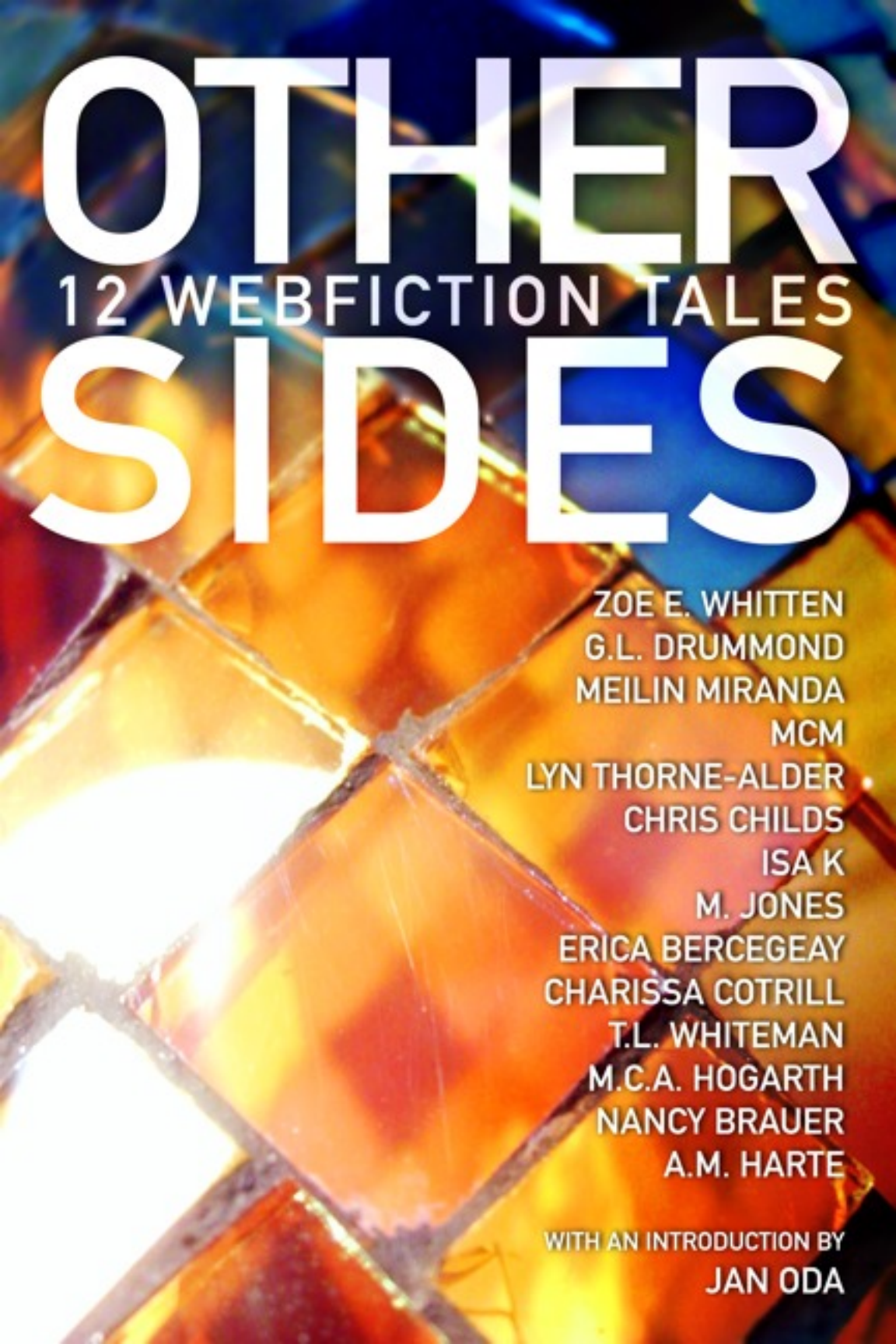




OTHER 12 WEBFICTION TALES SIDES

ZOE E. WHITTEN

G.L. DRUMMOND

MEILIN MIRANDA

MCM

LYN THORNE-ALDER

CHRIS CHILDS

ISA K

M. JONES

ERICA BERCEGEAY

CHARISSA COTRILL

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
JAN ODA



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Introduction by Jan Oda

We're living in exciting times. The dwindling of print publishing, the rise of ebooks, apps and tablets — it is said that the digital revolution will have a bigger impact than the invention of the printing press. I'm not sure if this is true — if e-publishing will make a change in how stories are told from now on.

What I do know is that I am part of a community which has been experimenting with one of the older digital inventions, a community which has been telling tales online. The internet is a marvellous place of discovery, communication and socializing, and when you mix that with fiction, sometimes unexpected beauty arises.

I'm proud to present you with twelve authors who've built worlds in their own little corner of the internet, who've woven stories for and with their audience. Some of them have published in more experimental ways than others, some depend on reader interaction, others simply like to share their fabrications. But all are tellers of tales, small and large.

The internet is a big place, and it can be quite a hassle to find what you are looking for. I hope that by stumbling on this small collection, you'll enjoy the opportunity to sample some of their work, and maybe you'll be tempted to pay a visit to their worlds.

Sincerely,

Jan Oda

Chief Editor

Ergofiction Magazine

OTHER SIDES

Walking Home With Strangers

Zoe E. Whitten

Excuse me? Oh! Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. I just wanted to ask for a lighter, if you've—great, thanks.

Mmmm, nothing like the taste of a slow suicide, right? Heh, now that's Marlboro country.

I guess you're new to this neighborhood. I'm very good with faces, and I've never seen yours. When did you move in?

Ah, good, probably still haven't unpacked anything but the essentials yet.

So what do you do? Oh, a nurse! That's great! Well...yeah...yes, I would think so, with all that blood and needles. Just—brrrrr. But still, it's a good job, something you can be proud to tell the family about.

I'm...well I'm between careers right now. I've just recently left my old profession behind, and I'm still not sure what to do with myself.

I don't know. I'd be reluctant to tell you, since we've just met. Hahahaha! A gigolo? That's very flattering, but no...I was a thief.

Ah, see? Now you're looking around. You're more alert, like you expect me to do something. Well you can relax. I gave up the habit, and I'm just walking home right now.

No, it wasn't an easy job. Being a good thief means keeping up on the latest security systems, and every job required meticulous planning.

Yeah, I did all right. If I gave you my name, you wouldn't find a record for me, which I think speaks volumes about my credentials.

Heh, no, I never whacked anyone. I rarely worked for the mafia. You pull too many jobs for those guys, and they think they fucking own—

Sorry, I'll watch my mouth. But no, I didn't like dealing with other criminals, except the guys who fenced stuff for me. And I didn't trust those guys as far as I could throw them.

I suppose I retired for a lot of reasons...no, that's a lie. I quit over one vampire, and the rest of the pack have made...oh, that's amusing?

I see. Well, given your logic, you've never seen a thief until meeting me; ergo, thieves don't exist. You want proof I'm a thief? Okay, see that door over there? Now look at me. Is this your wallet?

Oh relax! Here, you can have it back. Heh, is this your driver's license and credit card? See? Now you believe me. Calm down, I gave it back. Yes, your money is all there! Stop counting it in the open like some backwoods rube. You can get mugged that way.

Yeah, I didn't believe in the vamps myself until just a few months ago. Nah, never mind. I see you already think I'm crazy.

You don't really want to hear this. You don't even believe me.

Well...if you're sure.

Four months ago, I moved into Dallas. I moved about once every six months to work new cities. It kept me off the fuzz radar, and I could fence most of my stuff on the internet. No, not eBay. Don't you know that place is only for scammers and collectors? I was a thief, not a scammer. Of course there's a difference.

It doesn't matter how I sold my things. Besides, we aren't talking about the working lives of thieves.

I was getting settled in for a job. The mark was a jewelry store downtown with a vault that a four year old could have broken into. I was in the alley behind the building, and I was just about to unpack my toolkit when—

My toolkit? Uh, well it's like a fanny pack; but instead of a pouch, the pack unrolled to give me access to lock picks, my drill bits, a battery-powered Dremel hand tool, and a stethoscope. I kept other tools in a backpack, but those changed depending on the job. Just then, I was carrying a bigger drill, a handheld acetylene torch, and several rods of thermite. That's a special mixture of rust and aluminum which burns hot enough to eat through carbon steel.

The thermite was my last line of attack if I wasn't able to crack the safe using my toolkit. I was just about to start working the door when I heard a startled cry. A second later, I heard feet shuffling. From the voice and the

scrape of the heels on the pavement, I guessed it was a woman in high-heeled shoes.

I looked to the end of the alley, and this woman staggered around the corner of the building. She was hunched over, and she looked drunk with the way her legs kept wobbling.

She passed under a light, and I thought she was barfing wine, because red liquid was gushing from her. It looked like she had her hand over her mouth.

Then she raised her head, and I saw she clutched her throat. Blood poured between her fingers and coated the back of her hand before rolling down her chest to stain her dress.

Behind her, a pale skinned man walk around the corner. I thought he had a dark birthmark or some kind of makeup over his eyes and nose.

I ducked down behind a dumpster, and I didn't think he'd seen me. His attention was focused on the woman, giving me time to get to know his face.

When he stepped under the light, I saw a violet streak painted on his face. By the time he grabbed the woman, I'd pieced together what happened. The woman walked to her car with her pepper spray key ring in her hand. She'd been spun around and cut before she could react, but she'd managed to get off one burst of tinted pepper spray in his eyes.

I wondered if I was watching a hit, or if the woman was just another random victim of a serial killer.

My attention moved to the man's hand, where I expected to find a knife. He didn't have one, and I wondered if he dropped it until he grabbed a handful of the woman's hair and yanked her head up. His other hand clutched her wrist and pried it down to expose the gaping hole in her neck.

Then he opened his mouth wider than any human being possibly could. I heard his jaw pop twice, and I saw the row of pointed fangs in his mouth just before he latched onto the wound.

His black eyes rolled back in his head while he drank, and the woman whimpered before she went limp. She didn't have that much blood left, so I think she was a light snack.

What? Yes, of course I was terrified. My heart was pounding in my chest, and I'd clapped both my hands over my mouth. Whether it was to muffle my panicked breathing or keep me from vomiting, I can't say. I

couldn't even think straight, and when I did, my first thought was, *This can't be real.*

But as scared as I was watching the woman die, it was nothing compared to the terror I felt when he dropped her body and his eyes rolled down to look directly at me.

In the vampire movies, vampires always wear some kind of suit, you know? I remember thinking as a kid how that was bullsh—malarkey. Their dry cleaners would spot the bloodstains, and then the vampire would be caught, right?

This guy wasn't wearing a suit. He was wearing an old, creased, black leather jacket. It was only shiny where the woman's blood had smeared into it. He wore black jeans and combat boots.

He stepped toward me, and my brain screamed at me to run. I turned and bolted.

While I ran, I thought of every vampire movie I'd ever watched, trying to think of some way to defend myself.

I decided church was my best bet. I ran out of the alley and headed for one of those megachurches. You know what I mean, right? Big white building with a massive cross and not much in the way of personality. Say what you will about the Catholics—at least they build churches with style.

Not the place I was headed. It was just a white box. Without the cross, it could have been an office or a store. For me, that was a good thing, because the doors of the church were glass. I unclipped my toolkit as I ran, and when I reached the door, I slammed the kit into the glass.

Huh? Oh, this is your place? All right, it was nice to—

No, I couldn't keep going unless you wanted to sit out here on the steps and listen. Yeah? All right then.

I dipped under the metal handle and backed away from the door. I imagined the vampire would scowl at the door awhile before he went to seek another victim. Instead, he went to a locked door and pulled it open.

The sound of the lock breaking was hideously loud, and I heard a pop as a fracture opened across the glass.

And then he was inside the church lobby, and I was feeling very foolish. I dropped my toolkit and started backing up before I whispered, "So... churches don't work?"

The son of a—of a gun laughed at me. It was a warm sound, like he was in high spirits after having to chase his food down. He said, “No, churches don’t work, nor do crucifixes.”

I backed into the open doors of the church. Stalling for time, I asked, “How about garlic or holy water?”

He grinned at me, and I could see his teeth were growing longer. He asked, “Do you have any holy water or garlic?”

I had a thought then, so I said, “I don’t know, let me check.”

I pulled off my backpack and unzipped it, and acted like I was rummaging my hand around. But the instant my hand was in the bag, I’d already grabbed the torch and one of the thermite rods.

I said, “No, I guess not. Does spitting in a church make it holy water?”

Again he laughed, and even if it sounded warm and friendly, waves of shock rippled down my back. He held out his hand in invitation and said, “Try it and find out.”

So I did, and he slapped that goober right out of the air. He laughed again and leapt at me so fast he almost blurred. I dropped my bag and let it fall away from the thermite rod and torch. I don’t think he even saw the rod until it was sticking out of his chest. I’d punched it up into his ribs while sidestepping the lunge.

No, he didn’t explode. Thermite doesn’t explode anyway. You light the magnesium tipped end of a rod, and the thermite powder ignites as it’s poured out on your working surface. Just to get the magnesium tip to burn, you have to use a torch about three or four seconds, so obviously, my plan wasn’t to burn him up. I just wanted to wound him, and the rods were all I had.

It did slow him down, and I mean a lot. I’d pushed the rod through one of his lungs, and his blood was dripping on the carpet fast enough to make a small puddle. I picked up my bag to retrieve another rod, and then I ignited the torch.

At the sound, he looked at me, and all the false good cheer was gone from his rapidly distorting face. His mouth was so full of pointed teeth that his lips were stretched in a wide O shape, and his brow furrowed down before it bulged out. His eyes were lost in a deep pocket of shadow, and something about that nearly stopped my heart. Even now, I’m not sure

why. I think it had something to do with how he looked like his eyes were gone, and yet he was still staring at me.

He spoke, but his words were so slurred through his grill of teeth that I had no idea what he'd said. Then he waved his hand, and I understood. He'd said, "Try again."

My mouth went dry, and I shook my head, moving the torch to the tip of the rod. I said, "Nah, I'll go with a new trick."

I had two plans forming at the same time. If he leapt at me and the rod ignited, I was going to sink it into his shoulder and let the white-hot slag burn a hole through him. If he stood there waiting, I was going to fling the rod, sending a burst of slag at him.

But as soon as the magnesium lit up, the bright white light made him throw a hand in front of his face. He leapt, but he went up and over my head instead of coming at me. I pivoted around on my heel, and when he landed, I flung out the rod.

My plan's flaw was exposed when inertia emptied the hot slag out and sent thermite powder out across most of the arc. A ball of the white hot metal made contact with the side of his shoulder.

His jaw unhinged down to his throat, and he roared in agony. His cry was so loud that I fell to my knees and dropped the torch.

Luckily for me, he didn't want to press his advantage. Then again, it might have been the thermite carving a blackened trail of flesh down his upper arm. He attempted to reach for the slag, which resulted in another pained roar.

Then he turned away from me and ran out of the church, bellowing the whole way like a beast in his death throes.

I knelt in stunned silence until the crackling sound of fire alerted me to the two rows of wooden benches which were starting to burn. I cut off the torch and took out another rod, just in case he came back for round two. Then I ran to collect my toolkit and get out of the church before the cops showed up. With that guy's roaring, I knew someone was going to be arriving soon.

I made it back to my car and drove home as fast as I could. Then I spent the next two days making my peace with God. And when I didn't get killed, I realized I might have to make good on my promises.

See, the whole time I was praying, “God, if I live through this, I promise I won’t steal anything else.”

Hey, can I borrow that lighter again? Thanks.

So, that’s my story. Pretty crazy, huh? What did he look like? Well, if you look casually to your left back the way we’ve come, you’ll see him standing by a streetlight, I said casually.

No, he isn’t following me. He was following you. You should get upstairs and bolt the door. Once you’re inside, he won’t know which apartment is yours. That’s why I asked you to sit out here instead of trying to invite myself in. Oh, and you’re welcome.

See you around.

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Zoe E. Whitten lives in Milan with her husband. She describes writing as her hobby, but has put enough hours in over the last few years that it may safely be called an obsession instead. She is an avid fan of horror, fantasy and sci-fi, and her writing fuses elements from each genre into her weird fiction amalgams. For more of Zoe’s writing see www.zoewhitten.com

The Psionics: One for the Road

G. L. Drummond

2010

From the backseat came a loud crack of gum. Logan glanced over his shoulder to find Bethany sitting back with a grin on her face. The teen informed him, "Hunter's zoned out."

He turned his attention to the young man. ~**Hunter?**~

No answer. Hunter's brown eyes were unfocused, staring straight ahead. Logan tried verbally. "Hunter? Do you sense something?"

"Psi Hunters. They're after someone."

Logan's next question was "Can we get there first?" He glanced at the other five kids while asking. Excitement shone from each face.

"Yes. Turn left," Hunter demanded, snapping to full awareness. Tanya frowned, but slowed and turned the van as directed. Twenty minutes later, she parked it alongside a curb.

"Well?" Logan asked the younger man once they'd both exited the vehicle. They resembled one another, both being dark of hair and eyes, with athletically muscular builds. Logan was a decade older; thirty to Hunter's twenty.

Hunter was gazing across the street at a brightly painted building. Taking a look, Logan saw that it was a daycare. "In there."

"Damn, we can't just waltz in." Logan frowned.

"Female. Young." Hunter's voice was a monotone. He stared as though he could see through the front wall of the daycare. *Shit. A kid?* Sighing, Logan glanced at the van. ~**Tanya**~

~**What?**~ She met his gaze through the windshield. He grinned.
~**We're about to become kidnappers**~

~**Lovely**~ Her mental tone was dry. ~**Better us than them**~

She had a point, and they *were* barely staying ahead of the enemy. If it weren't for Hunter, this new Psionic would probably end up dead or captured. But thanks to luck and his finding/tracking talents, here they were. Right place, right time.

"Let's go back to the van and figure out how we're going to play this," Logan said, receiving a slight nod from the other. Once beside the van, the older man stuck his head into the passenger window.

"I'm hungry," Mark mumbled from the very back. Beside him, Rachel scowled with crossed arms. "I have to pee."

"Bored now." Bethany cracked her gum. A flash of irritation zinging across his face, Jeff told her "Shut up. Jesus."

Turning to look at him, she replied, "You shut up!"

Their griping promised Logan a headache, and caused a flash of gratitude that Hunter was quiet. Even though it meant he wondered what went on in the kid's head most of the time.

Ian was quiet too. Logan glanced at him. The pudgy teen was the youngest at sixteen.

~**Quiet!**~ Tanya's icy mental command caused silence. "Well?"

"Female and young, in that daycare," Logan reported.

"How young?" She studied Hunter, who'd paused at the fender panel to continue staring at the building. "Or does he know?"

"Don't think he does, or he'd have said so." Logan shrugged. "Probably better to follow and snatch."

"You're gonna steal some little kid?" The question came from Bethany, who twirled a lock of blue-dyed hair while waiting for his answer. "Seriously?"

"If I have to, yeah."

"Dude," she muttered, impressed. Cars began arriving about then. Logan checked his watch: 5:20 pm.

~**Logan**~ Tanya nodded at Hunter, who was leaning on the hood, intently watching the doors of the daycare as they opened. Pulling his head out of the window, Logan stepped to the younger man's side. Hunter was perfectly still, his gaze focusing on someone.

Head turning to survey the people across the street, Logan picked out the object of Hunter's interest. A girl was herding a group of children towards the street, while carrying a stop sign. "The blonde?"

"Yes." Hunter's restrained eagerness reminded Logan of a hunting dog on point.

"Easy," he cautioned. He didn't grab Hunter, who preferred not to be touched. With personal experience in why, Logan didn't blame him and tried to respect that preference as much as possible.

The girl stepped out into the street, holding the sign up, and gestured the children across. A squeal of tires sounded, followed by black SUV tearing around the corner. The engine roared as it sped towards them.

Logan cursed, dashing towards the street behind Hunter, who was already moving.

There were screams of fear, and the girl looked up from a child speaking to her. In the split second available, Logan saw her smile disappear, horror taking its place before a sort of fearful determination set in and she flung her free hand up.

Time seemed to slow.

The SUV crashed into an invisible wall as the children scattered. It slid to a noisy halt inches from her out-stretched hand, front wheels crazily canted due to a broken axle. Steam hissed from the crushed engine as she stared at the two men inside the vehicle. A few frozen seconds passed before she dropped the sign and fled.

Realizing he had hold of two kids, Logan gently pushed them towards the sidewalk. Hunter had a kid under each arm and set them down.

The Psi Hunter team had recovered from their surprise. Leaving the vehicle, they went after the girl. Logan caught Hunter's arm before the younger man set off in pursuit, dragging him across the street.

"What's her name?" he asked the women and children gathered there. Blank looks, but then the little boy who'd been talking to her began to cry. "They're gonna hurt Miss Kia!"

Kia. Logan released Hunter, and both men began to run. Behind them, Tanya pulled the van out and made a U-turn.

Ohgodohgodohgod Kia glanced back. *They're going to kill me!*

All those years of hiding what she could do, gone in an instant. Have to hide. She frantically looked for a place. Ducking between two buildings, she discovered an alley and turned right, only to be brought up short by a chain link fence. Whirling around, she discovered the Psi Hunters closing in.

Kia whimpered, slowly backing up and overcome with terror as both held up guns, their faces expressionless. *Pleasepleaseplease*

Hunter jumped, coming down on one like an avenging angel, with a dull cracking sound instantly following. Grimacing, Logan used his TK to fling the second one into the brick wall of one building. There was a sound like a ripe melon bursting as the man's head struck.

Kia's eyes rolled up, her body dropping. Hunter silently watched as Logan teleported, catching and hefting her limp figure. "We have to get out of here. Now." ~**Tanya!**~

~**Stop yelling. I'm right here**~ The van appeared in the alley entrance.

"Take the front seat," he ordered Hunter as they hurried to the vehicle. Bethany and Ian were already moving out of the second seat. Climbing in, Logan slammed the door shut. "Go."

Laying the girl down, he checked her pulse, which was fast and light. "Give me a blanket."

One of the kids passed the requested item forward. Logan spread it over her and settled in the floorboard. "Well, that was fun."

"Are they dead?" Tanya asked.

"Yeah. Good thing we were headed out of town." Logan glanced at Hunter. Mission completed, the younger man was gazing straight ahead. "Nice job, kid."

Hunter gave no sign he'd heard.

* * *

The humming vibration of tires on asphalt seeped into Kia's mind. Regaining consciousness, she was still until memory flooded back. Lunging up and away from the man watching, she scrambled to the far end of the seat.

"Take it easy, Kia. We're not going to hurt you." Logan rose and sat, stretching his legs out with a grateful sigh.

“That was so damn cool, the way you crushed their truck!” Bethany popped up, bright blue eyes dancing with excitement. “Just BAM! Instant motor toast!”

Realizing the van was full of people, Kia shivered while pulling the blanket close. “Wh-who are you?”

“Logan. The driver is Tanya, that’s Hunter and,” he continued the introductions while watching her wide, fearful eyes. **~We’re Psionics like you, Kia~**

“I-I don’t understand.”

Jeff propped his arms on the seat’s back and grinned at her. “You will.”

Scenes from movies and books swirled around in Kia’s mind. “Wh-where are y-you taking me?”

“Somewhere safe, baby,” Logan promised, strangely charmed by her obvious fear and vulnerability. He ignored the sharp glance Tanya threw via the rearview mirror.

“We’re like, totally gonna be superheroes,” Bethany enthused. Rolling his eyes, Jeff sat back.

“B-but I want, I d-don’t want...I want to go home.” Kia gave Logan a pleading look. “Please?”

He shook his head, voice gentle. “You’re not safe there anymore. They know about you.”

Bethany offered a pack of gum. “Wanna piece?”

Shrinking away, Kia almost fell off the seat. “N-no thank you.”

Logan tried to pick up her thoughts, but the girl had a good, solid shield. It was just like Ian’s and why they’d been tagged by the Psi Hunters. The other four kids had been on the streets. They’d learned to keep a low-level shield of white noise over their true mental shields instead of presenting a completely blank surface.

~Kia, everything will be fine~ She stared at him, gray eyes wide and frightened. Offering a reassuring smile, Logan continued. **~Hunter and I have both spent time in the so-called care of the project. Believe me, you don’t want to end up there~**

~I just want to go home~ Her mental voice was light and uncertain, but confirmed that she could both hear and send.

~You're going to have a new home, with us. Everything will turn out just fine~

Kia pulled the blanket up to her chin, huddling in the seat. **~What did she mean?~**

Realizing she was referring to Bethany, Logan grinned. **~Bethany's exaggerating. Tanya and I are going to teach you how to protect yourself. We're working out ways to rescue other Psionics, maybe find out how many of us there really are~**

~I don't want to~ *I want to go home, what will happen to my parents, why is this happening to me, why can't I be normal?* Her mind babbled, shield cracking a bit.

~Shh, baby. Everything will work out~ Logan soothed. **~You'll see~**

* * *

"We have to fly?" Rachel scowled, twisting her dark braid around a finger. "I don't fly."

"We won't be in the plane long. We'll teleport once we're in the air," Logan informed them. "Keeps our location more secure."

"I'm like, totally in." Bethany bounced up and down.

"I can't do that," Ian protested.

"Tanya and I will handle it." Logan ruffled the pudgy teen's dark blond hair. "Don't worry. We haven't lost a passenger yet."

Mark stretched and yawned before asking, "Where are we going?"

"Some place with a great beach, big house and all the sun you can handle."

"Awesome." Bethany started up the steps to the plane. "My tan needs work."

Logan herded them on board, noting that Hunter was hanging back, his gaze on their newest rescue. Kia was looking around, teeth sunk into her bottom lip.

"Come on, Kia. If you'd like, you can write to your parents and I'll make sure they get it." Holding out his hand, Logan knew the young woman was going to require special handling.

"I-I'm scared of heights." He wondered if the stuttering was an impediment, or caused by fear. "It's safe, I promise. Come on, baby, I'll hold your hand. It won't be long before we're on solid ground again."

His coaxing wasn't the reason she accepted the offer. Behind her, Hunter moved slightly, and after glancing at him, Kia grabbed on with a shaking hand. She didn't resist, but Logan could see reluctance coloring every line of her body while guiding her up the steps. Hunter followed silently. "Thatta girl."

"Everyone have a seat. We need to get moving," Tanya ordered, standing at the front of the cabin. Urging Kia into the seat next to Ian, Logan went over the tiny amount of information he'd collected from her. She was twenty and had been still living at home.

Her behavior made her seem younger; Kia had no confidence, was fearful and skittish.

"I'm scared of heights too," Ian confided. Logan watched her head turn, then smiled when she clasped the teen's hand. Patting the one he still held, he nodded to Tanya. The gray-haired woman responded with a faint smile before mentally informing the pilots they were ready for takeoff.

Six more saved. It wasn't a bad week's worth of work.

G.L. Drummond is a gun-toting alien with a fetish for fur and four-legged creatures who writes fiction & tweets. She also wields a mean katana and is prepared for the coming zombocalypse. For more of her writing see <http://midnightintentions.com/series/>

Dalston Junction

MeiLin Miranda

Hackney Central, London, 1898

It always amused Amelia to see Margaret's little round glasses steam over when she peered into the teapot. She herself had strong eyes, the only way in which she was stronger than Margaret, she mused. She returned her thoughts to the letter in her hand. "Another answer to our advertisement," she said. The handwriting jumped its lines, as if the writer had trouble controlling the pen, and ink blots spattered the page. "No lack of sad cases this week."

"So much the better for us," said Margaret, taking the letter. "Boy," she read aloud. "Three weeks old. 'Discretion called for.' Perfect." Margaret linked her hands behind her back and stretched. "Damnable corset, I'll never get used to it. Have you taken the last one's clothes to the pawn shop yet?"

"No," sighed Amelia. "I'll sort them over tea, shall I." A drooping, brown paper bundle tied with limp string stood on the trestle table. Margaret took up the tray sitting next to it, laden with the tea things, and strode through the kitchen door. Amelia tucked the sad package and her enormous pink challis shawl under her arm, and trailed after.

Once in the comfortable sitting room, she opened the package, thin hands moving among the tiny garments: two dresses; several flannel waists; two caps knitted in fine wool; miniscule shoes that shook in her trembling palm. "Shouldn't we ought to burn these? The pawn shop's bound to get suspicious at some point."

"Then use another one. There are only several dozen in London," said Margaret. The dull gold signet ring on her right hand clinked against the

porcelain tea things as she reached for cake. “We need the money for housekeeping. The money’s the whole point.”

Amelia examined the fine seams of a little dress of pale blue fine wool. Expensive fabric for a baby dress. Such care taken in the stitching. She wondered about the mother who’d made these things for her child. Amelia had only seen the woman for a few minutes, but fingering the dress brought a closeness she shouldn’t allow herself. “Pity the wee one won’t ever wear them.”

“Somebody’s ‘wee one’ will.” Margaret fixed her companion with a pinched eye. “I often wonder why you’re here, Amelia. You’re far too soft-hearted.”

Amelia’s fingers hovered over the sugar bowl. Two lumps? One? “I like babies.” None.

“You spend minutes with them. I do all the disposal work. I don’t see how it matters,” snorted Margaret between bites of cake.

“I don’t suppose it does,” murmured Amelia. She folded the tiny clothes into a neat pile, set the tiny shoes atop them, and drank her tea.

Later, she would obediently re-wrap the bundle in different paper and trot down the street. She would wish for the great pink shawl around her meager, gray-wool-clad shoulders; she was always cold here despite the layers of clothing. She would pawn the little bundle, and bring the money back to Margaret for housekeeping. Fastidious, records-obsessed Margaret would put the pawn ticket in her little basket full of tickets.

But now, Amelia threw the brown paper wrapper, the one with the baby’s name on it, into the fire. It flared briefly, then flew into ash.

* * *

They met the girl from the advertisement the next day at the Dalston Junction rail station. She was a miserable snip in a rusty black coat; her breath came in wispy threads in the cold air. She carried a tiny pink baby, snuggled against the chill until only his bemused eyes and flat little nose peeked from the wrappings. “Aah,” cooed Margaret, “and who’s this, then?”

“Manfred,” the girl said, so low that Amelia strained to hear her over the station’s clamor.

Amelia reached to take him, but Margaret intervened. “Manfred, hello, Manfred!” she said, plucking him from his mother.

"It's my father's name," said the girl. "I couldn't keep calling him Baby..." She teetered on the verge of tears, and clutched at Amelia's sleeve. "His new people, they will love him, won't they? They will love him?"

Amelia patted the girl's hand, but before she could answer, Margaret said, "Of course they will! They love him already, I'm sure! Now, don't worry, you're doing the right thing for everyone, dear."

"The right thing? The only thing!" said the girl, her voice rising. "His father won't...I can't work if..."

The baby started fussing, and Margaret made a face as she bounced him in her arms to quiet him; Amelia thought he wouldn't cry if she were the one holding him. "Let's not have a scene in the middle of the rail station," said Margaret. "Amelia? If you could take Miss—Collier, is it? Take Miss Collier to her train and Manfred and I shall get to know one another."

"Wait! His clothes!" The girl extended a little brown package, like all the other little brown packages.

Margaret snatched it from her hand and hurried away, walking with purposeful strides toward the ladies' lavatory. "The other matter, Amelia!" she called over her shoulder. Manfred gave a newborn's thin, puzzled wail as Margaret strode into the lavatory.

Amelia stared after her. So many times they'd done this before. Why did she hate it so this time, she wondered. Perhaps it was time to quit. But it was so easy, so lucrative—

She led the dazed girl through the brick archways to the platform; the girl kept looking over her shoulder toward the lavatory. "Oh, don't," murmured Amelia. "Don't look back, dear. He'll be all right. Now...the other matter."

"Oh." The girl broke from her daze. She pulled a knitted black wool miser's purse from her pocket and slid its rings apart. "It took me some time to get it—seven, eight...there. Fifteen pounds."

"That's right, a present for his new parents, to settle him in his new life," lied Amelia. "He'll be much happier where he's going, I promise you, Miss Collier. Here's your train, yes? Goodbye, now! Goodbye!"

Amelia didn't stay to see the girl off. She nearly ran from the platform, back through the arches to the lavatory entrance, where Margaret waited,

arms empty but for the little brown package. Amelia didn't ask where the baby was.

"Let's go home," said Margaret. "I want my tea."

"Did he give you any bother?"

Margaret linked her arm in Amelia's as they walked from the station. "Never one yet who did. I'm bigger than they are. I'm bigger than you, for that matter. What shall we buy with our fifteen pounds?" Amelia was frowning at the yellow-and-red fancy brickwork and the crenellations above the archways to the street. "Amelia, don't go into a brown study on me."

"I'm not." Amelia made an effort to bring herself into the moment, though she didn't like the moment. The moment was cold, sad and laced with guilt, though she knew it was for the best. It put bread on their table, and the babies these mothers surrendered had no lives anyway.

The two women walked on through the streets toward Hackney Village, trying to keep their long skirts from the winter muck. Amelia marveled at how she had learned to maneuver in these dresses, and the stays beneath them. She corseted herself first thing in the morning, and she maneuvered through the world in layers of cotton and wool as swaddled in her way as a baby, but always cold. They should be gone by summer, or at least moved on.

"She loved him so, I can't help but feel sad," Amelia said as they climbed the steps to their front door.

"Don't," said Margaret. "She's better off without a baby, and Little Manfred's in a better place than this."

* * *

"Why here?" fretted Amelia as they entered Spitalfields Market. "I prefer Dalston Junction. It's all over with quicker that way."

Margaret towed Amelia through the Market's fringes into the labyrinth of stalls. "We'll only have him a little while longer this way. The mother didn't want to meet at the train station. In a hurry, too. Wanted to see us immediately."

Food vendors' calls filled the air. "Pies! Pies hot and hot!" bellowed a man tending a squat, square pie-can; he opened its side and rotated the hot pies from the bottom near the coals to the top shelves, and the cooling

pies on top back to the bottom to warm. A man holding small fish on forks over a fire crooned, “Come and look at ‘em! Here’s toasters!”

Amelia never ate street food, never ate anything here unless she prepared it herself. She knew too much about the food here in London. She hadn’t eaten meat the entire time they’d been there unless she cooked it gray; the hanging, fly-specked carcasses on display here in the stalls, bone white and mottled red and brown, strengthened her decision no matter how enticing the “pies hot and hot” might be. The Market’s stench overwhelmed her: fish, muck, blood, and unwashed people.

“You’re feeling all right?” said Margaret. “You look pale. Not qualms again?”

They moved into the fruit and vegetable stalls; the smell abated somewhat. Children called to them, one tiny, barefoot girl who couldn’t have been more than seven piping, “Watercress, miss? Buy some cress?”

“Do you see her?” said Margaret. “That’s what the one we’re getting today would probably grow up to be—a barrow boy, at best. Better our way.”

“At least it’s quicker,” said Amelia.

They arrived at the other side of the market, the edges trailing off toward Petticoat Lane, and found their arranged meeting-place at the Jewish bookseller’s stall. Amelia pretended to thumb through the ragged merchandise as the bookseller argued with a studious-looking, hollow-cheeked young man over a teetering pile of volumes.

“Are you the lady from the advertisement?” whispered a voice.

Amelia looked up to see a young woman holding a bundle close to her chest: a tiny baby, days old. The young woman tried to blend in without much success; she looked disguised, in ill-fitting, down-at-heel clothes, but the cashmere shawl haphazardly wrapped around the baby must have cost a good deal. “I’m sorry I made you come here,” she said. “But I was afraid someone I knew might see me at the station. No one I know would ever come here. I’ve been...away.”

Amelia knew she meant a lying-in house, where the better-off hid their pregnant daughters. “Why didn’t you let the people there take care of the wee one? A boy, yes? May I see?” she added. She took the baby from its mother—no, she mustn’t think about her that way—and peeked at the little face. The baby’s eyes were drawn tight beneath a black powder puff of

hair, and his mouth worked in his sleep as if dreaming of the breast. Amelia's heart contracted.

The young woman spoke. "I wanted to make sure no one would ever—I wanted—I wanted to make sure..." She didn't finish, but the meaning was clear: she wanted to be sure the baby could never be traced back to her, to be sure she never had to think of him again, to be sure someone took care of him in a way she could not manage to do herself, unwanted though he was.

That always made it easier, thought Amelia. "What's his name?"

"He doesn't have one." The young woman turned to go without paying, perhaps thinking should could outpace a woman with a baby in her arms, but Margaret penned her against the bookseller's stall.

"The other matter," said Margaret.

The young woman flushed, dug in her purse, and thrust a twenty pound note at Margaret. "There, now let me pass!" she hissed. Margaret stepped aside, and the woman disappeared into the crowd.

"No brown paper parcel, eh?" said Margaret as they walked out of the market and doubled back down a different street toward home.

"Poor thing doesn't even have a name."

"Doesn't need a name where he's going. Let's hurry home, it's on the way to Dalston Junction. We can grab something to nibble on. Don't even take off your hat. We'll go in through the garden."

Amelia held the baby the entire way home from Spitalfields; whenever they had a baby for any length of time, Amelia held it. Rarely did she get the chance. She breathed in the scent emanating from his crown, the delicious smell that always tugged at her before Margaret disappeared with them into the station lavatory, only to come out alone. It wasn't good for her to indulge her longing, she reproved herself. They weren't in this world long enough for her to grow attached.

And yet.

She had no child of her own, would never have a child of her own. She had no family at all, and cursed inwardly at the women abandoning what she herself longed for. But she knew what an unmarried mother faced. No support from the father, no job but one open to her. And the children of prostitutes were as lost to their mothers as if they'd been given to a baby farmer in the first place. She and Margaret were baby farmers, she reflected,

though they had no “crop” to show for it. Instead, they had a comfortable enough living in Hackney off the fees the women paid them—and the pawn shops.

They walked through their garden at last and entered the kitchen through the back door. Amelia started toward the trestle table, but Margaret laid a restraining hand on her arm; noise, a great deal of it, came from the sitting room, covering the sound of their own entry. “Who is it?” whispered Amelia.

“Hush.”

“Look, guvnor,” called a man’s voice. “Pawn tickets. First one matches the number for Manfred Collier’s clothing. Must be a hundred of these here tickets.”

“Search the place,” came a higher, more nasal voice. “They’re supposed to have adopted the babies out. See what you can find in the way of records. Anything to show what’s happened to the Collier child. And take those tickets back to the shops. I wager we’ll find more baby clothes.”

“What d’you fink, sir?” said the first man.

“I think we’ve got a pair of murderesses, lads. We’ll be digging up the basement, and I wager we’ll find Manfred Collier there, along with who knows who else.”

Margaret’s eyes went wide behind her little glasses; she tugged Amelia back out the door, and propelled her to the garden gate. “It’s the cops. They’ll be looking for us as a pair. You go one way, I’ll go another. I’ll meet you at Dalston Junction.” Amelia turned left, Margaret right.

Amelia scurried against the bitter wind. Tears pricked her eyes, leaving cold tracks down her cheek; she pulled the shawl tight around the baby, hoping he would stay warm. She was tempted to keep going, to head for a different station and disappear into the countryside with the baby. It didn’t have to happen to this one; she could keep him, and love him. But she had no money for a ticket, or food, or lodging. And she was unmarried; she would find herself in the exact situation the desperate mothers they dealt with sought to escape.

Nothing for it but to meet Margaret at the rail station.

Amelia kept the threads of her composure past every policeman, through the red and yellow brick archways, and into the crowds,

unnoticed and unfollowed. She let out a long-held breath at the sight of Margaret striding through the archways toward her. “They’re right on my tail.” She seized Amelia’s arm and hauled her toward the ladies’ lavatory.

“Oi!” came a loud voice. “Oi! You two with the baby! Stop!” People were turning toward them. A hand reached out at them; Margaret pulled harder, and Amelia stumbled after her faster than before. She knew there’d be a bruise on her upper arm, but she didn’t care. They had to make it into the lavatory.

They charged through the door, thrusting past women to the last stall, pushing open its door to the angry squawk of its occupant. Margaret paid no heed. She slipped one arm around Amelia and pushed her signet ring against a tile in the wall, white like the others but with an odd, bluish tint at variance with the rest. Amelia closed her eyes and felt her body melt away.

* * *

Omaha, Nebraska, 2249

When Amelia had eyes to open again, she saw the darkened office she’d left behind a year before. Or two hundred years ahead. Time travel: so confusing. “The lights should have switched on as soon as we entered the office,” she said. She walked into the reception area, jiggling the now-restive baby. “No lights in here, either. What happened?”

“I don’t know.” Margaret opened a drawer in the small desk beside the wall they’d just come through, and brought out a ring that matched the one she already wore. She slipped it onto her left middle finger, brought her hands together, and spread them apart. A display materialized between them. She began tracing patterns through its filmy light, muttering to herself. “Crap. It’s six months later than I’d planned to be back. That’s what I get for hurrying. Our power’s been switched off for nonpayment? Good thing the drop has a backup source.” More patterns. Margaret’s fingers grew less fluid and more staccato, punching through the light as she pushed windows out of the way and summoned new ones. “Shit. Shit, shit, shit.”

“What’s wrong?”

“We’ve been found out, that’s what’s wrong,” muttered Margaret. She pulled up another display. “See? I set a trap in our cloud. Someone’s

tripped it. Rent's six months overdue along with utilities. Goddamn it, our guy should've..." She squinted at the display. "Landlord must've paid someone to crack the cloud to find out where we were. I bet we know the guy, too—our guy. Everything about the adoptions was in there. He'll tip the cops or he'll try to blackmail us, and I'm not having it. We're done."

Amelia hugged the baby until he gave a tiny squeak. "What's going to happen to him?"

"He fell into our laps, I just thought I'd take him through and contact one of the people on our waiting list, get him squared away, then hop back to Dalston Junction to the moment after I left you. We're stuck with him. Shit, what are we gonna do with him?"

Hope expanded Amelia's thin chest. "I'll take him."

Margaret turned from her screen; her arm and shoulder bisected it, the colored light running down her puffy black sleeves like bright inks. "What?"

"Why not? We'll just put me on the baby's identification as the adopting parent."

"Didn't I just tell you our guy is probably the one who turned us in?"

"But there are others who can do it, surely? We certainly have the money, more than enough. I'll use my share. We've been saving and saving, waiting until we were through with all this—I thought that's why we pawned the clothes and such in London to use as housekeeping! Margaret," she coaxed. "I have no one and nobody. Just you, and we're...I don't know, I think of you as my friend, but..." The baby began to cry; Amelia slipped her pinkie into his mouth, and he sucked vigorously, complaining around her finger as he did. "Let me keep him. Please."

Margaret kept scanning windows, discarding them, conjuring new ones. Her face drained of all color but the display's light, reflected in the archaic glasses perched on her nose. "No money." She drew a finger through the display. "Whatever we converted to jewelry in London is all we have left."

"What? Where is it?" said Amelia, trying to follow the data flow.

"Accounts frozen. Shit, just looking at them, I've tipped the cops off! What is the *matter* with me?" She punched at the screen, sending a ripple through the readout. "There must be some kind of reward—that'd pay our

back rent, all right. Goddamn it!” She whipped through the display like a frantic conductor. “They’ll come looking for the adoption records. They’re in my data unit, not in our cloud.”

“I wish you hadn’t been such a record-keeper. Those pawn tickets—”

“Yell at me later. We gotta go. Shit, we just got here! Calm down, Margaret,” she said to herself. She pulled up a new window and started to wave instructions into it.

The baby in the shawl gave a few whuffling noises, and Amelia jiggled him up and down. “Now, now, little man, I know you’re hungry— Where can we go without money and without getting tracked? And with no ID for the baby...Margaret?” In the corner, the fabricator whispered into life. The baby began a muffled rooting against Amelia’s shoulder, looking for a nipple. “Margaret!”

“Be quiet.” Margaret brought the rings together with a clack; the display died. She slipped the left-hand ring into her breast pocket and lifted the fabricator lid. She threw a duffel bag at Amelia, ran to the safe, palmed it open, and began sliding antique jewelry into a small purse. “Put that baby down and pack.”

Amelia deposited the baby on a nearby couch—he was much too young to roll off—and loaded archaic clothes and counterfeit money from the fabricator into the duffel bag. Dollars, she guessed. Worthless now, though it’d pass for real back in its day. How much was twenty dollars in real money? “Where are we going?”

“San Francisco.”

Amelia gaped. “How will we live there, exactly? In hazard suits?”

“Not *now*.” Margaret turned to the small input unit on the wall next to the safe and began punching in codes. “The only market for babies as strong as ours was the United States in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. They really wanted the white ones. Very lucrative. I have a drop in San Francisco in 1997 and an ID as an adoption lawyer. I made bank,” she grinned to herself. “I was gonna liquidate everything there into precious metals at some point and bring it forward, like we did with the jewelry.”

Amelia closed the duffel bag a little more forcefully than necessary. “Were you planning on telling me this at some point?” she said.

"I'm telling you now. You're the Victorian history expert. I always thought you'd be the one to fuck up—the less you knew, the better. So we portal, we destroy the drop, we're safe, we're rich. Stuck in a primitive backwater, but rich." Margaret finished her coding; her eyes swept the office. "I think we got everything." She picked up the duffel.

"What about him?" said Amelia, picking up the baby.

"What about him!" exploded Margaret.

"Can I—"

"Will you shut up? He's yours! I can set you and the baby up with ID no problem. No database security back then worth mentioning."

The baby fussed and rooted, and Amelia crooned to him. Of all the babies they'd carried from certain death from starvation and neglect in baby farms, of all the babies she'd had to give away as her own heart splintered, this one was hers. Amelia couldn't take him back even if the mother had wanted him. She wondered if this was how all the clients they'd sold babies to—delivered, she preferred to think of it as delivering babies—if they had felt this throat-closing joy. "Thank you."

"Eh. I'm tired anyway." Margaret pressed her ring into an indentation in the wall; the wall became a filmy haze. "The coordinates will erase as soon as we're through. One-way trip. C'mon." She stepped through the haze, and Amelia followed. "What will you name him?" Margaret said as they faded into the past.

"I think," Amelia answered, "I'll call him Dalston."

MeiLin Miranda is the pen name of Lynn Siprelle. She writes a series of novels called "An Intimate History of the Greater Kingdom," and the more comic webserial "Scryer's Gulch: Magic in the Wild, Wild West." Both are available in installments free on her website, MeiLinMiranda.com; Gulch updates Wednesdays, and History updates Mondays and Fridays. "History" book one, "Lovers and Beloveds," is also available as an ebook and a paperback, for those who don't want to wait an entire year to find out what happens. She lives in Portland, Oregon with her husband, two daughters, two cats, a snoring floppy dog, and far too much perfume and yarn.

The Little Problem

MCM

The cottage lay at the bottom of a long, gentle hill, traced around by a trickling stream, a patchwork quilt of orange and brown leaves scattered up the long walkway. Darvey waited behind the oak tree, shivering, watching the warm orange glow through the frosted glass windows. The air smelled of roasting marshmallows, lavender, and the kind of freshness you only get far, far away from cities. It made him want to retch.

“Perimeter’s clear,” said Kaps, ducking back behind the tree after having spent ten minutes creeping in the shadows in a feeble imitation of stealth. Kaps was eight feet tall and an alien species that appeared to be made of rock; his face looked like it’d been carved by a blind toddler with a jackhammer. Stealth was as natural to him as tap dancing was to a snake.

“So what do we do?” asked Darvey, checking his gun, making sure it was fully loaded with needles. “Last time I decided something, you told me I did it wrong.”

“You didn’t do it wrong, you just broke CSA protocol.”

The Controlled Substances Agency — the intergalactic narcotics cops — had protocols for everything from major drug busts to brushing your teeth. Darvey broke six of their protocols every morning just by getting out of bed.

“I’m not setting foot in that place,” Darvey said, shaking his head. “I’m tired of getting lectured all the time. So you tell me: what do we do?”

Kaps observed the scene, the peaceful valley they’d found themselves in, and shrugged. “Kick in the door and then kick some ass,” he said.

“That was my plan too.”

“Great minds, right?”

“You sure it’s not breaking protocol?”

“Hell yeah, it is. I’ll just tell ‘em it was your idea.”

Before Darvey could protest, Kaps marched to the cottage door, wound back, and kicked the door with all the force he had in his formidable body.

Unfortunately, the door seemed unimpressed. It didn’t bend, break or even creak. Kaps fell onto his back, stunned. “Your idea sucks!” he called back to Darvey.

“In my version, the door breaks down,” Darvey replied, safely hidden.

Kaps got to his feet, pushed his fist against the door, and laughed. “It’s metal painted to look like wood,” he said. “Crafty buggers.” He took two steps back and charged at the door, throwing all his weight at it at once.

The door refused his overtures.

“You might as well just use the handle,” Darvey called. “I think they know you’re coming!”

Kaps dusted himself off, took hold of the door handle, and then swung it open, flattening himself against the wall. There was a terrible moment of silence where both Darvey and Kaps expected the world to end... but nothing happened. The silence persisted. Darvey looked to Kaps for ideas, but Kaps just shrugged. Darvey motioned to go inside, and Kaps grumbled to himself, checked his gun, and raced into the cottage.

Darvey checked the surrounding hills, finger on trigger. There was something about the situation that felt like an ambush, and it was making him nervous. He thought he saw moonlight glinting off something metal up near the western ridge, a gentle rustling to the south that felt out of place. He lowered himself against the tree trunk, gripping the gun tightly.

“Hey,” Kaps called from the door. “You gotta see this.”

Darvey looked back up at where the glint had been. All he saw was black, and the faint blue of the evening sky. The hills were silent.

“Darvey,” Kaps repeated. “You still there?”

“I’m here,” Darvey said, leaving his uncertainty at the trunk and walking briskly to the cottage. He stepped through the unbreakable door, past Kaps, and into the main room. And he nearly dropped his gun.

“What the hell is this?” he gasped. The room looked like any rustic cottage on Earth, with a long table flanked by two benches, a hearth letting out the orange glow, and a series of tiny beds against the far wall. What was not common were the dozens of plaster garden gnomes placed

around the room, posed as if playing an elaborate game of house. One of them was even carrying a stack of sticks to the fire.

“Amiri,” said Kaps, stowing his gun. “I think we just found a smuggling outpost. And a pretty good one, too, judging by the size of it.”

Darvey picked up one of the gnomes, turned it over. The craftsmanship was impressive, but it felt too solid to be hollow.

“How many drugs could you possibly cram into such a small thing?” he asked as Kaps looked through drawers. Darvey lifted the gnome over his head, took aim at the stone floor, and threw it at his feet. It exploded, throwing bits of plaster across the room.

Kaps shrieked. “What the hell, man?” he said shoving Darvey back. “That’s just sick!”

“What?” Darvey said. “I’m looking for the drugs!”

“What, *inside* them?”

“Isn’t that how it works?” Darvey asked.

“They’re not mules,” Kaps said, stepping around plaster carefully. “They’re the smugglers!”

Darvey looked around the room, broad smile on his face. His translator usually played tricks on him, but this one was really quite absurd. All these garden gnomes, sitting around the room playing cards and drinking from tiny shot glasses, sharpening knives, reading... gnome... porn....

Darvey looked at the shattered plaster at his feet.

“Oh damn,” he said. “The gnomes are alive.”

“Not anymore, they’re not!”

“Why didn’t you *tell* me!”

“You looked like you knew what you were doing!”

“When do I *ever* know what I’m doing?”

“Obviously never!”

Darvey sat down on the bench, put his head in his hands, and stared across the table at a gnome with a scar from eye to jaw who was greedily counting a stack of bills.

“They’ve been poisoned,” said Kaps, coming back to the scene of the crime with a broom and dustpan. “Amiri have this crazy reaction to lavender. Kills ‘em almost instantly.”

“And it turns them into plaster?”

“Nah, they all do that when they die.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’m sweeping a corpse off the ground, man, I’m not in the mood for kidding.” He dropped the broom on the ground in frustration. “Someone pumped this place with lavender, and took them all out at once.”

“But why? They look so peaceful. Well, except that one. Are all their teeth that sharp?”

“Amiri are notoriously bloodthirsty,” said Kaps. “They’re mean little buggers, and they’re everywhere. They reproduce like... like...”

“Rabbits?”

“Like Amiri, really. Nothing comes close. They’d probably overpopulate the galaxy in a year, except they kill each other enough to make up for it.”

“So who killed these ones?” Darvey asked, stealing a candy from a bowl in the hands of another gnome. “How do we find out?”

Kaps looked around, scratched his massive chin. “They usually deal in Zoink and CarpetFuzz,” he said pensively, “but CarpetFuzz takes a lot of space to store. So I’d guess we’re looking for someone planetside who’s got a lot of cheap Zoink to sell all of a sudden.”

“Who names this stuff?”

“I dunno, guy-who-comes-from-*Earth*.”

“You’ve got some of his ear stuck on your boot.” Darvey said, turning back to the table and looking at the dead aliens all around him. Most of them looked relatively harmless, and he suddenly felt a tinge of guilt at shattering their friend.

“What do they usually do with their dead?” he asked, stealing another candy. “Maybe we can bury them?”

“Nah, they have some crazy ritual they do with incense and fires and cliffs and stuff. They’re really particular about their last rites. We’d better just leave ‘em.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Darvey said, then clapped his hands down on the table. “Well, as much fun as this is, we should go.”

He stood up, and the long bench wobbled just enough to throw the five other Amiri onto the ground, where they cracked and shattered all over the floor.

Kaps looked at Darvey, mouth hanging open.

"They're already dead!" Darvey pleaded, but before Kaps could argue, there was a loud boom against the outside wall. Darvey and Kaps got their guns ready, took cover, and waited for something bad to happen. Ten seconds later, another impact shook the cottage as the roof was hit.

"They're trying to blow us up?" Darvey hissed.

"No," sighed Kaps. "They're trying to shoot a grenade through the front door. Come on." He got up and led Darvey to the front of the cottage, and they peered out the door to see, up on the far hill, a collection of tiny figures with a very large gun. There was a flash, and a moment later, the wall next to them shuddered loudly.

"Their aim sucks," Darvey said.

"Amiri have terrible eyesight. This is an improvement for them."

"So what do we do?"

"We're safer in here. The odds of them finding the door are about a thousand to—" a grenade tore past them, bounced against the far wall, and landed on the floor. "Crap."

The explosion was sudden and fierce. A burst of air nearly knocked Darvey off his feet, and then purple gas sprayed everywhere, filling the room in seconds, and pouring out the door in ominous-yet-wispy clouds. Darvey held his breath for as long as he could, but then noticed Kaps rolling his eyes.

"It's just lavender gas," he said. "It's harmless."

"They think we're them?"

"They can't see us well enough to tell the difference," Kaps said. "They'll be here soon. Be ready. They bite real hard."

They positioned themselves out of sight, and a few minutes later, twelve Amiri in garishly-made gas masks marched in, carrying little hammer-like objects that could conceivably do serious damage to a human's shins. When they were all inside, Kaps cleared his throat. It took the Amiri a few seconds to figure out what was going on.

"Giants!" yelled the leader. "Run, brothers, run!"

"Hold on, tiny," said Kaps, pointing his gun at them. "CSA. You're under arrest."

“Arrest?” stammered the leader. “But whatever for?”

“Don’t play dumb with me,” Kaps said. “Drug trafficking, murder...”

“Desecration of remains,” said Darvey, pointing to the shattered bodies on the ground. “Shame on you. Shame.”

The leader tried to hide his shock, but it wasn’t much use. His hands were trembling. “We have nothing to do with drugs or murder, good giants!” he said. “We are just simple troubadours, making our way—”

“You shot a lavender grenade at us,” said Kaps.

“Lavender! How... how silly would that be! No, that is just a... an air freshener. To make the air... uh... fresh.”

“Really,” said Darvey, stepping forward, making the leftover fog swirl around him until he was directly in front of the leader. “Then how about you take off your mask?”

The leader stared at him for a moment.

“That is okay,” he said. “I have allergies.”

“Really.”

“Yes. Ragweed.”

“I think I have a pill if you—”

“No thank you. I cannot take medication from strangers. Now if you will excuse us—”

Kaps grabbed the leader by the pointy hat and lifted him off the ground, staring directly into his tiny, badly-focused eyes. “Where’d you put the drugs?” he asked.

“What drugs? I am but a simple troubadour—”

“Don’t play games, ass-lint,” Kaps said. “Tell me where the drugs are.”

“I don’t know what you mean!”

“Oh gosh!” said Darvey, standing next to Kaps and glaring at the Amiri. “The strap on your mask is twisted. Let me help you fix that... just need to take the mask off and—”

“Fine! Fine! Please stop! Fine!” squealed the leader. “We do not have the drugs! We only just arrived! We had heard a gang of Amiri was using this cottage to ship Zoink, and their defences were weak, so we decided to ambush them and steal it!”

“So you gassed them with lavender?” snarled Kaps.

“Yes!” cried the leader. “Yes, only once! Just now!”

Darvey and Kaps exchanged confused looks.

“What about earlier?” Darvey asked. “Did you just come back, or—”

“No! No, we only just arrived! I swear!”

“This makes no sense,” Kaps said to Darvey, shortly before another grenade bounced through the open door and exploded. More lavender gas filled the room, and two of the new Amiri’s masks were knocked off by the shockwave. They gasped for air in shock, but solidified before they could scream. It was really quite horrible, seeing it happen. Kaps set the leader down, and the rest of his team ran for cover.

“Someone’s lying about *something*,” Kaps grumbled to Darvey, watching the door for the new visitors.

“I don’t think so,” said Darvey. “I don’t think this is a smuggling outpost at all. It’s a honeypot.”

“A what?”

“Amiri are using it to kill off their competition. They spread a rumour about a weak outpost just waiting to be ripped off, then they kill off anyone that steps inside. I bet there’s never been any drugs here at all. It’s just a really convenient location.”

Kaps sighed, put away his gun. “You take all the fun out of this job.”

“I do what I can,” Darvey smiled, and then looked back to the door to wait for the next batch of Amiri to come in.

But instead, one lanky alien stepped inside, pulling stacks of boxes on dollies behind him. He settled things down and then turned around to see Kaps towering over him.

“Er,” he said. “Wrong house.”

“You bet it is,” said Kaps, grabbing the alien by the neck. “What’s in the boxes?”

“What boxes?” smiled the alien, before the Amiri leader stumbled forward, pointing an accusing finger at him.

“That is the man who told us about the drugs!” he yelled. “Arrest him!”

“Arrest *him*?” Kaps snapped. “Shut up and wait your turn, tiny.” He shook the tall one around a little more. “You’re pretty scrawny for a thug,” he said.

“I’m not a thug, I’m a *businessman*,” said the alien.

“Same difference,” said Kaps. “Now you’d better explain to me what’s going on here before I—”

“Kaps,” said Darvey, holding one of the boxes in shock. “You have to see this.”

“I’m busy, Darv,” he said. “Just—”

“It’s really—”

“Just tell me!”

Darvey looked at the Amiri, then the lanky alien, then turned the box around. On the front was a photo of a garden gnome, surrounded by lawn and soil and plants. Written above it, in a language nobody but Darvey would understand, was “Happy Gnomes,” complete with a trademark symbol.

“There’re no drugs at all,” he said. “He’s trapping Amiri so he can package them up and sell them on Earth.”

“S-s-sell?” gasped the Amiri leader. “As what?”

“Lawn ornaments,” said Darvey.

“Your race puts our corpses on *their lawns*?”

“Not most of us.”

“*Barbarians!*”

Darvey shrugged. “Can’t argue with that.”

The Amiri looked at the lanky alien, beady eyes flaring, and he bore his pointed, savage teeth beneath his mask. “You *beast!*” he screamed, and leapt at his newfound enemy. The lanky alien cried out in pain as his lower thigh was bitten, shortly before the Amiri turned to plaster and fell off, a chunk of flesh in his mouth. A second Amiri took his place.

Kaps looked over at Darvey unhappily. “This isn’t our jurisdiction, is it?”

“Doesn’t look like it,” said Darvey, scratching his neck as the second Amiri solidified. “Want to go get a drink?”

“Sounds good,” said Kaps, throwing the alien at the savage little beasts and wiping his hands on his pants. He followed Darvey outside, stretched his arms out wide and sighed. “Drinking while on duty is breaking all kinds of protocol.”

“I know,” said Darvey. “That’s why you’re buying.”

Kaps laughed loudly. “You humans really are barbarians.”

“Bastards,” Darvey corrected. “You mean ‘bastards.’” He slapped Kaps on the back and they started down the walkway, back to the hills and their ship, so they could fly off into the thick, black night once more.

Just as they reached the stream at the edge of the property, another grenade shot out of the darkness and bounced off the oak tree, spraying the ground with more leaves.

MCM is the creator of the animated series “RollBots”, and the author of “The Vector”, “Typhoon”, “Fission Chips” and “The New Real”, which features Darvey and Kaps and their adventures in the CSA. He lives at 1889.ca, as well as physically in Ottawa and Victoria, Canada, where he is also insane.

Poaching

Lyn Thorne-Alder & Chris Childs

A story of Year Four of the Addergoole School

Literature had never been Wren's favorite subject, but in Addergoole it had its upsides. Professor VanderLinden was stunningly good-looking, and he actually managed to make Lit entertaining, something she'd thought impossible in such an abstract subject. He made books that should seem ancient and dry seem fresh and new again, and spoke of the authors like they were friends of his.

More importantly, Lit was one of the two classes she shared with Phelen. She liked being around him; it calmed her when things got overwhelming and, well, classes with your boyfriend were always better.

Even a good class was still better when it was over. She packed up her books and put her hand in Phelen's so that he could lead her to lunch. He made sure she never missed a meal, kept her from the nervous bingeing-and-purging cycles she'd gotten into before she met him. He took good care of her.

She squeezed his hand a little, smiling. She'd been a wreck when she came here, not just the food issues, but her whole life. Being sent to Addergoole had disrupted the carefully-built patterns she'd used as coping mechanisms and here, underground and locked away from the world, she'd had no way to rebuild them. He'd fixed all that, taken her life in hand and given it order. She had been afraid, when he'd first slipped the collar around her neck, but now she couldn't imagine going back to what she'd called life without it.

"Phelen? A word?" The sleek brunette stepped out around someone else as if appearing out of thin air: Liza, Wren thought, a First Cohort.

Trailing behind her was another student in Wren and Phelen's year, Rafe, looking like he was trying not to appear too forlorn. Why did she want to talk to Phelen? Wren didn't like the look of her, didn't like the way she was intruding on their time. Phelen was hers. Okay, technically she was his, but it amounted to the same thing, didn't it?

"Just one?" Phelen smirked at the taller girl. Wren hid her grimace behind a sweet smile; it looked like they were going to talk to her anyway. "I suppose I can spare that, for a member of my cy'ree. What's on your mind?"

She was pretty; Wren wasn't sure she liked the way he smiled at her. She scooted closer to him; if she did it right, he'd put his arm around her waist without scolding her. And he probably wouldn't scold her now even if she did it wrong. Not in public.

"One word?" Liza volleyed back at him. "Crew."

Now Wren was sure she didn't like it, although at least Phelen's arm had obligingly encircled her. Cy'ree was one thing; it meant they shared a Mentor, and although many cy'rees were also social groups, they weren't necessarily close. Cy'rees tended to have a lot in common, but they were also to some extent creations of coincidence. Crew, on the other hand...

"You want to join my crew?" Phelen asked, still smirking. "I could put in a good word for you."

That wouldn't be too bad – with Magnolia, Shiva, and Tya there to keep her in line, Liza wouldn't get too close for comfort. But the girl was shaking her head.

"Oh, wouldn't that be lovely? I'm sure I'd fit right in, too. No. I want you to join ours."

"Your crew?" He leaned against the wall casually, thrusting his hands into his pockets, his dark hair falling in his eyes but not seeming to bother him. "Remind me again who all you're talking about?"

She didn't like losing his arm around her, not just because of the warmth and pleasure the Keeper-Kept bond gave that touch, but because the shift in posture meant things were getting bad. She knew what she was supposed to do, though, when he got tense and casual all at once like that; she leaned against the wall, putting him partially between her and Liza.

“Me, Meshach, and Shadrach. And our Kept, of course.” She gestured negligently at Rafe. “Him, Eris, and Joff.” Joff, Wren knew nothing about. Eris and Rafe had been friends when they’d all showed up; now the girl wandered around half-naked and angry all the time, and Rafe...

“Right.” He looked past her to the other boy, who presented such a contrasting image, in his white polo and khakis, against Phelen’s own all-black ensemble of t-shirt, jeans, and trenchcoat. “How’s it going, Rafe?”

The boy glanced at Liza before he said anything; Wren’s eyes travelled from the polo to the thin steel collar under the shirt. Phelen wouldn’t collar her in metal; she wondered what it felt like, stiff and unyielding...

“It’s okay,” Rafe shrugged, having apparently been cued that talking was acceptable.

“Okay,” Phelen repeated, the word echoing hollowly. “Wren? How do you feel about being with me, and Shiva’s crew?”

This wasn’t one of the questions for which he’d taught her a rote response, which meant he wanted a real answer. ‘I like being with you. And the crew is fun.’ Except Niki, but he’d probably get over that soon.

Phelen nodded, his eyes shifting back to Liza, although he’d never really stopped paying attention to her. He was vigilant like a stalking panther, her master, she thought proudly. “So what makes you think we’d be such a good fit for your crew, then?”

We. Of course she came with Phelen, but something in the girl’s eyes told her she hadn’t been thinking of Wren at all.

“Well, you’re learning to play the game quickly.” She gestured at Wren. “Fourth Cohort and you already have a pet. That’s impressive. You’re cy’Fridmar, do you really belong in a crew of cy’hooker – sorry, I mean cy’VanderLinden? And they’re way too goody-goody for you. I see the way they look at your little toy there, when they think you’re not looking. They don’t understand you. We will.”

Wren, looking at Rafe’s dead expression, doubted that. He might not mind being called a toy, but that’s not what she was. She was Phelen’s girlfriend. Well, she was his property, technically, but that was okay too.

“You’ll understand me.” Phelen sighed, shaking his head. “Being cy’Fridmar doesn’t make me just like you. He’s a good teacher, and he has some good philosophies. I like the particular brand of consequentialism

he espouses; some of the others here are rather too deontological for my tastes. That doesn't mean I fit in with your crew. Y'know, I like some of the cy'Lindens? Not Shadrach, of course." His smile touched the corners of his eyes as he spoke, but his hands remained tense in his pockets. "Some of the others, though, can be downright pleasant."

"Pleasant." Liza smiled at him. "Is that what they have to offer you? Pleasant?"

"I happen to like pleasant. What can you offer me that's better, really?"

"Power." She made it sound like sex and chocolate and money all rolled into one, and, for a moment, Wren was worried. "We're the most powerful crew in the school right now, and when we leave, all that will be your legacy. And you like pleasant? Play nice with your little toy, and we'll leave you Eris when we graduate."

Play nice with your little toy. Wren didn't like the sound of that, but she had faith in Phelen. He wouldn't let anyone hurt her. She looked over to Rafe, whose fists had clenched at his sides. He didn't like it, it seemed, any more than she did, and was looking at Liza with an expression between rage and hurt betrayal.

"You can't do that," he managed, though it sounded choked.

"Of course I can," Liza said with evident shock that her companion had spoken so to her. "Just like Phelen could swap his little bird like a trading card, if he were so inclined. And whether he realizes it now or not... well, Fridmar picks his students with certain qualities in mind, is all I'm saying." The glance she shot Wren confirmed that she was just trying to provoke her, and Wren was chagrined to realize that it was working.

She could freak out later. That's what he'd promised her; if she needed to lock the bathroom door and scream, she could do so. Later. Right now, she had to stay calm and trust him to take care of her. She smiled at Liza like she liked being a trading card, and promised herself a good long cry tonight.

"Nevertheless, I'm not so inclined," Phelen said. "Owning a girl who would hate me for it isn't my idea of a good time."

Oh, good. Wren tried hard not to let her relief show on her face; Rafe was showing enough for both of them, anyway.

“Hate you?” Liza chuckled. “I don’t see why that matters.” She petted Rafe’s hair idly and, clearly torn, he leaned into her touch. “There’s quite a bit we could teach you, Phelen. Give some consideration to our offer.”

“So why me? And don’t patronize me with how much we have in common and how helpful you can be. You said it yourself; we’re both cy’Fridmar. I find it hard to believe that altruism is really in your nature.”

“You do learn fast,” she smiled, nodding in approval. “We heard you at the Proving Ceremony. You’ve got an impressive collection of Words, Phelen; or at least you will, once you’ve had more training. We could use your talents.”

His Words. She’d heard Shiva and Magnolia mention something similar – *with those Words, the upperclassmen are going to be all over him* – but something about the way Liza said it made it sound less like a compliment and more like a mugging.

“Use my talents.” Phelen made little air quotes as he repeated her words. “Like you use Joff’s, and Eris’s, and probably Rafe’s? I may be young, but I’ve no interest in being a junior associate. If I were to sign on, I’d be looking to be treated as an equal partner.”

“Use? They’re *Kept*; that’s what they’re for. We protect them, teach them, keep them – and in return, they give us themselves. There’s no point in getting all cy’Luca about it.”

Around here, cy’Luca – being Luke’s student – was synonymous with “white knight.” Her master was good to her, but he was no silly idealist. Wren wondered how he’d take the accusation.

But Liza was still talking, so she kept looking at Liza. Phelen would tell her later, if he wanted her to know.

“And this ‘junior associate’ nonsense – we’re not trying to collar you, Phelen, we’re trying to get you to join us. It’s Meshach’s crew, of course, but crew is crew.”

“Crew is crew,” he acknowledged. “And you’d want to include someone who could be so easily taken from their existing crew? Doesn’t say much for your peoples’ loyalty.”

He hadn’t actually said no, though, Wren thought with some consternation.

“But what do you really think?” Liza echoed Wren’s thoughts, tilting her head slightly and tapping her lip with her index finger. “Idu Intinn Phelen cy’Fridmar, Idu Hugn Phelen...”

“Stay out of my head, witch,” Phelen snapped. The shadows boiled around his feet, a more palpable darkness pouring forth from his coat. Inky tendrils coalesced and writhed about him, playing across the wall and floor, rising up to squirm around their legs with an eerie, chilling sensation. Wren held her breath, knowing that this was only an indicator of his displeasure, and waited for his actual retribution.

“Tempero Tlacatl Liza cy’Fridmar,” he spat, and the older girl froze in place even as she began to speak again, the fingers of one hand curled in mid-gesture. “You’re right. I am Fridmar’s student. I’ve learned fast. And I don’t take kindly to being manipulated. Come, Wren.”

He stalked away, past the open-mouthed and staring Rafe, and the darkness followed, enveloping him in a tenebrous shroud. Wren swiftly moved to accompany him, not minding in the slightest the compulsion he’d so casually forced on her; indeed, had he told her to stay, she might have fought it. As they stepped out the door, Liza broke from her stillness, shaking her head to clear it and glaring after them.

From his unobtrusive position in the corner of the classroom, Professor VanderLinden watched them all and smiled approvingly.

Lyn Thorne-Alder lives in the Finger Lakes region of New York State with her husband and their flesh-eating cat. When she’s not writing, or working her day job, she enjoys hiking gorges and old cemeteries, knitting, sewing, drinking wine, and watching the geekiest television she can find.

Chris Childs studied engineering, but now runs a retail store, and spends his spare time writing. Go figure. When not working on Addergoole with Lyn, he enjoys roleplaying and other creative endeavors, which is to say he spends almost no time actually in reality. When grounded, he lurks in upstate New York.

<http://addergoole.com>

Mifflin County Coke Blues

Isa K.

Jake can remember the stars as they are: not as little pinpricks of light but as bright clouds of smokey blues and grays, clusters of twinkling heavenly bodies hovering silently among flecks of glittering space dust.

This is the kind of view of the stars one only gets when vast communities have opted out of electricity. Jake can hear the refrigeration system humming with the milk cows from all the way down the field precisely because it is a foreign sound. This is always the way he remembers the stars: full and detailed with contrast and depth, humming in the barn and the occasional moo.

“Did you get it?” he asks as footsteps break stale dry blades of grass coming up the hill.

“Better,” the voice answers.

Jake frowns. He does not want “better” he wants the ignorable trespasses. Beer he cannot have because no one is really sure how his body will react, but there’s no risk in girls, music, cellphones and marijuana.

He sits up. “What do you mean ‘better’?”

And then Danny shows him, the small vial pinched at the top between two fingers. He walks closer and Jake can start to make out what’s inside: white ... powdery ... like sugar but so obviously not sugar.

“What’s that?” he says as a reflex.

“You know what it is,” Danny laughs ... and he does. He knows exactly what it is. “Come on there’s no protein in it, I checked.”

“Oh, did you ask my doctor about it?” Jake replies sarcastically.

“Nah I looked it up online.”

“Where? You don’t have a computer.”

And there would be little point in getting one either. If his parents weren't going to accept on-the-grid power or a telephone line, a broadband hook-up was completely out of the question.

"At your Uncle's."

"My Uncle let you use his computer to look up the per serving protein volume of cocaine?"

"I didn't exactly tell him what I was doing."

Danny's thick hair is tousled and he is wearing an appropriately "English" shirt: no collar, faded but colorful AC/DC concert logo splashed on his chest. He wears traditional trousers and suspenders along with it, which make a perfectly ridiculous picture: half punk half farmer chic.

"Come on," the other boy coos at his reservations. "We're 16, we can do whatever we like and they can't touch us."

"Not anything," Jake answers as he flops back onto the grass.

"Well..." he dangles the cocaine vial over Jake's nose provocatively. "We can do this."

Jake stares at the stars through the edges of a fine dusting of narcotic and thinks. For as long as he can remember everything in his life has been carefully controlled. Everything. And for a while it seemed like even this simple rite of passage would be denied him. Just too dangerous! Not just his immortal soul at stake but his very life. As if he couldn't figure out what in the devil's playground was likely to kill him or not.

Finally his parents acquiesced and his teenage years looked like they would begin in earnest.

"Fine," he sighs. "But how do we ... do it?"

"Look." Danny is too excited, he bounces as he sits down and unscrews the top. "There's a tiny spoon inside! So neat!"

"Huh..."

* * *

"Oh wow..."

"Jesus Christ."

"Don't curse Yacob. You'll go to hell."

"Not before you," Jake replies.

Danny laughs and rolls around in the dry grass. There are little bits of debris woven sloppily in and out of his boring brown colored hair. His lips

are pale pink, light coral colored marks where he's been biting them nervously. His breath is warm against Jake's skin as they wrestle while hidden sticks and pebbles stab at tender places from beneath the grass.

He pins Danny's hands above his head and kisses him. He tastes amazing, he feels amazing, the exhilaration doesn't let up until Danny's fist knocks into his jaw and he falls off to the side.

Then it occurs to Jake that he just kissed another boy. On the mouth. He hasn't even kissed any *girls* and now all of the sudden he's kissing boys.

He rubs the bruise up against grass and reluctantly looks back at Danny.

"That's the last time we give you coke," Danny says, he's rubbing his mouth and spits off to the side in sly skittish disgust, but he doesn't look angry or upset. Jake thinks he's probably right... it's probably just the drugs that did that.

He rolls on his back and stares at the sky. The stars seem brighter. They glide like dancers around and around the black sky, the moon looking on enviously.

"I'm going up the hill," Jake says suddenly.

"What for?"

"To her house."

Danny thinks he's crazy. He doesn't have to say so, Jake can see it in his face.

"You can't do that! She's ... she's shunned. You can't do that. It's forbidden!"

"We can do anything remember? Besides, she's my kin so I don't have to shun her."

"But..." Danny twists in his seat among the grass. "You... She's a witch!" He blurts out.

"...are you kidding?"

"She is!" He continues speaking with a flustered tongue, tugging at Jake's sleeve before wiping invisible traces of cocaine from his nose and tugging again. "Come on we can crash at your Uncle's house until the high wears off. He's shunned too but at least he's not a witch!"

Jake slaps his hand away, already staring up at the little house all the way across the field and up the hill.

"You do what you want," he says. "I'm going up the hill."

"You're nuts!"

He has never been up the hill before. Like the rest of them he has watched that house with curious worry, not really believing the things that have been said but not really disbelieving them either. Jake convinces himself that if his grandmother was really dangerous they would never allow her to live on the hill at all. And they certainly wouldn't do business with her like they did with the rest of the shunned.

* * *

She has thin, brittle looking fingers that move like a typewriter striking a sheet of paper. Fast with stiff intensity and unforgiving certainty. As grandmothers go she is neither warm or affectionate nor particularly cold or bitter. If she is not a witch she has fashioned a pretty convincing image of one — knobby joints, sagging wrinkled skin, salt and pepper long hair and a wart not on the nose but loitering close.

"You will have a long life ... just not here."

The cocaine keeps Jake from reacting the way he should. "I'm leaving?" he says distantly. "I can't leave!"

"Why not?" the old woman coos. "Your mother did."

Jake struggles to picture his mother, a woman he sees everyday but whom the memory of seems to jump out of his grasp. With her plain clothes and her constant worrying about the trappings of their own small isolated society, the idea that she could go out into the world outside is ridiculous.

"Yes," his grandmother says. "A long time ago."

"Why?"

The tea kettle hisses. The old woman takes spoonfuls of strange brown herbs from old glass jars and mixes them into two metal tea strainers.

"She was about your age and wanted to see the world."

"What's to see?" Jake mumbles nervously. He has never considered the possibility of leaving home. His frequent and recurring illness keeps him tied to the places he knows; specifically the hospital in town twenty miles away.

A tiny painted teacup filled with brown infused liquid appears before him and he hesitates before touching it.

"I haven't poisoned it," she says with some humor in her voice.

"Ahh—Of course not! I would never think—"

"I know what they say about me in the village. You'd be stupid not to wonder if it was true."

She is not like women in the village. She wears her confidence blatantly and defiantly— Jake finds himself thinking this is ostentatious and sinfully proud— but she is also calm and collected in a way that is unfamiliar as well.

"...Is it?" he asks.

"Yes."

Jake cannot believe his ears. He thinks for a minute that she's kidding and then he wonders if she means the same rumors he does or if there are other less superstitious things said about her.

"The tea is for the drugs," she explains. "It will help dull the hook they have in you."

He flushes at the word "drugs". How does she know?!? Is it some mysterious psychic sense that has given him away or is he naively obvious?

"I..."

"You'll do them again, and then something bad will happen and you'll leave this place."

A few possibilities come immediately to mind. Jake touches his lips as the memory of the stolen kiss stirs from where it is buried and watches in horror as the old woman's eyebrow rises like she can read his thoughts right out of his head.

"Something bad I do?"

"Perhaps."

"Do I leave or am I sent away?"

She smiles. "You leave. Of your own accord. The villagers don't run anyone off anymore, bloodlines are too few."

Jake stares into his tea for a long time without actually drinking any. Tiny burnt bits flutter around the bottom of the cup, having escaped from the strainer.

"That's where your disease comes from," she says. "There have been children here before that have had it. The community is too small."

Inside he feels far away and he's not sure if it's the drugs or the storytelling. There is suddenly so much he wants to know, like he's just discovered all these holes in his life— things that he understood before that no longer make sense. "Why did my mother come back?" he asks.

"Your grandfather went out and brought her back." She reaches up and plucks a photograph off the wall. It's still colorful and is unlike other photographs he has seen — glossy with writing printed on the back in tiny type.

"She went there," his grandmother says, gesturing to the bright modern city in the picture.

"Philadelphia?"

The old woman laughs. "No! New York!"

He knows such a place exists, but all big cities look exactly the same to him. Still, he feels stupid and blushes lightly at the mistake.

"So my grandfather brought her back?"

"Not against her will, she wanted to come back."

"...Why?"

"She was pregnant."

He understands what she means immediately and he looks down at the postcard again and has to force himself not to cry at the sight of those tall glittering buildings. He feels as if he should have always known somehow, but the thought has never occurred to him. That he does not resemble the man he calls father in any particular way never seemed important or significant.

"Why would he..."

"I made him believe you were his."

She dunks the tea strainer back into her tea and gives Jake a look that suggests she does not mean she lied to him. That the man he calls father knew the truth once and then suddenly didn't.

"I told you it was true what they say about me."

Isa K is a webfiction author and entrepreneur. She publishes webfiction on community writing platform fluffy-seme (<http://www.fluffy-seme.net>) and in the erotica letter series Coquette (<http://www.cqtt.us>)

Junk Drawer

M. Jones

Sally puttered about her apartment, wondering when it was she had acquired so much junk. No surface was free, and it was becoming an increasing problem as of late to merely get around the stacked, piled items to make it to her front door. With a tired sigh she picked up an ancient magazine layered in dust at her feet and shook it off before laying it on top of another pile of boxes to her left. She glanced over her shoulder into her kitchen, and was sickened by the pile of dishes that had grown overnight in her sink. Usually that particular section of the apartment was kept spotlessly clean, but the last few days had been a challenge. She shook her head and slung her purse over her shoulder. Tonight, when she got home from work. There was no way she was keeping any of this crap any longer.

She kicked aside a pile of clothes. T-shirts of unknown vintage. Shoes that had worn out their welcome. She looked forward to the purge.

As she waited for the bus to take her to her office job deep in the city, Sally had time to contemplate what had brought her to this situation, a fact she wasn't happy to explore. Ron, her boyfriend of five years, had decided that no, he didn't want a nice house with a two door garage and a girlfriend baking cookies in his massive, ornate kitchen. With the scent of burning chocolate muffins in the air, he had announced that it was over, that he was selling the place and moving out of State to another city, another home, where he was going to make his success as a commodities broker. This lovely house and its lingering responsibility was heading to market. Just like that. A snap of the fingers, and he was the wealthy one, off to make his fortune and buy more stuff for his stuffy condominium in Florida.

So, here she was, same city, same bus stop, same job, same pile of stuff that had once comfortably fit into a large house now crammed into a one bedroom apartment, the entirety of which was about the same size as her former living room.

* * *

Three bags had gone to her local charity thrift store, but there was the nagging sensation that something more had to be done. Sally wiped her brow with the back of her hand, a thin sheen of sweat beading against her skin. It hadn't been a good day. She was threatened with a layoff, a message that came direct from her boss. Downsizing. Her mother had called, asking if she was coming home for Thanksgiving, and if she did she'd need to stay at a hotel. There just wasn't any room. Ron had left a message on her answering machine: "Sally, I'm just calling to ask if you've seen my blue sweater, the one with the worn elbow. It's not mine, it's Dave's. Don't call me back, I'll be too busy to answer my cell. Leave a message."

Her phone rang, and she pushed aside a collection of dusty socks and tea cozies to get to it. "Hello?"

"Sally!" her friend, Debra, exclaimed. "It's so good to finally get a hold of you!"

Sally sighed, overwhelmed with the relief of having someone to unburden herself to. "Debra, I'm so glad..."

"Listen, I'm on the run right now, I'm heading to the Bahamas in an hour, so I have to pack and get going. Heard about the break-up, that must suck."

"Yeah. Ron and I..."

"Stuff happens, what can you do? I never liked the guy anyway. I just didn't want to say. Thanks for the email with your address—I'll send you a postcard!"

"Debra, I..."

The dial tone droned.

* * *

She could barely find her mail beneath the piles of telephones. When did these things start springing up? She'd never bought them, she was sure of it. A crazy part of her brain insisted they were shoved on her,

unwillingly, by some unknown reverse burglar in the middle of the night who kept dropping things off instead of taking them away. Despite her efforts, her apartment was slowly becoming more and more cluttered, a massive external weight gain that she had no explanation for. Rummaging amongst the receivers, she found her utility bill. It had gone up a significant amount, enough to make eating out a thing of the past.

Her mother had called her back, and now her answering machine blinked with a thousand messages, pleadings from relatives and long lost cousins. “Can you hole me up for a day or two?” “Can you babysit?” “You can’t believe the things that are happening in my life right now.” “I have to tell you about this, it’s not something I can keep to myself for much longer without going crazy.” “I need some help with something. You’re not going to like it.”

Hundreds. Thousands of messages. Cajoling and demanding, a choir of angst and need that begged for her attention.

At work, things weren’t much better. Co-workers were miserable. The front door receptionist told her about a terrible time during her childhood, a confession she had never released to anyone else. The cafeteria lady was insistent: Could she keep a secret? Every minute was filled with a tale of woe, the need for misery shared. It was no use shaking her head, trying to shyly hint that this was not her business, that she didn’t have the capacity to listen to more. But still the demands came, and even Sally herself began to feel a tug of expectation with every stranger she met. Fill my pockets with your worries, her silence seemed to say. Line my purse with your concerns.

Her desk began taking on the aspects of her apartment, as she was sure she never brought that collection of out of date encyclopedias to lay against her filing cabinet, or the dozen or so self awareness manuals written during some dark hour of the 1970’s, or ‘How To Live With Less For More’, of which she had five copies. Her computer monitor took on a permanent dusty hue despite the amount of time she spent wiping it off with glass cleaner. Empty bottles of vinegar solutions littered her feet, the garbage was overflowing with crumpled papers. There were piles of pencils on her desk, most broken in half, others clumped with glue and plastercine

and other debris that had no business being there. She used to be so neat and tidy and efficient. Her boss waved her into his office, his face grim.

At least her pink slip was fresh and crisp.

* * *

Debra's postcards were scattered on the floor, mingling with the myriad advertising fliers and bills, the shiny gloss of items promising an easier, more attractive life creased with white lines, the edges curled from an unknown source of damp. She picked up the soggy postcards and tried to read Debra's large, scrawling handwriting, the ink smudged from coffee stains. "Having a terrible time. I wish I could call you and tell you how bad things are, but it's too expensive from here. Gorgeous beach and all I want to do is cry. See you when I get home. Love Debra XXOO PS: Did you ever give Ron back his blue sweater? He sent me a text about it, the jerk."

There was another bill on the floor. A threat from the utility company that she would be cut off if she didn't pay the exuberant new hook-up fee. A new Sears catalogue (forty of them, actually) lay in a crumpled, nested pile near the front door, images of refrigerators and heaters torn from them, littering her path to the kitchen. The kitchen counters, once gleaming white, were now piled near to the ceiling with dishes, food encrusted on them, boxes of opened cereals and spilled tins of coffee layered in a haphazard arrangement. Her fridge was partially open, rancid piles of rotted meat dripped a large pool of blood onto the floor. She should be horrified, but all she sensed was a bland kind of annoyance at this. She tipped the fridge door open, releasing a slippery pile of yellowed skin and fat. She backed away from it, the flies buzzing around her, landing on her with their fat bodied, disgusting probing. A pile of blue sweaters blocked her path. With a sense of overwhelming resignation, she knew that she was trapped. All these things, pressing on her. There had to be a way to even this out. There had to be a way to compress it.

* * *

"Sally?"

Debra pounded on her friend's door. She'd been home a week from her awful trip to the Bahamas and she was in desperate need of unloading. An orange tan belied her suffering, accented by a bleach blonde hairdo

braided close to her scalp. A dangling keychain was fixed to her purse, one that proudly displayed a map of the islands and the city of Bridgetown trapped beneath a bubble of thick plastic. After knocking a few more times, Debra tried the door and was shocked to find it was unlocked. She entered the apartment with tentative, worried steps.

“Sally?”

The name echoed in the emptiness of the apartment. Not a surface had been touched, it was as if all had been sandblasted clean, freshly rebuilt and waiting for a new tenant. There was the softest scent of bleach in the air, not corrosive but pleasantly clean. Confused, Debra checked the kitchen and living/dining room and found the same, barren emptiness save for a shabby, antique chest of drawers in the bedroom. The apartment had been abandoned, and clearly Sally wanted the same treatment.

“I just got back. I figured we could go for coffee.” She walked into the pristine kitchen, her fingers running along the white cupboards. She opened one and discovered they were sparkling and bare, the scent of freshly cut wood still hovering about them. “You wouldn’t believe the nightmare I suffered. All that beach, the sun shining everyday, and I couldn’t even enjoy any of it. Did you ever find that stupid sweater?”

No answer. If the surroundings hadn’t told her enough, Debra was truly alone. She crossed her arms over her chest, her forehead pinched into an annoyed frown. This wasn’t fair. She’d come all this way, hadn’t even fully unpacked, and had come here to invite her friend for coffee only to be faced with this blank canvas of desertion. Surely, she should have been able to rely on Sally. She’d always been there in the past, always willing and able to listen, a fixture in Debra’s life that she could hang whatever concerns on.

Hurt and frustrated with her friend’s lack of empathy, Debra left the brilliant white space of the apartment with pensive reluctance. A terrible vacation, now a friend who wilfully disappeared. It was so unfair. She didn’t even leave a forwarding address, didn’t even say a word about moving. Some friend!

Debra started dialling on her cell phone as she exited. There had to be someone she could unload all this on. Her shoulders felt heavy with the weight of it, and there was no way she was going to carry this around with

her for the rest of the day. She'd deal with Sally later. Her steps were taut and businesslike as she journeyed down the narrow corridor of the apartment building, her cell phone buzzing like an insect in her hand.

Inside Sally's apartment, a creak disturbed its sterile silence. From the top drawer of the dresser fingers pushed it open from the inside, bloodied and desperate. A hand clawed its way over the lip of worn oak.

Blue wool tangled around its palm and with a violent tug pulled it back into the drawer. There was a tinkling of broken glass, pieces of metal, splintering wood. A muffled voice, too buried to be found.

The drawer slammed shut, echoing through the emptiness of the room.

M. Jones is the creator and author of the sci-fi/horror/dramady web series 314 Crescent Manor. When she isn't busy peeking into parallel universes, she can be found digging up dead Victorians in her series Black Wreath and taking care of the hearts of zombies in the upcoming series Frankie & Formaldehyde. You can find M. Jones and all of her nefarious deeds at her main creative hub: Bloodletters ink (<http://bloodlettersink.com>)

In the Court of the Peacock King

Erica Bercegeay & Charissa Cotrill

Gerald

Picture this:

A man stands eight feet tall, his deep green hair reaching down to the floor. A solid gold crown rests above his brow, one of the key signifiers that he owns everything and everyone in this room. His face is painted stark white and is offset with ornate swirls of black that arc up over his cheeks and eyes. That and the signature green hue of his robes are the most obvious clues as to just what King I am staring at from across his Court.

Of course, he pays me no heed. I'm disguised pretty well, if I do say so myself. Even if it means I'm practically wearing a dress right now. Audiva Rocale is a stylish empire, but nobody within the Palace region seems to know what pants are. Along with the robes and other finery, Aurocans of the Peacock King's Court prefer to paint their faces as the King does, which helps to disguise my face well enough. Suitable attire and makeup are only small parts of my method, though. I've got other tricks to ensure that people overlook just how red and curly my hair is — two attributes rarely, if ever, seen on citizens of this Empire. It's a matter of concentration, that's all. People just overlook the feature, since I've gotten all the other stage dressings right.

Call it a fringe benefit of being a Poet. If I were more experienced, I wouldn't have to bother with the physical disguise at all. I could just walk in my regular boots and jeans and button-down shirt and my beloved hat, getting trail dirt all over the parquet floor. But... that's mastery, and I've only just graduated from Trainee level. I'll have to put up with the skirts and eyeliner for now.

But it's for a good cause. Someone from Crux Radia has got to keep an eye on the Peacock King. Since I'm an experienced Armed and I have my new basket of Poet skills at the ready, I was the perfect candidate to come spy on the Court. The spy role is pretty exciting — kind of glamorous, even — but it's a bit of a downer in that I have to keep my Guns stashed away in a way that they won't be detected. They're a little different than ordinary weapons, after all — and the Peacock King has a definite fear of any Armed being in his vicinity. Heck, he's more scared of Armed than he is of Poets—

What's everyone turning around to look at? I start to turn around too, but then I realize that the Peacock King is looking directly at me.

His eyes meet mine. The right one fades gold-to red, the left fades purple-to-green. In the middle of that rainbow visage is a gray-violet catseye teardrop. The ashen slit running down the center of the eye winks at me.

It's only pure instinct that keeps me from looking directly at it. Then the King's gaze slides over and past me, and I'm out of his line of fire, forgotten. Something tells me that if that gray eye in his crown had caught my eyes, I'd be in a lot of trouble right now.

But I'm fine, just fine. My heart's not lodged up inside my throat or anything. I didn't get caught less than one day into a mission. How could that happen to me? I mean, other than that one time in Moana, but that wasn't really a spy mission and Katherine managed to bail me out of jail within a couple of months.

More importantly, I have a chance to turn and see what's gotten everyone's attention. A retinue of sorts has entered the throne room — a richly-dressed man leading a procession of servants, some of whom are pulling an enclosed cart. I narrow my eyes. The man's garb is strange for this region — I don't think he's Aurocan at all. It's more likely he's from Astoniarche, which certainly borders the Aurocan Empire, but is allied with the Empire of Crux Radia. I didn't expect to see another Crux Radian here besides myself. After all, we tend to be a bit... unwelcome within Aurocan borders.

The Peacock King shows no displeasure at the sight of this man, though — especially once the man executes a slow bow in the manner of the

Aurocan Court. The monarch smiles deeply in appreciation, then reaches one long-fingered, manicured hand into the folds of his robe. It comes out holding a token-box. It's fine carved wood, I can see from here, decorated with a copper and gold acorn. There's more gold inside, surely, or some fine commodity of equal expense. It's a payment, after all — this man is obviously a merchant.

And the person inside that cage of a cart is obviously his merchandise.

My hands almost go to my guns — not wearing them was, it seems, an inspired decision. I can't think with my guns here. All they ever want to do is shoot people, after all.

One more lad in a collar. One more pretty boy, already entranced, already far-gone. Drugs, possibly, but it could just be the sheer effect of standing this close to the Peacock King.

He tames. He has always tamed. See the peacocks he's named for, see them perched to each side of his throne. Docile, quiet, collared little pets. Such proud, loud birds — they might as well be mute sparrows now.

There's some dickering over price, or at least, the merchant draped in his silks and baubles attempts to dicker. He learns fast that there is no haggling with the Peacock King. The rainbow-eyed one doesn't even argue with him, only stands with his hips tilted just-so, arms crossed, and that smile on his face. It says "go on". He even nods a little, ever more pleased with the merchant's fast-talk. Then he tilts an eyebrow, and the merchant begins to talk himself out of a steeper price. The King smiles wider, and more smug, when the merchant's words trip themselves into a lower price. Lower, and lower still, and I see sweat bead the merchant's brow as he stares fixated at the eye in the middle of the crown, unable to stop his mouth. The Peacock King lets him go after a few more moments, tiring of the game. It's a lucky merchant. He's still allowed to keep a pittance of what he would have been given: the box, empty of pay.

It's certainly more than most who try to haggle the Peacock King usually manage. The bird-lord's happy today, it seems. Must be pleased with his purchase. And why not? He's a fine boy, I'm sure. Where I'm from, people don't keep slaves, but this one seems to be high-grade for someone you'd buy in Aurocale. Unbroken, unmarred, no bruises or scratches at all.

Very, very quiet. He's not very clean or well-dressed, though — his clothing's all furs, his hair's shaggy. What's strange, though, is that his ears—

Wait.

The leaves in his sandy brown hair, the feathers along his collar. The long rounded tips of his ears. The feral clench to his jaw, the animal spark — maybe drugged, but still very there — in his yellow eyes. The natural crouch to his stance. He's an Animism. A forest spirit.

Whistling godsouls, is the King of Mockery trading in THEM now? I didn't even know you could *buy* one. I've never seen one that could be sold without the owners getting killed by the attempt to keep one captive.

The Peacock King gestures at the merchant, the last bit of acknowledgement he deigns to give the man. After a few moments it sinks in that the merchant has been dismissed. He decides to leave while he still has what little payment he's received — I merely take note of his features and file them away for later. He'll see Justice one day, for the crime of caging an Animism and whatever else he's guilty of. My guns growl in agreement; I mentally shush them before they're heard.

The Peacock King reaches his hand through the bars of the cage, palm up, and perches his fingers under the animism's chin. He tilts it up. The King beholds his new acquisition, a quirk of a smile on his painted lips. I think he's daring it to bite him.

And it should, or it would, if this situation were at all normal. But the animism just manages a hiss that echoes through the audience chamber.

A noblewoman asks to pet it. I almost shoot her. I know, I know — I'm supposed to be a spy here. See, we of the bullets tend to shoot first, ask later. I may be subtler now that I'm a Poet, but some habits die hard. Such as calling someone's attention to common decency in the bluntest way possible.

The Peacock King denies her with a delicate hand-wave and a low chuckle, shaking his head. "He's not just a kitten, you know. This animal—" he lifts the chin just a little higher, "has sharper claws and a deeper, quicker bite. And he may appear docile, but that is only because I am focusing so much of my strength and talent right now. I am impressed by him, you know. Even for a keeper as skilled as I, this is a strain." The smile tucks into the corner of his smooth painted cheek, sick in so many senses

of the word. “It’s been such a time since I’ve had the pleasure of trying to train, of *having* to. Oh, my new pet, how much *fun* we shall have together.” His voice is soft, teasing.

The creature snaps at his finger, but the King anticipates the move, more’s the pity. With that jaw, and the teeth in that jaw, it could have severed that finger right off. If it could eat, the feral thing would probably have enjoyed the meal. But the tamer has all of his hand left after the snap. He just grins at the attempt, grins so happily that I begin to feel nervous. Am I going to have to step in and blow my cover?

“Oh, I was just *waiting* for you to do that.” The grin etches deeper, grows crooked and more cryptic. Any further and it’ll run past the King’s jawline. “Faun-doe.”

A current of power runs through the air as the King speaks those words. It’s like someone’s run a finger along the back of my neck. I see a few others wince, which relieves me — if I slipped and let some discomfort show at my reaction to that, then I’m not alone. Perhaps they’re more wincing at the implications, though — the Peacock King has just gone and renamed the Animism. I remember now — I’ve actually heard of this Animism. Faun. He’s very well-known as the only animal spirit that will talk directly to and negotiate with humans.

But the new name he’s been given is a slight, is more of a collar than what’s around his neck. Pet-names are very common in a region like Audiva Rocale, where slavery is rampant. A pet-name binds the being to the Master that names it. It’s worse than chains or collars, which can be broken and shed. Names follow you, and after long enough, they become part of you.

The Animism’s yellow eyes widen as he pales. His crouch deepens and slips, betraying weakness. The Peacock King reaches forward, dips his hand down, and then catches a handful of nothing and closes his fist on it. As he tightens his grip, there’s a canine grunt from his captive. The Animism sinks to his knees. His hands don’t quite make it to the collar on his neck, but it’s obvious that he would claw at it— if he hadn’t just crumpled to the bottom of his cage and passed out.

What I am seeing goes beyond crime, but it is very much calling to the Law. Still, I let it pass. I watch, witness, and I’ll record. There’ll come a time

later when Justice is served. When that time comes, I'll be there to watch again, maybe to fire the bullet myself. Besides, there's no way I can free that creature through brute force. I'm a newly-trained Poet, and it'd take a Master-level one to cast off a pet-name spoken by a man as powerful as the Peacock King.

Maybe I can send a letter requesting backup... It'd suck to do that for the first day of my first Poet mission, but the stakes are already pretty high here.

The King looks up from his quarry and towards the entrance. Other members of his Court turn to look, but we all see the same thing: nothing. The merchant and his retinue are long gone, and no one is on this side of the grand doors.

The King grimaces, a momentary break in his carefully schooled mask. He brushes away a few polite inquiries as to what could be wrong. "Another visitor. He should have arrived at this time." He looks down at his newly purchased Animism, sleeping soundly in its cage. Something about the sight eases his tension, and a smile creeps back onto his face. He waves his hand, ending the matter. "Send him along if he arrives within the hour. He should have the proper credentials. If he arrives later than that... send him away. I've no need for—"

The great doors close, the sound surprisingly soft considering their size. Everyone turns, in the same motion that the King does, to behold a small blond man trying to sneak in without notice. His eyes widen as he discovers his subterfuge is lost upon the entire Court. The element of surprise lost to him, he recovers his composure during the ensuing deep bow.

Wow, he's really a wisp of a thing too. Five feet tall, if that, built with the sturdiness of a dandelion. His garb is as fancy as anyone else's in this Court, though there's a few foreign elements to it. A scarf from Astoniarche and a belt that might even be all the way from Radia betray him to be a traveler.

The King's eyes might hold mirth, but his rainbow gaze is difficult to read. The rest of his face is a study in aloof disapproval. "Come closer, then, if you're inclined to bow to me."

The visitor shakes for but a moment, then creeps forward as demurely as possible. I have to double-check that he's a man — he steps so lightly,

and every motion is delicate. His approach makes so little sound that I wonder if he's another spy from a stealthier division.

But I would have been told about that, right? ...I hope.

After a moment passes, all questions of whether he's a spy like me are, well, out of the question. He's no spy at all. Under all that makeup I can still recognize his face — in fact, the delicate makeup job might be the most telling thing of all.

Maybe I should hold off on backup for the time being.

He stops nine paces away from the Peacock King — a proper distance, to be sure. I wonder when he learned such excellent decorum. He certainly didn't know it at all ten years ago. Being closer to the King would make him more timid, I would think — but this new guest seems to draw strength from his proximity to the monarch, as if having such an important audience allows him to truly perform better. He bows again, this time with a flourish and bravado that certainly seems appropriate in a room full of peacocks.

I'm unimpressed, but the King merely smiles as if he's holding back a laugh. I suspect that expression isn't an act. "Putting on airs? Really? You imply that you're worth the gawking of a crowd — considering your purpose here, I think it an appropriate claim. Come closer still. I want to see if you're truly worth my attention."

The guest's eyes widen just a little. He glides forward, his robes fluttering behind him. I inspect him closely. I want to be absolutely sure that it's him, that I'm not just leaping to conclusions. While I spend my time staring so intently at him, I forget that I'm easily within view. Thus, it's his double-take that gives him away.

He can't turn to look at me, though — he has to stay on his approach to the Peacock King. And while he's doing that, I sink back behind the crowd just a little. If he decides to turn back and look, I'll be gone.

Stupid of me. Rash. Thoughtless. Of course he'd recognize me if I stayed out in the open — after all, we're brothers.

Damnit, what is he *doing* here?

He's three paces away from the King when he's gestured to stop. "That's far enough." The King raises an eyebrow, then looks my brother over from head to toe. "Very pretty, but can it teach animals to dance?"

My brother replies with a bow. “It can, if it is but given a chance. Would you like me to try?”

The King’s smile dawns, a note cruel. “I would indeed.” He turns, sweeping his hand towards the cart in which Faun is now letting out whistling little snores. “If you would be so kind? I would prefer you to begin in the arena of the Palace courtyard. It would be more well-equipped for the purpose. Your recommendations lend you quite a bit of credit, but until you’ve proven yourself, I prefer bars to be present between me and your first dance.”

My brother’s face is all confusion.

The King’s smile hasn’t changed. “Is there a problem, Jhe Lotus? That *is* your name, isn’t it? Or have I summoned the wrong trainer? You are the one famed within all the Kingdoms that border Audiva Rocale for having incredible skills in conditioning and teaching discipline, are you not?”

Lotus?

His name’s Lyric Akribastes, just like mine’s been Gerald Akribastes since long before he took off for parts unknown. I’ve got enough of a sense of the truth (something my Armed and Poet skills each lend to me) to tell that his name’s ‘Lotus’ only by a marginal technicality.

Stage name, then.

‘Lotus’ bows once again, very quickly this time. He looks the King straight in the eyes when he rises — for his sake, I hope his gaze doesn’t stray to that crown jewel. “Your esteemed pardon, Sire, but I was given to believe that this position called for an *animal* trainer.” Lyric’s eyes stray to the Animism in the wheeled cage.

The King’s lip curls up into a sneer. “That *is* an animal, Jhe Lotus.”

Lyric pales. “I...”

The King crosses his arms. “Would you like me to prove it, Jhe Lotus? I *am* an authority on these matters.” As if to emphasize his position, one of the two peacocks perched beside the arms of the King’s throne lets out a soft ‘coo’ that’s far from the piercing cry the fowl are known for.

“No.” Lyric’s reply is as quiet as the bird’s interjection. I try to hide my scowl. Is he actually considering working for the Peacock King?

That's why he came here in the first place, ye of slow wits. Wagner, the more talkative of my guns, decides to weigh in on my mental deliberations.

I understand that much, but I can't believe he'd still consider it, having seen what's to be trained!

Well then, I'll give the little cretin some credit. Maybe he doesn't know it's an Animism.

That just makes me feel sick. Wagner might be right — which means that Lyric thinks he's capable of training a human.

Does he think that sort of thing is alright?

Erica Bercegeay goes by Irk in most circles, for ease of use and sometimes for sheer descriptive purposes. She's been writing and illustrating The Peacock King since 2008 — in her spare time she has a day job. When not doing any of those things, she enjoys bothering her cat.

Charissa Cotrill goes by Char in most circles. Her persistence in editing, story doctoring and worldbuilding led to The Peacock King being written, finished, and polished. She is the other artist for PK and the website guru that makes sure nothing important goes boom. Char has two kids, a husband, a dog and two cats to ensure that nothing is where she remembers it.

<http://peacock-king.infernalshenanigans.com>

The Spaces in Between

T. L. Whiteman

“Okay,” I hissed while slamming my wine glass down upon the table, some of its contents splashing across the previously white table cloth, “*now* you’re just provoking me.”

Leid flashed a pearly grin, leaning back in her chair and slinging one leg over the other. The ivory dress she wore slid up her thigh, revealing more than I’d ever seen. I tried my very best to stay focused on the fact that she’d just completely pissed me off.

Through the candlelight, the smile she wore seemed eerie. Her violet eyes were imperceptible against the shadows of her long, black hair. However, I didn’t need any candescence to sense the mockery she held within them.

“I am *not*,” she objected, though her smirk betrayed her words. “I’d just like to know why you disapprove of *Creationism*.” She then tilted her head and scrunched her nose. “I guess I never really pegged you as such a humanitarian.”

I seriously doubted she ‘pegged’ me as anything other than lazy and naïve since I began my training. So far I’d endured three decades of humiliation and verbal abuse through fancy, verbose words. Just because it sounded prettier didn’t mean it wasn’t just as insulting, *bitch*.

When I’d finally thought of something witty to reply with, the waiter showed up and ruined everything.

Because we were eating dinner at an upscale restaurant in Paris, we conversed in French. Sometimes, languages seemed to clash together for me. I found the Latin-based languages very similar to each other. On top of that, knowing Latin fluently made determining what they were saying even more difficult. Though, I had to admit that over the years it became a

little easier. At first it was pretty hard to control the universal-dictionary in my head.

As the waiter left, I eyed her. “You always order chicken.”

She lofted a brow. “So?”

“So, aren’t you revolted by it yet?”

Leid scowled. “What do *you* care?”

“I don’t; never mind,” I muttered. I didn’t even know why I found that irritating.

And then, as if the previous conversation never took place, Leid’s expression melted away. “How’s the target?”

My eyes slid to the man we’d been watching for the last three hours. At that moment, he sat alone at a table and was ordering wine. Though no one else in the entire restaurant could see it, he was **infected**.

On the outside, he may have appeared like your typical middle-aged, upper-class guy in an expensive suit. But to *our* eyes, he was a shadow.

“Enjoying himself,” I said with an impatient sigh. “Are you meaning to tell me a symbiote possessed someone in order to see a movie and eat dinner?”

“It’s waiting for an opportunity.”

“Well why can’t I just go over there and take its fucking head off already? It deserves to die worse than any of the others; it watches romance films, for God’s sake.”

She frowned. “Do I even need to answer that, Alezair?”

I said nothing and looked away. We had to wait until this guy was completely alone to waste him. The trip out of the restaurant seemed promising, as it was near many alleys. Symbiotes liked these places, too. No audience.

Leid finally leaned forward as our food was placed in front of us. When the waiter left yet again, she smoothed her hair and began to pick at her plate. She ate like a bird.

“Getting back on topic, I’d honestly like to hear your views on creating life versus biological spontaneity. I wasn’t trying to instigate you or anything.”

I swallowed a spoonful of my lobster bisque. “Yes, because ‘*what in the Multiverse would ever make you think that, Alezair?*’ wouldn’t be classified as instigation.” I tried to imitate her voice, but failed. “Right, I got you.”

My expression changed no sooner had I put the spoon to my mouth. I looked down at my bowl with widening eyes. This was *really* fucking good.

She shrugged, shifting in her seat. “You know that’s just me.”

I did. Leid had the uncanny ability to transform the most passive aggressive statement into blatant provocation. She didn’t necessarily intend to be insulting; she just had a substantial lack of empathy for everything around her.

Despite this flaw, she was incredibly beautiful. When she’d bring me to the point of near madness, I often had trouble deciding whether I wanted to choke her, or fuck her.

Unfortunately, Leid wasn’t interested in me at all. I was only her trainee, the newest addition to the Jury. I had to accompany her on tasks until I either completely grasped the concepts, or shot myself in the head. So far, it was leaning toward the latter.

But no sooner had I noticed her introspection, my irritation evaporated. “Life is spontaneous, Leid. You of all people should know this. To say that it’s alright to create life for *any* excuse goes directly against the course of nature.”

“And what exactly *is* nature to you?”

I looked around me. “Not *this*. Humans were created, for one of the most pointless reasons no less. A proper species should evolve with their environment, not just suddenly *appear* in it.”

“*This* species was specifically designed for the environment,” Leid corrected me, gesturing to the surrounding crowd with a hand. “By taking the molecular pattern of other creatures existing here, and building one that albeit is new, is also genetically similar, doesn’t destroy any moral, existential law.”

“Yes, but you can’t deny that it destroys the natural course of everything. What kind of world would this be had the angels not placed humans here?”

Thoughtfully, she tapped a finger against her chin. “Don’t know. But I’m going to have to disagree with creationism destroying the natural course of everything.”

I raised my eyebrows at her challenge, taking a sip of my wine. “Oh? This should be interesting.”

“Nature either *doesn’t* exist, or is *everything*,” she began, her eyes narrowing. This look meant she was about to seriously school me. “If you want to say that creating life destroys this supposed natural course, then you’d also have to deny that the ability to create came about naturally as well, which isn’t the case. Their natural course led them to acquiring the necessary knowledge. Therefore, even creationism is nature.”

I sat there, glaring at her. Either she was absolutely insane, or I was really stupid. “*What?*”

She frowned. “Respect creationism; it keeps us employed.”

“Of course.”

I picked up movement in my peripherals. The symbiote was getting up to leave. “Leid, it’s time.”

We both waited until he was a safe distance ahead of us, and then we stood. Halfway through the restaurant, Leid stopped me. “The *bill*, Alezair. You forgot to pay it.”

Shit. I began to head back. “Just go on ahead, I’ll catch up.”

She only shook her head in evident disappointment and continued her pursuit. I tended to grasp the general concepts better than the little, mundane details of human behavior—;

Like paying for my meal.

I left the money in the check-book, not exactly counting the right amount. I was sure the waiter would be pretty happy, though. I then quickly began after my Commander. At this rate, she’d probably already killed the fucking thing.

The night was cold, and I pulled up the collar of my jacket. People bustled to and fro around me, ignorant to the dangers that lurked around *them*. Little cars and bicycles traversed the main road; the smell of bread and the stench of liquor emanated across the warm, dry air from various bars and cafes. Paris’ nightlife was astounding. I seriously didn’t think I’d be able to complete this mission unseen.

I paused for a second amidst the evening passersby, and then sensed the direction Leid had gone. I followed, jogging across the street and into an alleyway.

I was expecting the symbiote to already be dead. I didn't know who was more surprised when I ran directly into him. Leid purposely led me into a trap to see if I'd be careful, and I failed. *Fuck*.

That wasn't the only problem. Just as I could see him, he could see *me*. Symbiotes were considerably strong as well. Since each member of the Jury worked alone, we relied on stealth to kill.

This was not stealth. This was me flunking another examination.

The moment we laid eyes upon each other, the symbiote lunged at me. Grabbing me by my collar, he slammed my back against the wall.

Ignoring the searing pain that was now present in my shoulders, I managed to rip him from me by the neck, and then I slammed his face into the wall. His arm swung out simultaneously, but I caught it, and snapped it at the elbow like a twig. The infected man screamed in pain, dropping to his knees.

I stepped back, wincing as my right hand exploded from my wrist in a cloud of crimson spray.

From my severed appendage slid a serrated, black '*blade*' that we called a scythe. They were actually extensions of our skeletons, but were also used to kill violating Celestials. Now that I'd been given the chance to unleash it, I gained the upper hand.

No pun intended.

The symbiote got up again, his forearm now seemingly hanging there by a thread, and I moved in.

Our struggle ensued for less than ten seconds before I managed to shove my scythe through his chest. At first he thrashed against me, but then he gave a final, inhuman screech and erupted into salt. Before this happened, he spat a wad of blood directly in my face. Now I was covered in it.

Ugh. I liked this coat!

With an irritated scowl, I touched the wall as my scythe retracted into my wrist, and my human hand reconstructed itself. We could heal through

transfer of matter. Our bodies were capable of stripping down elements to their subatomic particles and reconstructing new ones.

Leid was now behind me. I sensed her before I even bothered to look over my shoulder. Her impatient expression indicated that I was about to be scolded. However, she said nothing. Shaking out my new hand, I spun to face her.

“Go on,” I grumbled. “I already know what you’re going to say.”

She simply shrugged. “Precisely why I’m not even going to say it.”

That was even worse; the whole ‘*you should know better*’ routine. “You just didn’t want to get your dress dirty.”

I watched her grin. “I’ll admit that was part of it.”

By now I’m sure you’ve gathered we aren’t human. However, we looked enough like humans to be able to perform the duties of judges. Our foremost responsibility was to kill angels and demons that walked this world. Having direct contact with their creations was a *Code violation*. This contest worked on indirect influence alone.

Symbiotes were demons that moved through human bodies. Lately, all of the violators were from Hell. A sort of *political uprising* had been going on there for a while.

Violations weren’t exactly frequent. So aside from policing, we also had extremely boring desk-jobs. I spent most days imprisoned in my office in Purgatory, at the mercy of mountains and mountains of paperwork. Currently, I was Leid’s office assistant until I deserved my own desk. That also meant I had to do all of the shit *she* didn’t want to.

I tried to wipe the blood from my face, but it was already dry. “Can we go?” I then asked. I didn’t want someone to see me. I looked like Jack the Ripper.

Her smirk didn’t cease. “I don’t know. That blood really goes well with your eyes. It makes you look like a wolf, fresh after a kill.”

I fell awkwardly silent. Sometimes she said things like this, and I didn’t know what to make of them. At first, I thought they were signs of attraction for me. However, thirty turn-downs later and it seemed she was just extremely odd. But her eccentricity not only drove me crazy; it also intrigued me. I never met *anyone* like her before.

I was sure what she said wasn't far from the truth. The only real physical abnormality we had from humans (other than giant black scythes exploding from our wrists) was our eye color. My eyes were silver, while Leid's were violet. Most of the time when we were here, people just thought we wore contacts. But matters tended to prove more difficult when we encountered times where contacts hadn't yet been invented.

My hair was a typical brown, which often shadowed my eyes enough that I didn't appear too strange. However, Leid was *extremely* noticeable. This was both good *and* bad.

Although I probably make us sound really pretty, trust me; laying eyes on us was a death sentence. No one knew we existed. And while taking a human life was something we always tried not to do, casualties weren't that big of a deal, either.

I came to her side, watching the salt pile shrink as, one by one, the wind carried each grain into the darkness. There went another life.

"Alezair?"

I looked down at her, inquisitively. "Yes?"

She didn't even come to my shoulder, but don't let *that* fool you; she could have killed me where I stood.

"Despite forgetting to pay the check and letting the symbiote see you," she began, "I'm going to say you did a good job. Well done."

I gawked at her. "What? Leid, I've been through better trials than this one."

"You're right. But I feel like I haven't really congratulated you on the good ones you've had."

I lofted a brow. "Stop acting nice. It's weird."

"My apologies." She then moved deeper into the alleyway, her body swallowed by the evening shadows. "You're to report to the Celestial Court tomorrow at 6 A.M., where I'll then give you my full length evaluation of your—"

I turned my back on her, sighing. I could see the Eiffel Tower from here. We never got to actually *visit* many of the places we ventured. We were constantly working. In fact, now that we had to kill *this* fucking asshole, we'd be spending the next hour or three filling out paper work and reporting to Lucifer's Court. Ultimately, it was just another day in my life.

—examination and overall progress so far. Don't stay up too late raiding our liquor cabinet, do you hear me?"

Shoving my hands into my pockets, I followed her with a roll of my eyes. "Uh huh."

On the bright side, at least I got to have that soup.

Terra Whiteman is currently working on her Bachelors in Biology, Pre-health, and Chemistry at Avila University's School of Science and Health, and also serves as Vice President of Tri-Beta National Biological Honors Society (Phi Iota Chapter). The Spaces in Between is a stand-alone piece based on her web series The Antithesis (<http://the-antithesis.net>). In her free time, she enjoys writing, drawing, and reading. Some of her favorite authors are Edgar Allan Poe, Bret Easton Ellis, William Faulkner and Garth Ennis.

New Stories

M. C. A. Hogarth

Sedikit was dying. I could smell the sharp tang of it on his breath, hear it in the strained hiss that passed between his parched and parted lips. I wrung the rag, letting the drip of the water displace for just a moment the sound of the male's distress. This sickness had already killed Marne's baby, the one that had stolen the last of her wit with its birth. In that, it claimed two victims, for I sorely missed Marne's humor.

Daridil stepped into the room, his passage ruffling the woven grass curtain hung in the door and allowing in the mingled scents of sun-baked clay and rikka sweat. I did not look at him, knowing what he would say.

"Deciding to stay was a mistake."

I sighed. The sun had seen this argument before, and no doubt would rise and fall many more times over it yet. "We have passed over this place dozens of times in our travels, Daridil. You know as well as I do that this is an unusually dry summer. It will go, as seasons do, and the rains will come."

"The rains were one thing. But this... don't you think it's a sign, Serel? How many more will we lose for breaking our customs?"

I did look at him then, for his voice had a breathy flutter better suited to fear than his usual belligerence. Daridil was atypical for our kind: he'd remained male through both puberties, and it showed in the adult. Tall and limber, he had the emodo's long fingers and flexible toes, perfect for complex and delicate work. His wedge-shaped head had a handsomely blunt end that complemented the triangular ears with their dark tufts. He was in some ways too perfect, for the family tended to overlook his mind while praising his body.

"I don't think the sickness is related to our decision to stay here, truly," I said to him. "It is coincidence."

His narrowed eyes told me he didn't believe. He glanced at Sedikit and tossed his braided mane over his shoulder. "Well, I shall go burn incense for him. The Trifold is displeased with us."

"Gods are not cruel," I said.

"No. But errant children may mistake a cuffing for cruelty if they don't know better."

I sighed. "Daridil—"

"Pray we'll have no more cases of this," Daridil interrupted me. "Or we will abandon these ill-thought buildings." He lifted his chin and ducked back out.

The rustle of rushes brought my eyes back to Sedikit. I finished wringing out the rag and placed it over his forehead, flinching at the heat rising off his skin. We were not meant for heat, we Jokka. Too hot and our minds burn up and die, and the first to go are our breeders. I clasped one of the emodo's warm hands in my own, my fingers cooled by the water, and murmured, "I will not let you die."

Not only because I loved him, as I loved all our family. But because I would not release the two brick houses we'd spent so much effort erecting. Our new life—a life free of the constant indignities and hardships of travel—must prevail.

* * *

"There is a madwoman in the hills," Resa told me. It was glaring at the herbs it was attempting to grind into paste for the evening meal. I stood beside the youth, my shadow stretching outward in crisp violet on the dun ground. There were no clouds in the hard sky, and the heat rose from the earth in dense waves. No wonder there were no females or males outside the house.

"What rumor is this?" I said, crouching beside the eperu child.

"Its not a rumor," Resa said stubbornly. It stretched its fingers without releasing the pestle, then resumed its efforts, muscles tensing beneath its side and shoulder. "We went looking for vegetables. We found a doused campfire and then we saw her." It licked its lip. "Her fire smelled like medicine."

My ears twitched. "Are you sure?"

“Do I look nose-blind to you?” Resa asked, scowling. “It smelled like that liquid you have to drink when you’re feverish. High, thin and bitter.”

“A madwoman in the hills with a medicine-scented fire,” I said aloud, affecting a nonchalance that had no relationship with my pounding heart. Could it be a lore knower? Would I be so lucky! “A strange tale.”

“It’s not a tale,” Resa said. “Look for yourself.” It pointed to the northwest. “Those hills.”

“I suppose I will,” I said. “Thanks, ba eperu.”

Resa only sniffed and continued its labors.

I resisted the urge to check on Sedikit again and strode past the rikka tethered at our outermost building and into the northwestern hills. The land we had chosen for our settlement was beautiful when the sun wasn’t baking it to char. We were near a deep pool and a stand of scattered trees, close enough to sit under their leaves but far enough to take advantage of other passing families on the main thoroughfare south. It wasn’t a new idea, putting down roots: several other tribes had done so. They had chosen that course because of infirm members, or to remain near someone they’d buried. We had chosen it because I had convinced Daridil that there was some value in remaining in place. Because I was convinced that the constant travel shortened the lives of all our family, and our anadi, our females, especially. The anadi had the most fragile constitutions of all our sexes... even the burden of pregnancy often consumed their minds. So the concept of an anadi in the hills seemed outlandish. Females did not walk alone—

The point of a spear nudged my back and I halted.

“Mean me no harm and I will treat you the same,” said a trembling but determined voice.

“I bear you no ill will,” I said.

The pressure at my lower spine eased. I looked over my shoulder and found Resa’s mysterious anadi there, looking like no anadi I’d ever seen. She was thin with barely any breast, and wore clothing without showing signs of discomfort at the heat. I could not decide whether to think of her as anadi—soft, frail and feminine—or eperu like myself, a hunter, a neuter, a hardened creature suited to the climate.

Something in my expression softened hers. She chuckled. “Am I confusing you?”

“I admit I didn’t believe when I heard there was a female in the hills,” I said. “You don’t look like any female I’ve seen.”

“That’s because all the females you’ve seen have been pampered breeders. I am a fighter.”

“Born eperu?” I asked. It was impolite to ask of a stranger, but curiosity had me in its teeth.

“Born anadi,” she said. “Turned eperu at first puberty, then back female at second.”

Perhaps it explained her endurance and her physique, though I’d known plenty of anadi who had been eperu and none of them looked like this creature. Most of us Turned; our first puberty was more likely to see us from one sex to another than our second, but the second still held potential. Why we were all given these experiences of another sex, why sometimes we blended the best, or worst, of their attributes into our final form, no one knew... but I felt for the stranger. I had been eperu, then emodo, and eperu again; never the weakest sex. “I see,” I said. Then blushed pale at the ears. “I apologize for my curiosity. It’s a weakness. I’m Serel of family Nudet.”

“It is no trouble, Serel... for I’ll have some questions from you, if you’re done. I’m Kediil. What are you doing down there? Are you actually planning to stay in those houses all year?”

“Gods willing,” I said.

Kediil shook her head in amazement. She had truly marvelous skin... *sukul* we call it, moon-shell white. Her hair had been messily braided into an eperu style, but its color, a luminous silver-gilt over white, made the mess seem affected, beautiful. Even the smudges of brown soil and the pallor of a few bruises and scratches did not mar her appearance much.

“I have never heard of such a thing,” she said. “Why?”

“Because the travel is hard on the breeders,” I said.

“Ah,” Kediil nodded. “Of course.” And then we stared at one another, hers a look of great amusement and mine the embarrassed pause of someone who has realized the incongruity of its observation.

“Ah!” Kediil laughed. “I’m done teasing you with your preconceptions. Come sit by my fire and have something to drink. It’s been long days since I’ve had company.”

I followed her over the next rise, where she’d set up a small camp beneath a single, drooping tree. The anadi patted its trunk as she passed it, then dropped beside her fire and gently poked it back to life with a stick. The ceramic pot over it did indeed smell of heat-calming medicine; she did not pour from it, but from a smaller pot. I accepted the petal-tinted water.

“You know some of the way of plants?” I asked, sitting across from her and attempting to be casual.

“I know all of the way of plants,” she said, glancing at me. “All that a lore knower should, at least.”

So she had been taught by the lore knower of her family, a teaching traditionally given only to other neuters. “They thought you would stay eperu?”

Her ears flattened, but she gave the single dip of assent with her chin.

“My sorrow, Kediil.”

“Why?” she asked with a flick of her tail. She grinned. “I am living a life I enjoy.”

I rested my hands on my knees. “Do you offer your services to those in need?” When she looked up at me with lifted brow, I said, “I will not overlook aid whatever shape it comes in.”

“Then you must truly have need,” she said. “What’s wrong?”

I took a deep breath. “There is a fever in the family. It has taken one of the babies, and now has settled on a male. His breath is sharp and comes hard to him. I think he’ll die soon.”

Kediil frowned. “There are many sicknesses with similar symptoms. I would have to see him.”

I paused then, realized exactly what I did. Jokka do not travel alone. Breeders do not wander without family. This anadi could be mad, or have done wrong to be cast out... and bringing her home would win me no favor from Daridil. Particularly since we had no lore knower, a lack he never ceased to remind me of. It would have been my task, had Ikeser not died beneath the claws of an eightclaws before it could teach me.

"You're worried that bringing me to your home would be a poor idea," she guessed into my silence.

I blushed again, but met her eyes. "Yes."

"It would be," she said. "I have been in and out of the tents of the Jokka these many days I have been free. I have learned more than any lore knower I've met, for I've collected the wisdom of all those I've met in passing. Yet no Jokkad will come close to me. They fear that their anadi will take my madness and follow me into the wild." She laughed. "As if a life of hardship, of solitude is welcome to most!"

"And yet to you it is welcome," I said. "What are you to enjoy it?"

Kediil's head twisted, a gesture torn between sorrow and self-consciousness. She ran her finger over her toes, through the hair that grew to cover them. She'd clipped the ruffs very close. Said she, "I don't know, ke eperu."

I stood, brushed the dirt off my loin-skirts. "I will take you back with me, if you care to come, ke Kediil."

She looked up at me and smiled, faintly. "Where there is suffering, I care to heal."

* * *

The heat had driven the entire family to shelter; their fear of sickness into the house that had not seen the death of Marne's baby, nor now witnessed the decline of Sedikit. I led Kediil inside, watched her as she studied the walls and the door with its curtain. The building had only one room, and this one was smaller than the other where the family huddled. We were only a twice-handful: three males, three females, one neuter and three children... the travel had not been kind to us. And why do the Jokka roam? "Because the Jokka have always roamed." So Darisil said.

Into the sepia shadows went Kediil, to sit by Sedikit's bedside and touch him without any visible fear. She peeled back his lips to examine his gums, stared into his eyes, brushed his forehead, his nose, his sides. "How long has he been sick? Has he eaten? Has he passed waste? Has he vomited? How is his speech when he speaks?" And on and on the questions went. I answered as well as I could. When she'd learned all she deemed necessary, she stood and stretched.

"He may yet live. Bring me a mortar and pestle."

I did so. Throughout the rest of the afternoon and well into the evening, I aided her in the mixture of her medicinals, studying her actions without understanding them. What Kediil knew far surpassed anything I'd ever seen Ikeser do.

"A knife," she said.

I paused.

She bared her teeth at me. "A knife," she repeated.

She slathered the knife I brought her in one of the many pastes she'd made, then turned to Sedikit and poised it over the side of his neck.

When her muscles tensed, I snatched her wrist before she could plunge, almost knocking over the stool to reach her. "What are you doing!"

"His sickness has overwhelmed his body. We must release some of it so he has a chance to finish the fight," she said. Her pupils were vast in the shadows. "Let me do what I must!"

Sedikit's breath hissed below us. His pulse fluttered against his neck too quickly. I released her hand, but I feared anyway.

"Be ready with the bandage," she said, and sliced.

The ordure of decay and infection surged from the wound, following the pus. No blood, save for that which dripped from his skin... I wondered at her skill, to avoid the great vessels in the neck. When she asked, I gave her the bandage and she painted it with yet another poultice before closing the wound and opening the other side. She chose a few more locations on the body—behind his knees and beneath his arms—and then set the knife aside. She checked his forehead and nodded.

I set my hand on Sedikit's head and gaped. "He's cooler!"

"The disease had much advanced," she said as she washed her hands. The cool fragrance of one of her herbs rose from the bowl beneath her fingers, and the sound of the water falling sounded sweetly with the eased breathing of the male. "Earlier I could have treated it with draughts and diet, but so far along there was no choice but to open him." She canted her head. "I will give you the recipe for the draughts, in case anyone else falls ill. You must give them the regimen immediately, or it will do as it has done to this emodo, and you will have to ply the knife."

"I don't think I could," I said, still staggered. The glow beneath Sedikit's skin had re-kindled; even his sleep was easier. "Where did you learn that?"

“Accident,” Kediil said with a lopsided smile. “An injury on an already sick male. It does not work for all diseases, but if it will you will be able to feel it with your fingers. There will be lumps... hardened ones, if you have waited too long.”

“I don’t know how to thank you,” I said. “Your knowledge is without price.”

Kediil found a full smile for me then, but did not answer.

“Serel, you’ve missed supper—”

Kediil and I both looked up when Darisil stepped through the curtain, his body following his words. Despite the warning, I moved in front of Kediil too late.

“The rumor is true!” the male said, eyes widening. His gaze found the knife and the bowls and he snarled. “Out! Both of you!”

I thought it wise to obey, if only because an altercation would disturb Sedikit’s sleep. I flicked my ear toward the door and Kediil left before me, dropping bags of herbs back in the pouches at her thin belt.

Outside, half the family waited to see what Darisil had been shouting about. Our more spectacular fights had always been viewed as good entertainment, though the family never believed we would remain at odds. One day we would surprise them.

I stood in front of Kediil, waiting to see exactly what part of the situation irritated Darisil the most.

“Are you trying to get us killed?”

That was not what I’d expected. He prowled to and fro before us, so angry his claws showed at the tips of his fingers. The starlight picked them out well enough, though the gathering dusk is one of the hardest times for us to see. “The gods are angry enough with us. They gave us the dry season. They killed Marne’s baby and are taking Sedikit. Now you bring this abomination into our home? Are you trying to get us cursed?”

I glanced over my shoulder at Kediil, uneasy. “She is no abomination,” I said. “Only another Jokkad like us.”

“An anadi who looks half-eperu and has no family? Who wanders wild? I had the stories from the children. Are you mad to bring her here, Serel?”

The family looked disturbed and frightened. I hated when Darisil resorted to such tactics... though sometimes, I thought he actually

believed his own rhetoric. I straightened and lifted my chin. “She healed Sedikit.”

“She took a knife to him!”

“To help his body fight its disease. He is better! Look yourself if you doubt me!”

“Serel... hasn’t it occurred to you that if the gods are cuffing us for our disobedience, stopping their hand will only make them angrier?”

I stared at him. “You don’t truly believe this is the work of the Trinity, do you?”

“Trifold.”

“Whatever!” I said, exasperated. “Bad luck! Coincidence! We will weather it as we’ve weathered everything.”

“Will we?” he asked. He glanced from me to Kediil, then said to the watchers, “Come. It is past time to rest.” And he led them into the house, leaving me in the deepening dark with my peculiar half-eperu anadi and her magic potions. I turned to her, chagrined, finding her expression resigned and her eyes darker than the starlight would have them.

“An old story,” I guessed.

“The oldest,” she answered, her voice soft. “That which is different is threatening.”

I touched her wrist. “I would have thought to offer you something for your work... truly, I would have liked you to stay, if your wandering feet could have been stilled.”

Her brows lifted. “And invite the displeasure of the gods?”

“I have never been much for religion,” I said. “And I have always been more interested in the mind beneath a body.”

She tilted her head, cupped my shoulders in her hands. “And that is why you want so much to stay in one place, is it? Because you sorrow to see the breeders lose their minds to exertion, toil and heat. You must know that staying in one place will bring its own hardships?”

“Of course,” I said. “But a new danger may be an easier one.” I smiled. “We make of life what we can.”

Kediil searched my eyes—an unmistakable examination, her own gaze unblinking and bright. Her eyes had a beautiful color, a green-blue that

suggested deep water. She withdrew her hands and took a deep breath. The packets she handed to me were fragrant with the scent of life.

“I would like to have stayed and mixed these properly, but they will do some good as long as they’re ground. They should help.”

She turned then and walked away. I fingered the packets, breathing their clean, sharp fragrance, then called, “You could visit. I could meet you in the hills, tell you how our grand experiment goes... this settled life.”

Kediil grinned. “Perhaps in a year your children will see my fire in these parts again.”

“I look forward to it,” I said, and she left.

For a long time I stood there with the herbs in my hand. Thinking of how old the stars were that gave light to my eyes, how many Jokka had stood beneath the purple sky with the heat of the summer on their skins and the weight of tradition on their shoulders.

I thought how nice it was to be one of those who did not feel the burden.

With the packets in my hand, I went to tend to Sedikit.

M.C.A. Hogarth has been many things—web database architect, product manager, technical writer, massage therapist and rather more side jobs—but is currently a parent, artist, writer and anthropologist to aliens. This excerpt concerns one of them: the Jokka, featured in *Strange Horizons* and *Oceans of the Mind*. Her writing has also appeared in the *Leading Edge*, and her art in RPGs and on book covers. You can keep up with her current projects at her website, www.stardancer.org, or Livejournal, haikujaguar.livejournal.com

Sixth of November

Nancy Brauer

The crowd in the Music Concourse roared when Gwen Frontera and her band took the stage. “Gwen!” Leslie screamed. Kristin kept her smile plastered on and shrieked along with her friend. Two weeks ago she’d have been just as excited to see the pop star live, and during the Independence Day festival, no less. Now it was all she could do to not look over her shoulder at the soldiers posted throughout Golden Gate Park.

Something nudged Kristin’s side. She yelped and whirled around only to find Leslie, who rolled her eyes. Still bouncing to Gwen’s opening song, Leslie laughed, “Jumpy much? And when did you develop a thing for men in uniform?”

“Huh?”

Leslie nodded to Kristin’s left. “Tall, dark, and military over there. You were checking him out.”

Kristin felt her face flush. “N-no...” She couldn’t be found out. She wouldn’t be able to work on those drugs—not on the initial high dosage. They’d destroy her work. Her career. Her life.

Leslie threw an arm around Kristin’s shoulders and turned her toward the soldier. He was tall, dark-skinned, and quite handsome. The man’s military uniform and holstered stun gun negated all of that. “Oh, come on. I don’t see a ring,” Leslie grinned. “When the hell did you get so shy? Wink at him. At least smile!”

Kristin managed a smile, then turned her eyes to the stage. Pins and needles pricked at her skin, just like they had two weeks ago. *Stay here*, she thought as she drew a breath. *Here*. Exhale. *Here*. Inhale. *Here*.

The sensations subsided. Tears of relief welled in Kristin’s eyes.

Leslie moved her grip to Kristin’s upper arm. “Hey, are you all right?”

Her friend's concern and innocent question made the tears spill over. "Yeah," Kristin lied. "Allergies."

"Oh. Did you take something?"

"Yeah. It should kick in soon." She didn't like lying to her friend, but in this case it was better than the truth.

"Good." Leslie craned her neck and stood on tiptoes to get a better look at Gwen and the band. Between being 100 feet from the stage and her petite stature, she was out of luck. "This sucks. Let's try to get closer."

Kristin followed Leslie through the crowd. Her friend was right; all she needed was to get out of the lab and have some fun. By the time they'd danced/pushed/maneuvered within a stone's throw of Gwen, Kristin's worries were all but forgotten. The party atmosphere was infectious, and none of the soldiers they'd passed had given Kristin a second glance.

Gwen's first song was rewarded by cheers and thunderous applause. "Thank you!" Her soprano echoed a bit due to the sound system. "Y'all know we've been on tour." Cheers erupted again. Once they'd waned the singer continued, "Traveled all over, even to New America." Kristin and Leslie booed along with the crowd. "The sapiens there are tough. Right up there with us!" She flung her arms wide, including her audience and the band in the gesture. Leslie and Kristin shouted their agreement, clapping.

Gwen waited for the crowd to quiet completely. After a full minute had passed, she spoke soberly. "Thirty-two years ago we showed the nicts and their sycophants the door." The throng murmured agreement. "Thirty-two years ago we made sure it hit 'em on the ass on the way out." Leslie and Kristin sounded their support with the crowd. "Thirty-two years ago five thousand of us—sapiens and our nict allies—died. For us. For freedom!"

"FOR FREEDOM!" Kristin and Leslie cried with the others.

Gwen waved her band members around her mic. They cheered, "Happy birthday, Western Coalition!" The audience went wild as the band dove into their next song.

Despite the part of Kristin's mind calling her a hypocrite, Gwen's speech buoyed her spirits. As she danced to the fast-paced music, Kristin reconsidered her predicament. A small percentage of the population was nict. They'd proven that they could coexist with sapiens. Kristin could do that. She had for 29 years. No one needed to know about her latent abilities. It didn't matt—

Kristin's arm swung into someone... different. She and Leslie had been bumping into each other and anyone around them since they'd gotten this close to the stage. On instinct Kristin turned to face the person who'd grabbed her attention. A skinny Latino teenager with his dark hair in a ponytail stared back. The short, dark-skinned woman he was dancing with looked from him to Kristin. Both were psychic. She was sure of it even with her empathic shields up.

Leslie bounced up to Kristin, who'd long since pulled her arm away from the kid. "Hey," she shouted at the pair. To Kristin she said, "Friends?"

"No," Kristin replied, managing a shrug. She gave the pair an apologetic smile. "Sorry." She deliberately moved away from the two, although she wasn't sure why.

Kristin lost herself in the festivities until the end of Gwen's set. The musicians bowed and waved to riotous applause. Then three flashes of light shattered the jubilant mood. The crowd gasped as the light coalesced into three people, who stood on the stage with Gwen and her band!

The blood drained from Kristin's face. Leslie huddled close and grabbed her arm. "How'd they get in?! The Prime Minister said that the park's secure," she hissed. "The whole park, for the festival!"

Kristin nodded, her eyes riveted to the stage. Other than their abrupt appearance, the nicts were unremarkable: a lanky, freckled redhead, a middle-aged, heavysset black man, and a thirtysomething Latina. The black man stepped in front of Gwen while his companions fell back behind her. Militia swung into action as the singer tried to bolt, shouting, but Gwen's outrage melted into compliance. She halted between the nicts, seemingly at ease.

Also at ease were the nicts, although they watched the soldiers taking positions around the stage. A few fired, but the energy blasts hit an invisible wall surrounding the terrorists. Unfazed, the dark-skinned nict stepped up to the mic. “You claim to celebrate freedom, but you live in slavery, sapiens and nictans alike.” His baritone was cool confidence. “Think for yourselves! We’re stewards, not despots.”

Kristin sniffed. *Not despots*, she thought. *Murderers*.

The nict freak swept his gaze over the crowd, smirking. “Ask Ms. Frontera later.”

The nicts vanished, taking Gwen with them. Soldiers darted in various directions in organized chaos. The earth erupted fifty feet to Kristin’s right, raining down dirt, grass, and blood.

Kristin stared stupidly at the flecks of red in Leslie’s fair hair. She felt the wet warmth that had been a person moments ago on her face and arms. The uninjured ran screaming around them, fleeing the carnage.

Leslie tugged at Kristin’s arm, yelling. All Kristin heard were her parents’ screams. The nightmare she hadn’t had in so long had come to life. “Not real,” she murmured.

“What?!” Leslie shouted. “Kristin, come on!” She dragged Kristin a few feet toward the east exit.

Kristin’s arm felt numb, then tingly. She smiled as pins and needles rippled through her body. That wasn’t real either, thank God, or the flash of heat.

Kristin blinked the haze of white from her vision. She felt and saw Leslie release the death grip on her arm, then back away. Horror and revulsion contorted her pretty features. “You’re one of them! You did this!”

“What?” Kristin’s still-addled brain slowly put the pieces together. They weren’t in the Music Concourse anymore. The landscaped area behind Leslie looked like the neighboring botanical garden. “No! No, I’m—”

“HELP!” Leslie screamed. She scrambled away, not quite daring to turn her back to Kristin. “Nict! THERE’S A NICT HERE!”

A soldier sprinted toward them, barking into her radio.

Adrenaline fueled Kristin’s legs and sent her thoughts racing. *Where am I going? Where can I go?* Losing the soldier who’d responded to Leslie’s cry was her only goal now.

Kristin darted into a copse of young trees. Once she was sure that the foliage hid her from view she veered to the left, slowing to a jog.

Leslie—Leslie—outed me to the militia. She'll tell everyone at work. Kristin slowed further, forcing herself to think logically. *Aunt Viv.* Kristin reached into her purse, which she'd managed to hang on to, for her cell phone. After a moment's consideration she removed the battery from its compartment. *I've probably already been added to the watch list. They'll track me with this.*

She stopped and listened for pursuers. At least one person crashed through the underbrush, but they sounded far away. Kristin headed in the opposite direction.

When Kristin reached the edge of the woods she couldn't believe her luck. No soldiers were in sight. A few low hills and the copse at her back hid her from the rest of the park. Kristin hurried west, praying that her luck would hold.

Kristin sensed more than heard the handful of men climbing the hill ahead and to the left. They made too much noise for soldiers, so Kristin kept walking, albeit nervously. She breathed a sigh of relief when four thick-necked young men—frat boys judging from the Greek letters on their T-shirts—crested the hill. Their flushed faces spoke of inebriation, which explained why they hadn't gotten the hell out of Dodge already. Kristin continued forward without breaking stride.

Footsteps thundered down the hill, catching Kristin by surprise. A heavy hand fell on her shoulder and whirled her around. "Where're your friends, nict?" the blond frat boy with a crew cut growled. He and his friends smelled like a brewery.

"Yeah," the shorter, olive-skinned guy grunted. "You assholes aren't gettin' away." He grabbed a fistful of her hair.

Kristin's fight or flight instinct took over. She pushed her attackers away physically and mentally. "Let go!"

The frat boys tumbled backwards and into each other. Kristin darted around them, but one grabbed her ankle. She wiggled free, but not before losing her balance. She landed on hands and knees, scrambling away from the drunken goons as fast as she could.

"The only thing worse than a bigot is a drunk bigot." The Latino-accented tenor prompted Kristin to glance over her shoulder. The kid she'd bumped into earlier stood behind her attackers. He reached for the two frat boys nearest him, and they vanished!

The two remaining goons roared as they rounded on him. "What the hell?!"

"Goddamned nict!"

The teenager danced backwards, smirking at his oversized, if clumsy, opponents. Kristin got her feet under her as she watched the young nict. Surely he couldn't take out the two who were facing him.

Just behind the pair of frat boys light flashed, coalescing into the young woman who'd been with the teenager. Her multitude of short braids swung forward as she laid one hand on each of the drunkards. After another pulse of light, they disappeared as well.

Kristin hadn't realized that she'd been backing away from the nicts until she bumped into a tree. She yelped, drawing their attention. "Please, don't!" she cried. "I won't tell anyone about you, I promise! Just let me go!" To her horror, pins and needles crept up her arms and legs. "Oh God, not now!"

The woman held her hands up, palms out. "It's all right. We're not going to hurt you. Just breathe. Concentrate on here and now. The tree at your back. The breeze. Can you smell the salt from the bay?"

Kristin found herself nodding. She wanted to be far from the terrorists, but not if that meant teleporting to God knew where! So she breathed. In, out. In, out.

"That's right," the teenager said softly. "I'm Miguel, and this is Petra. We're leaving soon, and we—"

Once the horrible, tingling energy subsided, Kristin found her voice. "What did you do to them?"

Miguel cracked a smile. "I dropped my two in Stow Lake." He glanced at his friend. "You?"

"The Bison Paddock," the woman grinned.

"This isn't funny!" The way Kristin's voice cracked wasn't funny, either. At least the nicts had sobered. "I, um, I'm safe now. Thank you." Please, let them leave now!

Petra and Miguel exchanged a look. “You should come with us,” the young woman said.

“I’m not a nict!” Kristin risked taking her eyes off of the terrorists to look for soldiers. So far, so good.

“No, you’re *Homo sapiens nictans*, like us.” Miguel sounded proud of the fact.

“I’m not a terrorist!”

Petra gave Kristin a patient smile. “Neither are we.”

“You’re *nicts*!”

Miguel scowled for a split second. “Not all nictans are terrorists.”

“We don’t have time for this,” Petra said, then looked around. “Stay here if you want. If you change your mind, go to the Seal Rocks. We’ll keep an eye out for you.”

“I—” The nicts teleported away before Kristin could say more. Good riddance!

Kristen moved deeper into the wooded area to think. Moments later a helicopter few overhead, but the thick canopy of eucalyptus and pine hid her from view. Did the militia use dogs? She thought so, but wasn’t sure.

After a few minutes of pondering Kristin had a plan: get out of the city. She had to act fast; her profile would start circulating soon. The faster she got out of San Francisco, the better chance she had to start over somewhere new. In the worst case scenario, she might try to cross the Los Angeles border into New America. The thought make Kristin shiver.

She headed west, staying in the wooded parts of the park as much as possible. Although her T-shirt and shorts were perfect for the warm November afternoon, the underbrush scratched her bare legs. By the time she’d darted across Crossover Drive into the western half of the park, she was hot, thirsty, and uncomfortable.

The answer to her earlier question about tracking dogs came when she crested the next hill. Kristin spotted two soldiers with a police dog emerging from the woods to the north. She slunk down the west side of the hill, then waded down the first stream she could find. That’s what criminals on the lam did in movies, anyway.

The sun nearly touched the horizon by the time Kristin got to the western edge of the park. She stood at one of the Great Highway's crosswalks, waiting for a break in traffic and ignoring her growling stomach. The breeze carried scents from restaurants on the east side of the road. She reluctantly sprinted away from them—she didn't have any cash to buy food, and her debit card would surely be flagged—to the sandy strip of beach. There'd be fewer cameras on that side, she hoped.

Although she should probably be hitchhiking, Kristin found herself trudging across the sand toward the blood-red sun. Her eyes were tugged north, where the Seal Rocks rose out of the surf a half mile away. From this distance she couldn't tell if any sea lions were perched on them. They had it easy, she thought. They just had to eat, swim, and lounge. A quirk of genetics and recent history had made her a fugitive.

Kristin sat near the strandline, fidgeting with broken bits of shell the high tide had left there. She considered her predicament until the cooling air had her shivering. She was cold and utterly exposed. Where would she sleep? How would she eat? She was an electrical engineer, not a silver-tongued con man!

Taking a deep breath, Kristin stood and faced the Seal Rocks. At least it wasn't fully dark yet. A nict's flash of light would be obvious then. She concentrated on the rocky outcrop. *If I can do this, then I'm a nict. A nictan.*

Something like static electricity raised the hairs on her skin. Energy swirled, and rock replaced the sand under her feet.

Kristin stumbled, swearing, only to be caught by a waiting hand. She looked up to find Petra's smiling face. "Glad you decided to join us." The dark-skinned woman nodded to her left, where Miguel perched on a flat part of the outcrop. The sea lions appeared to be elsewhere.

"Um. Yeah." Kristin didn't know what else to say.

Miguel asked, "What's your name?"

"Kristin. Kristin Tsue."

"Are you ready to come with us?" Petra's voice was as gentle as her smile.

Kristin shrugged. Better to feign nonchalance than laugh hysterically. “I guess. Where are we going?”

“To freedom,” Miguel grinned.

Kristin returned the grin as best she could, remembering a lyric from one of her mother’s favorite songs: “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.” Aloud she murmured, “Freedom.”

A geologist turned web programmer turned writer and graphic artist, Nancy Brauer (www.nancybrauer.com) has yet to decide what she wants to be when she grows up. She’s been writing, drawing, and cracking open rocks for as long as she can remember. Her latest works are the sci-fi/romance novel *Strange Little Band* (www.strangelittleband.com) and the paranormal thriller *Tori’s Row* (www.torisrow.com). Nancy lives in southwestern Virginia with her partner, a dog who’s allergic to nearly everything, and two allergy-free cats.

Belonging

A. M. Harte

The service tunnel was deserted, the emergency lights glowing a soft yellow that turned the metal walls green. Anthony pounded down the corridor, each step echoing on the grates beneath his feet. His heart was racing, his breathing short. Yet he had to hurry; every minute was precious.

He scanned the left wall as he ran, eyes trained on the painted block letters marking each exit. The jumbled words and letters flashing past were all familiar, for Ant had grown up in these tunnels, spent most of his childhood escaping the doctors and playing hide and seek in Precision Horizons' underbelly. You could travel from one end of the company building to the other without catching even a glimpse of sunlight — and now that the others had been evacuated, he didn't have to worry about being seen.

O-DECK 42. Ant skidded to a halt when he saw the words and began clambering up the ladder. The rungs were cold and smooth beneath his fingers and he focused on the sensation. The ladder up to the observation deck was long and he'd never been great with heights; it was better to keep his eyes level, just on the rungs before him.

Soon he'd reached the top. There was a little shelf space, then the curved wall of the air vent. Ant pried the grate loose and crawled into the vent, slowly now, quietly. He breathed through his mouth with his lips pursed to help soften the noise.

A little further down the vent was a second grate, at floor level, looking into the observation deck. Here Ant hesitated, peering through the slits of metal. He could see one set of legs: black suit trousers, shiny black shoes, round leather laces. It was the Doctor. What was he doing here? Why

hadn't he been evacuated yet? Ant had been waiting in his room for the Doctor to come and collect him but as time passed he'd become nervous. A little eavesdropping on the evacuees walking towards the underground passageways and he'd discovered the Doctor's whereabouts. He'd resolved to fetch the Doctor himself, if he had to. The man was too important to die, or risk infection. It's why Ant had brought the prototype tranquilizer — one small jab, and the Doctor would have to obey his commands.

Ant moved his head from side to side, trying to see the rest of the room to determine whether the Doctor was alone. He couldn't see anyone. Still.... Ant pursed his lips together and emitted a soft chirp. Then he lightly scratched his nails against the metal.

"Damn ferret," the Doctor said, turning on the spot so that his feet pointed straight at Ant. There was a moment of silence as he no doubt looked around the room for the company's unofficial mascot. Then he said softly, "Anthony?"

Ant felt a surge of relief; the Doctor was alone, then. "Here," he said. He pushed the vent open and slid into the room, belly down.

"You shouldn't be here!" The Doctor strode over, helped him to his feet. "You weren't seen?" His lips had turned down and there was a large crease in his forehead, deeper than usual. Even his lab coat, usually so pristine, was crumpled and stained.

"No one saw me. There's no one left! And I was careful, too," Ant added with a touch of resentment.

"Of course you were." The Doctor relaxed a little. "For a moment I thought you were Charlie. The director's started taking that ferret everywhere with him." He shook his head and walked back over to the window, resting his hands on the railing. Ant joined him. The horizon was thick with smoke; even the city's golden *Madunina* had been swallowed from sight. And the flames were creeping closer, stretching out towards the company building with long, flickering fingers.

Ant couldn't stare at the flames too long — they left burning afterimages on his retina. He examined the Doctor instead. "They're behind the flames?"

“Yes.” The Doctor looked grim. “They’re burning everything, letting the flames clear a path. Whatever the fire doesn’t consume, they will no doubt destroy.”

“The fire will die out on our walls. And they will, too.”

But the Doctor shook his head. “Wishful thinking I’m afraid. The old are already dying, yes, but the young are adapting. Evolving. The gene will make them stronger, as it did with you.”

Ant looked away and kept his mouth closed, hiding his sharp canines and slit-shaped pupils. With his head down, Ant could pass for human. Sometimes he wondered what his life would have been like: growing up outside of Precision Horizons, having a family, a mother... All he had of his mother was a row of test tubes in the Containment Room with her initials and the date neatly printed on the label, countless ova stored inside. Potential brothers, potential sisters, all frozen inside glass.

“The greatest experiment yet,” the Doctor muttered, and now his voice was soft as he looked upon the burning horizon.

The first faint stirrings of suspicion formed in Ant’s mind. “You wanted this,” he accused, his throat tight. For his whole life *he* had been the prize, the prodigy. Now with the creation of the virus he would have to compete for the Doctor’s attention with hundreds of others — no, thousands. His fingers brushed against the tranquilizer in his pocket.

The Doctor placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. “They will be nothing like you. I made you; I raised you. They... They are God’s happy accident. Who knows what they will become.”

Ant managed a small smile, savouring the warmth of the Doctor’s hand, reassured by its presence. For a moment they stood there, united, then the stillness between them was broken; the Doctor’s phone rang.

“Gray speaking.” The Doctor turned away from Ant. “Yes, I *realize* they’re coming. That much is obvious.” His shoulders tensed. “She what?” A pause. “I understand. We will be there soon.”

He hung up and Ant looked at him, hopeful. “Are we evacuating now?”

“My daughter,” the Doctor said. His voice was choked, and Ant too felt the fear rising. “Laura.... She’s still outside, helping evacuees. She won’t make it back in time.” He leaned heavily against the railing, all appearances of strength drained from him.

Ant stared, felt the fierce anger wash over him as if it were happening to someone else. How dare Laura go where he could not follow and risk her life without telling him? She was his only friend. She couldn't die. He wouldn't let that happen to her — *couldn't* let that happen. Not when she had finally started to notice him the way he had always wanted her to.

"Well call her! Tell her to come back!" But the Doctor was shaking his head; it wouldn't work. Ant paced back and forth. "Is she far? Can we see her? Maybe if we shout? Or..." That was when it dawned on him: the perfect plan, the only one that would work. Surely the Doctor would let him break the rules just this once?

"I'll go," he said, firm. "I'll take one of the company motorbikes. I've ridden them before."

"But you've never gone outside of the compound!" The Doctor twisted his hands together. "You could get lost. Someone could see you!"

"Anyone that does will soon be dead," Ant replied. "And I'm the only one here who can't be infected by the virus. I already am, after all." His laughter was choked.

There was a moment of tense silence where the air seemed to thicken with every passing second of inaction. Finally the Doctor bowed his head and sighed heavily "Go. Bring her to the bunker. Please."

Ant nodded, determined, and moved towards the vent, but the Doctor stopped him, fishing his keycard out of his pocket. "Use the main corridors for once. There's no one around to see you."

* * *

The Doctor's keycard made things easy: doors opened automatically as he approached them, and Ant was able to cut straight through the building to the garage rather than take the roundabout service tunnel route. Near the garage exit was a row of company motorbikes. Ant touched his keycard to the nearest one to unlock it, then took hold of the handles. His palms were sweaty and it took three tries to get the motorbike running.

"Come *on*," he begged, and the machine finally roared to life. He slung a leg over the bike and rode straight towards the garage exit, praying the keycard would work here as well. It did; the metal double doors raised automatically as he approached.

Within minutes he was out in the sunshine, squinting against the bright light. No sunglasses, Ant realized — he'd left them in his room. He would have to make do without. Ant hunched forward and pulled on the throttle, was distracted momentarily by the answering surge of power. He shot down the straight road and towards the main gates of Precision Horizons, heart racing with a mixture of adrenaline and fear. He'd imagined escaping the company, sometimes; he wondered whether it would have felt like this, like his chest would burst with the conflicting emotions.

Someone had left the main gates open. Ant went through them, turned a hard left to take the road into the city. This was the furthest he had ever been from the company. It took all his willpower not to look behind him, just to make sure the building was still standing. Laura. He had to focus on Laura.

Luckily it was a straight road and there were regular signs pointing him to the city centre. The closer he got, the stronger the smell of smoke and burning. Soon it was snowing ash, grey and light and crumbly. The infected were close, and he was heading straight for them. He couldn't discount the possibility that they'd already passed their sickness onto Laura, or worse — murdered her. Ant pushed aside the tingle of worry and drove even faster.

There! A group of people hurrying towards him, just barely ahead of the all-consuming flames. The roaring of the fire was louder than he expected, the heat flushing his cheeks. Ant braked hard, skidding the bike in a half circle in case they were infected. But they still looked human, acted human — none of them were having seizures.

He scanned the crowd desperately and soon spotted Laura. She was near the front of the group, helping a woman with young twins. She hurried towards him, one of the children in her arms.

"Ant! Thank God you're here." Her hair was a wild tangle of curls and her face was streaked with dirt. "These people need help, they can't make it alone."

"Your father sent me to get you," he said, coasting the motorbike along beside her.

"And I'm helping Cal and Mike's mother," she replied, mouth set in a stubborn scowl. "So it's in your interest to help her, too."

Help? He looked at the boy in her arms, barely a toddler, thumb stuck firmly in his mouth, his feet bare save for one sock on his right foot. The boy stared wide-eyed at Ant, but the puppy dog look had never worked on him. He'd never spent much time around children and they made him feel uncomfortable. And the rest of the rag-tag group.... Women, children, the elderly; none of them could walk fast enough to make it to the bunker in time.

Ant raised a hand to brush a lock of hair from Laura's face, but let his arm fall short. "Your father told me to get you."

"We can't leave these people here!" In her anger she started walking faster, but on the motorbike it was easy to keep up.

"We're sixteen, Laura," Ant said. "It's not our job to save the world." And how mean he felt for saying those words, but to him all that mattered was getting Laura to safety. "I promised your father I would. Just come with me, please."

She shifted the boy to her other hip so that she could glare at him all the better. "Forget my father! Why do you need his approval for everything? You don't see *me* going around doing everything he tells me!"

Ant struggled to rein in his anger but it was impossible. "That's because you don't have to prove yourself. You don't have to do anything!" he shouted. "Your father would love you even if you were infected!" And Laura's face froze with sudden understanding, her lips parted, her eyes soft. But Ant had no patience for her pity. "Get on the bike. Now."

"Take Cal," she said, holding out the boy. "I can catch up." She tried to put the boy on his lap, but Ant blocked her with his arm.

He glanced behind them and saw that the fire had crept closer, that the stragglers at the back had fallen down to the ground and weren't getting up. "I'm sorry," he said, and he reached into his pocket and took out the tranquilizer.

Before Laura had the time to react, he jabbed the needle into her neck. She stopped walking, stiffened. Ant got off the bike and felt Laura's pulse — a little fast, but not worrying. He had to hurry; the forced compliance didn't last long. He plucked the boy out of her arms, setting him down on the ground. The boy ran back over to his mother, who was holding the

other twin in her arms. She looked at him, sad and resigned, and Ant turned away, ashamed.

“Get onto the bike,” he told Laura. She obeyed, her movements stiff and sluggish, but her eyes burned with a fierce hatred. Ant hardened his resolve and helped her climb on.

He was about to get on himself when something hit the back of his head, his vision blackening with the pain. Ant staggered, caught himself on the motorbike. When he turned around he saw an old man right behind him, holding a plank of wood in his hands.

“Gimme the bike!” he said, waving the plank threateningly.

Ant’s mouth opened in a snarl and he leaped forward, hands curled into fists. The old man noticed his eyes and fangs and dropped the plank, holding his hands up with his fingers crossed to ward off evil. Rather than land the punch the old man deserved, Ant shoved him away, snarling. Before the man had the time to react, Ant had clambered onto the bike and driven away. He didn’t dare look back.

* * *

They had driven through Precision Horizons’ main gates by the time the tranquilizer faded. Laura began to scream and sob, beating her fist against Ant’s back, but still he drove onwards into the garage. The doors opened automatically, then locked behind them, the metal bolts sliding into place with a deadening finality. All those left outside would soon be dead. It sickened him that he could do nothing about it.

Ant braked, the bike sliding across the floor and coming to a stop by the main door. As soon as the bike slowed, Laura jumped off and slapped him.

“You left them out there to die! How could you just leave them?”

Ant only stared. She knew the answer.

Laura clenched her fist as if to punch him, but after several seconds she turned around and stormed through the door.

Ant bowed his head and thought back to the twins, abandoned outside. “I’m sorry!” he roared, punching the wall next to the door. The skin of his knuckles split but the pain wasn’t enough. “I’m sorry,” Ant said, softly now. He slid down against the wall and sat on the floor.

He could not help but feel guilty. They — those infected people outside — were practically his cousins. They were the Golden Race turned black. How he longed to strangle the man responsible! At least he had been born this way. Those innocent people outside would be infected by a virus that changed their very DNA and everything they had ever known. And left unchecked, the virus could mutate them far further than him. Would they even look human by the end?

“Ant?” It was Laura. She still looked angry. “You’ve done your job. Now stop sulking and get your lazy ass off the floor before they close the bunker.”

She had come for him. Despite everything, Ant felt a tendril of hope. Even scowling, she was beautiful. And she was right, of course. He should have stayed behind to help the other people, but he was not half as good a person as she was.

“Ant!”

“Coming.” He pushed himself to his feet, doing his best to hide his growing conviction that he would not go underground. He would not hide with the others, not when he was immune to the virus. He would stay behind, help the survivors — if any. That was the least he could do. It was what Laura would have done.

That was when the banging started. The doors of the garage trembled with each blow. From outside came the sound of voices screaming, barely human. Laura moved towards the door but Ant grabbed hold of her arm.

“It’s too dangerous,” he said.

Laura sagged against him as the doors shuddered under the blows. “So many people,” she whispered.

Ant wrapped an arm around her shoulders for a moment, then pushed her away. “Go. The doors won’t hold long,” he said, “and you can do nothing against them. Get to the bunker. I’ll hold them off as long as I can.”

“But Ant,” Laura said, eyes wide.

“Just go!”

“I’m not leaving without you! So if you want me safe, you’ll come with me.”

“Suit yourself,” he hissed, glaring, but there she stood with her feet firmly planted into the floor, hands on her hips, and Ant couldn’t resist. He grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her towards him, pressed his mouth against hers. It was awkward, it was rushed, their teeth smacked against each other and when he pulled away, Ant’s lip was bleeding, but he didn’t care.

“Come with me,” Laura said, “and I’ll kiss you again. Properly.” She laced her fingers through his.

Ant looked at the doors, shuddering now, a growing crack of light visible as the infected fought their way inside. Staying behind would be the right thing to do — the honourable thing — but he was not honourable, and Laura would always come first.

“Okay,” he said. “Okay.” He squeezed Laura’s hand tightly and then they were running through the door and down the corridors, towards the bunker, Laura leading the way. There was no one in the hallways but the floors were littered with abandoned possessions: papers, purses, even books — Ant recognized one slim volume called *Other Sides* that the director had been reading earlier.

Finally they came upon the door leading downstairs to the bunker, but it was barred off. Locked. Ant tried the Doctor’s keycard, to no result. He looked to the ground, then, spotted the small ventilation shaft. “Through here,” he said, pulling it loose. He led the way now — this was his domain.

They crawled on hands and knees through the shaft, and soon Ant stopped and pushed through another grate. The door to the bunker was in front of them. It was open, and standing in front of it was the Doctor with two guards.

“Laura!” The Doctor ran forward to hug her. He looked over her head to Ant. “Thank you,” he said, his voice somber. Then the Doctor pulled a needle out of his pocket and jabbed Laura in the neck. She went stiff, compliant. “Go inside,” the Doctor told her, and she walked through the bunker door without a backward glance.

There were tears in the Doctor’s eyes when he looked at Ant. “You are like a son to me, Anthony,” he whispered. “Be safe.” The Doctor walked through the bunker door and it was then Ant realized what was happening.

“No!” He jumped forward, but one of the guards shot him with a tranquilizer and he crumpled down onto the ground. The calm of compliance spread through his limbs, his mind edged with a pleasant fuzziness, but inside Ant was screaming.

The guards didn’t even give him a second glance. They walked through the bunker door and locked it behind them. As the tranquilizer faded, Ant curled up into a small ball and sobbed brokenly. But the Doctor was right: he was infected. He belonged above ground.

A.M. Harte is a speculative fiction enthusiast and a chocolate addict. She is the author of *DarkSight* and the *Above Ground* series, which is set in a post-apocalyptic world where humans live underground whilst the infected roam the surface. She is excellent at missing deadlines, has long forgotten what ‘free time’ means, and enjoys procrastinating over at amharte.com.

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