-room*" shade of pink, but a furious "*I-am-going-to-kill-you-five-different-ways*" crimson.

²⁷ And frankly, some I wouldn't want to, either because of their terrible movies or their terrible personalities.

²⁸ I must admit, she had a *great* figure to boot. I had *curves* for the first time in my life!

After storm, the phoenix flies

Kara Wright

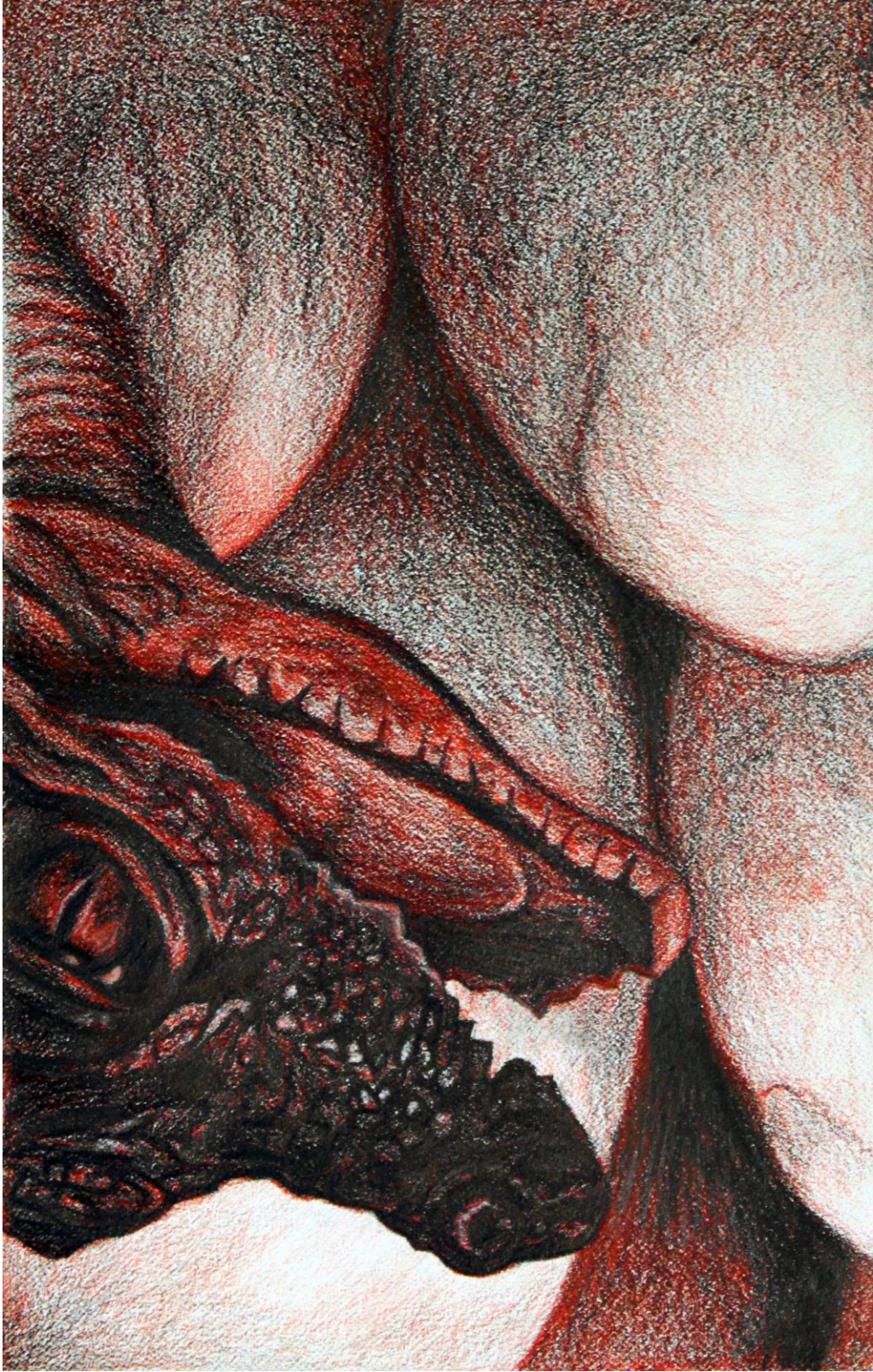
Long travel wears down the flare of her feathers.
Dawn is past—the clouds are thick with smoke.
Her form glimmers through the miasma of shadows.

She roosts upon a field. Men lay at rest, tucked
under Winter's blankets. They grip their muskets
like stuffed bears, wrapped in embrace, sooty snouts

to frigid flesh. Her gaze lifts to a distant mountain:
a crown shaven of its gray hairs. The cotton white
is a precious soft she clenches between her claws.

Songs are stuck in her throat, and her eyes, full
of morning, weep light—not bright as the shine
of polished stones, but like the glow of dying stars.

Day is present. The remains of the ashy nimbi subside.
Her tears are burnt to soot. Once again, the phoenix flies.



Dragonne's Egg
Kyri Lorenz

Homespun Thread

Grace Gorski

On the night the spinning wheels burned,
The old woman on Rue Douze killed herself.
Widowed, childless, no one noticed she was gone.
Burdened with christenings and weddings,
the seven fairies paid no attention
to the death of one so old, so unwanted.

Towards midnight, the fires died down.
In the square, pages swept splinters and ashes.
In the small house on Rue Douze,
the remains of orders for thread
disintegrated on the coals.
Doors locked, windows dark, the house
was long ignored by soldiers
fulfilling the King's commands.
The last spinning wheel sat cold.

Before dawn, a foul breath swept in,
and the spinning wheel vanished,
leaving a burial shroud in its wake.

The Mage of Shadows

(Excerpt from a longer story)

Mandy Moore

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.
-Arthur C. Clarke

Elizabeth Carter had never been a fan of alchemy bars—too loud, too dirty, too easy to end up drinking something deadly and not notice—but James absolutely loved them. If she was going to find him, she would have to go inside and brave the crowds of drunken alchemists. Her roommate had helped her pick out an outfit, although now Elizabeth was really starting to regret the too-tightly laced corset top and the knee-high boots. Some of the more repugnant patrons were already leering at her, so she let loose a flicker of a spell down each arm, the buzz of magic dancing down her sleeves and into her fingertips. James had explained that most of the alchemists in places like this wouldn't bother her if they knew she was a real mage who had trained in the alchemic arts for years to receive a lodestone. "Lowlifes," he had called them, "struggling apprentices who can barely summon a shield, let alone send any sort of spell at you." And indeed, as her arms began to glow with a faint blue energy, most of the leering men looked away.

With the noise reverberating in her ears and mouth and even her nose, it was hard to communicate with anyone, but finally, the bartender seemed to understand who she was looking for and motioned her back to a hallway behind the main room. The noise faded—probably some sort of sound-proofing spell, she thought—and Elizabeth could finally make out what the bartender was trying to say.

"Mr. Cavenie is in the back room, Miss, with his brothers. I don't think they wish to be disturbed, Miss."

"I seriously doubt he'll mind if I am the disturbance." *After all*, she thought, *he did promise to marry me today.*

Elizabeth thanked the bartender and started towards the back, attempting to gather her thoughts before confronting her fiancé. Secrets, she could handle, along with fudging the balance books, plotting to bring down perfectly legitimate businesses, and blackmailing world leaders with magic.

It was broken promises that she couldn't take.

James had always been different from other people. He didn't forget things—he just didn't. He never missed her birthday, her holy days, the dates they planned while half-drunk at two in the morning, and yet... "I'll meet you at St. Marshall's," he'd whispered, kissing her goodbye. "The preacher said six o'clock, yeah? Wear something nice."

“No, I think I’ll get married in my lab coat,” she had retorted—as if they hadn’t planning this for weeks.

But he hadn’t been there. He couldn’t have gotten lost. It was the only church called St. Marshall’s, the only church in the neighborhood that would let a world-renowned alchemist mage through its doors, the only one with a spire tall enough to pierce the gray mass of clouds covering the city, the only one where she was waiting for him.

And now it was nearly midnight, her beautiful silver dress exchanged for something more suited to a night out in the alchemy district: a lacy indigo corset top with coattails, one broken promise, and a fistful of angry words.

She had planned to slam open the door, interrupting whatever ridiculous scheme the Cavenie brothers were working on. Who cared about the latest updates to the Aethernet or the construction of a new mage-lab when her marriage was in danger of not happening? But something stopped her, making her pause and swallow her anger. James *never* forgot. Something must have happened, something big. He never would have broken his promise otherwise. She had to at least listen to his excuse... and maybe then, she could do some screaming.

Elizabeth had just come to this conclusion when she felt it—a chill, a wave of cold that hit her bones before it hit her skin. She recognized it instantly from all the nights when James had fooled around with dark magic, the nights when he sent everyone else home, even the guards, sometimes even her, and sat in the freezing labs to watch the blood-red shadows dance. For the first time that evening, her mind pulled away from its imaginary cathedral with the candles and the solemn vows, and she suddenly felt that something was about to go horribly wrong.

Standing outside the door, Elizabeth could hear the raised voices of the four Cavenie brothers, the four most powerful mages in the world, arguing over... she couldn’t tell what, exactly. She slid her finger along the edge of her lodestone, casting a spell to enhance her hearing. The round rock hung on a chain around her neck, heavy with potential magic, allowing her to manipulate the alchemic field with a single touch or a few syllables of incantation.

“Obviously, this is how it was meant to be!” bellowed William, two full years older than her fiancé but with a little less talent and a lot less social aptitude. Elizabeth could picture him, tall and lanky and rude, bellowing everything. “Stop complaining!”

“You cheated! I know you did! You rigged it, all three of you!” That was James, sounding like an angry, somewhat petulant child. He often sounded like that when his legions of adoring fans weren’t around, and Elizabeth usually found it endearing, but tonight, it made her cringe with a fear she could not explain.

Tonight, he sounded dangerous.

“Come on, Jamesie, why would we rig this?” asked Charles. *The slimy one*, Elizabeth thought.

“Don’t call me Jamesie! I’m not the baby anymore, and you can’t trick me out of what’s mine! I am more powerful than all of you put together!”

“Yeah? Come on, little brother! Why don’t we test that?” Elizabeth heard the crash of a chair hitting the floor as William and James began to murmur the opening words of incantations. Her own lodestone jumped and thrummed against her collarbone with the power of their spells. She was prepared to go in then and break up their fight when Henry Cavenie spoke up for the first time.

“Stop bickering, idiots.” His voice was lower, quieter, and yet it made Elizabeth freeze, and she knew that behind the door, his brothers had frozen, too.

Elizabeth had never disliked anyone so much in her life as James’s oldest brother. William annoyed her, and Charles disgusted her, but Henry terrified her, made her skin crawl like he had invaded her organs, her blood, her cells, just by looking at her. She wasn’t sure where his strange aura of power came from, but he managed to yank around the other two brothers like puppets, and even James obeyed him most of the time.

“Yeah, we rigged the draw, James. So what? You got what you wanted, and so did we. Who cares if it happened by chance or fate or some magicked cards?”

“What I... what I wanted?” spluttered James. “How dare you presume to know what I want? You don’t know everything, Henry, not by a long shot, and you most certainly don’t know me.”

She heard another sound, one that she couldn’t quite place, and suddenly, Elizabeth just had to see what was happening inside. She reached up to rub one thumb against her lodestone, letting out the spell on a tiny puff of air. The molecules of the wooden door began to change, becoming clear as glass to form a one-way window.

Her gaze fell first on the four cards splayed out across the table, each the size of a regular playing card but covered with strange runes, each a different color—green, red, black, white. She couldn’t make out exactly what the runes indicated, but she could detect the faint blue haze of alchemy clinging to the paper, and she wondered just how drunk James would have to be to miss that. Around the table were the Cavenies, each narrower than the last under their matching mops of dark hair. Charles was the only one still sitting, his booted feet propped up, while across the table from him, William’s frame crackled with unused magic. The real showdown, however, was between Henry and James. Even though James was taller by far, Henry appeared so menacingly and viscerally *there* that he seemed to tower over his youngest brother.

Henry leaned in close, his nose inches from James’s chin, energy emanating from him in waves so thick that Elizabeth thought she could feel them. “I *know* you, James. You are nothing but a coward, a magician with a few cheap tricks who plays at being a real mage.” To Elizabeth, his each and every word felt like a physical blow, muted only by distance and a thick door. She wondered how James could still be standing when he was so close to the one raining those blows down. “Inside, you are a screaming child, frightened of anything and everything but mostly of yourself—a rat, dressed up in rags

and a brother's mask. You belong with the dead, feasting with them, lording over them, one of them."

Elizabeth bit the inside of her lip, worried that this would devolve back into a fight, either with punches or with spells. James was a great mage, to be sure, and a pretty fair boxer. She had no doubt that he could easily defeat Charles or William. Henry, however... well, she'd never tell James, but she had always had a sneaking suspicion that Henry Cavenie was much stronger than he let on.

James, however, did not try to fight back. Instead, he seemed to shrink into himself, collapsing back into his chair. Elizabeth let herself breathe again, relieved. Whatever this was, whatever shiny new magic James felt he'd been cheated out of, it couldn't possibly be worth being cursed or maimed or even killed at the hands of his brother.

"Lord of the dead," James echoed softly. "I... you're right. I got what I wanted, and it... it doesn't matter how."

When Henry spoke again, there was no trace of gloating in his voice, but Elizabeth could see the sparks of triumph in his eyes. "That's right, little brother. That's exactly right."

Henry, Charles, and William began to make preparations for some sort of ritual, although Elizabeth couldn't figure out what it was for. Henry flattened out a thick sheet of paper on the table and laid a pen beside it, the kind of pen alchemists used when they needed to write with more than ink, its point charmed to soak blood out of a wound into the glass barrel. He then scooped up the four cards and placed them in a bowl. Closing his eyes, Henry started chanting, one hand on his lodestone. Meanwhile, William knelt by the fireplace, sterilizing a thin and wicked-looking knife. Charles was drawing with chalk on the floor behind the table, a perfect square with circles of runes at each corner. None of them was paying any attention to James.

And James was... James was still sitting, peering intently at the paper Henry had set out. His left hand clasped his lodestone while his right index finger traced patterns on the tabletop—writing, Elizabeth guessed, using a binding spell to add the words that he traced with his fingertip to the paper. Some of the pieces had begun to fit together in her head, forming a bigger picture that she didn't like at all. Lord of the dead, four cards, four colors, four corners, a contract signed in blood, and James changing the words while his brothers' backs were turned...

At that moment, James paused in his writing, glancing towards the door as if he knew that Elizabeth was there. But he couldn't know, could he? It would be impossible, and yet still, she flinched back, afraid of being caught spying.

And then, impossibly, casually, arrogantly like always, James *winked* at her.

Elizabeth was Catholic in name only—well, she believed enough to like cathedrals and feasting on holy days, and to stay away from blood magic when she could, but she hadn't really prayed since she was a little girl. Now, however, she found herself praying

desperately for this to be over, to all go away. She and James could just disappear together, forgetting cathedrals and laboratories and creating a world of magic. All she wanted was for him to be safe, to be himself again. She prayed that she was wrong and that everything would be fine. She prayed for a fire, an earthquake, an avenging angel, *anything*.

Elizabeth knew what the ritual was—she supposed she had known for a while that they would attempt it eventually—and the knowledge of it was making her stomach turn inside out. She remembered hearing James speak, almost reverently, of the spell that would bind a person, body and soul, to the alchemic field. He had talked about the four spheres of alchemy and how they could each be controlled, in theory, by a single mage, if the mage was powerful enough, if the spell was done right. And she remembered him saying, once, under his breath, that if someone was brave enough, strong enough, he could possibly bind himself to all four of the spheres, to the entire alchemic field... She felt like vomiting, felt fevered and shaky. They couldn't be doing this, not now, not tonight, and James was just sitting there, *winking*, like they had just designed a new social networking program for the Aethernet. She thought about sending a distress call out, but James would notice that. Distress calls were, by their very nature, noticeable spells, their magic loud and ugly to anyone who was listening for disturbances in the alchemic field.

And even if she did send for help, what use would non-magic police or even half-trained alchemist guards from the labs be against the four most powerful mages in the world?

James had finished secretly binding his new words to the piece of paper; William had finished with the knife; Charles had finished his runes; Henry had finished his chanting and placed the bowl in the middle of the chalk square. The brothers took turns slicing shallow cuts down their arms and signing their names to the contract with the blood pen, not bothering to read it closely, not noticing that James had altered the terms. They were signing their lives away with flourishes and glittering red cursive. The paper went in the bowl with the four cards, centered in the white square that filled the back half of the room. And as they moved, each to one of the four corners of that square, Elizabeth knew that she had to do something. She couldn't sit by and watch James destroy everything, burning up the world just to see his brothers' faces when he won.

She had barely pushed open the door when Henry Cavenie snapped his fingers, not even bothering to look up at her. The door slammed all the way open as a wave of magic forced Elizabeth inside. Henry rubbed his pinky around the curve of his lodestone and Elizabeth found herself pinned to the wall, hands above her head, the invisible tendrils of his spell holding her in place so tightly that she could barely breathe.

“Will you look at what I found? It's your little pet, Jamesie.”

Elizabeth spat at him.

Charles snorted. “She's not much, if that's who you were counting on for backup, little brother.”

Henry gave her a long, chilling look, as if appraising her. “She wasn’t here for backup.”

“What was she here for, then? Spying us out?”

Still staring at her, Henry said, “She thinks she’s in love.” It wasn’t a sneer, but it might as well have been. Elizabeth could *feel* his contempt pushing her back against the sheetrock along with his spell.

James sighed. “She’s here because I was late to our wedding.”

“Wedding?” William looked appalled.

“I *did* tell you I had other plans for tonight when you dragged me out here. Look, let’s just get this over with. We can discuss my love life after.” James sounded resigned to it, but Elizabeth knew he was bluffing.

The Cavenie brothers turned back to their chalk square, each raising their right hands towards the ceiling and placing their left hands on their lodestones. Elizabeth tried to scream at them to stop—*You can’t do this, you have to stop, it’s terrible enough what you have planned, but you don’t know James, you really don’t, you don’t know what he’s done, you don’t understand!*—but a gag spell descended on her mouth. The magic tasted different from Henry’s holding spell, and she knew James was the one who had silenced her.

Elizabeth knew then that there was no way to stop it. She tried to hold on to her anger—*How dare James make me quiet? How dare he ignore me?*—because that was better than giving in to the terror that threatened to overwhelm her. As they started chanting the words of the ritual, she could feel the fear fraying her edges, pulling her apart, spilling into her and overpowering her rage. She felt faint, heady from the air that was thick and soaked with magic and from the spell that was still crushing her lungs. She needed something else to concentrate on or she was going to black out, she could tell, and whatever happened next, Elizabeth wanted to be awake for it.

Four cards. Four colors. She made herself focus, reciting in her head the words. She’d seen them every day, printed on one of the alchemy posters James had framed in his office, although she’d hoped he would never use them for anything besides decoration.

Green for the natural, the growing, the pure. Around William, the runes chalked onto the floor burst into flames, burning like a pillar of emerald fire. The others did not pause in their chanting, although Elizabeth could see that Charles had gone wide-eyed in fear.

Red for humankind, determined and bright. The scarlet flames that enveloped Henry were bright enough to pierce through Elizabeth’s darkening vision. She felt like she was caught in a dense, black fog that blurred everything, even the crackling noises of the fire.

White for all substance, inanimate, sure. The fire around Charles was the brightest yet, a white hot pinprick in the blackness that was quickly overtaking her. If she could just hold on, if she could just stay awake...

Black for the dead who walk the night. Elizabeth thought for a second that she truly had lost consciousness, but she could still feel the roughness of the wall behind her and the press of magic on her chest. No, she could not see because of the dark fire that was

burning around James. Unlike the other columns of colored flames, James's fire was spreading down the lines of chalk, burning the air itself, taking over until it filled the entire room. His brothers were screaming, writhing beneath the fiery dark. And she could hear James laughing, laughing...

The pressure was gone suddenly from her lungs and Elizabeth could breathe again—great, gasping breaths of smoky air. She collapsed to the floor, which was covered in a layer of ash that smelled of bitter magic. James crouched next to her, running his fingers over her coiled-spring curls, his murmurs barely audible over the ringing in her ears. He tried to pull her up into his arms, but she waved him away, shaking her head to clear it.

“James... what have you done?”

The lines that had been white chalk were now lines of black ash, still smoking faintly. At three of the corners lay Cavenie brothers—not dead, because Elizabeth could see the small movements of their breathing. Henry's arms were splayed out at awkward, impossible angles. Their hair and clothes were all singed, although their skin remained untouched by the magic fire.

“I've made everything better, Lizzie, just like I always said I would.”

Elizabeth rolled up onto her knees, trying to ignore how the room was still spinning. “You bound it all to yourself, all of it. All the magic in the world, all four realms...”

“Not exactly,” James laughed, and for a moment, he sounded like himself. But when she looked at him, she could tell that he would never be that way again—his skin stretched and bruised, his cheekbones gaunt where once they had been full, his eyes bursting with panic and power and madness. “I could have bound it all directly to me, but they would have noticed and tried to stop the ritual. That would have killed us all. No, darling, I did something much, much better.” He leapt upwards, making her flinch back. James, who had once known her every breath and blink, did not even notice. Instead, he raised his arms dramatically and said in his most grandiose voice, “I took their souls.”

James waved his fingers upward like he was conducting an invisible orchestra. His brothers stood, looking for all the world like marionette puppets, limp and empty. They lurched into a line, facing James, awaiting his orders. Elizabeth found she could not bring herself to look at their eyes, pale and void of feeling or thought. She had not liked William, Charles, and Henry, but at least they had been William, Charles, and Henry, not empty sacks of skin and bone and blood, monsters without souls.

“We were going to rule everything, be the masters of all magic. But they tried to cheat me, Lizzie. They thought they could fool me into taking their scraps, letting them get all the glory while I sat in sewers with ghosts.” He smiled, began to stalk the room, his movements frantic. “But I am more powerful than they knew. I am the most powerful mage ever to walk the earth, and no one can stand in my way. I took their souls and their magic. I am invincible. I am the Mage of Shadows—I rule it all, the living and

the dead, the animate and the inanimate...”

He was muttering now, holding himself tightly as if trying to keep four souls in one body with his bare hands, still making jagged circles around the room.

There was a rumbling in the ground, and beside Elizabeth, the table and chairs began to shake. *Earthquake*, she thought, knowing it was true even though the city was nowhere near any major fault lines. *Magic’s just molecules!*—the phrase shouted by so many alchemy preachers echoed in her ears. All those molecules, the layer of magic-laden particles, the blanket-like alchemic field... all of it was connected to James Cavenie, and he was being driven mad from the souls of his brothers that were trapped in his skin.

Elizabeth stood, the tremors rattling her bones. She grabbed James by his forearms, making him stand still, trying desperately to connect with whatever was left of the man who had promised to marry her. “James, James, you have to listen to me! Please!”

“Elizabeth?” He brushed his fingertips across her cheek as if seeing her for the first time.

“James, think about the molecules! They weren’t ever meant to be bound to a single person like this. It’s just science, James! You’ve got to let them go! Please!”

The earthquake was getting stronger, and Elizabeth guessed that it was happening all over the world—quakes, freak weather, volcanoes, sinkholes. And she could feel it affecting her, as well. The fabric was getting pulled and wrinkled and *ripped*, buzzing at the back of her skull, making her see things that weren’t there. James... James was suddenly Henry, his eyes burning bright as coals.

“No!” he screamed, throwing her into the table. “I am the strongest! I can hold it! You cannot make me let go... you can’t make me...” And then he was James again. He turned to his three lifeless soldiers, the puppets that once were Cavenie brothers. “We are going to march now. We’ll go the capital, let them know that I’m in charge now. Kill anyone who gets in the way.”

Magic was crackling over everything now—the floors, the walls, the furniture, Elizabeth’s skin. And the world was still shaking, trying to break free of this man who was endeavoring to tame it all.

“James, please just listen to me!” He had to understand, somewhere inside. Some part of James had to know this was wrong. She wrenched herself up again, stumbling towards him, and grabbed for the edge of his coat. She only meant to make him pause for just a moment, just long enough to hear her voice and find his reason.

Just a moment was too long for the puppets who could not fathom that someone who was hindering their master could also be someone who loved him. They had their orders. *Kill anyone who gets in the way.*

Elizabeth was in the way.

Immortal Evolution

Sarah Landauer

1. ADDITION

The body is cleansed of invaders—
foreign viruses and parasites, deviant
and traitorous mutant codes—
attacks from both outside powers
and the architect who holds spiraling
blueprints encased in membranes
both vigilant and naïve by nature.

White blood cells defend the natural body
aided by infinitesimal bits of unnatural metal
that course through the bloodstream
and destroy enemies without hesitation.
Stronger, faster, smarter, the added
unnatural forces prolong life for the host.

2. EXTENSION

Woven like an intricate spider's web,
like individual parts unified by machines,
metal wiring connects, synchronizes
with severed tissues, muscles, veins,
blending seamlessly into each other.

Mechanical parts do not age, do not feel.
The natural and unnatural combine,
cooperate. Cybernetics extend the host,
enhancing abilities and lifespan.

3. EXPANSION

Manufactured blood cells course through metal
veins under reinforced skin. The unnatural expands.
Almost no trace of the natural host remains.

4. DIGITIZATION

The host is abandoned, consciousness
preserved, plugged in, digitized, eternal.

5. EVOLUTION

The host evolves beyond reality. Silence.

By Fairest Blood

Michelle Mangano

The Mirror has never been a passive bystander. Many a tragedy has been brought about by its meddling. And more will come to pass.

How many times has a Queen, possessed with her own beauty, asked the ultimate question? The question that, in her mind, has only one answer?

Far too many.

But the Mirror always knows what to say. “You are the most beautiful of all, my Queen,” it coos. “Only you.” The Mirror repeats these words, inflating the Queen’s ego until it consumes her entire being.

Not all of the Queens the Mirror served in the past were wicked. In fact, many of them were quite good in the beginning. But the Mirror poisons their minds with its snake tongue. Along with sugared lies, the Mirror whispers of the many dangers the Queen’s rule faces: foreign spies, barbarian invaders, and the envious in and outside the court. It doesn’t take long for the kindness and love within the Queens’ hearts to curdle into paranoia. The Mirror becomes the Queen’s confidant, seated at the right hand of power.

Once the Queen is ripe with vanity, the Mirror allows the first axe to fall. Now, there is a new answer to her famous question. “Although you are indeed beautiful, my Queen,” it sighs, “there is one who is lovelier than even you.”

Oh, how it enjoys the look on each Queen’s face. The darkness within her comes forth at that moment, perverting her lovely face. She then asks the same question they all do.

“Who is it?”

It is then that the second player in the tragedy is introduced: the innocent maiden. While this role is usually fulfilled by the Queen’s stepdaughter, the Mirror provides a substitute if there was no such relation: a pretty village girl, perhaps, or a princess from a rival kingdom. In the rarest cases, the Queen’s own beloved daughter is marked for the slaughter. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter who exactly the girl is. The Queen always swears vengeance against her young rival.

At this point, the Mirror lets the Queen decide how to proceed. Every now and again, it suggests a gruesome method of killing the maiden once she was found: ripping out the young girl’s heart and devouring it raw; taking a bath in her boiling blood; drinking a vial of the maiden’s tears as she slowly dies on the stake. Though the Queen rarely got to try out these colorful recommendations, they wet her thirst for violence and speed her onward.

All too soon, after many failures and rather predictable twists, the Queen’s reign comes to a sudden and violent end. Her defeat is inevitable and absolute. There is no

changing it. When the time comes, the Mirror lets the girl decide how her predecessor should be dealt with. It needs to know if the girl has potential. If she has the old Queen executed, then she is suitable for the Mirror's needs. More often than not, the victorious girls are far crueler than the Queens could ever be, despite the former being championed as pure and innocent.

When the old blood is finally scrubbed off the stone floors, the Mirror's real work begins. The Mirror has to convince the girl-queen to trust its counsel. The crown is heavy, after all. The new Queen needs someone to trust, someone who knows how things work in this new life. This was especially true for the ones who are not used to royalty. Once the Mirror is accepted into her inner circle, the calamity begins anew. This time, however, it is the girl's turn to act as the aggressor against her own little rival.

Why does the Mirror do this? It is simple: out of necessity.

There were times where the Queen is clever enough to distinguish the pattern and escape her own horrible fate. But the Mirror is not discouraged when this happens. It has a knack for choosing beautiful women with a flair for butchery. To them, the fairest always conquered. There has to be a Queen for the fairest to fight, so that, in her time, the fairest could defeat her and rule. The Mirror has seen this pattern play out again and again, and it sees no point in changing things now.

After all, everyone loves a good story.

For Amelia: Changeling Child

Rachel Carleton

We stood in the fairy ring, hand in hand,
imagining ourselves changeling daughters
of the Fairy Queen. Exploring the trees
between your house and mine, we'd weave
strands of flowers in our hair,
picturing gossamer wings sprouting
from our backs as our bodies shrunk
to the size of dolls. When your hair

began to fall out, I thought you
had started the transformation from girl
to Fairy Princess. You got to wear
knit caps to school in pink and green yarn:
our favorite colors. Each time I visited—
bearing sprigs of daisies and cardinal feathers
carefully picked from the patches of sunlight
nourishing the fairy homes—you were smaller,

adjusting to your new body. When your parents
called, saying that you were gone, I ran out
into our kingdom, searching for a flash
of your smile among the fiery October leaves.
I shouted your name into the trees until my voice
cracked, answered only by the rustling branches
as you played tag with your new friends.



Within the Bones

J.D. Donnelly

[exit_procedure/message.doc]

Emily Catedral

Pronouns are difficult, but I'll try to keep this natural with a straightforward account. I was informed that most people coming out of the procedure want to know why they chose the operation, so I'll try to be clear, but succinct on that reason. The other documents should cover your other questions.

I was born eighteen years ago with a minor gene mutation that resulted in an aberration in my hippocampus. Had this occurred before the universal adoption of Maxithymet®, I would have been diagnosed with a slightly below-average long-term memory, that would have been the end of it. From the research I've done, I would have likely needed to review a bit more, and maybe work on study skills with a tutor. I would have kept pace though, I know I would have.

When Maxithymet® hit the market initially, the price kept it out of the reach of many. After just a few years, however, the government determined that the drug skewed the playing field too severely. People who couldn't afford it were, in most fields, simply overpowered by those who could. Banning Maxith, as people came to call it, would have placed the country at too great a disadvantage to other countries on the international market. Instead, the government declared access to Maxith to be a universal right of all the country's citizens. That happened with the passage of the "Right to Recall Act" that passed in May 15th, 73 years ago, and I know that date 'the old-fashioned way."

Thus we entered the age of perfect recall. The entire school system reformed, our culture reformed, entertainment reformed, everything changed in a thousand different ways that I don't think anyone could ever truly understand, even if they did remember.

Of course, I only think that because, due to the aberration in my hippocampus, I am unable to take Maxithymet®. The changes it makes and maintains over time would damage my already shitty memory.

People like me are rare enough that there isn't much procedure for how society "deals" with us. My parents have perfect recall, and so does my

older brother. We're not like those people who live isolated and refuse the Maxith that would be provided to them for free by the state. They generally teach their kids whatever sort of history they think is right and stay away from most "normal" people.

In any case, I'm not there. If I'd been brought up in a family like that, then I wouldn't have been so different, but I can't say that I think mainstream society is really evil or something. Obviously I don't, or I wouldn't be writing this, I suppose.

So I struggled through school, taking the non-express classes and every alt. ed. option that was offered. From what I've researched, school has always sucked for those outside the purview of "normal," but all I can really know is my own experiences. I used to know a dyslexic kid named Taylor whose first instinct was to spell every word wrong. I still finished last, as usual, in the spelling units because while I struggled to remember and make natural the rules for how it worked, Taylor just memorized all the correct spellings with one glance at the list and it never mattered that the rules couldn't stick right with the dyslexia.

It really sucks when you're a freak for having to ask for somebody's name more than once, ever. Most people think it's an insult, because with "everybody" on Maxith, consciously choosing not to remember someone's name is a blatant slight. If I explained that I wasn't *on* Maxith, I went from being rude to being a stupid freak.

The last time I had a friend, Maria, a few years ago, things were pretty good because I thought she understood the differences between us. She really seemed to, but she also couldn't quite *get* how differently people treated us. There's a difference between having perfect recall, perfect memory from the time you're four where you never forget anything and everything is so clear that half of kindergarten is kids just learning to balance between living in the present and not falling back into the perfect, real-time memory of seeing a movie the previous weekend while I toddled around class taking an extra week longer to tie my shoes—

Sorry, I get carried away sometimes. I'm told it's because, with my imperfect memory, I'm less able to process lessons I've learned. That's why I *still* get carried away, instead of it happening once or twice before I

just stopped. But I was saying that there's a difference between someone having perfect recall and them actually understanding.

Maria, well, she could recite the stories I told her back to me with better accuracy than I told them, but she never quite understood. For years she thought my flawed memory was a bit romantic, still running the same pathways humans used for millennia where we re-write our memories slightly every time we think of them.

The government puts out bulletins on why Maxithymet® is good for everyone and sometimes it includes stuff about how the divorce rate used to be higher, and people just used to be worse at being people because they could just rewrite their whole lives in their heads, only holding onto stuff that supported their worst views and forgetting anything that contradicted what they wanted to believe. Perfect recall means people can't ignore those issues.

But yeah. Maria. Two years ago, we got in a fight and because I'm flawed, I can hardly remember what we were *actually* fighting about. It just ended up in this place where I insisted that something happened one way, really, that what had happened meant this one thing. She insisted that my glitchy memory had me thinking about it all wrong. We ended up in a fight that had a lot of dialogue I don't remember, but what it meant was that, because I couldn't remember perfectly, I had to be wrong. What it meant was that, because it was my faulty brain that started this mess, that meant to her that the government fliers were right about why Maxithymet® is best. Because, basically, when people like me remember everything wrong, we just mess life up for the normal people.

Then she quoted the entire pamphlet at me, because she knew I hated it when people did that just to prove a point to me.

I said she was being a bitch, and then Maria just started quoting for me, word for word, every tiny mistake, every minor insult I'd ever said to her since we were seven. Then, she recited, without pause, every small slight I'd paid her over the years. Every time I'd forgotten the order of her favorite colors, or the one time we were singing her favorite song together at her birthday party, and I messed up the words in front of everyone.

They say that starting kids on Maxith at four is best. It's the perfect compromise of ages where they're not too young, but not too old to

adjust to it. I hope the latter isn't too true. Personally, however, I've always wondered what that transition is like. Because until then, they're like me, forgetful and imperfect. Most people I know say that they remember having memories from before they started Maxith, but that getting perfect recall apparently just outshined the vividness of their previous memories, like a washed-out, badly lit holo-pic next to a good one. The contrast just makes the over-lit holo look worse, and you can see even less detail than usual.

I keep a collection of over-lit holo-pics in my room. Maybe you'll find them. I don't know whether or not that will mean anything to you, but I hope you find them.

Anyway, I applied for a digi-school exemption after the Maria thing. Within a few days, everyone in school could recite perfectly just how I looked when I started to cry. I was granted an exemption, and I managed to graduate a few weeks ago. Kind of sad that it won't really matter soon, but that's what got me here. I found out about an experimental procedure that Maxith's makers were working on. They needed some test subjects for this hippocampus adjustment for people like me who are unable to take Maxithymet®.

They liked my essay well enough, and now here I am, sitting at a table, dictating this letter to the comp they gave me, and scratching at my head because they had to shave it. My skin looks weird and pale there, but you'll probably have seen that. Hopefully it ends up matching the rest of my brown skin before they let you go. Let me go?

Pronouns are confusing.

The procedure, as I understand it, is destructive in nature. In order to properly adjust my hippocampus so that my aberration becomes irrelevant, they'll need to basically wipe my memory. I'll still have bits and pieces of other stuff I've learned (apparently physical memory keeps fairly intact, so you should go try and play piano first thing to see how much your fingers remember from mine) but eighteen years will be gone.

The rest of my life, however, the rest of your life I guess, will come through perfectly. The 18 years I have stored are flawed and glitchy. I don't remember most of it, to be honest. It used to be that most people never did, but that's not good enough anymore.

Our parents are opposed to this procedure, but now that I'm

eighteen, I've made this decision for us, and our participation in the experiment pays for what the fees would be. Please trust me when I say that the details, the few I remember, aren't what I'd want to know if I had the chance to start over.

You'll have to re-learn a bunch of stuff, but you're older and you'll have some "residual pathways" (that's what the Maxith makers called them) that should accelerate your learning. Apparently you'll be reading at my current level within a month, based on the program they have set up for your post-procedure rehabilitation.

So when you read this, please remember to have mercy because, as imperfect as my memory is, I think people have forgotten. There are still people who can't fit in, they should be part of the other files I've left on general acquaintances, and they need someone "on the inside" to make sure people understand.

And you *need* to understand. Try to do more than remember, but know the why and the how. Remember this letter, as if it will take effort, and find those pathways to recalling what it means to be excluded.

Please don't forget. I know that you can't.