

EIDOLOTRY DIGITAL #7

COME OUT COME OUT

WHATEVER YOU ARE



WELCOME TO EIDOLOTRY #7

IT'S JUNE AND THAT MEANS IT'S TIME TO HIGHLIGHT THE DIVERSITY OF OUR FRIENDS IN THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY. THERE'S HORROR AT THE END OF THE RAINBOW AND THESE FOLKS ARE ON THE CUTTING EDGE.

ENJOY!

| | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|
| ALL THE BEST ART..... | DS OSWALD |
| SCENT OF PEONIES..... | TOSHIYA KAMEI |
| HOSTILE TAKEOVER..... | RAY DALEY |
| THE SCORPION..... | FIONA MOORE |
| CHANGES..... | ROBIN LOCKE |
| THE MONSTER IN THE CLOSET..... | KAY HANIFEN |
| YOU SHOULD THANK ME..... | RH BERRY |
| SAVING THE MAYAPPLES..... | MARK GROVER |
| JOY IN THE WORK..... | ISAAC GRIMALDI |
| THE FIRST BLASPHEME..... | EMI ROSEN |
| THE DIVE..... | MORGAN MELHUISE |



DEMON NUZZLE
BY
JANIS HOLM

ALL THE BEST ART

DS Oswald

I hope this makes sense, I—well, you all know what shock can do to a person, you're police—but it's hard for me to wrap my head around it, even now.

Where should I start? The disappearances, the job offer? No, maybe...maybe I should just tell you about Oz. Ha, I promise, I'll get less cryptic over time. I just want to establish things correctly.

I wasn't close with Oz. He was my friend Crow's husband, and to be honest he was the kind of person I wouldn't have liked if we'd met normally. He was reclusive. Quiet. Had a habit of appearing just behind your left shoulder and saying something in that hoarse, scratchy voice of his that, no matter how well-intentioned, always came across as creepy. He was tall, and almost painfully thin. He reminded me, in a weird way, of a stick bug. You know, those bony, weird things with limbs too long and torsos too stiff? Like that. And the worst part was, I couldn't honestly tell if he was doing it to try and creep me out, or if he was just like that. It didn't seem to bother Crow, but nothing ever bothered Crow. If I didn't know he was straight-edge, I could have sworn that man was high four days out of five.

Whatever Oz's problems were, they were definitely exacerbated by him working from home. A freelance artist, Crow had told me proudly when we'd first met, handing me his phone so I could look at Oz's Instagram. I was impressed at the time—I mean; I don't have too much of an eye for art but I could tell Oz had real skill. It was that respect which kept me around the first few times I hung out with Oz, and by the time I realized I just didn't like the guy, we'd been around each other often enough that cutting him off would be rude. But, whatever, right? A mildly creepy man I barely knew wasn't going to kill me. It was just another one of those little irritants in life, like parking tickets and taxes.

The first time I noticed anything odd was when one day, after work over drinks (beer for me, and a soda for Crow) at our normal place, Crow told me excitedly that his husband was working on a new project.

"The biggest commission he's had yet," Crow exclaimed—well, it was exclaiming to me. In truth, his voice was only pitched slightly higher than normal, but for Crow that was huge. Over the time we'd known each other, I'd learned to pick upon on little things like that: the slight raising of an eyebrow, the micro-undertones in his voice. I'd always been good at reading people. "I was getting worried about rent, too, but it looks like with this we can even pay for the next month in advance!"

I don't remember what I said in return, and I guess it wasn't important. Some platitude about being happy for him. You know, the kind of thing you say when you're trying to hide your disinterest so you can change the subject as quickly as possible. I wasn't expecting much more on the subject, which was why Crow's next words struck me.

He leaned in, his eyes oddly bright. I'd never seen him look like that. At the time...the word that came to mind was feverish. "He told me it's going to be unlike anything the world has ever seen." And then, without giving me any time to respond, he drew back again, turned to a nearby waitress, and asked for a refill on his drink, then quickly changed the subject, asking me how my date with Glinda had gone. I tried to brush it off, but I found those eyes haunting me even that night when I tried to go to sleep.

I chalked it up to stress. Manager was really starting to lay into me about my lack of progress digitizing that kids' series, Goldenroad, and it was making me more jumpy than usual. I mean, I didn't normally have stress nightmares about random things my work friends say, but, ha, first time for everything, right?

Nothing else happened for...I'd say a week. I went to work as usual, slacked off as usual. By Friday I'd got the damn picture books digitized, finally, and I had a date with Glinda that weekend, so I was actually starting to relax again. I was leaving for the day when Crow ambled up to me. After a bit of friendly conversation, he told me that his husband had finally finished a sketch of that commission—the "biggest one yet"—and Crow wanted to show it to me. As I said, I did really enjoy looking at Oz's art, even if the man himself wasn't to my taste, so I said yes.

Here's the thing about Oz's art. He tended to paint landscapes: lush jungles and crumbling temples and endless shorelines, his human figures dwarfed by the vastness of the scenery. It was good, and it sold. He had one Star Wars piece, of Rey climbing a rusted-out AT-AT, that I had actually bought because I liked it so much. I've seen it crop up several times on social media. When he did do pieces that focused on human beings, they tended to be very portrait-like, still and serene.

So it was very odd to see that this sketch was so, so violent in its movement. That's the only way I can describe it, I mean, I know that illustrations don't move but the creature at this one's center was so twisted and tensed that it felt like it was springing out to grasp at my throat. And the subject itself was monstrous. Its head was obscured by slime and rot, layers on layers of muck captured in the act of cascading down its shoulders, but despite all that its teeth were visible: rows and rows and rows of flat, dull molars, too many to fit sensibly into a mouth like that. The rest of its body was dripping some liquid I could not define — but somewhere, in the back of my head, came the thought: that's its skin. Its skin is sloughing off its body, and those lines there, those are its tendons, warping over each other, writhing in an effort to puppeteer its bony frame. It was just a sketch, just lines, but I still pushed the phone back into Crow's hands with fingers that shook in a way I had rarely felt before.

If Crow noticed how affected I was by the sketch, he didn't say anything. But I saw, as he put the phone back in his pocket, that his hands were shaking, too. "Love-ly, isn't it?" He asked, turning to me. His eyes were bright then, just like the night he first told me about Oz's job.

I nodded.

When I got home that night, I was no longer in a good mood. But the bottle of wine in my cupboard fixed that. I had a hangover the next day, but that was almost pleasant compared to the way I got when I thought about that sketch. After a while, though. After a while, the pain and the sick, awful feeling I got in the pit of my stomach when I thought about it began to...grow on me. In an odd way it was beautiful, the sinking feeling, the hollowness in my chest. It felt so right, so close to my soul. I felt like I was standing on the edge of some vast, deep ocean, and while I knew it was too cold, too deep for me, I couldn't—couldn't help but be curious: what would it be like to drown? Feel the air leave my lungs, replaced by that cold, uncaring seawater. You know, we all go out of our way to avoid pain, to keep our suffering to a minimum, but sometimes it's just so tiring. I tried to avoid thinking about that...thing for so long, but when I finally stopped trying, when I finally embraced the discomfort that lingered in my mind, I found a sort of peace with it. A dull, horrible kind of peace, but a peace nonetheless.

That's why I went to the dinner party.

Oz and Crow were celebrating Oz's first payment. Crow wasn't kidding about the patron being wealthy. Some sort of church, I think? Or maybe just an eccentric—I guess it doesn't matter. They were going to unveil another bit of progress in the piece, too. And again, I was curious, morbidly, how this one would prey on my mind. I think Glinda was a bit worried about me at this point, to be honest, but she kept quiet. We hadn't been dating that long and I guess she didn't want to make me uncomfortable.

I was one of many guests invited, and one of the few who actually turned up. People liked Crow, but there was some kind of strange cold going around the office and there weren't many of us to start with. The other guests that night were. Well. You know who they were. Nikola Chopper and Leo Ernst. My coworkers, the ones who —

Yeah.

They were nice; you know. If that matters. Nikola was new, but she had a knack for code that I honestly envied and last Christmas season she baked everybody cookies even though she doesn't celebrate it. Leo was an older gentleman, moved to our section of the office from the print division. Did miracles with InDesign. He kept to himself a bit more, but he always seemed to know what to do when something went wrong. I didn't know them well, but I still enjoyed their company, so I was kind of looking forward to it.

I arrived at Crow and Oz's apartment for the first time that evening, holding a pie because I'd been taught it was rude to show up to a party without bringing something. I was the last one there. Leo and Nikola were talking in the living room. We exchanged a few pleasantries, and then I asked where the hosts were, so that I

could give them my pie and say hello.

“It’s weird,” Nikola said. “I saw Crow when I got here, but he kind of disappeared into the kitchen and when I went in to find him, he was gone.” She gave me this weak smile and added, “Leo got here sometime after. We’ve just been...chatting in here.” Nikola’s voice trembled slightly.

“Yeah, that’s definitely weird,” I said. “You guys haven’t gone to look for him?”

“He’s probably just with Oz. He said something about needing to help with the work,” Nikola said, quickly. Too quickly. Why was she so nervous?

Leo touched Nikola’s shoulder reassuringly. Looked like he could tell that something was wrong, too.

“I’ll just go and have a look around,” I said. Nikola’s jumpiness was setting me on edge. Maybe it would be good to wander around the apartment a bit. And maybe, just maybe, I’d get a glimpse of the progress on the painting. I wondered if, in color, it would look even more lifelike. By the end of the process, how close to real would it look? Real enough to step out of the frame? Real enough to snap my neck?

I realized where my train of thought was heading and shuddered. It had been months since I’d had any really self-destructive impulses. If they were coming back, perhaps I needed to give my old therapist a ring.

No, I assured myself. No, this wasn’t serious. I had recognized the pattern: that should be enough.

The apartment had looked smallish on the outside, but the inside was almost spacious. I would have been jealous if it didn’t somehow feel—too big. The lights were just far enough apart that shadows crowded against every wall, making the rooms feel like they had no end: instead, there was just the never-ending space beyond the light. If it weren’t for the silhouettes of furniture and the windows, I would have forgotten I was in a building at all. And even though there were only a few rooms (the kitchen, the living room, the hallway leading to a bedroom and office), traversing them took longer than you’d think. It was like moving in a nightmare, where no matter how fast you go, the ground passes beneath your feet at a snail’s pace.

No wonder Nikola was so jumpy.

But I pressed forward still, despite (or maybe out of a desire for) the sickness roiling in my stomach. In the hallway were three doors. One was open, and obviously led to a bathroom, so I disregarded it. The other were in opposite directions. To open one door, you would need to turn your back on the other. There was no light coming from under either of the doors. I paused at this fork in the road. I spent maybe too long trying to figure out which door had our hosts behind it. For some reason, I really didn’t want to guess wrong, and hear the creak of a door opening

behind me as Oz and Crow came out to question where I was going. I even briefly considered going back to the living room and getting someone to look at the other door, but in the end I decided that was probably silly. It was just my mind playing tricks on me, making me more scared than I needed to be.

Still, I hesitated before turning to the door on the left. I kept glancing behind me.

I must have been taking a while, because just as I put my hand up to knock, the door opened and Crow stepped from the shadowy room beyond.

“Oh, hello,” he said. “I’m sorry I couldn’t greet you at the door. I just had to help Oz with something.”

“It’s fine,” I muttered. “Um. I brought a pie.” I’d nearly forgotten I was holding it.

“That’s really nice of you,” Crow said, in his mild way, and took it from me. “Let’s catch up while I put this in the fridge.”

Crow seemed normal. The light in his eyes, the feverish light, was gone. It did a little to shake me out of the miasma I had been under since I’d entered. Rooms no longer seemed vast, empty. The lights reached the walls. We crossed to the kitchen, then the living room in half the time it had taken for me initially. Nikola and Leo brightened up considerably.

Crow was usually pretty good with people, so it was little surprise that within minutes, he had us all laughing in the kitchen. The wine probably helped too. The only thing that struck me as odd was the complete absence of Oz, who was normally attached to his husband at the hip during most social functions. Still, like I said, I wasn’t the biggest fan of Oz, even though I did want to see his painting, so I didn’t really pay it too much mind. Nothing too suspicious happened, all through dinner and drinks over the pie I’d brought, until Oz came out again.

He looked scruffier than normal. Tired. His hair was unbrushed and messy, his eyes bloodshot. His left fingers were still wrapped around a tablet pen, tracing little lines in the air, and he seemed to look through us all, as though he were still looking at his canvas instead of all of us.

Crow got up immediately and wrapped his arms around his husband. Was that relief on the edge of his expression, or just happiness?

Regardless, Oz responded to Crow’s touch, blinking and smiling gently down at him. He slid the pen into his pocket and hugged Crow back before turning to address the rest of us.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said, licking his lips. “I just got...wrapped up in the work, lost track of time. You know how it is.”

I nodded my assent. The others murmured agreement. We’d all stayed late at

the office; we all knew how it was.

“Make sure you don’t make that a habit,” Leo added. “Let me tell you, it’s hard to keep up for forever.”

“Mm. Well, it won’t be much longer,” Oz replied. He glanced at his husband and wrapped an arm around Crow’s shoulders. “Just a week or two.”

It had such a finality to it that Leo looked a little concerned. He cast a nervous glance at Crow, who shrugged kind of helplessly.

“He gets like this when he’s really excited,” Crow said. “But don’t worry, Leo. I’ve been keeping an eye on his work. How long he works, I mean.”

I should have found that exchange more alarming. I should have recognized the trace emotions in Crow’s voice, should have asked to see Oz’s office, should have done anything—and yes, I know what survivor’s guilt is, and yes, I will be seeking therapy. It’s just. It’s just so hard to believe that there really was nothing else I could do.

Crow kept talking. “Speaking of which, how about we get that sneak preview I was telling you all about?”

That feverish look was back in his eyes again, and when I said yes, I could feel it burning away at me, too. No, not burning—that’s not the right word. Burning implies heat, implies light. This was like corrosion. Like if I let this fester in me long enough, it would consume my mind, leaving me only with the desire to see more. It frightened me. It excited me.

Leo and Nikola clearly did not see what Crow, and I did. They looked at us oddly, as Crow and Oz worked together to link up his computer and their TV. It went surprisingly smoothly, and within a minute, there it was, blown up to ten times the size I’d first seen when Crow showed me on his phone. Colors had been dashed over the sketch lines that were still visible in places under the rough painting. The ghost of the beast’s past self. An imperfect ghost; I could see that now. It looked even more real in its present state. The glass of the TV screen warped around the knuckles closest to us, as though the barrier between our worlds were nothing more than a thin sheen of water, its surface tension on the verge of breaking. The painting itself was only the faintest suggestion of the real creature. Rough planes and shadows. And yet I could hear the low groan of pain as it reached towards me, hear the grinding of its endless teeth and the slow, steady drip of its flesh rotting off its bones. At the time, I was certain it was just my imagination. The denial kept me safe. Kept me from losing my mind. It wasn’t moving. It couldn’t really be moving.

When the image flared to life, Nikola, who was standing, took an involuntary step back. Leo pressed himself against the back cushions of the couch. The smell of rot, suddenly, hung in the air as the sickness huddling quietly in the pit of my mind branched out into my stomach and throat. I fought the urge to throw up, and also the urge to laugh.

It hurt. Of course it did, it—that painting didn't belong in this world. And that was good. The part of me that had over the past week sunk into a comforting haze of pain craved it terribly. Finally, something that matched the grinding unbearable machinery of everyday life, but did so in a different key. It was new and comfortable all at once.

I don't know how long we waited there, staring in rapt fascination at that rough painting, but all too soon it was gone. The sudden darkness plunged my mind into confusion. My gaze snapped to Crow, who was holding the power cord to the television and panting. He looked scared.

He smiled weakly at me. "I think that's—enough—for tonight."

I stared blankly at him for a moment, and nodded, more out of habit than anything else. Leo and Nikola left with me. I kind of wanted to stay with them, huddled together while our psyches reeled, but we were all on different trains home. Leo parted from me first, and then Nikola.

The subway compartment I got into was curiously empty, so for the most part, I spent my time looking at the graffiti and ads on the walls.

I won't say they all pointed back to that painting. That would be ridiculous, right? But...but I couldn't help noticing the faintest smell of rot in the air. And I couldn't help but see one of the ads was done in Oz's style. Another one—for a new show?—depicted a strange monster, its hand reaching out to grasp at the viewer.

I went back home, and for the first time, as I walked through the door, noticed that my hands were shaking. I could see the veins in them pulsing, see the muscles as they moved subtly, and I was struck with the sudden thought that it wasn't part of me. It wasn't my hand. It was just...some strange thing attached to my arm.

I should get rid of it.

The urge to tear into my skin, to see if it would begin to melt like that creature's was almost overpowering. I had a kitchen knife in my hand before I knew what I was doing. I held it against my flesh, felt the cold, hard steel against my hand, and still, it didn't feel like a part of me. I wanted to see what would happen if I cut away at the skin. Would I look like the creature in the painting then, too? Another pale imitation of that great and terrible thing which had been haunting me—pale, yet noble, somehow, in intention.

I didn't do it, obviously. I mean, I still have two hands. I couldn't bring myself to make the cut. I breathed in, counted to seven, and took a Sharpie from the purse I'd left lying carelessly on the counter instead and spent the next few minutes drawing on my hand. Not the lines of the drawing, though the temptation was great. I forced myself to draw a small flower. Simple, because I'm not an artist: just four teardrop shapes and a line for the stem. It made my head feel clearer, so I drew another, and another. I focused so hard on filling my hand with blooms that I was shocked when I looked up and saw that it was one in the morning. My hand was

covered in childlike drawings of flowers. My head finally felt clear.

Standing there in the kitchen in the early hours of the morning, no longer aided by the wine from earlier, I broke down. I—I couldn't—didn't want to...d-do I have to talk about all this? I know that you guys knowing everything is. Important. But if it's all the same—

Thank you. I'm sorry about all this, I didn't expect to get so emotional. Oh, thank you, yes, a tissue would be, would be great.

Yes. I think...continuing tomorrow would be for the best. If talking about this gets me so worked up, I'm going to need to prepare before I begin with...the rest.

Thank you, officer. I'll see you tomorrow—what time?—okay.

Right. Uh, where...was I again?

Oh. The night I nearly cut myself. Of course. I'm sorry I forgot.

Well, to summarize, I—I realized what a toll this whole affair was taking on me. I finally recognized the, the morbid curiosity I'd developed as nothing more than another effort to seek something with which I could hurt myself. I decided to stop talking about the painting, stop seeking it out, no matter what pulled me towards it.

I didn't want to abandon Crow, though. The office queers have to stick together, after all. Well, that's what I told myself. Maybe, on some level...I still wanted to be involved. I still hoped that maybe, just maybe, hanging around the periphery would get me information without the danger.

Stupid idea.

But separating myself from all further updates on the painting wasn't stupid. When Crow brought it up, I changed the subject, and eventually asked him not to tell me about it, and over the next few weeks I found myself concerned with Oz's work less and less.

Not everybody was following my lead, though. Nikola and Leo, who previously hadn't been all that interested in the art piece, were suddenly taking every chance they got to come and visit Crow's office, hanging around, hunger and pain twisting into one on their faces. I thought maybe they were all assigned to a project together or something, because I kept hearing them ask about progress. But when I asked Nikola about it, she just looked at me quizzically.

"What project?"

"The one you're working on with Crow," I said, blinking in surprise. "And Leo?"

Nikola shook her head slowly, bewildered.

“I thought that’s why you kept going back to his office.”

At this, Nikola’s face lit up and a way that was too familiar. “Oh! That’s what you meant. Well, actually, Leo and I have been asking about that commission Oz is still working on.”

“Still?”

At this point, I’d assumed that Oz had finished. It didn’t usually take him that long to complete a piece, and Crow hadn’t gone around the office offering to show the latest progress in a while.

Nevertheless, Nikola nodded fervently. “It’s so beautiful, now,” she said. She leaned in and took my hands. I noticed for the first time that she had bandages wrapped around her palms. They were wet to the touch, like the blood was uncongealed and still leaking through. Fresh. Nikola continued: “You know the sneak preview at the dinner party?” I nodded, wordless. Was it just me, or was the liquid seeping from her palms cold? “It’s so much more pure now,” Nikola said.

And that was what made me shudder. She didn’t say—didn’t say better or more interesting or prettier. She said pure. As though, as though all my thoughts about pale imitations were in her head too, driven in like syringes into flesh. And if that was true, then the painting was becoming less and less an imitation and more the pure embodiment of that which the sketch attempted to capture.

I pulled my hands away from hers quickly, feeling that ache of curiosity burn where her fingers brushed mine. I stumbled backwards. Words fell clumsily out of my mouth—sorry, got to go, sorry, have that new project the boss assigned me—and I retreated. My feet could not carry me away fast enough. It was at this point that I began to avoid Nikola and Leo, too.

I...I should have done something. I should have told them. But I was so scared, and my own mental strength was fraying at the edges with every second I spent thinking about that painting. Its sickly siren song tugged at the edges of my senses, begging me to embrace its pain, begging me to just take one more look. I should have gone to the manager, to Glinda, to anybody. But I kept quiet. And when I overheard (on accident) Nikola talking about another dinner party, another progress reveal, I shook my head and tried to forget about it.

It’s my fault. It’s my fault they disappeared. I didn’t tell anyone. I didn’t even try talking to them. Every time I thought about it, I would see those bandages on their hands and think of how cold Nikola’s blood had been and—I just couldn’t do it. I wasn’t strong enough.

I don’t know where they are, by the way. I have no clue. They were just gone, not at work on Monday. I heard my manager bitching about them not even having the decency to call in with a fake excuse. Crow was there, though. He looked just as placid as ever. Maybe a hint of worry, the tug of a frown at the corner of his lips. The next day, though, he called in sick and sent me a text asking if I was willing to

hand over some of the papers on his desk to a woman in the print department.

I would have done as he asked, but before I got the chance to actually deliver the thing, he showed up. I heard someone greet him and I got up and went to his office, intending to tell him I hadn't done the task yet, but I stopped in the door to his office.

Crow looked awful. And, I mean, not just awful for Crow, which usually meant frowning and muttering over a coffee and that was about it. I mean, actually awful. His face was unshaved—I hadn't even known he could grow facial hair—and he was still wearing yesterday's clothes, rumpled and stained with something dark and oily near the edges of the sleeves. Some of it had gotten onto his desk and computer keyboard, but Crow wasn't paying attention to it. He just sat there, staring at his computer screen like for all the world he couldn't remember what it was supposed to do. When I stopped short in the doorway, he didn't even look up.

I walked into his office. I was worried. It was the kind of feeling that sat in the pit of your stomach, like someone had reached into you and nestled a rock amongst your guts; every movement jostled the stone, making even the four-foot walk from the threshold to Crow's desk uncomfortable. Thankfully, he seemed to notice me by the time I'd finished my approach. His eyes held no flame of recognition as they passed over my frame.

"Hi, Dorothy," he said. His voice was so quiet I had to lean in to hear. "Need something?"

"Y-you doing okay?" I asked, though the answer was obvious.

"Yeah," Crow replied. A smile slid onto his face, but didn't reach his hollow eyes. "Yeah, I'm doing great. How are you?"

I wanted to scream. "Fine," I muttered.

"Cool. Oh, yeah, don't worry about...giving Ev the memos. I can get it." Crow's smile was still the same, stretching his face in odd ways. I'd never seen him smile that big before.

"Crow—" I started. The weight in my stomach had spread to my chest but I couldn't let my dread destroy my ability to help my friend.

"Hm?" And then Crow picked up one of his hands, bandaged, of course it was bandaged, and moved to set it over mine, his sleeve still damp with that oily... whatever it was. I shuddered. Crow didn't notice.

My voice wouldn't come out. Crow's eyes were so dead but I couldn't stop looking at them. He waited patiently as I found my voice, croaking as best I could: "Are you...sure...you're alright?" God, every word took such effort. I wanted to collapse and lie on the ground twitching. But I stood, tearing my eyes away from Crow's to focus on his hand where it still touched mine.

His palms were cold, too.

“Oh, I am fine. Don’t worry.”

Crow squeezed my hand, at first in a limply comforting way, but then harder, tighter, his nails digging into my skin. I looked back up at him, scared.

Crow had stopped smiling. He looked a bit more himself now, but his expression was verging on desperation.

“You should really take care of yourself first, you know,” he said, deliberately. “You’re not looking too well.”

And then his grip slackened. I jerked my hands away and stood up straight, searching his face for clues, but he’d returned to staring blankly at his computer. Whatever spell he was under, he’d broken through it for just a few seconds to tell me to stop looking out for him. He wanted me gone; he wanted me out of this mess. It was almost comforting. Somewhere, in there, Crow still lived. There didn’t seem to be anything I could do right now, but maybe somehow I could fix him.

All the same, I didn’t turn my back on Crow while I left his office. I kept backing up until I turned a corner and he was out of sight. I never got the impression that he was watching me, it just—felt dangerous. I backed around a couple of cubicles, then ducked so he couldn’t see me and went back to my own cubicle practically on hands and knees. I got a few weird looks, but most of the people were too busy looking at cat memes or working to take notice of me. Not that I would have cared. I...don’t think I was still under the strange spell the painting cast over me, but I could sense that this was bigger than what was on the surface.

It was kind of like, well. Do you remember when you first learned about the scale of the universe? How, how small we are, and how even our planet is just this infinitesimal speck, one of hundreds of millions in a galaxy that’s one among an equally large number of neighboring galaxies? And even all that together, even our universe, may be part of something so vast that it’s hard to comprehend? Do you remember watching those videos of the world, scrolling endlessly out from where we are to reveal the widening maw of space? But, it never felt real. I remember looking around the classroom and not being able to process that something that felt so large and real was so insignificant. Hah, I know I’m rambling, but that wasn’t just me, right? You know that feeling, right?

That’s what it was like. When I was trying to assess the situation. I knew, logically, what was in front of me, and I knew that whatever it was, it was part of something big. But I couldn’t connect the two. I couldn’t even begin to conceptualize what the bigger picture might be. Every time I tried to think about it, I felt this wave of sickness wash over me.

So yeah. I wasn’t exactly in the mood to care whether people thought it was odd that I was sneaking through the brightly lit publishing office, or if they wondered when I got back to my cubicle and immediately began scribbling on whatever

scrap paper I could find. I was preoccupied. And nervous.

I guess a pro-con list sounds stupid when I say it now. But yeah. I did a pro-con list for each of my options. ‘S probably still sitting at my desk, honestly. I could get it for you, if you want it for, I dunno, evidence? I expect it doesn’t make too much sense, anyway. My hand was shaking a bit, and I was writing fast. It was technically still my lunch break, though I’d slightly lost my appetite.

As far as I was concerned at the time, I had three options: Call the police, ignore it, or go after Crow myself. Calling the police was out within a few seconds. Sorry. I should have, I know that now, but then? I couldn’t frame any complaints that didn’t make me sound like a raving lunatic. My friend’s husband made a cursed painting?—I could hear the concerned tone in the operator’s voice without even dialing.

Besides, Crow was still my friend. If he was into something bad, something really bad, and it was making him do horrible things, I wasn’t going to report him to the police. I wanted to help him.

And...you already know where this is going, given where you found me. I couldn’t just ignore this. I felt like if I did nothing, something horrible would happen. Something more horrible than what I already suspected. So, that evening, I bid farewell to my coworkers and left the building, but did not go home. Instead, I cut around into a side alley and leaned up against a dumpster, waiting anxiously for my friend to leave. Around me, the shadows grew longer, pooling at my feet, then lapping my ankles, my waist, my neck. I hadn’t planned to stay out so late, and was just starting to shiver.

Then Crow came outside. His face was turned from me, but I was certain it was him. He was wearing the long, tan coat Oz got him for Christmas last year. It covered most of Crow’s frame, cutting him into the barest outline of a person. As soon as he was out the door, he turned sharply left and began striding away from me. I lurched from the shadows to follow my friend.

I’d never followed anyone before. At first, I tried my best to blend in, whatever that would have looked like. It wasn’t too late, so there were still crowds. I put on headphones and looked down at my phone with the navigation app open, so that hopefully I’d look like a confused tourist. But the further Crow walked, the more obvious it became that what I was doing didn’t matter. He moved like he couldn’t bend his knees all the way, his arms hanging limp at his sides, back ramrod straight. Like a puppet.

I followed Crow all the way back to his apartment building. Thankfully, there wasn’t a doorman or anybody checking IDs. I waited for Crow to take the elevator, then called a separate one for myself. That ride up felt like it lasted forever. The nausea I’d been battling forced bile up into the back of my throat in that silent, rattling compartment. Nowhere to run, now. This was my last chance to turn back. I knew

in my bones that as soon as those doors opened, I would reach a point of no return. And I was right.

The doors opened to a hallway sick with fluorescent lights. Moths flew between the bulbs. I stared at them as I stepped out of the elevator, and I couldn't help but feel sorry. Poor things, so in love with a god that will only ever harm them. They are journeying, stars in their eyes, towards the incomprehensible, and it will burn them up in the end.

If I hadn't watched Crow get on the other elevator, I would have known which one he'd used now. A trail of oily black footprints led away from the elevators and towards Crow and Oz's apartment. There was some of the stuff on the walls, too. It smelled awful, like something had died, and I tried my best not to touch any of it as I made my way to Crow and Oz's apartment.

The door was open. I don't think it could've been closed. The same oily substance coated the threshold. Strings of it dripped down from the ceiling, and beyond, the hallway was a dark, stinking tunnel that I could barely make out. It seemed to go on forever. If it had been silent, I would have turned around, I think. But I heard things. Squishing, like someone was walking through the inch or so of muck which clung to the insides of the apartment. Low muttering, too distant to discern words, that sounded like Crow's voice.

I stepped forward without thinking and felt the cold ooze hit my skin, slithering into my hair and down the gap between my coat collar and the back of my neck. I think I gasped. The doctors told me later it must have been mildly acidic, because it burned away some of my skin, but I didn't feel it then. I took another step through the door, fumbling to get my phone out.

I turned on the flashlight, but it didn't much help. Nothing in there was recognizable. Some of the ooze had hardened, like it was clotting blood, on the walls and ceiling, making a near-circular tunnel out of what used to be a regular hallway. I tried to remember the layout and moved towards where I thought Oz's office was, holding my breath as much as possible. The murmuring sounds of far-off voices were louder now, but I still couldn't make out what they were saying.

I found the living room. I think. It seemed so much bigger now, with an impossibly high ceiling and a floor that slanted every so slightly, so that the further I walked towards Oz's office the more careful I had to be not to slip on the still slightly wet ooze. I was shaking, and dizzy from the fumes and holding my breath. I could feel the sickness from before, too, a cold nausea that made my hands prickle, comforting and terrifying in its familiarity. My every nerve was screaming at me to leave.

But Crow, I —

Fuck. I'm sorry.

I just wanted to help him. I was so scared, and I just wanted to see him and try

to pull him out of this mess. I confess, at this point I blamed Oz for most of it. I probably wouldn't have saved him, even if I did get the chance.

I don't know how long it took me to cross the apartment. Felt like ages. Felt like...

I—oh. I'm sorry. I didn't realize I wasn't talking.

It was a long time. And sometimes, I felt things slither past me. The ooze got thicker. Felt like it was pulling me down. You know those illustrations you used to see in school of animals getting trapped in tar pits? Yeah. But I got there eventually. The little hallway with the doors on opposite ends.

I was struck with the same fear I'd felt at the dinner party, of opening the wrong door. Of turning my back. Which door had Crow come out of last time? The left. The left. It had to be the left. I was so busy trying to logic out what the suitable door would be in the nightmare apartment that I didn't see the obvious.

The ooze, the whatever-it-was, was flowing slowly but steadily out of the crack under the other door.

I remember that, because I turned and placed my hand on the knob of the door on the left, only to feel the sludge drift around my ankles and realize my mistake, too late.

I can't tell you how horrible it was. But it was worse when I felt the hand on my arm. It was slick, and cold, and when I spun around so sharply I nearly tripped I could see that it no longer had any. Any skin. On it. Though that meant nothing, compared to the face.

It was Crow. Not that you would have been able to tell. But I knew him. Even with his flesh dripping down his chin, I knew him. I felt a sound rise in the back of my throat, somewhere between a whimper and a groan, and it sounded so small, so quiet, that I was almost surprised. Surely—surely I had more noise in me than that. When I was terrified, the world was supposed to shake, to tremble with me. I mean, I'm part of it, aren't I? Shouldn't it, shouldn't it care?

Crow pulled me back towards the other door, which stood open now, silhouetting the glowing blue light of a computer screen, and I couldn't do anything. I felt like I was trapped in the prison of my flesh. For a moment, I envied Crow, entertained for the most fleeting of seconds the thought that if only I'd torn off my skin and joined him I wouldn't be so endlessly afraid. If only I'd given up the struggle, let the uncaring waters of the ocean of pain swallow me and find peace in it, I would have had to stop feeling afraid.

The room Crow took me into must have once been Oz's office, or maybe the spare bedroom? There were shapes, faint suggestions of furniture, but I couldn't make any of them out. It all just seemed so unimportant, especially in the face of the brilliant light emanating from Oz's computer.

Oz sat at his desk, moving his tablet pen along the surface of the screen that seemed to have grown far larger and more full of depth than any computer I'd ever encountered. He sat, hunched over at his desk, and the space between his hand and his pen seemed to have fused, melting them together into one appendage that moved with machine-like precision to add fine details onto...

The painting.

I can't describe to you how beautiful and terrible it was. Its flayed, blood-soaked hand stretched over Oz's bent head like it was giving a blessing, and when Crow pushed me through the shin-deep ooze towards the screen, its eyes moved and ensnared mine.

I was vaguely aware of Crow moving over to wrap his arms around Oz. I think I remember some sort of low, pained whispering, but I honestly couldn't tell you if it was my voice or Crow's. It wasn't Oz's though. I know that much. I mean, I don't know why, but seeing him, I knew he wasn't alive enough to make noise at that point. It didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was the pain that split my skull—and how glad I was to have it there. The way that creature looked at me, like it knew me, like it wanted me to stay with it forever. I knew what I was doing was bad for me. Some tiny part of my brain kicked and screamed in protest, but in the face of that majesty all I could do was revel in how comfortable it was.

There is a peace in drowning, if you love the water enough.

I reached up to my face and felt the skin there. The obstacle. The foreign element. It was keeping me from being one with the creature. It was keeping me from my pain. I may have been able to resist the compulsion at home on my own, when the painting was just a rough sketch, but when I saw it fully painted...

It makes me sick now. Looking in the mirror is horrible, having to see those gauges down my face and feeling the urge to pick at the scabs, to relive the memories.

I wish it would stop.

Crow is the one who snapped me out of it. I was—working on my face—when someone took hold of my hands and gently pressed something into them. Something cool and smooth and oblong. And at the same time, Crow stepped in front of my face.

He was uncomfortably close to me. I could see his raw, bloodied skin, and the salt tears streaming down it. I could see the grief he carried when he parted the space where his lips used to be and said, in the most broken voice I've ever heard, "My husband."

It was the first I'd heard him speak that night.

"What?" I was dazed. I moved, trying to see the painting behind Crow, but he laid two flayed hands on either side of my face and kept speaking in that hoarse,

broken voice.

“My husband,” Crow said, slowly, painfully, “is dead, Dorothy. My husband is dead and I am going to be gone soon too. But you... still have your skin. You can get out.”

“What? No,” I said, growing alarmed. I tried again to move to see the painting, but Crow gripped my face so hard that it hurt and stopped me.

“Burn it,” he whispered. “Please, burn it.”

And I realized that the object he’d placed in my hands was a lighter.

Crow stared at me, eyes pleading. I didn’t know if he was begging for death because he truly was a lost cause, or if it was because on some level he craved the pain of burning alive as much as I craved the pain of flaying myself. But he was my friend. The office queers have to stick together.

So I flicked the lighter on and held it to his chest until he started to burn.

It happened fast. Whatever that oily stuff was, it caught fire like—like oil. Crow didn’t scream. Instead, he staggered backwards, and turned to embrace his husband one last time. That final, achingly human act, I think, is what made me run. The ooze clung to my feet and made me feel always on the verge of tripping, and the fire spread so quickly that I was always only just ahead of it. If I walked eternity to reach Crow and Oz, I ran even longer trying to leave that fouled place. Sometimes, I did nearly trip; I had to claw my way back up using the furniture or by digging my bare nails into the walls, and force myself to keep going until, finally, I burst through the door into a darkened hallway not flooded with muck. I picked up speed, my breath burning in my lungs, and not bothering with the elevator, sprinted to the stairs as behind me the crackling roar of the fire grew stronger. I practically jumped down whole flights of stairs, fueled by adrenaline and terror, and when I made it out of the lobby doors, I was so exhausted that my legs gave out under me and I collapsed onto the sidewalk, scraping my elbow where I tried to catch myself. Still, I dragged my body forward, away from that mess, and watched, panting, while the whole building burned. I clutched the lighter and watched the flames. Just in case. Just in case some scrap of the fucking horrible thing escaped. I won’t lie. Part of me hoped it would.

But if any part of that horror left the building, I didn’t see it. The place burned. I watched. And when you cops came asking questions about who’d done it, I raised my hand. Because, yeah, I did burn down that building. And I’m proud of it. It’s the only part of my little story that I am proud of.

Now please, just let me go home.

NY, NJ, CT, PA Area Horror Fans!!!

Catastrophicon

ROCK & ROLL HORROR CONVENTION

Saturday, July 15 - Purchase NY



Ari Lehman
Friday the 13th



Beatrice Boepple
Nightmare on Elm St 5



Michelle Santiago
Terrifier 2



Plus!

Live Music

Cosplay

Live Gaming

Vendors

More!



Visit catastrophicon.com for a full guest list.

Scent of Peonies

Toshiya Kamei

The chilly autumn night envelopes Akari on the gravel riverbank of the Yodogawa, and goosebumps rise on their slender but sinewy arms. Shizuka, or her copy, has slipped away again. By the time Akari realizes it's another false lead, it's too late. They stand face-to-face with the ao-oni, a resurrected demon towering over their petite frame.

Akari's breath comes in white puffs as they step forward. The Oni's half-animal and half-mechanical roar scrapes their eardrums, and Akari blinks. No, they're not scared. Thanks to the monks of Mount Kongo, sword fighting is second nature to them. Yet they can't stop their hands from shaking. No, it's the katana that's shaking. They repeat the lie like a mantra under their breath.

As the oni edges closer, Akari feels tempted to resort to their nascent magic, but resists the urge. They would hate to risk their health for a quick victory.

"Shizuka!" Akari screams in lieu of a battle cry, but it fades in a mournful steam whistle. It's Tsunami, their sentient steamboat, who lies anchored in the serene river. She disapproves of Akari's bellicose way of life and makes her feelings known.

Akari sighs, longing for Shizuka, her faults smoothed over in the fog of memory. The last Shizuka turned out to be another copy. The telltale sign was a missing birthmark on her left thigh. All courtesy of her alchemist father, Masamune Ishikawa.

Shizuka was once the closet thing Akari had to family. For all Akari knows, however, she no longer cares for them. All they ask is a moment alone with her. It will only take a moment for Akari to say they still love her.

"I'm Akari Kataoka!" Akari yells, hoping to distract their opponent. "Give your name unless you're a coward!"

"I don't have one," the oni says, gnashing his teeth. "The wakadanna never gave me one."

"Not even Ao?" Akari points to the oni's blue skin. "I didn't know Kenzo was also stingy with names." Heir to the Ishikawa family, Kenzo has placed more obstacles in Akari's way than his father has ever done.

Akari scoffs at the memory of their last visit to the Ishikawa Residence. Kenzo's men at the gate wouldn't divulge his sister's whereabouts even under the threat of mortal harm.

Akari inches toward the oni. He salivates for their flesh, his fiery eyes gleaming in the moonlight. The bright burn of his pupil makes Akari gasp. They take a step backward. Can anyone blame Prometheus for stealing fire? A flame like that must

have also seduced my ancestors long ago.

The gravel crackles and crunches under their feet as they take a swift step forward, and their Katana bites into the oni's flesh. He screams in fury. They take another step forward, close enough that the beast's fur pricks against their arms and his rotten-egg breath assaults their nostrils. Close enough that the madness in the oni's eyes makes Akari flinch. It's a kind of madness caused by alchemy. The world comes to a complete halt in that moment.

At close range, Akari senses the oni's rage percolating inside him. Despite their jittering heart, a sweet triumph fills them when the oni gasps. All else being equal, sword fighting is mental. The monks taught them that much. Akari smirks, twisting their lips as the blade slices through the oni's muscle and grates against bone, sending a vibration up their arms and into their chest.

Akari misses the oni's head, failing to decapitate him. When they pull their Katana back, the ugly arm follows, severed below the elbow. Crimson blood spews, and the limb drops with a dull thud.

The oni bares his fangs and howls, drowning out even Akari's thoughts. His ivory horns glisten in the moonlight as he charges at his adversary. The oni rains down a flurry of punches, but fails to so much as touch Akari.

Akari's black leather boots shine under the gas lamps as they dance around the oni. A thick, white cloud of aether-steam floats from Tsunami against the dark canvas of night.

Akari raises their Katana over their head and swings down. The blade whistles through the air, and the oni bellows as it tears through his heart. A cold silence falls over the riverbank. Akari trembles, drops their Katana, and hugs their arms around their chest.

As the crisp night breeze caresses Akari's face, their failure to find Shizuka further dampens their already diminished sense of victory. Akari bites their lower lip. They pick up their Katana, wipe the blood off the blade, and sheath it by their hip before stepping onto their steamboat.

"I knew she wouldn't be here," Tsunami says. The deck rocks under Akari's boots.

Akari sighs at the censure and leans against the rail as Tsunami cuts through the water.

"We'll find her," they say. "Eventually."

As they drift into the fog, Tsunami remains silent.

#

The following morning, Akari enters a teahouse on a leafy hill commanding a view of the Yodogawa.

“Trasshaimase!” A young woman, dressed in a drab gray kimono and a white apron, greets Akari with a deep bow. She disappears into the kitchen, reappears with a cup of green tea, and flashes a pleasant smile. When Akari smiles back, she blushes and sits across from them.

“I’m Akari,” they say, lowering their voice to counter their feminine name. “Akari Kataoka.”

“Akari-sama,” the waitress says with another bow. “Akari as in ‘lights.’ You must’ve been a bright little girl.”

Akari says nothing, letting the awkward silence grow. All they can think about is Shizuka.

“I’m Oharu,” she says, her blush turning a deeper crimson. “I’m sorry to bother you, but I wonder if you could help me read the news.” She glances over at the kwaraban posted on the wall. “My family couldn’t afford to send me to a terakoya.”

Akari opens their mouth, wanting to refuse as they scan the room.

“Don’t worry, Akari-sama,” Oharu says, smiling. “Okamisan isn’t here.”

“Okay, then,” Akari says, and reads one headline that catches their eye: “Samurai Avenger Strikes Again.” Akari smiles, both amused and horrified at the stomach-churning illustration of a dismembered oni lying in a pool of blood.

“Where did that monster come from?” Oharu asks, her voice trembling. “I thought they were all dead.”

“Flesh and blood oni were eradicated thanks to Momotaro’s heroic feats years ago,” Akari says. “These new ones are put together with alchemy and reanimated with galvanism.” Akari imagines electric currents pulsating through a fiendish mixture of flesh and metal.

“That’s so frightening,” Oharu says, eyeing the katana resting beside Akari. “I wish I had someone to protect me.”

Akari clears their throat and reads an account of a night patrol officer: “I spotted faint traces of steam lingering over the water’s surface.” When Akari pauses, they meet Oharu’s eyes. Her sudden intensity startles Akari, and they break their shared gaze. Returning to the article, Akari ignores the fluttering in their stomach. “As I swatted away stray moths fluttering overhead, I detected a sweet floral scent in the damp air. A few white peony petals lay next to—”

“You also smell nice,” Oharu cuts Akari off, leaning closer.

The door slides open just then, and a well-coiffed middle-aged woman in a pink kimono steps inside.

“Okamisan!” Oharu gasps.

The proprietress glares in silence at the waitress.

Oharu stands and scurries away. The middle-aged woman gives Akari a nod before disappearing behind the kitchen noren.

Another headline declares: Alchemist's Daughter Goes Missing. Akari's heart skips a beat when they come across her name: Shizuka Ishikawa. The sweet sound of her name. They hurry along until more details confirm their fear: it's their Shizuka. The one they loved more than anything in the world. The one they still love. The subtle floral scent of Shizuka's skin returns, triggering bittersweet memories of their first kiss. Akari's heart pounds in their throat, deafening all other sounds. The reporter speculates Shizuka may have been sold into sex slavery.

Sex slavery?

Akari bangs their knee against the table and knocks over their cup. The tea spills all over them.

Oharu comes over. "Are you all right?"

Akari forces a smile and nods.

Oharu takes off her apron, wads it into a ball, and dabs Akari's wet hakama, patting their knee. Her hand lingers a tad longer than it should. "I'll get you another tea," she says before bustling toward the kitchen.

Akari sighs and glances back at the article. After his daughter's disappearance, the patriarch took to his bed, and his firstborn son, Kenzo, took charge of the family business.

Akari frowns as they recall the father and son. Both men thought Shizuka was too good for the impoverished samurai, and their prejudice wormed their way into Akari's head. They left her to appease her family. But what does it matter if Akari has no wealth to their name?

Kenzo bears a striking resemblance to his father, and both men are deeply engaged in alchemy. Kenzo is a dandy with a penchant for a waistcoat and breeches à la Victor Frankenstein, and he has a prominent birthmark on his left earlobe. Per the kawaraban, Kenzo has doubled the reward for his sister's safe return. The reward holds no interest for Akari. Samurai are to lead simple, frugal lives, after all.

Akari will find her. They won't rest until she's in their arms again.

#

"Danna, did you hear what happened last night?" the driver asks as his aether-driven rickshaw chug-chugs through dusty, unpaved streets crowded with carriages, metal horses, and pedestrians. The engine hisses like a snake coiled in the grass, leaving a trail of steam behind.

"No," Akari answers from the wooden passenger seat.

"Another oni showed up." The driver takes one hand off the handlebars to

wipe the sweat off his brow. There's no breeze, and the sun burns without mercy.

"Is that so?" Akari asks, feigning indifference. They squint against the harsh rays of the sun.

"Yes," the driver continues. "It was an ao-oni, a blue one, they say. Somebody butchered him. Cut off his arm and impaled his heart."

"I'm glad to hear it," Akari says in an absent sort of way. Their mind is still fixated on Shizuka. Earlier this morning, a glassy-eyed beggar at the port told Akari that he'd seen a woman who matches Shizuka's physical description in Shinmachi, Osaka's pleasure quarter, but an addict's words are about as trustworthy as a double-crossing snitch. Tsunami thinks it's another wild goose chase. Even so, Akari feels compelled to follow every clue. "Who's our savior?"

"Nobody's seen him," the driver answers. He turns briefly, glancing back toward the samurai with a beaming smile. "But I pray for his safety every night before I go to sleep."

As they approach their destination, the crowd becomes denser, pushing and shoving one another. The driver blares his horn as he zigzags through the throng of passersby in his path.

The rickshaw stops in front of a brothel in Shinmachi. Hopeful, yet fearful of what they may find inside, Akari trembles. They step out and tell the driver to wait. A satchel dangles around their waist. The scent of their perfume wafts from Akari, like some overblown peony.

The place swarms with sweaty, sordid men. They keep their eyes low, averted. The banto makes his calculations behind the cashier, deftly flipping the beads of a small abacus.

"Hey, banto," Akari says. "I want to see the most popular girl. I've heard great things about her." They wear a fashionable, loose hakama over black leather boots that shine like piano legs. Their monocle glitters like a distant locomotive headlight.

"Do you mean Oyuki?" The banto looks up, pushes his thick, black-rimmed glasses up his nose, and flashes a false smile. "She's with a customer right now. Please wait your turn." He bows to Akari, but not as deeply as he's supposed to, and it's clear the banto is a two-timing weasel.

"I hate waiting," Akari roars. They glare at the banto, their hand on the hilt of their Katana. "I need to see her now!"

After watching the banto cower for a few strained seconds, Akari pulls gold koban out of the bosom of their kimono and hurls a handful at his feet.

The banto's eyes widen, revealing the whites. A hush falls over the room behind Akari. The tension clings to them like a second layer of skin. The intense gazes of the other customers burn their back as the banto drops to his knees on the

earthen floor, scrambling to scoop up the koban.

“Much obliged,” the banto stammers. He raises the koban above his head and bows again before dropping the koban into his kimono sleeve. “Please wait a moment.” The banto bows once more as he slips into the corridor. A few minutes later, a half-dressed customer pushes past Akari and flees into the street. In turn, the banto sticks his head through the noren and waves Akari inside.

“Oyuki’s our top earner,” He says in an apologetic tone, wringing his hands together. “She’s in high demand.” He ushers Akari into a dimly lit room and scurries away.

The air reeks of opium fumes, rancid cat urine, stale tobacco, and gaudy perfume intended to mask everything else. Akari swallows and fights off a wave of nausea. They glance around the room, looking for a place to sit.

Just then, something strikes Akari on their head from behind, and everything goes dark.

When Akari comes to their senses, they’re lying on the floor. An elfish woman crouches beside them. Her loose-fitting robe leaves her shoulders exposed, and the dark hickies encircling her neck sicken Akari. An opium pipe lies at her feet.

Getting slowly to their feet, their head still throbbing with pain, Akari tries to ignore the tearing in their chest as their heart breaks.

Her hair is disheveled, and her skin is sallow, but there’s no doubt that it’s Shizuka. They force themselves to look at her. Who knows if it’s Tsunami’s cynicism or their own, but Akari can’t squash the insidious thought that Shizuka is only here to push them into Kenzo’s snare.

Akari hesitates for a moment and then decides to take a chance. They walk over to the woman and embrace her.

“Shizuka, I’ve looked everywhere for you,” Akari says, kissing her hair and tightening their embrace. Akari kneels before the woman to search for the birthmark, but she shoves them away.

“How do you know my name?” When Akari looks into her eyes, the fog of opium and pain clears for a moment to make room for alarm.

“Don’t you recognize me?” Akari steps back. Why doesn’t she recognize them?

Shizuka moves her mouth without forming any intelligible words. After a pause, she finally manages to mumble, “Akari? No, it can’t be.” She staggers and falls into Akari’s arms.

Akari gently pulls back so Shizuka can look into their eyes. “We have to get out of here first.”

“But how?”

“Remember this?” Akari says and pulls the clockwork frog from their satchel. It was Shizuka’s New Year’s gift years ago.

“Oh, you still have it,” Shizuka says, her voice still shaky.

“This little guy will create a diversion for us.” Akari forces a smile for her sake as much as theirs. When they wind the frog, its eyes gleam amber in its metal skull. The gears whirl and creak as it comes to life.

Shizuka smiles back, or at least tries to. Her eyes remain unfocused. Akari can’t guess her thoughts like they used to, when their minds were in sync. It doesn’t help that her eyes are not as expressive as they once were.

“Put this on.” Akari takes a man’s kimono from the satchel and hands it to Shizuka. “You can’t go out like that.”

Shizuka turns back for modesty, depriving Akari of the chance to take a peek at her left thigh. She drops her robe to the floor and slips into the disguise.

“Ready?” Akari asks, biting their lower lip. They pick the frog up off the floor and wind it again. When Akari lets the frog loose outside the room, it blows up to the size of a large dog, croaks aloud, and leaps down the corridor noisily.

#

The steamboat cabin is small, barely accommodating Akari’s single bed and small dresser. The low ceilings and dim lighting make the space feel like a cave. As the adrenaline fades, Akari’s fingers tremble. To their relief, Tsunami doesn’t object to Shizuka’s presence. Shizuka sits on the bed, her unfocused gaze resting on the hazy clouds outside the circular window. Akari kneels by their small trunk at the foot of the bed. Tucked at the bottom is a familiar cream kimono. Akari traces the Ishikawa crest stitched delicately near the collar.

“I have something for you,” Akari says. They turn and hand Shizuka the kimono.

It takes a moment before her eyes shine with what looks like recognition. “My old kimono?” Akari can’t tell if she’s faking it. Perhaps a copy retains more of the original’s memories than they thought.

“I’ve kept it all these years to remember you by,” Akari says with a smile as Shizuka blushes.

Akari sits next to Shizuka on the bed. The engine’s throbbing hum and the slow-moving current lull them into silence.

“Where have you been all this time?” Shizuka asks.

Akari takes a breath before speaking. “I was tired of being helpless and dependent on others. I went up into the mountains and trained with yamabushi at Senpou Temple. They taught me sword fighting.”

Akari bares their right arm and flexes it, showing off their biceps. Shizuka reaches out, and her feathery touch tickles Akari until they pull back.

“And they taught me something else.”

“What is it?” Shizuka asks, her hand still seeking their arm.

“Magic, albeit a weak form.”

“Weak?” Shizuka echoes like a guileless child. A far cry from the intellectually curious woman Akari once knew.

“Yes,” Akari says after a pause. “I can’t thwart my opponent completely, but I can weaken them.” Akari desires more than ever to possess stronger magical powers. With fortified magic, they may be able to restore what a copy has lost in the duplication process.

“I see,” Shizuka says. “They taught you well, apparently.”

“Yes, they did,” Akari says. “One morning, however, the chief monk walked in on me while I was bathing, and I was expelled immediately. By that time, I’d learned enough.”

Shizuka closes her eyes and groans, body tensing as her muscles constrict in spasm. All Akari can do is hold her close as Shizuka endures. They whisper, rambling through their memories of the monks. Between the serene rhythm of their words, Akari rocks her like a baby until she falls quiet.

“They hooked me on opium,” Shizuka says, shivering. “I’m going to be sick.”

Akari moves swiftly and helps Shizuka to the pot in the corner of the room. They run their fingers through Shizuka’s hair as she retches. Whether or not she’s a copy matters less now. Shizuka is in pain.

No one speaks for a long while. Akari buries their anger and fear before opening their mouth.

“I’m so sorry,” Akari whispers. “I’m sorry.”

“It would make my mind go blank,” Shizuka mumbles.

“You don’t have to tell me anything,” Akari shushes her, reaching for her hand. “Come here. I’ve missed you so much.” Akari holds Shizuka in their arms and pets her smooth, silky hair. Just like old times. They think back to the afternoon, a few years ago, when they kissed for the first time.

“Why did I let you go?” Akari wonders aloud. Their own words taste bitter, and regret weighs on their heart. “Forgive me for leaving you. That’s not going to happen this time.” Akari clenches their fists, and leans in to embrace Shizuka, to whisper in her ear, “Your brother is mean-spirited, but I shouldn’t have given you up so easily.”

Akari recalls how Kenzo warned them to stay away from his sister. He glared at them with raw hatred. Leave her alone!

What bothers Akari most now, though, is how easily they walked away without a fight. They felt too inadequate to stand up for themselves back then. They were ashamed of their impoverished state. Samurai are socially superior to alchemists, but such a distinction meant little to Kenzo.

“No one’s going to hurt you ever again.” Akari seethes with fury. “I won’t let them. If somebody lays one finger on you, I’ll cut them into pieces.”

“Don’t get so worked up.” Shizuka flashes a faint smile. “At last, we’re together again, just like a family.” This time, her words ring truer in Akari’s ears, and tears well up in their eyes.

“Shizuka, you’re my family,” Akari says as they kiss Shizuka’s cheek. “Let me ask you something,” they begin with a sigh. “How did you end up in Shinmachi?”

“I was abducted by an aka-oni, a red one, while visiting Sumiyoshi Taisha,” Shizuka says in a hushed tone.

An image of fiery orange hair fills Akari’s mind.

“I go there every month to pray,” Shizuka continues. “Twigs snapped behind me. When I looked over my shoulder, the oni was right there.” She casts her gaze downward while fidgeting with her kimono sleeves. She covers her mouth with her sleeve.

“And then what happened?”

“I tried to scream, but nothing came out. A filthy hand covered my mouth. I struggled to free myself, but I was being lifted in the air. I couldn’t breathe. Everything went dark. The next thing I remember was opening my eyes and finding myself in that awful place.”

“Who besides your family knows you visit there?”

“No one,” Shizuka says. “You don’t think my family is behind this, do you?”

“I don’t know,” Akari says. “Let’s go up the mountain and talk to the oni.”

#

A low chant rises from Akari’s lips and floats like a feather on the waves of an ocean, its sound vibrating through the crisp mountain air. The aka-oni, half-flesh and half-machine, thunders, ready to pounce upon Akari. The trees around Akari and Shizuka shake violently, and a flurry of dry autumn leaves dance overhead, some of them getting stuck to the oni’s scarlet skin.

Akari winces against a splitting headache, experiencing the adverse effects of their magic. The overuse of magic can be harmful, even deadly. Even so, Akari has no stomach for another duel right now.

Their mantra reaches the aka-oni, wraps itself around his body, and stops his charge in midair. With his monstrosity diminished by Akari's spell, he shakes his head, dazed. His eyes no longer hold the fury they had a moment ago. Akari sprints to the oni, grabs him, and throws him down.

"Argh!" The oni's desperate screams echo through the solitary bamboo grove as he rolls in pain on the ground. A light breeze gently rustles the bamboo leaves, and the occasional caw of a crow produces a false sense of serenity.

"It's no use crying out for help," Akari says. "Nobody can hear you." They put one foot against his chest. Shizuka stands back and whimpers.

"Don't kill me!" the oni begs. Tears stream down his bearded cheeks and fall onto the soil still wet with recent rain.

"Give me a reason not to!" Akari shouts, tightening their grip on their Katana.

"What do you want to know?"

"Who put you up to this?" Akari lowers their voice to a whisper.

"An alchemist from Osaka." The oni glances toward Shizuka.

"Kenzo Ishikawa?"

"I don't know his name," the oni says. "Everyone calls him 'Wakadanna.'"

"What does he look like?" Akari places more of their weight on the oni, making him groan.

"He dresses like a nanbanjin," the oni says in a quivering voice. "His coat also bears the three gentian blooms." He points to the Ishikawa crest on Shizuka's kimono.

"My brother," Shizuka says.

"Deliver my message to the wakadanna," Akari tells the oni, "And I'll spare your life."

The oni groans his consent.

Shizuka shakes her head. Her face is pallid, and she closes her eyes. Like a flurry of petals, Akari catches her as she falls into their embrace.

#

An air balloon lands softly on the outskirts of the city. Shizuka draws back and squeezes Akari's hand when she spots the crest of three gentian blooms on the balloon. The gondola's door squeaks open, and a dashing figure in a black velvet waistcoat and trunk breeches steps out. He reminds Akari of Victor Frankenstein.

"I got your message, Akari." Kenzo sneers. "Thank you for finding my sister. As I promised, you'll be compensated handsomely for your trouble."

“You know how to make a grand entrance,” Akari says, glaring at him. “I’ll give you that. But I don’t want the reward money.”

“Suit yourself,” Kenzo says, his clipped tone betraying his annoyance.

“Remember what happened to Icarus?” Akari asks to Kenzo and grips their Katana firmly. “He was an overreacher like you. You shouldn’t fly too close to the sun.”

“Who are you to lecture me?” he says with a short, mocking laugh.

Shizuka opens her mouth to say something, and then falls silent.

“Don’t worry, little sis,” Kenzo says, his voice hollow. “You’ll be coming home with me.”

“You and me,” Kenzo says, turning to Akari. “Let’s settle this old score.” He glares at Akari. “Stay back, Shizuka. You’re too precious to get hurt.”

“What are you talking about?” Shizuka’s voice shakes as she backs away. “Why do you hate us so much?”

“I don’t hate you,” Kenzo says, shaking his head. “On the contrary, I love you. I love you more than anyone else in the world.”

There’s something amiss about Kenzo, something Akari can’t quite put their finger on. They glance toward Shizuka, but they can’t read her blank face.

“That’s enough!” Akari thunders, unsheathing their Katana. Kenzo mimics the action like a reflection in the mirror, cold light gleaming along his blade. Their breathing becomes subsumed as cicadas buzz loud. Clouds thicken overhead and drape their surroundings in shadow. Beads of sweat roll down Akari’s body. They steal another glance at Shizuka. She looks as pale as a ghost. Flyaway hair falls across her forehead. Akari wants to go to her, but Kenzo moves into their path. He crouches low, and Akari’s heart dances in their chest. One last inhale. One last exhale. They leap forward and catch his blade on theirs.

Kenzo turns into their blade, using his weight to push Akari back.

“Damn!” Akari cries, slashing. Kenzo parries. He wards off their first blow and deflects the second, launching a counterattack. His blade thrusts like a fang, sharp and tipped with red from a cut on Akari’s arm.

Every time they meet, Kenzo cries out. A flicker of flame dances in his dark eyes. Fury. Wrath. Akari narrowly escapes a knee to their stomach. Their own knees buckle slightly. Every inhale is filled with dust, clogging their throat. Kenzo is bleeding too, and his chest labors with each breath. The sun peeks once again out of the clouds. They land a cut on his thigh. Red blooms through his pant leg. As blood runs down their elbow, they lick their cracked lips.

“Stop, Kenzo!” Shizuka shouts.

Akari steps sideways, avoiding Kenzo's charge. They slash at his hand, sending his Katana flying from his grip.

With a curse, Kenzo hurls himself at Akari and knocks them down. Still reeling from the strain of their earlier magic use, Akari is slow to get back on their feet. Kenzo dashes toward Shizuka and takes her in his arms as she screams. As Akari stumbles upright, Kenzo hoists Shizuka into the gondola before following.

The air balloon slowly rises as Kenzo discards its weight.

Akari leaps and grabs the rope ladder hanging down.

Their feet dangle in the air as they hold on with all their might.

"Akari!" Shizuka gasps.

After much struggle, their knuckles turning white as they climb, Akari manages to haul herself into the gondola.

The air balloon soars into the clouds, floating high above the city. Osaka Castle looks like a miniature model. The chilly air slaps against Akari's cheeks as they gaze at Shizuka.

"She's mine!" Kenzo shouts at Akari.

"Stop, Kenzo!" Shizuka cries. "Leave me be!" She struggles to free herself from his grip. "Why are you doing this?"

Akari closes their eyes and chants a mantra. Their chant drones on. A sudden change comes over Kenzo. He trembles like a leaf. He wiggles as his body takes on feminine contours. His hard male features melt and then turn soft and womanly. His hair grows like vines, cascading over sloping shoulders. His grip loosens, allowing Shizuka to look at him. His face is now identical to hers. In the throes of a severe migraine attack, Akari staggers, but manages to stay on their feet.

Shizuka's copy lets out a little gasping cry.

"How did you know?" The real Shizuka asks, turning toward Akari. Dressed in her brother's clothes, she tightens her grip on her copy's wrist.

"I didn't know," Akari says, still stunned. "I'm as surprised as she is," they add, pointing to the cowering copy.

"Much as I hate to admit it," Shizuka says, one eyebrow arching. "I was jealous when I saw you with her." She draws out the last word to spit out her contempt for her copy. "You just can't help yourself, can you? You always were a romantic."

Akari takes a step toward her, but halts when she glares at them. Cold sweat runs down their body. "You still care for me. I know you do."

"Maybe I do. Maybe I wish you didn't leave. Maybe I wish things were different." Shizuka looks at Akari. "But it's too late."

The anger in Shizuka's eyes fades away, replaced by chilly apathy.

"No, it's not." But Akari's voice trails off as they speak. It's too late, and both of them know it.

"Things change," Shizuka says. "People change. Circumstances change. You can see that, can't you?"

Akari nods, casting their gaze downward.

"Family has always been important to me. Besides, I love having the ability to manipulate the essence of life."

Akari fails to hold their head up, tears brimming in their eyes.

"You're getting in my way," Shizuka says. "How many more oni will I have to send after you?"

Her words echo in their head. Is this the same woman they fell in love with? And all this time, Akari believed Kenzo was solely responsible for a steady supply of oni that had come their way.

"Look at me," Shizuka says, her anger tinged with sadness. She grabs the copy, and the copy groans. The original tightens her grip until her knuckles turn white. Akari winces at the copy's pain.

"I'm a great alchemist," Shizuka continues. "My father says I'm better than Kenzo."

Akari's headache returns with greater force than ever, pain quickly blasting against their temples. They regret their recent magic use, but it's too late. They barely steady themselves against the railing.

Shizuka pushes away her copy and raises her hand to cast a spell. A dark shadow gathers around her as she chants.

Dizzy and sick, Akari grabs a rope overhead. The coarse fiber burns their palm as they steady themselves. They have moments to counter Shizuka's spell. Heart and head pounding, Akari reaches forward.

As they conjure magic, shivers course through them like electric currents. The world lurches underneath them.

"Shizuka, no!" Akari's throat is scoured by the cold wind. They tremble with horror as the copy hurls herself at her original.

The gondola tilts and creaks. The copy kicks and screams, lashing out at the original.

"How could you do that to me?" Her words fade into the howling air.

Shizuka shoves her copy away, and she falls against the side of the balloon with a thud.

Akari meets the original's gaze in the sudden stillness. All Akari sees in her eyes is hatred, dark and bitter. With a sob, Akari releases an orb of purple flame to counter her spell.

Shizuka unleashes a guttural scream and brings a charred hand to her chest. "Damn you, Akari!"

Shizuka charges forward. Still lurching from their magic use, Akari teeters aside.

Akari watches, horrified, as Shizuka flips over the railing. Her upper body hangs over the edge. She seesaws, kicking her legs desperately, trying to gain a foothold.

Akari reaches out to grab her, but misses her by mere inches. She tips all the way over and disappears from Akari's view. A scream pierces the air, gradually diminishing. Akari averts their eyes, turning away from reality, the one where their Shizuka no longer exists.

Shizuka's copy cries and covers her face with her hands.

Akari embraces the copy, shushing her softly and holding her while she sobs. Akari weeps for Shizuka, her copy, and themselves. They hold the copy tight in their arms and keep crying until their tears run out.

"I'm so sorry," Akari says, swallowing their last sob. "She was unwell."

Akari wonders how long it will take for her to adjust to her new reality where the original is no longer present.

"Her disguise didn't have a birthmark here," Akari says, touching their left earlobe.

Shizuka nods, her eyes clouding.

"I'm so sorry," Akari repeats, steadying themselves again and wincing against their headache. The intensity of pain alarms them.

Akari glances at Shizuka's copy. She stares out into space at the gondola's edge. A mere pawn sent to torment Akari. Disposable.

They can hardly expect the Ishikawa clan to do right by the copy. They will send her back to the pleasure quarter the first chance they get. It would kill Akari to be complicit in this kind of scheme. She deserves sympathy, not contempt.

"Now it's just you and me," Akari says, stepping closer and tugging her to them. This Shizuka smells wonderful in their arms—faded perfume, stale soap, her sweat mixed with Akari's. And a last waft of peony fragrance. Akari takes a deep breath and savors the blend of scents. They begin to appreciate alchemy for the first time in their life, albeit begrudgingly.

"Where do you want to go?" Akari asks. They brush away Shizuka's tears with

their thumbs. A birthmark, or lack thereof, no longer matters.

“I don’t know,” Shizuka mumbles. “It doesn’t matter. As long as we’re together.” A faint smile forms on her lips, then fades away.

Shizuka buries her head against their chest. As gulls cry high above, Akari glances toward the iridescent horizon.



Hostile Takeover

Ray Daley

Just another regular day on the data entry crew, punching the humble keyboard. When I removed my headphones, I could hear the clattering of the keyboards all around me, that's because we are the best team here. A-number one. I quickly replaced the headphones, for fear of going deaf or crazy from the noise.

PLEASE LOGIN...

The prompt waited patiently for my input. I lifted the mouse-mat, searching for the bit of paper I normally kept there. As I fumbled around, my questing hand finally found the familiar sensation of paper and grabbed onto it. I ran it over the waiting reader.

WELCOME, GUEST, MINIMAL ACCESS GRANTED.

That login cost me a pretty penny, I can tell you! Three blow-jobs, two hand-jobs and a nude selfie to the openly gay chaps in IT. And a gobble on the quiet to their manager, who didn't like to broadcast his sexual preferences. Worth it.

Well worth it. Despite what the greeting message may have read, I had full access to everything they'd got down in IT. Right now; it was just the ability to send email, without my every word being spied on by the guys up on fifth, the men in black, Security.

Next to me I was vaguely aware of Georgie, she'd been scratching her neck all day. I guess the vitamin shot they give to all new arrivals had got none easier to stomach then?

I accessed the internal messaging system.

SEND> TO TERMINAL 87A, STOP SCRATCHING IT, IT WON'T MAKE IT FEEL ANY BETTER.

Her terminal went BEEP in her headphones, and she saw the green text appear before her, then Georgie looked around. And saw me shaking my head and wagging my finger at her.

FROM TERMINAL 87A> IT ITCHES! WHEN'S BREAK TIME? She sent to me. We're not allowed to talk to each other, and the microphones planted around the room track if we do. It's an instant dismissal too, if we dared to even try.

SEND> ENCRYPT, KEY22 TO TERMINAL 87A, ANOTHER HOUR YET SWEETS. BUNK UP IN THE GENTS WHEN WE DO?

I could see her eyes scanning over the encrypted text, I'd shot her the key as soon as she'd sat down beside me on her first day here. Her chip had picked it up automatically.

This is a smart office, a smart building, in fact. No key cards that can get lost or stolen, all our personal data is encoded into the collar of the shirt or blouse we wear each day. They give you five identical ones on the first day, then you're expected to change into it in front of thirty-five complete strangers. Not that I cared on the day I started. It was a room full of men. Hunky men too!

I swing both ways, in case it's not entirely obvious. I'm quite happy to also live under the star sign of vagitarius. Georgie is quite hot, I enjoy sitting next to her, hence the message. She knew they were monitoring her every keystroke. But not incoming text boxes. So I got a tap on the shoulder from her, closely followed by a thumbs-up, and a knowing smile.

Just as I was done syncing my phone to the terminal, the shit hit the fan. I'd barely loaded more than three new photos of my cat onto the guest account, when my terminal froze.

And it wasn't just my terminal either. I made to reach for my keyboard, having seen the pop-up appear on the screen.

ALL TERMINALS FROZEN. REMAIN WHERE YOU ARE. YOU'VE NO CHOICE ANYWAY. INSPECTION TEAMS ON ROUTE TO ALL SECTIONS.

All I could do was move my eyes and breathe. I was aware of panic emanating from the direction of Georgie, though. And I was powerless to do a bloody thing to help her, either. If I'd been able to type, I'd have sent her a reassuring message, telling her to stay calm. Quite frankly, I could have done with receiving such a message myself at that point.

From the very edge of my peripheral vision, I could see Georgie. Also sitting bolt upright, totally motionless. In front of the exact same message I was seeing on my screen.

'Hang on,' I thought to myself, 'this was supposed to be a top-level IT user account. Surely they weren't subject to the same rules and regulations as us mere worker drones?' If I could have shaken my head right then, I would have done. Surely these buggers weren't coming to fire me, just for putting photographs on a

company machine? Photographs of my damn cat, too! As cute as the little bugger might have been.

The message on my screen changed.

STAND UP.

I rather found I had to. My legs weren't under my control any longer. And I could hear voices getting closer, too. "Where is it?"

"Dunno, it's some kind of guest login. It's bloody close though, Bob."

So one of them was called Bob, or Robert perhaps. I knew everyone in IT. I had shagged most of them. I was aware, full well that no-one called Bob or Robert worked there. So whoever they were, they weren't going to be the friendly IT men who were susceptible to a nice arse and a decent hand-job.

REMAIN STILL. THEY'RE TRYING TO TRACE THIS TERMINAL. 53. 53. 53. KNOW WHAT I MEAN?

Ah. That was Ian in IT, room fifty-three. And it looked like it was me they were after, whoever they were.

SEX. SEX. SECX. SECX. 5-3.

Oh, crap. I think Ian was trying to tell me these guys were fifth floor — room three, bloody Security!

BLANK. THINK BLANK.

Well, I did still have control of my thoughts. Blank. Blank. Blank. Hang on, could I feel my feet?

WIGGLE TOES.

Yep, I could.

NO TIME. LEAVE THE BUILDING NOW. LOSE THE SHIRT, SEXY.

Very clever, Ian. They wouldn't be able to track me without the shirt.

87A. 87A.

Hang on. Did he want me to take Georgie too?

SHIRRRT!

Oh, no then. Oh, right! Her blouse!

“Sorry, Georgie, I’m nicking your blouse, hun.” I had to whisper, I didn’t want them homing in on me. I then discovered how difficult it was to remove the clothing of a totally paralysed person. Extremely.

It took persistence to part Georgie from her blouse, and I had that in spades. That, and a nice arse. I get a lot of good shags on account of that arse, I’ll have you know!

I dumped my shirt on the keyboard and rapidly buttoned up Georgie’s blouse. It was a pretty good fit, considering I’m not as well blessed as her in the mammary area. ‘Nice bra, Georgie!’ I thought to myself. ‘Shame I’m gonna miss that bunk up in the bogs.’ Then I legged it, mostly because I could. Well, at least I could at first.

I got about fifty feet away, that was around all of three bits of corridor and two corners. Then I couldn’t move again. But I could see dumb terminals everywhere. I got the even worse news next.

ATTENTION ALL EMPLOYEES. YOUR BODIES ARE NOW UNDER OUR CONTROL. A ROGUE EMPLOYEE IS ATTEMPTING TO FLEE FROM SECURITY PERSONNEL. YOU WILL STAND UP AND PURSUE HIM. WE SEE THROUGH YOUR EYES. WE CONTROL YOUR LIMBS. CATCH HIM AND YOU’LL ALL GO FREE.

Somehow, I very much doubted that last line applied in any shape, form or description to me. I tried to guess what was happening, and why. Then they rather kindly told me.

THE VITAMIN INJECTION WAS AN IMPLANT. WE HAVE A CHIP BEHIND YOUR EAR. WE HAVE FULL ACCESS TO YOUR MOTOR SYSTEMS AND VISION.

And I was stuck, totally immobilised. That didn’t stop me from trying to move, though. The one thing I was suddenly aware of, I could hear people walking, very close to me. Oh. And the ability to ... move?

EMPLOYEES. SYSTEM OVERLOADED. PLEASE REMAIN CALM. YOU ARE STILL UNDER OUR CONTROL. CONTINUE TO FOLLOW OUR ORDERS. LOCATE YOUR FORMER COLLEAGUE.

Former? I didn't much like the look or sound of that message. But suddenly I was back in control of my own limbs once more. By activating all the implants, they'd only gone and overloaded the entire control system. And somehow, I was free to move. I wasn't one hundred percent sure if that would continue to be the case for much longer, but I had try and escape, if I could.

Not that it mattered.

I tried looking for ways out. They had placed people outside every door, on all the staircases, by each lift. No matter which way I turned, my former work colleagues were everywhere. And out to catch me. Every thought I had, it seemed like Security were just that one step ahead of me. There was even someone waiting in the broom closet that I contemplated hiding in. And he almost got me. Lucky for me, they moved slowly whilst under remote control.

So I made the one move I hoped they wouldn't predict. I climbed into the crawlspace above the ceiling tiles. And there I stayed until home time. Only no-one moved to go home.

Mostly because they couldn't.

"Where ever you are, we know you can hear this because the PA system covers the whole building. None of your friends are going to be released from our control until you are either caught, or you willingly give yourself up. We just want to talk about what's loaded onto that login. It means a disciplinary hearing for you, at most. Please give yourself up?" Then the tannoy turned off.

You don't want to hear how uncomfortable it was to spend a night sleeping in a roof crawlspace. I'm sure anything you imagined in the last three seconds was much worse than what I actually endured. Security had everyone patrolling the building all night. It was only due to sheer tiredness that I got any sleep at all. I wish I could say any of my colleagues got any sleep too, but apparently not.

In the end, I was forced to give myself up. I was tired, hungry and bursting for a pee. I had tried to crawl over to the men's toilets, but they'd even deployed people in all the stalls, hoping to catch me. Eventually, I came down in a corridor. Right into the arms of one of their drones.

Georgie.

I could tell she wasn't happy to be catching me. She might not have known Morse code but her blinking and winking made that fairly clear. It took ten more of them to herd me up to the fifth floor.

#

OVERTIME WILL BE PAID. WE THANK YOU FOR YOUR ASSISTANCE IN CAPTURING YOUR FORMER COLLEAGUE. SADLY, HE HAS NOW BEEN TERMINATED.

‘Terminated how?’ Georgie thought to herself. ‘Fired? Or killed?’ She reached up and scratched her neck once more.

PAYMENT BONUS FOR EMPLOYEE STATIONED AT THIS TERMINAL. YOUR COMPANY THANKS YOU FOR YOUR HELP.

Georgie read the amount again. Then a third time, just to make sure. ‘Oh. Well, he was a nice boy, but that’s going to pay off my car loan. I think I might get to like working here!’

THE END.





They Come at the Darkest Hour
Skye Meyers

The Scorpion

Fiona Moore

“I don’t know why you’re upset,” John said. “You knew I had a scorpion when we started dating. And if we moved in together, sooner or later the scorpion would come too.”

Judith was still doubtful. It was four feet long from claw to tail, black, glittering and eerily silent. It stood there in the living room, swaying slightly.

He showed her how to feed it. “See?” he said as he threw the rat carcasses to it. “Nothing to worry about. So long as it’s fed and cared for, it won’t hurt you.”

A few days later, they came back to the house to find that someone had forced the bathroom window. Judith’s jewelry was in a heap, the television disconnected, and the corpse of a burglar on the hardwood floor of the kitchen. He’d apparently managed to find the little axe they kept in the storage cupboard in case of fires, but hadn’t had a chance to use it.

“Oh, no need to worry, sir, it’s a clear case of self-defense,” the police officer said as he took down statements. “A man’s got a right to protect his own home. Good thing you got a scorpion. Those are mighty useful.”

John shot Judith a triumphant look. The policeman said the scorpion was okay. No reason to object now.

Judith thought a few other things as she cleaned up the stain where the burglar had given up the fight for life, aware of the silent, swaying thing observing from the dining room, but she kept quiet. After all, didn’t she love John? Hadn’t she asked him to move in with her, not the other way round? Hadn’t she always wanted them to live together, to be a proper family?

Every family had its problems.

A week after that, she found what was left of her Jack Russell terrier.

“The scorpion’s well fed,” said John, “so the dog must have done something to provoke it. We’d have had to get rid of him anyway, you can’t have a dog and a scorpion in the same house.”

Judith knew it would have torn her apart to take her dog to a shelter, that was why she’d been putting it off. But better a shelter than this ending, ragged, bloody fur strewn across the floor. It seemed unlikely that the elderly, shuffly animal, who spent most of his time these days sleeping in the spare bedroom, and who always cowered and cringed around any kind of threat, could have done anything to set off the scorpion.

But John must be right.

She was still crying as she dug a hole in the garden, but quietly. She didn’t

want John telling her how silly she was being. She couldn't bear to think what her life would be like without John. Most of her friends had drifted out of her life since she started dating him, she'd be so lonely if he left. Like John kept saying, he was the only one who'd stuck with her. Without him, she'd become a crazy single lady.

Better a scorpion than nothing.

But she still mourned the dog, missed his still-bright eyes, urging her to come for a walk in the mornings and his furry body pressed against her feet in bed at night. Trusting her to keep him safe.

It shouldn't have ended that way.

#

With the terrier gone, Judith found herself having to help out more and more with the scorpion. Feed it. Take it out into the yard for exercise. She would wake to find it scuttling silently at the foot of the bed, waiting for something.

She felt as if it was watching her, wanting her to make a false move so it could attack. She told John, when he asked her what was wrong. John told her she was talking crazy.

Her eyes became dull, guarded, developed bags underneath that makeup couldn't hide.

Her clothes grew less fashionable, her posture less upright, her smile less spontaneous.

Invitations to join the usual after-work drinks on Fridays got fewer and fewer.

She took to buying sandwiches and eating them at her desk. She told everyone she was just too busy, that she really had to get that project finished. And eventually she just stopped explaining at all.

She had to keep thinking of ways to hide sting marks.

John kept telling her it was okay. That the scorpion was tame, civilised. Under control. That it was on her side. That the stings were accidents. That any malevolence was imagined. "It's an arthropod," he said scornfully. "What's it going to do? Just don't provoke it, and it'll be okay."

Sometimes, when she sat looking away in the evenings, trying to find a frame of view that allowed her to pretend the scorpion wasn't there, he asked, "what's wrong with you?"

She got good at pretending to her friends, telling them amusing stories about life with the scorpion, about the funny things it did, or that John said about it. Letting them know everything was okay. Brushing off those people who said they were worried about her, telling them everything was under control. Hoping, deep inside, that one of them would eventually read the subtext, push past her platitudes, come

and get her out of there.

But no one did.

Sometimes, too, she actually found herself liking the scorpion. The time it stung John, for instance, though he said it wasn't funny. When she was alone at night, if John was away or out late, she did feel more secure with it around. Sometimes she found it impressive, the sleek black mechanical jointedness, the precise movements.

And wasn't it worth it to have John there? John with his jokes, his cooking—standing in the kitchen proudly demonstrating his stir-fry-toss technique—his funny T-shirts and the way he loved fairgrounds. He listened to the same music she did; they liked the same movies. He'd been there for her during her most difficult times. He was right; he completed her; he was the loyal support she needed.

Wasn't it worth putting up with the scorpion, to have all that?

#

Then one day she came home to a silent house.

John wasn't there. Wouldn't be back for a few hours, she remembered. He was doing a presentation to some client, wouldn't be back till six, maybe later if there were drinks afterwards. She put her bag down on the hall table, brushed her hair back, and thought about making a cup of coffee as she wandered distractedly into the living room.

The scorpion crept slowly out from behind the sofa.

"You," she said.

The scorpion raised its claws, swayed. Raised its tail, the long stinger deployed. Circled around, keeping her in view.

"Me?" she said.

Judith realized what it wanted.

Realised too that John, for all they were to each other, would let it. He would be upset when he came home and found her body, of course, and she was sure the policeman would also agree it was a shame. But they would also agree that she should have known better.

That she must have forgotten to feed it.

That she must have done something to provoke it.

That it was a clear case of... something justifiable.

No one was going to save her.

The scorpion inched forward.

Judith backed up. Thinking. She could give up, or she could fight back. What could she fight with? Picked up a candy dish, laughed scornfully at herself. Stupid woman, she could hear John saying. Put it down. Backed into the kitchen. Saw the now-fading stain on the hardwood, opened the storage cupboard.

Her hand found the fire-axe.

#

The door swung open, and John came in. "Sorry, I--" John began, then stopped.

Judith watched as his head turned slowly, taking in the state of the living room. The axe. The gashes in the hardwood. The glittering segments, scattered like the parts of a car or gun or motorbike across the floor. The greenish-brown fluid splashed all over everything, the furniture, her shoes, her clothes, her dripping hair, in the fading sunlight.

And, standing in the middle of the wreckage, the scorpion.

Smaller than the other scorpion, and paler, a sort of sandy brown, the colour of lionesses. Not glittering. But like the other one, it stood in the living room, swaying gently, claws raised.

It might have emerged from the corpse of the other scorpion, Athena, breaking open the head of Zeus. It might have just appeared in the living room and methodically taken John's scorpion to bits. It might even have been there all along, and only become visible now.

Judith knew, of course. But she wasn't going to tell anyone else.

Especially not John.

The scorpion shifted slightly towards John, raised its claws as if registering his presence, keeping him in view.

Judith, too, regarded him neutrally.

"Get out," was all she said.



DEMON SMOOCH
BY
JANIS HOLM



Changes

Robin Locke

No one notices the change at first. That's the insidious thing about the curse. But it gets us all in the end, even the unbelievers. I peer into the thick pitch of the night and my hands shake as I flick the safety off my rifle.

They burned that damned witch over a century ago. We're still serving her sentence. Those final words uttered as her body was devoured by smoke and flame. They laughed at her. Well, nobody's laughing now. There's nothing funny about monsters.

Nothing stirs the stillness of the dark. God damn it, Uncle Billy. Come out here so I can get this over with. Nobody relishes the chore of putting a bullet in a family member's brain. But you do it. Not out of duty. But out of selfish hope that, when the change takes you, some poor sucker like me will return the favor.

A shadow shifts at the periphery of my vision and a wild thing bursts out of the alley across the street. It howls. Saliva drips from its shiny white teeth. I wait till I'm staring right down the creature's bright red throat and then empty my barrel into its skull. It falls to the pavement, whimpers, twitches and is still.

I sling my rifle back over my shoulder. "Rest in peace, Uncle Billy."

None of us fear death. We fear something deeper. The descent into mad unquenchable blood lust, perhaps. Yet, for us, that has become as inevitable as death itself. No, what we truly fear, deep beneath the churning waves of our subconscious minds, is that maybe the witch is right. That the curse merely reveals our true form. That we are and always have been nothing more than monsters

END

The Monster in the Closet

Kay Hanifen

It's stupid. I know it is. Thirteen is way too old to be scared of a monster in my closet, but tell that to whatever's scratching the inside of my door. I've heard it every night the past week, and I just want it to go away or hurry up and eat me.

It started off quiet. I was on just on the edge of sleep when I heard it—a slow, deliberate scraping against wood so soft I thought I was dreaming. But when I woke up to use the bathroom, I could still hear it. Scratch. Scratch. It wasn't like an animal trying to escape from somewhere. That would sound more frantic, probably with a lot of whining. Besides, we don't have any pets to get trapped in closets.

I turned on my light and searched my whole room. Nothing. Nothing under the bed or behind the desk or in the closet. I was the only living thing in my room. When I turned off the lights, though, I heard it again. A slow, soft scratch, scratch coming from my closet. I pressed my ear up to the door and heard rasping breathing. It reminded me of when Grandpa was in hospice, that gurgling breath of someone near death. I hated that sound. It was wrong coming from a person, especially one as tough as Grandpa. The moment I saw him lying there, his eyes half lidded and vacant like he was already a corpse and heard that terrible rattling, it hit home that he was dying. He was dying and I would die someday too, and unlike him, I was so certain that I wouldn't go out from old age or surrounded by family. I would die alone. I don't know why I was so sure this would happen, but I knew it like I know the sky is blue and grass is green.

I took a chair and propped it against the door before retreating to my bed with my Grumpy Bear Aunt Gladys gave me for Christmas three years ago. I was hoping for Cheer Bear because I thought the pink was pretty, but when I saw the look on Dad's face when I was excited to get a Care Bear of all things, I think it was smart of her to get a blue one. As pretty as pink is, blue is a boy color, so Dad let me keep it. I knew when I asked for one that he thought it was weird, so this was probably the compromise. It's not like I want to be weird. Believe me, Dad, things would be so much easier if I liked hunting or fishing or chopping wood, whatever it is that manly men do. But no, I'm the kid covering under the covers with a Care Bear because there's a monster in my closet scratching at the door like a dog that has to pee.

I've had my closet barricaded for the past week, and I've barely slept. Tonight is the first night it's been quiet, and somehow that's worse. Is it gone? Did it escape? I've snuck so much coffee and soda that my heart feels like it's been replaced by a hummingbird's, and my eyelids are still drooping. I can't fall asleep. It might take me while I'm out. But I am so tired...

When I wake up, it's almost noon, and I feel more rested than I have since before the noises began. The creature in the closet didn't take me in the night to feast on my organs or sacrifice me to Satan. Maybe it really is gone.

After getting dressed, I find my mom in the kitchen making herself lunch. “Morning, sleepyhead, you feeling okay? You don’t normally get up this late,” she says, slathering mustard on her baloney and cheese sandwich.

“Guess I was just tired,” I reply, stifling a yawn and grabbing my own sandwich fixings.

“You look like it. Those bags under your eyes could hold a purse. What’s wrong? Have you been having bad dreams again?”

I give her a noncommittal shrug and sit at the kitchen table. “I guess.”

“Is that sleeping beauty I see?” Dad says from the doorway. He ruffles my hair and sits down across from me. “Woman, make me a sandwich with all the fixins’.” He puffs his chest like a sit-com dad from the 50s.

“Make your own damn sandwich,” Mom retorts, taking a spiteful bite of her lunch.

He waggles his eyebrows at me, making me giggle. “Women, amirite?”

“Say one more word and we’re getting a divorce.”

Dad gets a mischievous glint in his eye, reminding me of a cat about to push a glass off the table. “One more word.”

Mom and I boo at the terrible joke. On the surface, these jabs seem harsh, but they really don’t mean anything by them. It’s just how they tease each other. Mom threatens divorce every once in a while just to keep things spicy, and Dad can dish it out as well as he can take it.

While they playfully bicker, I glance out the window. The neighbor’s house has been empty since Old Mr. McCreedy bit the dust last year, but today, it’s bustling with activity. I see two men pull a grill into the backyard while another carries a patio chair. “What’s going on over there?” I ask, pointing to the McCreedy house.

“Oh, I guess someone’s finally moving in,” Mom says.

“It’s about time,” Dad replies, “I thought it would have sold months ago.”

“I should bake some cookies for them. Make them feel welcome. Do you want to help?” She turned to me with a knowing smirk. “I hear they have a daughter about your age.”

Dad chuckles. “Playing matchmaker, hon?”

A girlfriend. I could have a girlfriend. I could be someone’s boyfriend someday. I’m not sure how I feel about the concept. Something about it makes me feel a discomfort all the way down to my bones. I’m not gay, I swear. Girls are pretty. I love their long hair and the way it glints in the sunlight and their pretty dresses and the fact that they smell nice. Trust me, if you’ve spent as much time in a boy’s locker room as I have, then you know the unholy odors that teenage boys excrete. I don’t

think it's the concept of having a girlfriend. That sounds pretty nice. Maybe it's just the word boyfriend that unsettles me. It feels like putting on underwear two sizes too small. They fit, but they're not comfortable.

"Will it be your famous triple chocolate chunk cookies?" I ask.

"How else would I make them feel welcome and establish myself as the top baker in the neighborhood?"

"Yes!" I do a fist pump. Mom's triple chocolate chunk cookies are the stuff of legend. The world might end in a nuclear blast tomorrow and the PTA will still be raving about her cookies from beyond the grave. And when she bakes them, she always makes extra for us. If I help, she lets me lick the bowl.

After lunch, we set to baking, and, with my stomach full of sweet, sweet salmonella filled cookie dough, Mom and I headed over to meet the new neighbors.

The neighbor girl who answers the door isn't what I expect. Her hair is cut into a bob and she's wearing a baggy t-shirt and jean shorts. At a distance, I might have mistaken her for a boy. She takes one look at us and yells, "Mom!"

Her harried looking mother pokes her head into the front hallway. "Oh, hello there."

"Hi, we're the Dougherty's," Mom says, "I'm Charline."

I introduce myself and my eyes meet the neighbor girl's. She gives a shy smile. "I'm Jen."

"Hi Jen." I nod over to the moms, already in deep conversation about the stress of moving and baking techniques. "They'll be awhile. You wanna come over? We can hang out in my backyard."

"Please," Jen said with a pained look, "I literally haven't hung out with another kid in weeks."

"Where are you from?" I ask as we make our way to the backyard swing set.

"California," she replies, "Los Angeles."

"That's a long way from New York," I say.

"Yeah, well..." She plops down on the higher swing. We're the same age. How is she taller than me? "Dad got a new job, so we have to leave everything behind for some town in the middle of nowhere. No offense."

"None taken," I say, sitting on the other swing with less vehemence, "this town sucks. I wish we lived in New York City, or at least Albany. Somewhere where not everyone knows everyone."

"Albany?" Jen asks.

"Well, it is the capital."

She blinks at me in confusion. “Why isn’t it...?”

“New York City? Who knows?”

She snorts. “New York is weird.”

“And LA isn’t? Didn’t you guys have, like, a ton of serial killers? The Black Dahlia, Charles Manson, The Night Stalker?”

Jen rolls her eyes. “Okay, first of all, Black Dahlia was one murder and Charles Manson technically never killed anyone. It was his cult that did it. Second, why do you know so much about murders?”

“I read,” I reply with a shrug and hope I don’t come across as too creepy, “this town has so little to do that I spent most of my summer in the library.” That’s half true. The town has an arcade and a movie theater, but then I’d run into other kids, and that’s an unpleasant experience all around. “Why do you know all about them?”

Jen blushes and mumbles something under her breath.

“What was that?” I ask.

“I want to be a private detective,” she says more forcefully, “I want to solve crimes and bring bad guys to justice.” She glares as if daring me to laugh.

“Cool,” is all I say.

“Cool?”

“Yeah, you’re like Nancy Drew or something.”

She smiles and studies the grass as she gently swings back and forth. “Thanks. Everyone says it’s weird. Once, I told my Great-Aunt Mildred, and she said morbid things like that are unladylike. What does being ladylike have to do with solving mysteries?”

“At least you know what you wanna be. I’m not good at anything,” I say.

“That’s not true,” she replies.

“How would you know? We just met.” If she asks, I’d be happy to list all the things I’m bad at—making friends, fishing, hunting, physical activity in general, math, science, computers, not being afraid of the things that go bump in the night—but that might scare her off. She hasn’t met any other kids yet. This is my chance to make a good impression before she learns how weird I am.

“I think you’re pretty cool,” she says.

I almost want to say, give it time, but instead, I study my feet as they drag along the ground. “Thanks.”

A silence lapses between us, but it’s not uncomfortable. The early summer afternoon is still and calm and I find myself hypnotized by the rhythmic squeaking

of our swings moving back and forth.

“Do you...never mind,” Jen says, breaking the silence.

“Do I what?”

“It’s stupid.”

“Seriously, go ahead.”

“Do you like D&D?” The question comes out in a rush as though she’s afraid someone might hear.

If I’m being totally honest, I don’t know much about it beyond Dad hating it because “it encourages Satanism and the occult,” but that doesn’t quite seem right. To me, it looks like a combination of math and making up stories. Maybe the stories are satanic or something. I reply with a noncommittal shrug. “Never played.”

She wrinkles her nose. “I could teach you, but it’s not really a two-person game.”

In spite of myself, I scoff. Good luck finding someone else to play with. I almost feel bad. I like Jen. Should I tell her that hanging out with me is social suicide? Ethically, yes, but I’m allowed to be selfish. By the time school starts, she’ll pretend I don’t exist just like everyone else.

She must have seen the expression on my face, because she tilts her head like a confused puppy. “What’s wrong?”

Now or never, I guess. I open my mouth to tell her about my social status among my peers, but then I chicken out. “Isn’t that Satanic or something?”

She throws her head back and laughs. “You don’t really believe that crap, do you? It’s just math and making up stories. Saying it’s Satanic is like saying Barbies are Satanic.”

I pump my legs a little, sending the swing rocking back and forth. “You know, I always thought she was suspicious. I can totally see Barbie starting a Satanic cult. High Priestess Barbie. She comes with a pink ceremonial dagger and a vial of real goat’s blood.”

“You can collect all the cult members along with human sacrifice Skipper,” Jen adds, snickering.

“If you stab her, she actually bleeds!” We both dissolve into giggles. It’s strange laughing with someone instead of being laughed at. I know the names they call me behind my back—twinkle toes, fairy princess, queer—so it’s nice to have a someone just treat me like a person even if it won’t last.

“Jen,” her mom calls from the backdoor, “the movers are done. Help us unpack.”

With an eye roll and a groan, Jen gets to her feet. “Duty calls,” she says, walking off. But then she stops and turns around. “You wanna hang out tomorrow? Give me the grand tour of Willow Falls?”

“Sure,” I say, “Sounds like fun.”

She waves one last time before bounding off to her house. Stunned, I return to my own.

“So, how was the neighbor girl?” Dad asks over dinner, “What was her name? Jane?”

“Jen,” my mom corrects him.

“She’s nice,” I say, pushing around my mashed potatoes. It’s not that I’m upset that Jen and I get along. It’s just my parents. Every time I talk to someone my age, especially a girl, they have to go and make it weird. “We’re hanging out tomorrow.”

Dad’s eyebrows shoot up to his receding hairline. “Is that so?” He gives me a mischievous grin. “Do you think she’s cute?”

“Steve,” Mom exclaims, smacking his shoulder.

I think what I hate about them acting like this is that they’re so hopeful. Maybe their kid is normal after all. Maybe I’ll finally start showing an interest in girls beyond their toys and aesthetics. Maybe, when puberty hits me like a dump truck of hormones, I’ll finally man up.

Man up. Even the thought of being manly makes me feel unsettled in a way I can’t quite place. It makes my skin feel wrong, like it doesn’t quite fit my body.

But they’re both staring expectantly at me. With my eyes focused solely on the fascinating peas on my plate, I reply, “I guess she’s kinda cute. Funny too.” I pretend not to notice them beaming at each other.

That night, the scratching is loud, louder than it’s ever been and when I finally fall asleep, it’s all nightmares. I dream of pentagrams, obsidian daggers, blood, and a young, naked man tied to the floor. It’s disjointed, with sounds and images going in and out like a car radio when you’re getting too far away from the station.

When I wake the next morning, I feel less rested than when I went to bed. I eat breakfast like a zombie and then sit in front of the TV until the doorbell rings.

“I got it,” Dad says, opening the door. Suspecting who it is, I’m not far behind. Jen is standing there with a blue bike helmet decorated with flame stickers. Dad smiles magnanimously. “You must be Jen. Welcome to the neighborhood.”

“Thank you, Mr. Dougherty,” she says before looking past him to me, “You ready to go?”

“Let me get my bike,” I reply. Before I knew it, we were pedaling out of the neighborhood. I relished the early summer breeze, the smell of freshly cut grass and

wildflowers as we rode.

“Where to?” Jen asks.

Where indeed. I can take her to the library, but she’ll probably think it’s boring. There’s the movie theater, but then we’d be sitting in a dark room for two hours instead of interacting. I guess that just leaves the arcade. Let’s just hope we don’t run into anyone who knows me.

The arcade is right by the movie theater. Kids with friends would hang out there until the movie’s about to start or go after if they’re not ready to bid each other goodbye just yet. It seems mercifully empty when we ride up. Most kids are probably out enjoying the day.

When we get to the door, though, Jen smacks her forehead. “Wait. I didn’t bring money.”

Luckily, I’d grabbed my allowance before we left. I pull out two crumpled tens. “I’ve got you covered. This should get us each twenty tokens and lunch.”

“You don’t have to—” she starts, but I cut her off.

“Newbie’s privileges,” I say, “next time you’ll just have to stand around bored while I beat my high score on Pac-Man.”

It occurs to me while I’m buying the tokens that this might be considered a date. I mean, activity, food, only one person paying. Did she think it was a date? Do I want it to be? Jen’s cute and nice and yeah, maybe I’ve been thinking about running my fingers through her short, blonde hair, but I don’t know if I want to kiss her or anything. Honestly, I’m just happy to have someone who wants to be a friend at this point. If she wants more... I’ll figure it out.

If she does think it’s a date, then she isn’t too clingy about it. As soon as I hand her the tokens, she runs off to play Super Mario Brothers. We flit from game to game, the cacophony of beeps and music filling the air. And then the door dings. I look up from my game of Q*Bert to see Matt Sanders and his goons swagger in. Shoot. Matt is one of the neighborhood kids. Both a grade and a foot above me and a rising star on the football field, he’s the son my dad wishes he had. He also hates my guts. And my face. And my voice. And just about everything about me.

Jen is focused on her level of Pac-Man, oblivious to my attempts to signal her. Suddenly, I feel a sharp yank on my ear.

“Well, if it isn’t the little fag. Got AIDS yet?” Sanders says, pulling me away from the game.

“Ask you mom,” I shoot back. A “your mom” joke isn’t the best burn in my repertoire, but it does the job. Sanders yanks me back, sending me stumbling into his two lackeys, Aaron Hemple and Joe Allen. The ensuing scuffle gets the attention of Jen and the guy manning the cash register.

Jen approaches, her hands balled into fists. “Pick on someone your own size.”

“Oh, you’ve got a girlfriend,” Sanders says, “how sweet. Nerd love.” He stares appraisingly at her for a moment like she was an item at an auction. “But she is kinda cute, right, guys?”

Hemple and Allen nod their agreements like sycophants that they are. Allen has a bruisingly tight grip on my arm, holding me back while Sanders reaches out to caress Jen’s cheek.

“How about you dump this chump and hang out with some real men.”

To my shock, Jen bats her lashes and gives a coy smile. “A real man you say.” She steps forward, biting her lip. “Not for long!” Like a bolt of lightning, she punches Sanders in the wiener. The wiener. That alone would make her the talk of John Brown Junior High. But then she’s not done. With the same hand, she chucks the remaining tokens at the faces of Hemple and Allen. They stumble back in shock, letting go of me and she takes advantage of it and Sanders still doubled over in pain to grab my hand and drag me out the door. By the time they’ve recovered and run out after us, we’re pedaling like madmen.

Jen, a girl I’ve known for less than a day, just punched Matt Sanders in the wiener with a weighted fist for me. If I didn’t have a crush on her before, I most certainly do now. We’re both laughing in exhilaration, Jen whooping like some kind of warrior queen. “Where to now?” she yells above the roar of wind in our ears.

“Follow me,” I say, going off into the woods. The library is my favorite part of town, but where I’m taking Jen is my favorite place to go to get away from it all. It’s an abandoned house nestled deep into the woods. The barred windows are broken, the door eternally ajar, and the roof falling apart, but it’s a place where I can just be me. It’s where I keep my darkest secrets. And I’m showing this place to Jen. Somehow, though, I think she’d understand. She did punch Matt Sanders in the wiener for me, after all.

When we pull up, Jen flashes me a giddy grin. “This place is one hundred percent haunted.”

“If it is, the ghosts are friendly, trust me.” I lead her inside. Most of the furniture is still rotting away in there as though the owners left in a hurry.

She takes a seat on the dusty camping chair that I’d bought at a yard sale. “Swanky place you’ve got here. I’m surprised squatters haven’t claimed it already.”

I shrug, debating taking a seat on the dirty floor or just standing. I opt to stand. “I don’t think anyone else knows about it.”

“So, what do you do here?”

“Well, when it’s a nice day and my mom kicks me out, but I’ve got nowhere else to go, I come here and hang out.”

“Cool,” she says, and starts looking around, “Do you know anything about the people that lived here? Did they leave pictures? Books? Diaries detailing their descent into murder and madness over a harsh New York Winter?”

“Sadly, no. It’s like they just disappeared. I figured that it was just an old lady who didn’t have anyone to give the house to and no one else wanted it.” That’s not entirely true. I did find one personal item in the bedroom—an ancient and moth-eaten wedding dress. But I’m not going to tell her about it.

At that, her eyes sparkle. “A mystery,” she says as much to herself as she does to me.

While she wanders the house searching for clues, I get this strange feeling on the back of my neck. There’s something else in the house with us, but it exists only in my periphery and it’s watching me. Whatever it is, it’s watching me. I’ve spent hours in this house reading or drawing or doing the things I can’t tell anyone else about and I’ve never felt this kind of presence before.

And suddenly I’m somewhere else. The room is lit only by candles and Latin chanting is coming from somewhere. A half-naked man lies bound and unconscious on a red pentagram painted into the ground. I hear yelling and turn to see a badly burned man—no, not a man, just a woman what looks like a man—wrestling with a figure in a black hood. I move to help but feel a sharp pain in my stomach. Two years ago, I had appendicitis. It felt a bit like that. I look down and see a bone dagger sticking out of my stomach and organs through the long slice across my abdomen. My knees give out.

And suddenly I’m on the floor of the house and Jen is calling my name. I blink woozily and struggle to my feet.

“What happened?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” I reply, proud that I didn’t slur. I try to describe to her what I saw, but I know I just sound crazy.

But Jen doesn’t look at me like I’m crazy. She’s looking at me like I’m a puzzle to be solved. “And this has never happened before?”

I shake my head. “Never. If you’d said yesterday that this place was haunted, I’d have laughed.”

“Any other weird things happen?” she asks too casually, and I can see the tension in her body language. Great, she does think I’m crazy.

Well, in for a penny. “For the past week, I’ve been hearing things coming from my closet. Scratching. And I don’t know what it is.”

All the color drains from Jen’s face. “You too?”

I feel hot and cold all over and I can’t seem to get air into my lungs as she describes how she spent her first night in the new house with her door barricaded by

boxes. I'm not crazy or just some kid scared of the dark. It's real. The thing in the closet is real. What does it want with us?

The afternoon sun is high in the sky as we bike back. Even though she lives right next to me, I walk her to her front door. She pauses before going in, her eyes meeting mine. "I—uh—I had a good time today. Thanks for showing me around."

"One lame arcade that ended in a fistfight and a creepy abandoned house isn't exactly a grand tour—" I begin, but she takes my hand.

"Believe it or not, I had a good time. Finally got to put my years of Karate to the test."

"Stick with me, and you'll be fighting all my battles," I say, and then wince. Of all the wussy things to come out of my mouth...

But Jen just laughs. "Sounds like a plan. It'll prepare me for fighting real criminals."

"And cheating husbands," I add, "apparently, ninety-nine percent of detective work is catching cheating husbands."

"Well, better start early. You point me to the bully, and I beat 'em up."

"Beat who up?" her mom asks, opening the door. We both jump back with a surprised cry.

"We were just talking about the arcade game we played," Jen lies smoothly. She steps through the threshold and looks over her shoulder with a smile. "See you tomorrow."

"Y-yeah, tomorrow," I reply, giving a weak wave as the door closes in my face.

The thing in the closet is louder tonight. It's gone from scratching the door to knocking and rattling it. Whatever happened today, it made it super angry. Eventually, I'm so sick of cowering that I get up to sleep on the couch. I wish I hadn't.

I dream I'm in a crowd of people. It's Halloween night and a parade of sexy costumes fill the streets. But I'm not here for that. I'm being watched. No, stalked, by some unseen hunter. The makeup I wear is dry and weighs heavily on my skin. I'm supposed to be a vampire, but I've long abandoned my plastic fangs. If only I had real ones so I could rip and tear at whatever hunts me in this crowd. I spot the burned woman. She's dressed like Ripley. When we make eye contact, I'm suddenly deeply afraid, but underneath that fear, I'm resolute about something I can't quite place. Whatever we're doing tonight, it's important.

I turn into the alley and find myself face to face with a nightmare. She has long, stringy black hair, almost down to her waist and her scalp is bloody from where a chunk had been ripped off. Her face is gaunt and blood dribbles from her lips. For a moment, I think that she's holding a raw sausage in her hands, unable to process that it's her own organs. But the worst part is the way that she looks at me—

surprised and a little bit sad, as though I'm the one who should be pitied instead of the dead woman walking.

I wake with a start, barely able to make it to the bathroom before losing the pretzels I ate before bed. Mom finds me shaking by the toilet and puts her hand to my forehead.

"You don't have a fever. What happened?"

"A nightmare," I say and describe it to her in as much detail as I could remember.

"That is pretty scary," Mom says once I'm finished.

"Can I sleep in your bed tonight?" I know it's childish and stupid, but I just want to feel safe for one night. No scratching at closet doors or bad dreams. Just a peaceful night's sleep.

"Aren't you a little old for that?" Dad asks from the doorway.

We both jump. "Sorry I woke you," I mumble.

"Don't be, sweetie," Mom says before Dad can get a word in.

He forces his way past her and lifts me to my feet. "Come on, boy. Let's get you back to bed."

"Steve—" Mom begins, but Dad cuts her off.

"Your mom likes to coddle you." He wraps an arm around my shoulder. "But you're becoming a man now, and men don't hide in their parents' beds after a nightmare. You hear me?"

I nod, sending a pleading look my mother's way.

"It was just a dream, sweetie. I'm sure you'll be fine by the morning."

As soon as Dad shuts the door, the closet monster bangs on the wall. A quick but constant thud thud thud. It's as though it's knocking to get out. Or to be let in. Needless to say, I don't get much sleep that night.

The next day, Jen wants to return to the abandoned house. Because I have nothing better to do than investigate a weird mystery, I lead her there.

"Okay, so you described a pentagram in your vision, and an attempt at a human sacrifice? Like a Satanic ritual?"

I shrug. "I guess. I really only got flashes."

She chews her lip thoughtfully and pulls a notebook from her back pocket. "And you've never found any personal items here? No pictures, no books, not even a Bible?"

I shake my head. What was she insinuating?

She writes something in her notebook before looking up at me. “Okay, don’t laugh.”

I cross my heart. “I won’t.”

“I think this house was some kind of ritual.”

I laugh. “Really?”

She crosses her arms, offended. “I told you not to laugh! And it makes sense. The human sacrifice, the missing people, the weird visions. I think whoever lived here were Satanists, real Satanists, not the ones that pretend to worship Satan to look cool and piss off their parents.”

She has a point. But really? All this weirdness is a part of some kind of evil ritual. “But what about the things in our closets?” I ask.

“Maybe the house is trying to lure another.” She scans my face and then frowns. “You don’t believe me.”

“It’s possible,” I reply, “but a stretch. As my dad would say, the evidence is circumstantial.” When I see the look in her eye, I realize that this is the exact wrong thing to say.

“You want evidence? I’ll find evidence.” She clenches her jaw, jutting out her chin defiantly and stalking off to the bedroom.

The bedroom. Where my secret box is. Shit. “Jen, wait!” I call after her. The floor creaks as I give chase, but I’m too late. The idiot that I am, I kept the box just in the corner—the first place any snoop would look. She pulls out a ruffy pink dress and lifts it up to examine it.

“This looks newer than the other stuff in here. Weird. What do you think?” She looks over her shoulder back to me. I guess I don’t have a good poker face, because it looks like a puzzle piece in her mind has been locked into place. “These are yours?”

“I—I can explain,” I say, my face burning like summer asphalt. She arches and eyebrow and I deflate, stepping aside. “I can’t actually explain. Just, please don’t tell my parents. I don’t want them to know I—I’m some kind of pervert who feels more at home in women’s clothes. I’ll never talk to you or even make eye contact again, and you can pretend you don’t know me, and—”

“Hey,” Jen interrupts my spiraling, getting up and grabbing me by the arm, “it’s okay. Your secret’s safe with me.” She glances around as though someone might hear and leans in, adding, “I like to pretend I’m a boy sometimes. And when I do, I like it when girl’s mistake me for one. If you’re a pervert, then I’m one, too.”

I let out a sigh of relief so massive my knees nearly buckle. “Thank you.”

She steps back and hands me the dress. “How’d you get this stuff, anyway?”

Feeling sheepish, I study my feet. “Goodwill dumpster diving,” I reply, and she lets out a raucous laugh.

“Well, what are you waiting for? Strut your stuff” She hands me the dress and turns her back to let me change.

When I slip the dress on, it feels right. It’s like my skin finally fits on my bones. I do a little twirl, wishing I had ballet slippers or heels instead of dirty sneakers. “Ready,” I say.

When Jen turns around, she’s silent just long enough for me to get nervous before her lips stretch into a wide smile. “You look pretty,” she says.

Pretty. I’ve never been called pretty before. I’ve been called handsome, strapping, good looking, and a lady killer, but never pretty. I like it, though. Like the dress, it feels right in a way those other descriptors do not. “You think so?” I ask, turning my hips to swish the skirt.

“It could use some accessories, but yeah, you rock a dress.”

“Thanks,” I reply, rubbing the back of my neck in embarrassment, “maybe you could show me your boy outfits sometimes.”

“Maybe,” Jen says.

For the past few days, I’ve been afraid that she’d reject me like everyone else, but apparently, that was unfounded. In Jen, I see a kindred spirit. Her weirdness mirrors mine perfectly. Thank God.

Even with the monsters in closets and nightmarish visions, the summer is shaping to be the best one I’ve ever had. Word got around that Sanders and his goons were beat up by a girl, so we were mostly left alone by easily intimidated meatheads, meaning that we can go to the movies and the arcade in peace. And we do, watching movies that we quote back and forth forever and getting new high scores on Mario and Pac-Man. But our favorite spot is the abandoned house we use as our base of operations. In that house, we wear what we like, play D&D, and investigate the mystery of the closet monsters and the ritual sacrifice. A month passes in a moment. But every peace gets broken, and ours breaks with a newspaper article.

During breakfast this morning, Dad sits down in a huff with the paper. “Charline, do you see this bullsh—?”

“Language, Steve,” Mom chides as we both look over his shoulder to see a massive protest of people lying in front of the state capital.

“Homosexuals stage a die-in to protest lack of government response to their epidemic,” he says, his voice thick with disgust, “It’s their own damn fault. You choose deviancy and God has a way of separating the sheep from the goats.”

Mom smacks his shoulder. “You’re terrible.”

“I’m right and you know it.”

A strange look crosses her face as she sits down. “Judge not lest ye be judged,” she replies quietly, slicing into her pancake.

I sit down, suddenly a lot less hungry. When I’m with Jen, things feel so right that I forget we’re the deviants. Am I a homosexual? I like Jen, though. I might even like like her. Liking a girl doesn’t seem very gay to me. But I’m not like anyone else. A sissy, Dad once called me when he thought I wasn’t listening. Gay, but not gay and in a body that just doesn’t feel right. And because I was born wrong, I’m going to die of AIDS and I’ll have deserved it. A wave of nausea crests and I set down my fork.

“You okay, sweetie?” Mom asks.

“Yeah,” I mumble, “just not really hungry.” Before she can press, I’m saved by a knock at the door. I leap to my feet. “That’s Jen.”

Jen has a backpack slung across her shoulder. “Hey, I’ve got a—” When she sees my face, she frowns. “What’s wrong?”

“Not here,” I say.

She looks like she’s about to press but thinks better of it. “Where to?”

“The house.”

We pedal fast—faster than we’ve ever gone before—past the jeers Sanders and his goons and the edge of the neighborhood and into the woods. I pedal until my legs burn and Jen is left in the dust. My breathing comes out in uneven and I don’t know if it’s because I’m out of breath or crying. Finally, I reach the house.

Jen pulls up a full minute later. “Okay, what’s going on? I’ve never seen you pedal that fast before.”

“I—” I begin, but the words don’t come.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Jen says, “just breathe with me for a second. Can you do that?”

I try, copying her slow, rhythmic breathing until mine stops stuttering.

“Better?”

I nod. “Sorry.”

“No need to apologize,” she says, taking my hand and leading me inside. She sits me down in the new camping chair she liberated from her garage so that we’d both have some place clean to rest. “So, who do I have to beat up?”

I laugh, and it’s only a tinge hysterical. “What’s wrong with me?”

“Aside from the closet monster and creepy visions? Nothing.”

Jen's always been good at deflecting my self-loathing cycles, but this time, I need to know the truth. "Really. I—I like to look like a girl and wear dresses, but I'm not gay. At least, I don't think I am, because I like you, but everyone seems to think I'm a sissy, and I don't want to die of AIDS, and—"

Jen holds up a hand. "Wait, hold on. You like me?"

Really? That's what she's taking away from this? I roll my eyes. "Yeah, I like you, but that won't do anything if we're both dead of AIDS."

Jen giggles. She actually giggles. "How do you think AIDS spreads?"

"I—" I begin, but then I realize whatever was about to come out of my mouth was probably going to be stupid.

"You don't just get it by being gay. It's an exchange of bodily fluids like blood or semen." She takes a seat and rifles through her backpack. "My mom's a doctor. She knows about this, so don't worry. You're not gonna die for a while."

"But—"

"As for that other stuff, who cares? So what if you're not tough? So what if you like dresses? You're not hurting anybody. Aha!" She pulls out a makeup kit with a triumphant look and holds it out to me. "Aunt Mildred got me this for Christmas, hoping that it would make me more girly. Do you want it?"

I should say no. The dresses are wrong enough. But I've always been curious about makeup. Whenever Dad was out of town, I used to sneak into Mom's vanity and try on her lipstick and eyeshadow. He caught me once, and I'd never seen him so angry. I was grounded for a month and I still don't know exactly why.

"I can put it on for you," Jen offers, "I don't like makeup, but to be a detective, you need to be a master of disguise, so I'm willing to practice. Let me see if I can make you look like a real girl."

I nod, feeling a twinge of excitement at the idea of looking like a real girl. "I'll put on a dress?" I say, and she grins.

At the bottom of the box is the wedding dress. It's a little moth eaten, and the ivory color has faded to a parchment yellow, but it's still beautiful. When I found it a year ago and put it on, I felt right for the first time. I've grown since that day, but it still fits. The dress is long, long enough to mop up the dust wherever the train goes, but it's worth it for the look on Jen's face when I emerge.

"Damn," she says and gestures for me to sit down.

I lose myself in her ministrations, closing my eyes and opening them as she asks. It's strangely soothing, the brushes on my face spreading fine powders like butterfly kisses. Too soon, she's done.

"Here," she says, holding up a mirror.

I stare at myself. Myself. For the first time, I look like me. The makeup is clumsy, but I feel beautiful in a way I never have before. My breath comes out in a shaky almost sob.

Jen sets the mirror down, looking worried. “You okay?”

Okay? I’m more than okay. I’m perfect. I don’t think I’ve ever been this happy. Instead of answering, I pull her into a hug. “Thank you,” I whisper, my voice tight from unshed tears.

Jen awkwardly pats my back. “I—I’m glad you like it.”

Like is too simple a word for what I’m feeling, for how right it feels to look like a girl. It’s fear and euphoria and sadness and joy all swirled together like paint on a palette.

But then I see her. She stands by the window, her dark hair disheveled and blood dripping from her smiling lips. I scream and when Jen steps back in shock, half her face is burned.

“What’s—Oh my God!”

The flash of a polaroid, and then Sanders and his friends run from the window and almost certainly to our parents.

“No,” I say, “no, no, no, no, no!” I start to run after them, but Jen grabs my arm.

“Dress and makeup first.”

Right. Don’t wanna piss off Dad more by showing up dressed like a runaway bride. All care is gone as I tear off the gown and throw on my clothes. Jen quickly wipes off the makeup with moist towelettes, and then we’re off. My heart is pounding so hard I’m afraid it’ll burst as we speed through the woods, into the neighborhood, and to my house.

We’re too late. When Jen and I stumble in, our faces red and sweaty and our breaths wheezy, Sanders is already there showing the picture to Mom and Dad. For as long as I live, I’ll never forget the look of disgust on Dad’s face when he looks up and our eyes meet. His son, the queer. His son, the abomination. His son who would rather be a daughter.

“Jen, I think you’d better leave,” Dad says, his voice low and dangerous.

Jen takes my hand, drawing herself up to her full height. Admittedly, it’s not intimidating compared to my Dad’s six feet, but I appreciate it. “No, I don’t think I will.”

“Get out before I call and tell your mom that you’ve been turning my son into a queer,” he all but roars.

Jen flinches but stands firm. My eyes drift from my red-faced dad to Mom,

who has tears silently streaming down her face. I don't know what's worse: his anger or her grief over their freak of a child. Sanders looks on, snickering and I wish that Jen's punch had sent his balls all the way up his body like a carnival strongman game.

Dad hears and turns slowly back to the bully. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Matthew, but this is a family matter," he says slowly, his voice once again quiet, "Please take Jen with you."

Say what you will about Matt Sanders, but the rat knows when to scamper away. On his way out, he grabs Jen, yanking her out the door despite her loud protests. The last time Jen won because it was a sucker punch. She's not nearly strong enough to fight someone bigger when he's ready for it.

And then I'm left alone with my parents. Dad grabs my wrist hard enough to bruise and drags me upstairs. "You're hurting me," I exclaim as I try to struggle out of his grip.

"Good. Maybe you'll finally man up."

"Steve, don't!" Mom yells, following after us.

When we reach my room, he pushes me to the ground. "Get packed."

"What?"

"I said get packed. I want you out of here."

I lose my fight against the tears threatening to spill over. "Dad..." I plead.

Mom stands by the closet doors, watching the scene in horror.

"Please, Mom," I sob, "don't kick me out. I'll be good, I promise."

"Too late for that," Dad says, turning away.

And then the closet doors burst open. The gaunt woman grabs them both by the shoulder and yanks them in. They don't even have time to scream. I shakily get to my feet. "Mom? Dad?"

But it's not my parents that emerge from the closet. It's the woman, but she isn't wounded. I almost don't recognize her at first. Her face isn't pallid, her intestines don't dangle from her abdomen, and her hair is long and lustrous. She smiles when she sees me, and suddenly, she looks achingly familiar. We have the same dimples and the same eyes, though hers are sad. She could be my big sister.

"Hi," she says.

"Where are my parents?"

She snorts. "They're seeing what you've seen all summer."

"Your death?" I ask.

"Our death," she replies, holding out a hand, "My name is Ellie. I'm you from

the future.”

Taking a step back, I shake my head. “What? No, you’re a girl.”

At that, she arches an eyebrow. “So?”

“I’m a boy.”

“Are you?”

“I—” my tongue stumbles over the words, “I don’t know.”

“Right,” she says with a triumphant smirk. She nods to the closet. “You wanna know what happened? You know Jay will kill you if you leave it a mystery.”

“Jay?” I repeat.

She smacks her forehead. “Right, she still goes by Jen to you.”

I’m still reeling from that revelation when Ellie turns back towards the closet. She pauses, looks over her shoulder, and asks, “You coming?”

As if I have a choice. I follow my future self into the closet.

We emerge in the warehouse. The Ellie from my visions lies disemboweled in a pool of her own blood on the pentagram while our parents stare in horror. Jen—Jay is holding her and sobbing in a gory sendup to La Pietà.

“Hi Mom, hi Dad,” Ellie says, “welcome to 1996.”

They both snap up, their eyes wide with panic. “We don’t have a daughter,” Mom says.

Ellie gives one of her trademark smirks. “You sure? Look again.”

Slowly, Mom approaches, studying my future face. When it clicks, she gasps and says my name.

“My name’s Ellie, actually,” she says.

“What happened to you?” Mom asks, cupping her cheek.

Because she can answer, Dad says, “Why am I not surprised you ended up like this? What did you do, join a coven of Satanists and volunteer to be the human sacrifice?”

“I was here to stop it, actually,” Ellie says, suddenly cold. With a wave of her hand, the scene rewinds. We watch as this silent horror film is acted out before our eyes. A man in a cloak stands over the naked body of a seemingly drugged man lying on a pentagram. Just as he’s about to bring the knife down on his victim, Ellie and Jay burst in. While Jay unties the man and gets him to safety, Ellie tries to wrestle the knife away from his grip. In the ensuing fight, he grabs ahold of her hair and pulls out a painful chunk. In her distraction, she’s stabbed, and with a look of sadistic pleasure, he drags the dagger across her abdomen. She staggers backwards,

the bone dagger still lodged in her. Jay lets out a silent, primal scream and charges the cloaked figure. They scuffle, with Jay eventually getting the upper hand and knocking him out before rushing to Ellie.

“This is Rupert Eric Allstead,” Ellie says, “Remember his name, no matter what. He’s a wannabe Satanist and serial killer who took the lives of at least five people in a form of ritual sacrifice.”

“I—I don’t understand,” Dad says, “why didn’t you just call the cops?”

“We tried,” Ellie replies, not taking her eyes off the grief stricken Jay, “Everyone knew there was a killer in Greenwich Village, but the police didn’t care,” she looks up, her eyes meeting Dad’s with a world-weary intensity, “Why would they? God has a way of separating the sheep from the goats, right?”

Dad takes a step back, looking sick.

Ellie ignores him, continuing, “We got sick of our friends dying. Bad enough the government had killed most of them with its negligence, now there’s a killer on the loose, and Jay decided to solve the case. Like always, I was there as her trusty sidekick.”

Time rewinds further until we’re all in Jay and Ellie’s miniscule apartment. A conspiracy board tacked with victims, suspects, and clues take up almost an entire wall. While Ellie puts on her Halloween costume, Jay works at a desk. The phone rings, and Jay picks up.

“In the end, it was an anonymous tip that sent us there,” Ellie continues, “Haven’t quite figured out who. I can only visit the events was present for, and the people I know, so that’ll probably stay a mystery.” With a noticeable effort, she tears her eyes away from the excited couple and back to us. “I’m not sure exactly how or why this all works or if I can change anything at all, but I have to try, you know?” She pats my shoulder. “I think my story ends soon, but you might be able to change things. You have his name. You can stop him from killing. And you can stop Jay from getting that burn.”

“What?” I ask, but the scene already changes. We’re in the abandoned house. This time, the Ellie asleep in a sleeping bag looks like me. My hair is growing long and shaggy, but not quite feminine yet. It’s winter, probably a few months after Dad kicks her—me—us out, and it’s snowing. Jen huddles close to me, trying to keep us both warm.

And then there’s movement outside the window. Matt Sanders and friends peer in. We watch them spill something over the porch and then a match is lit. In a sudden flash of light, the front of the house goes up like a tinderbox. I watch myself and my best friend wake in a panic. We try the backdoor first, but it’s locked. The windows are barred, so no getting out that way, leaving only the front door. We—they argue. Smoke rapidly fills the room. Eventually, she pushes my future self back and opens the door.

With a roar, a back draft rushes in, knocking Jen to the ground. She's screaming, burning, and my future self rushes to her to smother the flame. When she's out, I see myself pick her up and run through the fire. If you run your fingers through a candle flame fast enough, you don't get burned. I guess I thought the same principle applied. It sort of works. I emerge not nearly as burned as Jen.

I look back to my parents, who have been mostly silent as Ellie took us on this tour through time. The look of horror has not left their faces since we first arrived. "Is this it?" I ask, "One misery after another for ten years until I die in agony?"

Ellie blinks and then looks down at me. The scenes shift rapidly as I watch myself grow up. I see myself shop at thrift stores for dresses and jab needles in my thigh and transform from a boy into a young woman. Jen is with me every step of the way. She brings me food and supplies when I squat in the abandoned house, runs away with me to New York City with bandages still on her face. We work together and grow together and create a little life for ourselves. And then, one day, she proposes, and we get married in a courthouse wedding.

"Wait," I say, and the world stops at the moment of our first dance in our apartment surrounded by friends, "we're two girls. We can't get married."

Ellie laughs. "There are some advantages to having male checked off on my birth certificate. The county clerk was mad, but what could she do?"

Mom walks up to our future selves. Jay wears a tuxedo while Ellie wears a simple, off the shoulder white gown that looks far too expensive compared to the rest of the festivities. Her black hair cascades down her back and she's smiling so hard my cheeks hurt just looking at her.

"She's—you're beautiful," I say in awe.

Ellie squeezes my shoulder. "We're beautiful. The dress was a gift from one of our friends. He makes gowns for drag balls and gave it to me as our wedding present."

"You look so happy," Mom says.

Ellie smiles sadly. "Isn't a girl's wedding day supposed to be the happiest day of her life?"

"Was it worth it?" I ask, "You have happy memories, sure, but all that pain and then we're dead at what? Twenty-three? That's not fair."

"I never said it was," she replies with a wistful smile, "but I wouldn't trade it for anything. I'd rather live for ten years as myself than a hundred years pretending to be someone I'm not. Believe or not, I'm happy. I came to realize that as much as I missed Mom and Dad, I could live without them. I won't say that I had to suffer to become a better person because that's bullshit, but I want you to know that even if Dad kicks you out, you'll be okay. I promise."

Mom puts her hand up as though she wants to reach out to her, to us, but hesitates. “I’m sorry,” she says instead, “I’m so sorry I failed you.”

Ellie takes a shuddering breath. “For years, that’s all I wanted to hear you say. Thank you.” She lets the breath out. “But I don’t think I can forgive you. Either of you.”

Dad winces at that and turns away. “I thought I knew my son. Apparently, I don’t.”

“I’m not your son,” she replies, “I never was.”

“No, I guess you weren’t.”

My heart pounds as I struggle to read Dad’s body language. Is he angry? Guilty? Ashamed? Dug in on his decision? I don’t want this to happen to me or Jen. I don’t want to be thrown out or for Jen to be burned or to die at twenty-three at the hands of a serial killer.

Finally, Dad turns back to us and I see the tears streaming down his face. He pulls us both into a fierce hug, muttering “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” over and over. Mom joins the hug and string of apologies.

The world shifts one last time, and we’re all back in my room. Ellie smiles and breaks away. “I think it’s time for me to move on. Thank you for this. Even after everything, I still love you.” And with that, I watched the brave, beautiful woman I will one day become disappear back into the closet.

For a moment, we all cling to each other in stunned silence. But then I hear yelling and a pounding at the door. Jen and Sanders must still be outside.

“Let me take care of this,” Dad says, drawing himself to his full height and striding out of the room. He opens the door, revealing Sanders trying to drag Jen away. “Matthew, please let go of Jen.”

He drops her, and she runs to me, clinging to my arm. “What are you gonna do to him, sir?” he asks, his voice full of a cloying fake concern.

Dad doesn’t say anything. In a second, he’s in the doorway and in the next, he’s standing over Sanders. The bully lies on the ground, a trickle of blood running down his nose. “If you ever get near these kids again, I will make you wish you were never born. Now, get out of here.”

Matt Sanders scurries away while Dad turns back to us, shaking his hand out. He smiles. “So, Jen, how would you like to stay for dinner?”

After dinner and the lengthy explanation of what happened, Jen and I found ourselves sitting on the swing set like we did the day we met.

“So, I really have a burn scar and catch a serial killer?” Jen asks.

“Yeah,” I reply, staring up at the rosy hues of the sunset and relishing the

warmth of the evening.

“Wicked.”

I snort. “Only you, Jen.”

“Do you know what happened to your future self after she left?”

I shrug. “Moved on, I guess. Hopefully to heaven.”

“Of course, you’d go to heaven,” she says, smacking my arm. With a sigh, she also looks up to the sky. Without looking away, she offers her hand. I take it and we watch the sun go down.

That night, I leave my closet doors open, but I don’t hear a sound.



DAVE
READS
KING



Smoke: Exhaling Ghosts
Skye Meyers

You Should Thank Me

RH Berry

I wake up with my own blood smeared across my mouth. Sticky scarlet iron oozes from the tender splits all over my lips, surging forward in fresh bouts no matter how I dab at them or how often I spit.

I can't figure out how it happened. If I'd bitten through them in the night, I would've woken up at the first sting. My whole face burns with every grimace. I can barely stand to see my reflection, so I keep my eyes down while I rinse out my mouth, clutching the knobs of the sink. Blood dribbles from my chin and splatters on the porcelain. No matter how much I wash my face, the flow doesn't stop.

Deep breaths. Panicking and cursing, my situation isn't helping the situation. Gingerly, as though my skull might shatter if I move the muscles wrong, I start contorting my expression, trying to find a way to hold my mouth that doesn't hurt.

The unexpected winner is a close-lipped smile. Even a neutral line makes the nerves feel raw.

Okay. A smile. I can maintain that.

Tentatively, I lift my gaze. My puffy, leaky lips don't look... too terrible. I definitely look like someone attacked me, though. I wince, imagining what they're going to say about it at the office today.

Maybe someone will have advice for me. I work for doctors, after all; they may have something topical they can recommend I apply.

As long as I keep my smile on and my chin up, I don't drip on my clothing. I shrug on a blazer and zip up my skirt, comb my hair back into a sensible ponytail, and grab my purse on the way out the door.

I keep smiling.

I live on the ninth floor of my apartment complex. I try to take the stairs down when I can — it's just enough of a trek that I feel good about the exercise without winding myself — but that isn't in the cards today. My grotesque affliction has doubled my heart rate already. I take the elevator.

We stop at floor seven. A middle-aged gentleman gives me an approving nod at the sight of me, giving me a full and blatant once-over as he boards. My finger hovers over the 'hold doors' button for him, baffled into stillness.

I'd ducked my face the moment I realized I was going to be seen by a neighbor. I expected recoiling, alarm, revulsion. This man appears downright pleased. Should I say something?

"You should wear high heels," he tells me once the elevator resumes its descent. "It will make your legs look slimmer."

My smile doesn't waver only for fear of pain. I don't know what to say to this unsolicited advice.

"Allow me?" He stoops abruptly, seizing one of my ankles. My mouth falls open, indignant, but snaps shut just as quickly. Parting my lips hurts.

The man wrestles off my loafers. I throw one hand out to support myself against the wall, staring down at him in perplexed anger. His thumb presses firmly up into the arch of my foot, rubbing a circle into the ticklish muscle. A humiliating squeak slips out from the depths of my throat. He chuckles.

Then his other hand covers the tops of my toes. I register the snap before the agony.

He's broken my foot. Popped bones out of their sockets. My scream is a strangled thing. I buckle and slip gracelessly to the floor, pulse thundering against my eardrums. The man finishes positioning the left foot the way he wants it and pulls at my right leg.

"Now the other one," he prompts, and he's destroyed my other foot before my blank brain has recovered the ability to make words.

I can only support myself on the balls of my feet. He's bent them drastically, like they were made of rubber instead of living tissue. My heels won't touch the ground. When I try, I lose my balance with a yelp. He catches me with a chuckle.

More blood has spilled down my chin and throat. I plaster my smile back on as my tears mingle with the crimson. Less pain. I don't want to hurt.

The easiest position to maintain, as it turns out, is to stand with my heels up, numb toes flat against the floor. I pick up my loafers, which won't fit with my feet in this position. The thin stockings rub awkwardly on the carpet, sending little sparks of static up my body.

"You're welcome," the man says, a tad pointed, as we part ways. Unthinkingly, I lift a hand to give him a timid wave.

Why did I do that?

I teeter out the double doors too shocked for tears.

I dither, stupidly, over going to the hospital the entire way to the subway station. The walk takes twice as long in my condition, my feet having stiffened rictus-like into their new position. Even knowing that my signal down in the tunnels will be spotty at best, I stare down at my phone with my thumb hovering over the 'emergency' button.

But I don't call an ambulance. I don't even try. My insurance won't cover injuries outside the workplace. I don't bother with the police, either. They'd ask why I didn't kick him away, and for the life of me, I can't figure out the answer.

So I don't call anyone.

It can be difficult getting personal space on the subway train, and today is no different. Stops and starts jostle me nearly onto my ass, wobbling on my wrecked feet. People notice, but no one offers me a seat. I've never wanted attention so badly in my life. I want someone to point me out and gasp, are you okay? How can I help?

Someone slams into my back. My phone tumbles from my hand and goes skittering away, vanishing into the crowd.

"Shit-!" I gasp, and cringe, and hate myself for both things—it hurt to emote. Smile. Always smile.

"Excuse me?"

The older woman to collide with me doesn't have the decency to draw back. She taps my shoulder at first, but then wrenches me back when I attempt to dive through the crush for my cellphone.

"Young ladies shouldn't curse," she admonishes, each word razor-sharp.

I'm compelled to defend myself, as if the blood and broken bones aren't explanation enough. "I'm sorry, I -"

"Good. I hope you'll watch your language in the future," she interrupts. Then she lets go of the dangling handle she was using to brace herself with. "That kind of foulness ages you, you know. Here, unless you want to look like me by the time you're forty..."

I have no idea what she's talking about. I'm frantic without my phone, pain radiates up my calves, and I don't dare stop smiling. Yet again, I'm caught too off-kilter to respond in time.

She puts her hand on my cheeks and yanks.

"Ow-!" I jerk away. Her grip remains tight enough that my skin stretches like fresh taffy.

"Oh, hush." She clicks her tongue and keeps pulling. "Beauty is pain."

This woman digs her acrylic nails into my flesh and drags my flesh where she wants it. My heart pounds all the way up in my larynx, eyes darting wildly to anyone I think might help and raking my fingers across her wrists. I don't want to argue with this woman, won't open my mouth and make things worse. But, if someone will intervene –

Nobody pays us the slightest amount of attention.

"There we are."

My hands fall away as hers do.

I can see myself in the train windows, black tunnel providing a perfect back-

drop for my reflection. Somehow, it's as if she's stapled my skin taut, smoothing my budding wrinkles and the bags under my eyes. The only mercy is that it doesn't influence my ability to smile.

I look... uncanny. Something adjacent to human.

"You're welcome, dear. Keep in mind what I said about that potty mouth."

The subway pulls into my stop. I'm stuck for a second, caught in an indecision's trap: I can't be late for work, but I need to find my phone.

Nonetheless, I stepped off the train.

Phones are replaceable, even if my paycheck does barely cover my living expenses. My boss, Dr. Cukor, might be the first—the only—person who can help me, so it would be far worse to inconvenience him. The sooner I get to work, the sooner I may find someone to care.

Because clearly no one here will, even if I let loose the scream aching to burst out of me.

I'm limping by the time I'm finished setting up the office for the day. Dr. Cukor hasn't arrived yet and won't for at least ten more minutes, and when he does, he needs to find the place ready for patients; computers on, phone messages taken down, equipment sanitized. No matter what condition I'm in, I still have my job to do.

And I'll do it, for fear that help comes with conditions attached.

Dr. Reisch walks in while I'm still sorting faxes, though, and stops in front of the front desk to give me a long look. It takes me a while to notice, absorbed in preparations for the day with my back against the plush leather of my chair. I was so relieved to finally get off my feet that I'm still vacant, foggy as my pain recedes.

"You've done something with your hair?" he guessed, tugging me from my reverie.

I lick my lips and smile in spite of the acrid taste of drying blood. I shake my head. Surely he's joking. Why he's joking, I have no idea, but —

"You should wear it down," he suggests, reaching down over the desk. I reflexively roll the chair back, but not in nearly enough time to escape his grasp. He takes the end of my ponytail and jerks my head closer. He plucks the hair tie away, yanking a few strands right out of my scalp. The sting is nothing compared to what I've felt today, but still startling.

He's barely even conversed with me when not necessary. I blink at him, stupefied, as the tears build up in the corners of my eyes. Why this, of all things, should break me is just... It's pathetic.

"You're welcome," he says, takes a sip of coffee from his cardboard cup, and

strides off. I stare at his retreating lab coat with fat tears rolling down my cheeks.

He took the hair tie with him.

I'm so busy in the file room attempting to compose myself that I miss Dr. Cukor's arrival. He's a busy man, darting back and forth between patient rooms and his office, not once stopping to get a glimpse of me. Every time I think I might catch him, something interrupts. The phone. A new patient. My own certainty that I'm about to cry again.

I attempt not to move my mouth much, but it continues to bleed nonetheless. My lips feel as though they've swollen to double their size. Every time I have to stand, I totter like a ballerina out of practice.

Not one patient shows concern when I greet them. Some are callous. Most treat me with utter indifference. It shouldn't get to me, that none of them recoil at my warped visage, but it does. It twists my heart around like it's being sucked into a whirlpool of frustration, hurt, confusion. It all settles in my stomach like a rock, and though I haven't eaten yet today, I've never been so put off by the idea of food.

I smile all morning, but it's hard to force.

My break doesn't come nearly fast enough. I want to sit in the break room alone. Collect myself, finish crying. Make sure I'm able to keep my voice steady when I finally manage to approach Dr. Cukor. He'll be on his break too soon, if he isn't taking it already.

I tread carefully on my way back. I pass Dr. Cukor at his computer with no intention of interrupting him, just in case, but his chair swivels and he puts out a hand like a barrier.

"Do you have a minute? I know it's your lunch break."

A glimmer of hope. Maybe he did see the state of me and wants to ask about my mouth, my skin, my feet. Ask me what happened and offer concern, condolences, assistance.

"Come with me," he instructs. His palms clap against the armrests of his chair and he hoists himself up. "Dr. Reisch's office."

I nod and follow as the relief makes my eyes brim again. Dr. Cukor takes me around the corner to the private office he and Dr. Reisch share.

Dr. Reisch is typing up his dictation notes, but he pauses the recording as the door swings open with a mutter of, "Ah. Good."

"We noticed you're taking a little more care of your appearance today," Dr. Cukor remarks, closing the door behind us.

What?

“It’s nice for patients to walk in and see an attractive woman behind the desk.” Dr. Reisch swivels his chair around. “We wanted to tell you, keep it up.”

“We might be able to lend a hand with that, actually,” Dr. Cukor adds. “What are you having for lunch today? Are you dieting?”

“We’re not surgeons, but liposuction might be good for you,” Dr. Reisch recommends.

Someone may as well have struck me over the head, knocked part of my brain right out my ears. I can’t think, aghast, piping hot rage coming up my throat like bile.

They can’t be serious. Surely they aren’t.

“You really just need to trim down that waist.” Dr. Cukor turns to me, grabs my shirt, and tugs it up from where it was tucked into my skirt. He exposes my stomach, and I gasp, try to knock his hands away. I almost fall straight backwards in my attempt to retreat, spinning and slamming into the door.

Locked. When had it been locked?

Dr. Reisch stands, looming over me. “Calm down, now. Don’t be rude, we’re only trying to help.”

Dr. Cukor grips the fleshy sides that spill out slightly from my beltline. I never took him for a particularly strong man, so I don’t know how he does it. It doesn’t matter how he does it, actually.

He sinks his fingers right through the muscle and starts to rip the fat away.

I black out, screaming.

I come to on the scratchy carpet of Dr. Cukor and Dr. Reisch’s office. Dr. Reisch is over me, lightly slapping one of my cheeks over and over, trying to rouse me. Past him, Dr. Cukor drops thick ribbons of viscera into the garbage can, his hands badly stained with clumpy, dripping red. There are rib bones, cracked and gory, poking out from the top of the bin. My heart, still feebly shouting beneath my sternum, pumps liquid terror through my veins. Why aren’t I dead? Why haven’t I been allowed to die?

“There we go,” Dr. Reisch murmurs. “That’s right, there we go. Open your eyes.”

They’re already open. My tortured body is wracked with constant, weakening agony. The exposed meat prickles like the open air is made of sandpaper, grating against the nerves. It all hurts.

But the strongest pain radiates from my mouth. So, shakily, I smile.

Dr. Cukor smiles back.

“You’re welcome.”



KINDLED ROMANCE
BY
JANIS HOLM

Savior of the Mayapples

Mark Grover

Every day after school, it happened. They had bikes. Not Jordan. His had been tossed off a bridge and floated down the river in the middle of summer by the two assholes. His parents told him walking was good enough for him since he wasn't strong enough to hold on to it.

With the approach of fall, the weather became misty, and the sun set earlier with each day. Dusk and shadow fell on the woods faster. The air was crisp along with the fallen leaves underfoot. On this particular Friday, Jordan felt more determined today to avoid their sneering, freckled, jagged toothed faces. It was his thirteenth birthday. This one would be no different. His mom worked until eight, and she'd bring home a pizza with coagulated cheese. His dad would wake up from a nap and eat it in his underwear.

He paused. If it weren't for David and Leroy, I could just live out here and never go back home. When will I ever be able to take them on? If not now, when? A clearing, a kind of grassy knoll with rocks and bramble, was about one thousand feet ahead. Jordan was running better now. His gym teacher told him he would cover more ground, inhaling through his nose and exhaling through his mouth. That tip gave him more confidence, but he still tired out midway on his journey home. He wasn't really that excited to get home. Home was not much better than dealing with all the eye rolling, contempt, and treachery that seventh grade bestowed upon him. But home gave him the solitude and safety of his bedroom. He could shut the door and leave the world behind him until the next day. He could listen to music and savor the posters of Joy Division, The Cure, Siouxsie and the Banshees. Maybe his darkness attracted these mean people to him. That's what his parents argued. Jordan held his breath and gritted his teeth when they said this. They'd just repeated the words of their minister like a parrot. Why would his taste in music make him deserve to be stalked? The boys peddled, kicked up dirt, and did wheelies as their voices escalated. Jordan looked to each side. Glowing green and yellow light emerged from the tree line along the forest that he hadn't noticed before. The warmth calmed him and beckoned him almost as if it took him by hand. As Jordan walked into the light, he spotted a large boulder surrounded by wild shrubs. He gazed past the rock, and the ground cover of plants with giant twin leaves blew in the breeze. They bore fruits colored with a light olive green with a wrinkled surface.

Jordan hadn't seen them before. Running through the woods left him hungry and tired. He knelt down in the middle of the ground cover and picked a fruit. It looked

foreign, but he felt an immediate warmth with taking a few bites. As he

chewed, it tasted sweet and zesty. The texture and flavor was banana mingled with lemon. He ingested a few seeds that turned his mouth sour. Jordan dropped the remainder on the ground. The voices of the two boys crept up on him, and he crawled over to the boulder and hid in the surrounding bushes as the boys wheeled into the clearing and dropped their bikes.

“Come on, chickenshit! Jordan? Be a man and show yourself! We know you’re in here,” David said. His head shaped like a potato, he panned the knoll like he could see everything and record it in his skull that formed a peak at the top of his head. But Jordan watch him through the branches, and thought that was probably untrue, that it

was his own fear tricking him. David had a low-pitched, dorky laugh that didn’t sound smart.

“The little pussy should be around here. This is where he usually stops because he loses his breath.”

Leroy, David’s sidekick, walked to the middle of the clearing. His complexion clear and his hair shoulder length and rebellious, he spun around with a smirk on his face.

“Tell you what, Jordan. You come out and face us, we’ll stop chasing you.” Liers! Don’t go to them. The whisper seemed loud, yet far away to Jordan. The words croaked, sounded ancient. His skin prickled, and he froze.

Leroy turned to David. “We know where he lives. He might be home already.” David tromped over to his bike and picked it up. “Then let’s go find out. We can’t let him outsmart us.”

“I don’t have time tonight. I have a football game at 6:30, and I have to go home and eat.” Leroy said.

“Shit! We need another person to join us. Your activities get in the way sometimes.”

“Don’t worry. I’m pissed like you. We’ll get him. It’ll just take some planning. He’s getting craftier.”

“Fine. Let’s just not waste too much time,” David said.

“Whatever.”

They both got on their bikes and rode back to town.

Don't make yourself visible yet. It could be a trick. The voice croaked again. Jordan cleared his throat and surveyed his surroundings.

"Where are you, who are you?" Jordan asked.

Underneath

"Underneath what?"

Just start looking. We're close by. Look around.

"I have to go home now. My parents will be mad if I'm late."

Don't leave just yet. Those boys want to hurt you badly, but we can help.
"Who's we? Why should I trust you?"

"We understand your suffering. Do your parents?"

"Not really."

We can help you, but not like your mom and dad. What they think of as help won't serve you. We've lingered the earth thousands of years in many forms. We just know.

Jordan bolted up and scratched his arms and face on the bushes. "Fuck off! You're trying to scare me, but you don't. Let me be."

I can't let you be. I'm inside you now.

Jordan stood, his limbs trembling. He didn't know what the voice meant. Rubbing his tongue over the roof of his mouth, the taste of the fruit he'd eaten just before David and Leroy came into the knoll came back and ignited his hunger. He wanted more. The desire was odd because before this afternoon any kind of fruit was just something he ate to tide him over before dinner because his parents rarely had candy in the house.

The voice took hold again and tantalized him. Hurry! Take a plant, pull it up by the roots, and take it home. Put it in a pot.

The sun settled through the gold and yellow leaves from the trees and gave off a warm and peaceful glow. On the floor of the forest, the light green fruits sticking out of the ground cover grinned and beckoned him down on all fours. Jordan picked up a heavy acorn nearby and dug into the dirt. As he pushed soil away from

the roots, Jor

dan recoiled as the mandrake used its thick extensions to pull itself up and released high pitched grunts from a puckered, wrinkled mouth.

“This can’t be real. Why am I seeing this?” Jordan stood up, rubbed his palms together, and shook off the dirt.

“Ha! I knew you’d still be here,” David said.

David crept up from behind and shoved Jordan down.

“Now I’ve got the little bitch.”

Jordan’s fear turned to rage that radiated like a heat from the ground. Before this day, fear only made him curl into a ball and left a metallic taste in his throat and stomach and made his head pound. His reflexes today were lighter, more unified. He closed his eyes and saw his weightless body lifting from the ground. Jordan jerked his right leg into the air and kneed David in the face with a loud crunch. David tipped backwards and stumbled over. He wiped off blood that dripped from his nose and lips. His mouth quivered, tears streamed down his face, and he scowled at Jordan.

“How do you call that fair, you little queer? If you were going to fight like a man, you’d doing it standing up and in front of me.”

Rage burned in Jordan’s torso. “You are such a fucking fake! How is anything you two have done to me fair? Go away. You’re fucking pathetic! Wait until I tell everyone about this tomorrow at school.”

“Other than your two geeky friends, who will believe you? People have to like you before they’ll believe you.”

“Say what you want, shit for brains. I know the truth. That’s what matters.” Jordan stood up and walked towards the plant. He’d had enough of their bullshit, at least for today. As he bent down to the loose leaves sprouting out of the bulbous body with awkward limbs, David stalked over him, roaring like a wounded beast. “You won’t say anything to anybody. I’ll make sure of that!”

Jordan twisted around and held the mandrake in David’s face. A deafening shriek shook and blew through the forest. Jordan knew how to protect himself. He shut his eyes and took a deep breath. The voice came back in a smokey whisper. Keep your eyes closed. Breath slowly. It will be over soon.

Even as the screaming cries shook the leaves around him, Jordan saw in his mind David running in circles with his hands over his ears, and he smiled while David crashed to his knees, grasping for his last breath. The blood curdling sound stopped within seconds. He took a few deep breaths and opened his eyes. David was flat amongst the plants about fifty feet away from Jordan.

A lump of air stuck in Jordan's throat. He stood, walked over David, and looked down. Blood still flowed out of his blown out ears with fleshy craters in the middle. No. This isn't real. How did this happen? Everyone will think it was me! Jordan shouted in his head.

Don't worry. You're a savior.

"I can't be! I don't believe in saviors!" Jordan shouted towards the sky. He heard a thick, gurgling, crunching sound as he looked down. David's body caved in, the flesh turned red, brown, and rotted with blistering heat coming up through the soil beneath. The ground slowly chewed, swallowed, and left no trace. He looked back over the plants and their light shone up through the trees. He was bathed in white light. Hundreds of smiling, withered faces formed and floated around him like bubbles with their hands outstretched and made them appear like birds ready to break free from amniotic sacks.

Even amidst all the warmth, he felt an insatiable hunger. He was tired. Eat, child.

Jordan dropped to his knees and dug like a dog. All these Mayapples were his. He salivated like a rabid dog.

Leroy will chase me again tomorrow. Maybe he'll rally his team against me and search for David. Let them come. I know what must be done. I'll be waiting. END



Bathtub: The Butcher
Skye Meyers

Joy in Work

Isaac Grimaldi

Uniform code C of the Employee Handbook says that pants should be ironed so that the crease is on the front, straight down the middle. If they're not, you get a point. You're only allowed three points before the company calls a Termination Hearing. The shaft of it is that there are so many things that give you points. Creases. Unkempt hair. Improper paperwork. I already have two points.

I lift my button-down from the ironing table and hold it up to the window. Pressed and perfect. I hate the color of our uniforms. We're like little clouds scurrying about. Or angels. At least, that's how we're expected to act. You get a point if you're caught without a smile outside the break room. Even in public. What can we do, though? Formico has to keep strong branding.

My phone vibrates on the kitchen table. It's Mom, of course. She's the only one who bothers to call.

"Morning, Mom." I hold the phone to my ear with my shoulder as I button my shirt. I have to leave soon or I'll be late.

"Good Morning, Miranda. How are you?" She has her serious voice today, which means it will be another news story.

"Fine, Mom. What's up?"

"Oh, nothing. I just wanted to talk to you."

"Sure."

"Do I need an excuse to speak with my daughter?"

"No, not an excuse. But there's usually a reason."

"I just — honey, are you sure you don't want to come back home?"

"Yes, Mom. I'm sure. We've had this discussi —"

"I just don't understand what you're still doing out there. When you were with Rita, sure. And then you join that horrible company, and dear, I don't know how you could even consider working there after what they did to your Grandmother —"

I try to forget that my mother just brought up Rita. "They didn't do anything to Grandma, Mom." We've had this conversation before. We'll probably have it again. Mom thinks Formico kidnapped her mother fifty years ago. Killed her or ate her or something like that. There was a lot of hysteria about the company back then, before the treaties and all. I don't really blame people, though. It's a pretty natural reaction to be terrified of a previously unknown race of massive, intelligent insects surfacing after thousands of years. Maybe if they'd acted the way everyone expected them to — roaring and killing or whatever monsters are supposed to do — maybe

then everyone would have been calmer?

Instead, the Formicidae — that’s what we call them — send out emissaries to communicate and draft proposals for improvements. Suddenly, all these problems that have plagued us for hundreds of years poof away. Climate Change? Handled. World Hunger and Supply Chain Problems? Handled. With those notches in their belt, the Formicidae Queen brokered a treatise for legal status within the confines of the North American Alliance. Their species would act as an independent, sovereign nation without borders, cooperating directly with other world governments. And in return, the Formicidae would allow us to use their extensive underground network for the continued relief of supply chain woes. See a need, fill a need, after all.

So no, I don’t blame people for mistrusting Formico back then. But now? It’s all crackpot. Especially my Mom’s theories. I think some mothers just abandon their daughters, that’s all.

“You know what I read on my newsfeed today, Miranda? Do you? There’s been a report filed with the NACL, did you know? ‘A clear pattern of malicious activity which prays on oppressed populations —”

“Mom, you have got to stop buying into all that garbage. Where’d you hear this from? Hmm?”

“Well, I don’t see how that matters any —”

“Where, Mom?” I’m smirking. Not smiling, but smirking.

“Former United News,” she says.

“See? You can’t trust anything those people say, Mom. It’s all anti-capitalist liberal propaganda. We’ve talked about this.”

“Yes, I’m sure you have it all figured out, Miranda.”

“I have to go to work. Goodbye, Mom.” I hang up before she can say anything back. It’s the only way to get off the line; otherwise, she’ll just keep talking and talking, running down the social clock.

Urtzbark Rail Station — where I work — is five blocks from my apartment. It’s the premiere station on the east coast of North America. It’s not like anyone can avoid using the trains nowadays, what with all the gas cars being seized and such.

I pay the pasty vendor for my usual breakfast and hurry along. The line for the shelter appears ahead. It’s longer than usual today. As soon I come into view — my uniform crisp and bright — the people all revert their eyes and stare at the floor. I hate to admit it, but it feels good. The respect.

“Miranda?” calls out a voice. Familiar.

I don’t know why I hadn’t noticed Rita standing there. Maybe it’s because they all blur together after a while. The homeless, I mean. Formico’s official designation

for them is “vagrants.” There are so many nowadays, and all of them have the same story. It’s always “the company made me obsolete” or “so-and-so retracted my benefits.” Part of me feels bad for them, but deep down, I know they’re all just whiners. And yet here is Rita. Formerly my Rita, standing in line so she has a place to sleep. Rita isn’t a whiner. I stare at her, not knowing what to say.

She nods and gives a sad face with a stiff upper lip. “How are you?” she asks. “Oh, fantastic. Big news today!” Without even intending it, I’ve slipped into my customer service voice. I guess it’s my default, or maybe speaking with her is just too painful. Maybe it’s easier for my brain to pretend she’s just another undesirable running around the station.

Rita grimaces, but she drops the expression in a moment and smiles. “I’ve heard... On your way, then? To work?”

“Yes. And, oh, look at that. I’m running behind. Have a great day, Ma’am.” I don’t know why I’ve just called her that. It’s like my mouth is connected to some outdated software backup.

“Miranda?” Rita steps out of line, following me for a few steps. She isn’t wearing heels, not like she used to. Always in heels — even when she was curled on the couch, drinking that god-awful licorice tea she loves so much. She’d tap her foot on the floor with a clack clack clack, and her steps were a welcome annoyance. But that was before my promotion. Before my first Termination. I was new, and it was normal to have some jitters the first few times. Comes with the job. I almost let the guy go. Not on purpose, but still. It was Rita’s fault. She’d gotten in my head. Ever since I started working at Urzbark, she’d been heading deeper and deeper down the socialist conspiracy rabbit hole. Later, when I told Rita about the Termination that day — about the door and the blackness — she completely lost it. Things weren’t ended, necessarily, but they were stable. She stopped going to work. Said it wasn’t as important as protesting the company. Then she started shacking up with some dude. It all became a little much. But oh well. Can’t get ahead in Formico without making tough decisions — that’s what Darien, my boss, always tells me.

“Miranda?” she asks again.

Against my better judgment, I turn back.

Over Rita’s shoulder, another white uniform comes into view. I don’t know their face, but that’s worse. I don’t even think about it. My lips snap back into my brimming smile, and my posture tightens. “You have a great day now, Ma’am,” I say. “And please, remember that vagrants are not allowed within Urtzbark Station. Failure to comply with Company policies results in legislated Termination.” And then I spin around and leave her. I don’t look back.

As I turn the corner on Einsburg Ave, the station comes into view. So tall. Stately. White columns support the statue above: a seventy-five-foot-tall depiction of a human and a Formicidae joining hands in comradery. A real modern marvel.

The first municipal art depicting cooperation with Formico. People come from all over the country to see it, and tourists are always flocking outside, snapping their photos.

Darien's out front holding a press conference. They aren't announcing the Brooding yet — just teasing the press. They're all so eager, hastily scratching notes and thumbing their phones. I try to be quick. Don't want to distract, but I'm probably being too cautious. The crowd is loud and revved up, and I doubt they even notice me. I glance over at Darien as I pass, and he gives me a wink. Then a smile. Always the charmer, that one, so well dressed in his blue suit and red tie. He keeps his hair high and tight, and his eyes always have that special twinkle in them. It's like that with everyone he speaks to — even men — but I like to pretend that it's special for me.

Finally, I make it through the doors, and the Grand Terminal opens before me. Busy as ever, tourists and commuters scurry across the floor. It's a massive room complete with an entrance hall and staircase that extends from the center and winds around a terrace at the top. Above this, a large balcony sits near the glass ceiling where Company Emissaries wine and dine. White columns extend up from the marble floor, and at either end of the Terminal, two Ant Nests — A and B — rest, encased in glass.

A scream rips through the Terminal's noise, but no one looks up or is startled. I barely notice it, really, but the incident's in my line of sight. Two other Quality Assurance Agents — Ben and Anaya — they're carrying this woman out of the crowd and toward the nearest Termination Chamber. She's flailing and screaming because of course she is, crying about her babies or some other excuse. But she has a yellow stamp on her hand. It's hard to feel bad when someone's been warned and breaks the rules anyway. Ben and Anaya take her through the double doors toward the Termination Door, and then the Terminals back to its normal bustle. The break room's only a short tromp away. Just down the stairs, past Ant Nest B, and then through the brass doors. As I'm walking by, I see a vagrant. He's stumbling down the hall opposite. I approach, and he looks down and away. Normally, I'd give him a pass before my morning coffee, but we're in front of Ant Nest B. A drone crawls out from one of the larger holes. Seems like he'll scurry back inside, but then he stops, and the beady eyes stare at me. Formico is watching. I'll have to issue a warning. They're allowed one.

“Sir,” I say, using the most assertive voice I can while still holding an ear-to-ear smile. The man ignores me. Looks behind him as if I might be talking to someone else and then continues. As we grow closer, his scent overwhelms me. Liquor. So much liquor. I don't know where they even get the stuff.

“Sir,” I repeat. “Sir, my name is Miranda Blanchard. I'm with Urtzbark Rail Quality Assurance. Vagrants are not permitted on Urtz —”

“I'll be moving. I'll be moving —” The man quickens his pace. Still staring at

the tiles and not into my eyes. That's good.

I follow him. He has to hear the entire warning, or it doesn't count. The drone's still watching. "Vagrants are not permitted on Urtzbark Rail property —"

"I promise. I promise, lady, I'm leaving." He's almost begging now. Trying to shut me up before we reach the crowd in the Grand Terminal. I reach out to stop him. His coat is wet. "Sir. Stop and listen." He looks up, and behind my shoulder is the Drone. Its pincers drip with hive glue. His eyes snap back to me. They're brown and scared, slightly yellow on the sides.

"Sir. Vagrants are not permitted on Urtzbark Rail property." I take out my phone and open our company app. Type up the ticket. "Hold up your hand, please."

"Ma'am, plea —"

"Sir, hold up your hand." I'm still smiling, but my teeth are gritted. The man complies, and he raises his shaky, limp hand toward my phone. Modular inkjets print out a yellow square on his skin, followed by a neon time and date. "You have ten minutes to leave the premises, or you will be subject to Formico disciplinary procedures." Still smiling.

"I'll be going, ma'am. I'll be going." He doesn't run because he knows there's no running, but his feet move as fast as walking can be.

"Have a nice day, sir," I say. "Thank you for visiting Urtzbark Rail." My pasty's almost room temperature now. As I turn, the Drone is gone, and Ant Nest B is quiet. I breathe a little relief and let down my grin just for a moment. Just a bit of reprieve. There's some clicking coming from the nest. I put my face on again, and a Worker scuttles by with a larva. I've grown to like the larva. They're sort of cute, like dumplings. Little white worms with no faces. Milky balls of potential.

The smell of fish and mass-produced noodles wafts out from the break room door. Finally, alone, my body decompresses a bit. I slump my shoulders, and my belly pokes out. White buttons scrunch together, and the shirt fabric puckers, revealing a hint of skin beneath.

I doom scroll through a dozen news articles about when the company might announce the next Brooding. There are lots of old stories about the first Brooding forty-five years ago. No one really remembers or knows what goes into it, but some people like to sensationalize. Rita was one of those people. Mom, too. I don't really feel like thinking about it. In one of the articles, there's a photo of the Prime Minister standing on a podium next to one of the Queen's

emissaries. They don't touch or shake hands — as if any Formicidae has hands — but both of them look happy. The PM has an ear-to-ear grin, and the emissary's antennae are spread a little wide. Reading Formicidae emotions and facial expressions is mandatory company training, of course. Despite what a lot of the anti-company nuts think, they do have emotions. They just look a little different from ours.

The door opens, and Darien pops his head through. He's smiling.

I snap up and dust the crumbs from my uniform. "Good morning, sir. How was the press conference?"

Darien nods agreeably, stepping into the room with a bit of swagger that isn't too unprofessional. "Good morning, Miranda. The press conference went well. Everyone's buzzing. I think tonight's going to be a great success, don't you?"

I nod, and my smile returns. "Yes, sir. Of course. I mean, you've been working so hard and —"

"Oh, nonsense," says Darien, shooing away my compliment. "Tonight's a success because of you and the others on your team."

My cheeks heat up, and I look down at my half-eaten pasty. "Why, thank you, Darien." When I look back up at him, he's staring deep into my eyes like I'm the only person he cares to speak to in his whole day. For a moment, I imagine the two of us ripping off each other's clothing, but that just makes me blush more.

"You have a great day, ok?" he says, waving goodbye and leaving the room. Before five minutes pass, the rest of the pasty is in my stomach, and I snag my stun gun from the locker. Part of me thinks I should use it on myself whenever I fantasize about Darien. Before I step back on the floor, I get my smile in position.

Things are calm for the first half of the day. I see the usual people. Only a few have the nerve to look me in the eye. The rest keep their heads facing down on the floor or struggle to look anywhere else besides my bleach-white uniform. At 10:00, there was a little boy who wandered away from his mother. Pretty standard stuff. We got him back to her before the little bastard wound up in a Nest. People should be more careful. If you're not going to watch them, you shouldn't be having them to begin with. After the morning commute dies down, I leave my busy post and strut around the station's underbelly. Not all the time, but sometimes, it's actually silent.

I pass one of the Termination Doors. I like to stop and look at them whenever I can. Not really sure why. Maybe it reminds me of the importance of my job — the finality of it all. They're quite unassuming portals, really. Like everything else, they're pure white with some hints of grey masonry and tin-plated hinges. Only thing that makes the Termination Doors stand out is the warning label.

No Public Entrance. For Use by Urtzbark Rail Quality Assurance Staff Only. Do Not Leave Open. Do Not Stare into the Dark.

Something squeaks down the hall. I turn away from the red letters and stare at Ant Nest Delta, snuggled into the corner. It's my favorite, that one. All of the nests built in the last decade have been more modern and neat. That was Daniel's idea, I'm sure. Easier for the passengers to deal with the Formicidae presence. But not Delta. Ant Nest Delta is old school. The brick of the wall just sort of ends as the nest begins, and the raw earth is exposed to the station. There's at least some glass in

front of it, though. Helps people feel safe. Their tunnels are numerous and chaotic, forming around one another in a concrete honeycomb. Drones and Workers weave in and out through them, going only God knows where. Most of the time, they pay no attention to humans. But every once in a while, one of them stops and stares at you for a bit.

I'm in front of the nest. Sometime, during my thoughts, I must have walked over here. I forget how big they are. The Workers, they're only 3 or 4 feet, but some of the Drones... it's amazing they fit through the tunnel. The Queen must be a monster. As I'm thinking, a worker drops a bit of concrete she's carrying in her pedipalps. Without missing a step, she scampers down the wall face, through a dozen other ants and picks it up. Her little head looks up at me, and I can't tell if her eyes are telling me, "Hi. How are you? We're all family here," or "Get back to work, you lazy cunt." I choose to listen to the latter.

In the midst of a sigh, a man slams into my shoulder and sprints by. He curses. Smiles back at me with rancid teeth.

I chase. "Stop! Stop, sir!" The smell of vodka trails behind him. Public intoxication. Assaulting a member of the company. Two strikes.

"Fuck you, whore!" he screams back at me. There's the third.

I'm still grinning ear to ear. Maybe a bit more now as my hand grips my stun gun. He isn't a hard chase. He's older. A little fat, and he runs with an awkward gait. Legs and arms are flailing about without any sense of athleticism. But I don't need to catch up to him. Really, I don't want to. It's more fun using the toys, after all.

We turn a corner into the back hallway near Ant Nest Q. It runs the entire length of the station. Nowhere to hide. I stop and plant a firm stance. Take aim, still smiling. For a second, I think about calling out to him again, but I don't.

I squeeze the trigger like I've been trained, independent of the muscles in my hand. Controlled. The prongs dislodge and shoot out from the gun, and in a moment, they've stabbed into the vagrant's back. I pump the volts into him, forcing a spasm. He falls and pisses himself. A bit of urine pools on the white tile. Of course, there's a Drone poking its head out at Ant Nest Q, watching how I handle things. I smile and nod to it before hoisting up the drunk. I don't think he's bathed in weeks. That's what it smells like — feels like it, too. His skin is slick with oils and grime. A grunt escapes his mouth, and I place his hands in restraints.

"Hey, Siri," I say. My phone comes alive.

"Yes? What do you need, Miranda?" I have the voice setting on a butch Cockney woman. I don't know why I think it's attractive.

"Open company app. Begin verbal processing of Form T-23."

"Of course."

“What’s your name, sir,” I ask the drunk as I pull the taser pins from his back. He winces, gives a quick spasm of aftershock, and then smiles at me over his shoulder. The red lines of gingivitis are even worse up close. “Bill,” he says.

“Full legal name, please.”

“William Robert Whipple.”

“William Robert Whipple,” I repeat, “You are hereby confirmed to have engaged in the following unacceptable actions: 1. Vagrancy. 2. Public Drunkenness. 3. Public Profanity. 4. Assaulting a Company Employee.” As I’m logging the case, we start walking back the way we came. Back to the door with the red lettering. I continue, “Do you have any statement to make regarding these actions?”

“Fuck off,” he slurs.

“Sir, please take this seriously. Again, do you have any statement to make regarding these actions?”

“It was fun.”

“Thank you. In accordance with Civil Contract 3 of the North American Alliance, and through the power granted to me as a Quality Assurance Agent of Formico, I am scheduling you for immediate Termination and removal from Urtzbark Rail Station.” As we move closer, as I say the words and the red lettering appears ahead of us, the vagrant gets tense. He moves slower. Resists a bit, but not too much.

“At this time, if you have a statement to make to any emergency contacts or family, you may do so now.”

The vagrant — William — clears his throat a bit. We’re standing in front of the Termination Door now. A couple walks down the hallway toward us, but they stop and whisper to each other for a moment. Realizing the situation, perhaps, they hurry back the way they came. William nods his head, looking down at his feet. “Yeah — Yeah, I got something to say. I’m glad I finally get to see what’s behind one of these things. You hear all these stories, but no one really knows. Well, I’m glad I get to know.”

“Anything else, sir?” I ask.

“Like what?”

“Sir?”

“What do other people say? Before you do it?”

“I can’t retell the details of other cases, sir.”

“I ain’t asking you to retell details. Just — I don’t know. Give me some tips. How hard is that?”

I take a deep breath. This happens sometimes. People don’t take it seriously.

They think the whole thing's one big joke. Before the NAA and Formico cracked down on conspiracy information, this sort of thing was all over social apps. "Sir, anything important you have to say, you should say it now. To anyone who may wish to hear it." I'm still smiling, but I try to get the most reverent voice I can. Not that I feel bad. I don't. Really. He knew the rules, but that doesn't mean I can't make him understand the protocol.

"Huh. Ok. Nah, nah. I'm good. Maybe tell your boss to go blow it out his ass." "Of course, sir. Siri, please submit T-23 to Urtzbark Rail Quality Assurance Department." "Of course," says the imaginary lesbian. "I see you're near Termination Door J. Would you like me to open it for you?"

"Yes."

"Right away." My phone dings, and then the light on the door's keypad turns red. A latch opens, echoing down the empty hall. William Whipple has a cocky grin on his face with pursed lips.

"Attention Urtzbark Rail patrons. Termination Door J is currently opening. For your own safety, please avoid transit in this area for the duration. Thank you, and have a safe trip." It's Daniel's voice over the announcement speaker, but it isn't really him saying it. Just automated.

The red warnings come closer as the door grinds open. At first, I was curious about what was behind them, but that stopped pretty quickly. Especially since the station averages two terminations per week.

William Whipple's eyes get a little brighter. He's probably expecting some grand truth to be revealed. But just like everyone else who goes this route, the only thing I see on his face is confusion. Maybe a bit of fear.

There's nothing there. It's just black. I try not to stare into it anymore, especially after what Darien told me. He says that if you look in too long, you'll start seeing things. Not good things. He says his old supervisor did that, back near the turn of the century. The next day, the weird bastard signed up for voluntary Termination.

So no, I don't look.

But William Whipple looks. He steps forward through the door and into the blackness. Doesn't say a word. Just looks around for a moment before continuing. The door closes, and then the silence sets back in.

The rest of the morning goes by without any more incidents. I stick to the normal patrol routes. Helped an older woman calibrate her bioware for the intercontinental loop. Gave another warning out — this time to a little boy who hasn't learned how to act right in public. The mother was mortified but serves her right. With the announcement coming at noon, I was sure to position myself in the corner of the Grand Terminal. It's anyone's guess how the public will react to the news. It's exactly 12:00 when some of the screens pause and flip over to an image of Darien's

big, military-like head. He's smiling.

“Good afternoon, travelers. Here at Formico, it's our mission to see that you're transported where you need to be when you need to be there. It was only through cooperation with our company that the North American Alliance was able to broker a treaty and move forward to a united Earth. And let's not forget the sacrifice of the noble Formicidae to allow us use of their tunnels in order to create our amazing rail systems. With this in mind, we have exciting news today. Urtzbark Rail Station has been chosen to host — this very night — the Second Exalted Brooding! In the fifty years since the treaties between Formicidae and the North American government, we've seen only one generation of Formicidae pupate. And now, we've arrived at the second.”

As soon as Darien says it, the room erupts. Lots of people cheer. Some even clasp their hands in prayer. But a lot of others are quite grim. They stay silent and slowly migrate out of the station while Company supporters enjoy the grandiosity of the news. None of them run, but many walk as quickly as they can to get away. One father in particular, his little girl starts clapping — mimicking what she sees around her — but he snatches her up and speeds out from the station.

My eyes troll across the Terminal as the celebrations wind down, and I see her near the station entrance heading out. She's looking back at me over her shoulder. Rita. Our eyes lock, and she stops moving. There is a stain on her hand. A faint yellow square.

Before any protocol can take hold, I pace toward her. Rita doesn't move — just stands there with a sad face straight from my memories. Why doesn't she go? Why doesn't she leave? Passengers and guests start weaving around her, some giving her dirty looks or remarks outright. One man, bald and corpulent, spits a foul slur at her. But Rita doesn't care. Her gaze stays on me, and she covers her branded hand with her sleeve.

“Good afternoon, Ma'am,” I say. Ant Nest A and B are empty. No one's watching. “How can I help you today?”

“I need to talk to you, Mir —”

“I'm sorry, Ma'am. We currently don't have any trains scheduled for that destination. But there is a Nozomi V5 departing toward Caracas tomorrow evening. You'll have to come back then.” My face hurts.

“Miranda, please. I just found out —”

“No, no, Ma'am.” I put my arm around her and shield her from the crowds and foot traffic. Rita uncovers her hand. The timestamp reads 11:24 AM. “I'm afraid we cannot offer any such compensation —”

“I'm preg—”

“Yes, yes. I'm very sorry. But we appreciate your patronage. We'll see you

tomorrow night, mmk? Bye-bye.” I think my face is cramping.

“Mir —”

I can’t do it anymore. My smile falls away, and for the first time in months, I’m wearing my real face at work. “Rita, go,” I say. No explanation. No grand gesture. I posture her toward the door, a little forcefully, and out of sight from the Ant Nests, I squeeze her branded hand. “You can’t be here. I can’t do this to you.” A pleasant bell tone dings as I open the door for her, and we step outside onto the marble stairs beneath the statue.

Rita’s cheeks twitch, and an angry tear wells up in her eye. “I need help,” she says. I’d like to think she understands what I’m doing, but who knows, really?

“Have a nice day, ma’am.”

Smiling again, I take a deep breath and reenter Urtzbark Rail. Darien’s there, in the balcony above. He’s not smiling. I’ve never seen him when he wasn’t smiling. His face is horrible.

Three points.

“At this time, if you have a statement to make to any emergency contacts or family, you may do so,” says Darien.

“Tell Rita Freeman I’m sorry,” I say. “And my mother — tell my mother to stop watching so much trash.”

Darien nods.

“Attention Urtzbark Rail patrons. Termination Door V is currently opening. For your own safety, please avoid transit in this area for the duration. Thank you, and have a safe trip.” Darien mouths along to the words of his own announcement and adjusts his tie. The alarm sounds, and Termination Door V starts to open. My eyes are shut tight. I don’t want to look.

When I awake, I’m in the Grand Terminal. It’s different, though. Dark. The windows are covered in copper-colored banners baring the Formico seal. I’m not standing. No, I’m leaning against something — flat like a plank. I try to push myself up, but I can’t move. No ropes. No zip ties. Something else is holding me, like mucus, but hardened. Hive glue. It wraps around my body from feet to forehead, holding every piece of me in place. I look to my side. There’s someone there. Above me, too. We’re stacked atop each other in a huge mound of flesh and crust.

Someone muffles a scream beside me. I peer over. It’s hard to tell, but I think it’s a familiar face. A vagrant. Mr. William Whipple. His cocky smirk is gone, that’s for certain. All I can make out are the whites of his eyes, big and bulging as they stare straight ahead.

Darien’s voice rings out over the loudspeaker. “Welcome, everyone, to the Second Exalted Brooding. We’re so happy to see you could make it tonight.” A chorus

of clapping and cheers bellows out, but underneath there is a current of clicks and scratches. Pedipalps and antennae squirm in hive approval. Darien continues. “I’m pleased to announce that we have exceeded the Queen’s expectations, and since the preparation for the Brooding began in the last fiscal year, we have managed to gather a host population that will increase Company assets by 120% volume.” More cheers. More claps. More scratching. “I’d like to thank the staff of

Urtzbark Rail for their dedication and service, and especially our Quality Assurance team here at the station. Without their dedication and vigilance, we would never have collected this amount of hosts.”

Then I see them — why William is so terrified. An entire hoard of Drones coming toward us. Their pincers are twitching. Behind them, in a line so uniform it seems unbelievable they haven’t rehearsed, are workers. Each carries a tiny larva in its pedipalps.

“And now, without further ado, let us all toast to the Exalted Brooding!” Darien raises his glass. The other humans follow suit, and the Emissaries touch their antennae to one another. I don’t scream. I don’t cry or struggle. All that I can do is look up to Darien. Darien who doesn’t look back to me. Darien, who smiles and schmoozes while he discusses the quarterly profits with some politician’s son from down south. And then his face disappears. It’s hidden behind the worker as she climbs and mounts my bound body. I stare into her eyes. They are perfectly black.

I like to think they have emotions — that these are merely the effects of encountering a different species — but as she cracks open the hive glue covering my mouth, as she forces the larva inside, all I can think is that the dissenters were right: there is nothing within her. But now, within me, the larva writhes down my esophagus.

Stone. I am a stone. But only on the outside. Rocky skin. Do I have skin anymore?

I’m having a change of perspective. What is being human? What is the difference between the love of one woman and the devotion of an entire hive?

My brain shrinks, and my physiology rearranges itself into something proven. The world opens itself. I see the possibilities of infinite versions of myself all working toward the same goal. What is the difference between two legs and six?

My old shape — in the months I’ve been asleep, it’s changed into something grey, dry, and ugly. I fight through the pupal casing, and my old face splits in two. We are not in the Grand Terminal, but somewhere else. Somewhere deep and dark. I have never been here, but I know it. The Queen needs me. She’s calling. I can feel her in my antennae — her sweet smell tickles and inflames me. I am told what I have to do, and it is all that I want in this world.

There is joy in work.

The First Blaspheme

Emi Rosen

“There’s no place like home,’ they say. But what if you don’t have a home? Then there is just no place. So how do you expect me to live in no place?”

“Child, your sins need to stop here. Your time will come before the gods. With some patience, your evil deeds will become unnecessary.”

“Twenty-three years. Twenty-three. My patience has worn thin for the gods. What gods would lay a child newly born onto the streets of spit, of famine and rats and expect unwavering devotion when the child receives that which all around them have had their whole lives? What sort of gods?”

“Child, as a priest, nay, a vessel for the voices of our Lords, I ask you to trust me. Nobody believes your situation to be favorable, but we must hold faith. From the greatest suffering comes the greatest growth!”

“Feh. You know what? I’ve had enough.”

“Wait.. Child! Come back! You mustn’t leave before your sins are confessed!”

Araki Nestler turned around,

“I’ve killed those who’ve kicked me, I’ve squatted in people’s homes for one good night’s sleep, I’ve raided and

obliterated shopkeepers for food. These are my sins. Tell the gods they’re next.”

The priest was left speechless as he watched Araki confidently walk out of the cathedral. She vented her frustration in shoving the heavy front doors open. If the gods won’t choose my time, one day I’ll make them wish they had, she thought. She glanced at the sun to see its position directly overhead. It was time to eat. The markets would all be busy by now, so she couldn’t go there. The best option for survival would be to reap the gifts to the dead, so she headed to the slums of the city. Down there, no number of guards would care about a little thief stealing something atop a grave.

The walk was painful, though; Araki hadn’t eaten yesterday as there were no good opportunities to find food, so each step brought on an aching cramp in her stomach. This was nothing new, however. For the past few weeks, she had had so few chances for food as well, so she ended up giving in and robbing some stores midday. She hadn’t had a burst of pure chaos like that in a few months at least. It felt good to get back at the world.

Staying quiet was more important right now, though. Araki knew she could take three or four guardsmen on her own — growing up on the streets taught her that well—but any greater and she’d be dead. It didn’t help that she stood out like

a sore thumb too: the hole in her cheek from a knife-fight, the birthmark on her head that made half her black hair white. Every guard in the district knew of her, yet none dared approach. All of this just to live. It was an aching feeling that haunted her every day.

Not only did the cramp make the walk miserable, but the shouts of the street-goers did, too. It was nothing she wasn't used to, especially up here in the wealthy district, but it still sucked having total strangers tell you to bug off when you aren't even doing anything. This day was no different. The weather was nice, which meant there were lots of people out, unfortunately leading to the expected insults to accompany the walk. Everybody needed somebody to hate. Just a few blocks down even, she spotted some kids following her. They didn't seem to want anything at first, just some curious rich kids watching a peasant like a wild animal. But of course, they treated her like they would a wild animal too, as she soon discovered.

Out of nowhere, something hard hit her on the head. A small stream of blood trickled over her eye as she yelped in pain, reflexes bringing her hand up to cover the wound. She heard laughs and turned to see those same kids snickering at her, some small rocks in hand. Araki knew better than to give them the attention they wanted, so she wiped her head with her hand and flicked a drop of blood to the ground. It was a threat that they definitely got as their faces said what their voices wouldn't: "this girl's tough,". She didn't have the time or energy for anything more.

At around a quarter past noon, she finally arrived at her destination. The largest graveyard for the poor. Those laid to rest here had enough money to afford a burial, of course, but not enough to be noticed. Perfect for her use. Araki scrounged around the many worn tombstones to find any bread or other scraps left by loved ones. No luck.

"Nothing for me today, Mr. Jones? Ms. Warren? Mr. Whatever-your-name?" she read the engravings as she walked by each headstone, "Guess this is just what a hobo who never says thanks gets."

Just as she began to leave, Araki noticed something down in one of the larger tombs. Gotcha. A lonely chicken egg sat inside the small chamber; its shell even uncracked! Araki looked at the lock on the little gate, then raised her steel-heeled boot—she stole it off of some rich tap dancer—and kicked. The lock flew off a meter, and the gate slammed open. The tomb looked like any other on the inside when Araki walked in, with the exception of the egg on the floor, of course. Upon closer inspection, the little thing seemed to be moving. It appeared a host of small spiders were trying to take it somewhere.

"Gimme that, little devils," she picked up the egg and shook the stragglers off, "you've got way more in this world you can eat than I do." At that, it almost seemed as if the spiders... looked at her. She shrugged it off and left the little room, not

thinking twice. Time to find somewhere to cook this. Araki may have never lived in a home, but she knew better than to eat stuff raw. One time, when she was maybe seven or eight years of age, she had raided the alleyway belonging to a butcher. There was plenty of meat that had been tossed out, which she'd figured would have made for at least a few days of hearty meals. She tore into it eagerly, not knowing the consequences. It didn't taste good, but even at such a young age she knew not to worry about taste when you had few options. Later that night, she felt her stomach begin to twist, and everything she'd eaten that day came out of her. She tried moving into public view to see if anyone would help the poisoned child, but no one came. People just looked at her in fear. No one wants to get near a peasant covered in vomit. Ever since that night, she knew never to eat something raw again.

When she left the graveyard, there didn't seem to be many options. Additionally, it appeared that in the time she was robbing the graves, some sort of parade had started. Everywhere on the main street was packed full of people. Araki decided to go check it out. If nothing else, it was a good chance to pickpocket. Being on the smaller side, she had to slip through the bodies to see what it was all about. After a minute or so, she came to the front and turned to the person closest to her.

"Hey, you. What's going on here?" she asked. It was a pregnant woman, looked to be shortly due.

"The Baron is coming to give a speech! People are saying he is here to show support for the working class!" the woman replied excitedly.

"What? He's never done anything like that before. I somehow doubt that is his true intention."

"Aw come on. Don't be so skeptical! Maybe he's turned over a new leaf. Though I understand your concern. You know the city is far kinder to those, uh... more honest than yourself!"

"...What?" Araki didn't like that.

"Oh, I just... y'know, figured you were a thief. I know I shouldn't assume based on someone's looks but... I can't really see where else you would have gotten... that kinda appearance from," the woman was looking at her cheek now.

"Heheh.. So now even the bottom of the barrel laughs at the ground it sits on? You realize that is exactly what the Baron is coming here to do right? He just wants to announce his riches to you like it is your own fault you live in some shitty shed that cost you generations of debt!" Araki replied.

"Hey, hey! Let's be calm n--"

"Shut up. You're no better than those who step on you," Araki then walked into the middle of the road, up the street where everyone was expecting the rich man to come from. People were looking at her now. She was planning on turning the fat money-eater around the second he got here.

“Wait! If you make a fool of yourself, the Baron may reconsider!” the pregnant woman had followed Araki.

“I said. SHUT UP!” Araki turned around and threw the egg that was still in her left hand right at the lady. It struck her square in the face and exploded. The yolk looked strange. It just wasn’t quite the yellow one would expect an egg to contain.

“And now you’ve lost me my lunch, bitch.” Araki snarled as the woman tripped from the shock and fell to her knees, the yellowish ooze nearly blinding her eyes. All faces from the crowd were on the scene now. Murmurs reached her ears as Araki heard whispers of past crimes she had committed being spread throughout the group. Nobody dared to say anything out loud.

“She’s just a pregnant lady! Leave her alone, Holeface!” but one lone voice in the crowd spoke. That did it for Araki. She growled and stepped over to the fallen woman, drawing her dagger. Some goo from the egg slid off of the woman’s eyes just in time to see the steel blade thrust into her throat, blood staining the pale hairs of her murderer before her.

“And now, she isn’t.”

People screamed. The already wide berth she was given became larger. Some ran, some couldn’t look away. Araki observed with a grin. All of these people, typically terrified by those with more than them, are now running in fear of someone with nothing. But when you are at the lowest of the low, the only people you can condemn are those above you.

“This is the truth, folks! You don’t need coin to stand above your oppressors! What’s a hunk of metal gonna do against someone with conviction, huh? Nothing!! What’s a round piece of gold going to do against sharpened steel? You all are nothing compared to me, yet I haven’t gone a day in my life where I’m not screamed at, insulted, shut down, you name it! You all experience every day what it’s like to live the low life, but none of you know it like me. The second you all have someone to make you feel strong, you become just like the Baron, just like our friends up the street. You’re all the same!” Araki yelled to the rustling crowd.

Just then, she looked back to the dead woman on the ground. She hadn’t removed the blade from her body yet. Yolk mixed with blood dripped over the dagger; she’d have to clean that up later. When she tugged at the handle, though, it didn’t budge. The vile mix of liquids then started moving up the hilt. It took her hand, her arm, her shoulder. Araki couldn’t move. Panic started to set in. What was happening? Why was this goo moving, and why was it going up her body? It hurt. It started to sting. She grimaced. As it slithered up her neck, it burned. Her head tilted away from it, but it kept going. It pulled at her jaw, opening her mouth as it climbed in. She started to choke. She could feel it moving inside of her. She tried to scream, but the deadly slime silenced it. She couldn’t breathe.

The sludge landed somewhere in her stomach, where she felt it change. It became prickly. There was no room to think, to process what was going on. Whatever it became began crawling back up her esophagus. Out of her mouth came the spider, placing its many legs on her lips before scrambling down her arm. It balanced elegantly on the blade of Araki's dagger as it turned and looked at her. Its eyes spoke through her mind.

"Let us build an army, Unchosen. Let us take this unborn child as our first soldier. Let us reform this city. Let us create a new home for the forgotten," and the spider turned once more to the corpse and entered its open throat. Araki then understood.

"Well, it seems the gods were too slow. If they won't choose me, then I shall name myself in opposition. I am Araki the Unchosen. And I will take what I should have had from birth."

The body before her seemed to convulse in agreement. Everyone around her had left now. Nobody wanted to see this, yet she would make them one day. They will face those burdens they so easily place on others. All of them. People always told her this world was just unfair, and for a while she never understood why. But now she realized that she didn't have to understand. No one else knew either, and that's never going to change; so why wait for it to?

× × × × ×

A week later, the baby was relieved of its mother's corpse. It did not smile; it did not cry. It simply gazed deep into Araki's colorless eyes. This wasn't a human, nor a spirit. The corpse-born child existed in both worlds. A super-soldier ripe for violence. It grew off of bloodshed, and if there was one thing Araki could do it was to provide that. The growth would compound as time passed, and it grew able to kill, too. It wasn't long before Araki had found her next victim. The Egg of the Queen, as she had been calling it, had left a part of itself to rest in her stomach for whenever she needed to acquire a new soldier. Progress was slow at first, but her conviction kept her on the right path. It was difficult to feed herself and her children, but after the third woman, she realized she could let them feed on the limbs of their victims. Too gross for herself, but the little fiends didn't care. Now everyone could eat.

Her name became truly known and truly revered. From the alleyways she could hear town criers announce the disappearance of yet another woman close to giving birth, and the whispers among the citizens. Those who didn't know her still insulted her when she moved in public, though it hurt less now knowing the end was near. Nobody would stop her plan. No one was even able to. Soon Araki Nestler and her misbegotten children would have a home.

A year passed. Nestler had to leave to be just outside of the city. She'd acquired so many monsters from the wombs of so many ex-mothers there was no

longer any room to hide them in the few abandoned houses inside the city walls. A nearby cave provided exactly what was needed, however, so the problem ended up being of minor inconvenience. Just a longer walk to get her basic needs. Still, though, despite the contempt that boiled in her heart for the city, it was still the closest thing to home she'd ever had. A tear ran down her face when she first left the walled perimeter in the night with her growing army. This wasn't her fault, though. She was driven out by the selfish populous. They forced her to this point. Leaving was a necessary sacrifice for the time being. Only a month or two longer...

And finally, it was time. Araki the Unchosen stepped out of her cave at the setting of the sun. Her army was ready. Five hundred glowing eyes clambered out of the cave behind her. Just as she was about to vanish into the crowd of demons, she rose. Dozens of hands swept under her as her minions lifted their Queen. She rode forth like a wave. Faster than the strongest horse ran the army of ghouls, leaving a trail of blood and grime as their sharp claws occasionally nicked whichever sibling was in front of them. It didn't matter, though. What's a few small scratches to a creature that could regenerate in a heartbeat?

She had plenty of time to think on her way to the gates. As the trees and shrubs rushed by, a silly thought came to her mind. If only I were a plant. Calm and carefree. She began to laugh. How hilarious! Here she was just unlucky enough to be born a human when she could have existed happily and carelessly as just a blade of grass. The gods really did hate her. That would be their biggest mistake. The laughing turned to a cackle. A blade of grass! Araki Nestler, Queen of the Forlorn, God of the Forgotten,

Voice of the Unheard, Prophet of the Unchosen, as a blade of grass! Her army howled with her, the wails landing somewhere between a battle-cry and a mockery of the soon-to-be ruins before them.

The laughing stopped.

"I should have killed myself long ago," Araki said to the air, "woulda been much easier to just be the soil of green plants than she who stains them red."

No. Now is not the time to be having doubts. I've worked too hard for this to go to waste. The walls were coming into view now. Besides, that would just strand my poor forgotten children to the streets just like I was. The time was approaching. In fact, I think I'll take as many lives as self-destructive thoughts I've ever had. The gates started to shut as guards began to see what was coming. I'll shove them all in the grave I never would have gotten. The heavy doors closed. To whichever whore brought me into this world, I hope you regret it. The horde of demons burst through the steel-enforced gateway as if it were nothing. The Unchosen's day had finally arrived. Kill them.

When the sun rose, no one remained.

The Dive

Morgan Melhuish

Three years I'd been away.

More since I'd ventured down to the bay.

Then there was Patrick, asking me to come back. There was my mum to see. And there was him. Still here after all this time.

There are more obvious places on this coast to be haunted: the scar of jagged rocks a mile or so out in the Irish sea, which foams with spray and looks like a cutlass from above and scuppers ships below, the Neolithic barrow on the Lock's farm, the abandoned crofter's cottage reeking of piss and tragedy.

There are scarier seasons. Mournful autumn when the harvest is done and the fields are slashed stubble, unforgiving winter with its howling, bitter winds and bleak weather.

There must be older souls too: drowned smugglers, suicidal lighthouse keepers, jilted lovers.

And yet it is this rock in summer that haunts me, Aled Sidolis preparing to dive and my twelve-year-old self stood by.

Even now, Aled stands on the rock. I watch the wriggle of his body as he tries to adopt a diver's pose.

I remember the summer breeze, the prickle of heat, not unlike today. And then there were the nerves I felt, watching him look down at the water below, turn his head to us. I could see the panic which turned to determination. We were down below, phones held out to record.

I remember the way he launched himself from the rock, a slender arrow of flesh. The way I squeezed my eyes, hoping he'd done enough to clear the cliff.

I don't need memories to re-live the crump of stone and bone, the sickening jolt... the wine dark sea and his body wave tousled. Aled is right here in front of me.

Jumping.

Flying.

Falling.

Dying.

Neither of us can escape it.

The nights I wished to boomerang him back to the clifftop safe and sound. How I wished the reel had another end.

All that potential.

No wonder he continues to dive. A stone taped tragic loop.

Today I will join him.

It was the end of July and school done for the year. The holidays stretched out satisfyingly: days like half chewed gum drawn between your mouth and fingers, seeing how wide you could make the gap before it broke and you had to quickly scoop the slobbery strands into your mouth.

“There’s all we need right here, eh, love? I’ll try and take a few days off and we’ll have a staycation. If it’s good enough for Will and Kate, eh?”

Mum doesn’t need to tell me how broke we are and I hadn’t been hinting, just mentioned how Gav was off to some Spanish resort and Big Dan had been sent packing to his grandma in Pontypridd. She didn’t need to invoke royalty.

“When I was your age, I’d have killed to be this close to the sea.” She ruffled my hair, and I tried to dodge away. I knew she was sad we couldn’t holiday that year and I wish I’d never brought the subject up.

If you stood on your tiptoes and craned your neck out the bathroom window, you could just about see a sliver of dark blue below the sky. By bike, the bay was about ten minutes, all downhill.

So while she was at work my days were gummed up with swimming and crabbing, the occasional ice cream or bag of chips when the pay from my newspaper round came in, climbing the headland, misdirecting tourists for a laugh, taking the bus to Bangor and dodging the fifty pence fee on the pier, cooling off in the shopping centre’s air-con, mucking about.

Wasting time, frittering it away, until one morning, he called my name.

“Rhys!”

I turned sharply at the sound reverberating around the cul-de-sac, far too loud in the morning stillness. Blearily, I zoned into the boy at the bedroom window, knowing precisely who lived there. I’d been delivering newspapers to his home for weeks, pretending at school I didn’t know a thing about Aled, pretending I didn’t come to his door each morning.

You couldn’t move to somewhere like this and expect to be anonymous for long.

The Sidolis had arrived from the south mid year - ma, da and son - avoiding the shittier ‘social housing’ of the area, where I lived, to wind up in this gated community. The father was a troubleshooter, called in to work at Llanddau Saint’s nuclear reactor. They weren’t words you wanted to hear put together. It wasn’t that

we feared a wintery fall out, but we all knew his presence would mean redundancies and that was almost worse.

The power plant was traditionally one of few escape routes open to people on our estate. Its fading vogue, like the pits and mines before, the search for greener energy, meant we'd be at even more of a loss.

And so Aled joined our year group - in the same form as me, but in none of the same sets. He was clever, you could tell he wasn't someone who was going to stick around.

Once he'd shouted, and had my attention, Aled seemed awkward and unsure.

"Alright?" He asked lamely.

"Alright," I affirmed.

"Wanna..." he flailed. "Hang?"

I jerked the newspaper bag slung across my shoulder. "Can't."

There was a moment when neither of us moved.

"After?"

It wasn't like I had anything better to do.

If only I had...

I'd like to say I was just using him for his consoles - plural - and cool stocked fridge. For Aled's multiple channels and comfy sofa. Somehow, that would make things easier.

And to begin with I was. Then things got complicated. I told myself his smile had no effect on me, that his jokes didn't make me laugh.

I knew what the others thought of him, of what he represented. Jim's dad had already been laid off.

"I'm so pleased Aled has found a friend," his mother said one morning as I placed their newspaper on the breakfast bar. "It can be hard, being new."

I wanted to deny it. "Oh, we're not friends..." the words were almost in my mouth when I guiltily swallowed them down. I just nodded to her, a lump in my throat.

I'd kid myself I didn't notice his puppy dog eyes lighting up at any kindness I showed him, when I agreed to stay to tea or I let him watch Heartstopper on Netflix - neither of us mentioning how he sat next to me in form. How I'd barely spoken to him these last few months. Both of us intensely aware of our proximity to one another on the sofa, the rugby boys on screen. How I'd jumped up at animated leaves curling in the corners of the screen and fled.

“Oi! We knocked for you,” Patrick accused, shouting over as I tried my best to pedal past them unseen.

“Twice,” Jim chipped in. I dragged my bike over rough potholes and came to a stop by the kerb of the graffiti-tagged convenience store on the edge of our estate.

“Alright lads,” I tried to smile like it was nothing, that I hadn’t been avoiding them for days.

“Where you been then?”

“Out. Should have rung.” We all knew signal around here was piss poor.

“Doing what?” Jim wouldn’t let it lie.

I shrugged.

“Come down to Cemlyn tomorrow.” Patrick made it sound like an instruction.

“Alright,” I bounced my front tyre up and down on the kerb.

Can I come? The message flashed up on WhatsApp.

I knew he’d ask when I told him I couldn’t come over.

What to say? Yes. No. Blank him. Tell him it’s a really bad idea.

I had no idea how bad.

I typed out, it’s a free country, and watched two blue ticks appear.

Although the power plant was perched around the headland, you couldn’t see it at all from the slate-grey pebbly crescent of Cemlyn bay. The locals say the waters are warmer here thanks to the radiation, that three headed fish have been netted and glowing seven-pronged star fish spotted. People will say anything. This is Wales, not a Marvel movie.

For days there’d barely been a cloud in the sky and my fingers were covered in the smudges of ink from headlines proclaiming hose pipe bans and heatwaves. My palms were sweaty, loosely gripping handlebars as the four of us freewheeled down to the bay. Gav was with us, full of tall tales of Spanish girls and unlimited burgers at the all-inclusive hotel.

The oppressive temperature pounded inside my skull and there was an emptiness within, trepidation, a conflict of feeling... wanting to see Aled yet desperate to keep those two worlds apart.

He wasn’t there when we arrived and I breathed a sigh of relief as we let our bikes drop and we stripped rucksacks and t-shirts, eager to get in the water. Trainers were kicked off, and I’d already got my swim shorts on, doing that high knee ‘ouch ouch’ dash across angular and sharp stones to the surf. I waded in, three strides and then launching myself forwards. The breath was knocked from me in a half laugh, half gasp, the chill struck groin, armpits, neck, small of the back... I surfaced with

a cry. Then the others were splashing, grinning, spitting, front crawling, jostling, lobbing a tennis ball.

There was a messy chaos to them I'd missed. I tried to imagine Aled amongst them and failed.

Speak of the Devil... I only had to think of him and Aled appeared. It was Gav who saw him first, a nod of the head, the jerk of an elbow in his direction.

“What the fuck's he doing here?”

It was time to confess, but before I could, Aled clocked me and waved. “Rhys!”

“Something you wanna share?” Patrick raised an eyebrow.

I shrugged. “He's OK...”

“OK? His dad...” Jim protested.

“I know, but he didn't did he?”

They looked at me with thinly veiled annoyance and incomprehension.

I got out and walked over, conscious of my bare chest. I crossed my arms in the way ma does when she's settling in for a good gossip.

“Alright?”

Aled was all smiles, eyes glittering the way the sea twinkles. He just nodded, not trusting words.

“Some of the lads aren't so keen you being here,” I warned.

“Oh.” He was crestfallen. Aled wasn't stupid, I don't know how he couldn't have foreseen this animosity. Book smarts don't mean a thing.

“They're muppets but you'll win them over.” I smiled and then turned away, a little embarrassed, caught between stone and surf, between them and him.

Before Aled changed, the others had surrounded him, dripping and looming large.

“Alright?”

“Rhys says you're sound.”

Aled looked at me and gave a nod, intimidated.

“There's an initiation.”

“Did he tell you?”

Aled shook his head, and Patrick pointed.

At the edge of the bay, pebbles gave way to rocks, huge hewn lumps that had

once tumbled and tried to break free from the land. Many were covered in a sparse layer of grass, pink thrift sprouting in cracks. Sometimes sheep grazed on the top or there'd be lads casting off lines but that day there was no one.

“Jump.”

“Jump?” Aled echoed.

“From there. We all have.”

It was true; we had. We'd probably have gone on to the rocks after swimming.

“I'll show you,” I offered, but Patrick glared at me.

“He's clever. He'll work it out.”

“Fine,” Aled told the lads and there was a nod of approval, Gav slapped him on the back.

All these years Aled's haunted me. Not just in Cemlyn bay. I've held him in my head, in my heart. He's like the donor card I carry in my wallet, his is the smile I search for on men in bars. He's the old acquaintance I toast on New Year's Eve. Aled Sidolis made me.

He drove me to escape his spectre.

He pushed me beyond all this - the sink pit of social housing and empty opportunities.

But today I am back, each street a memory lane, each road a recollection, all leading down to the sea.

“Where are you creeping off to? You only just arrived.” I hadn't realised Patrick was out here, sneaking a crafty ciggie in the graveyard.

“Thought I'd...” My face must say it all.

“Better you than me.”

“Do you ever...?”

Patrick shakes his head vehemently. “Never.”

“Is that why you called her Alice. Aled. Alice?” His first born, my new god-daughter. The christening the reason I've come home.

Patrick just stares at me, eyes smarting, then he waves around the gently smoking cigarette and I'm off.

Aled's there, of course, up on the rocks.

Jumping.

Flying.

Falling.

Dying.

I watch him as I shuck clothes. Neither of us can escape it.

The first time it happened his head cracked against a rock. We all felt it. Patrick threw up there and then on the stones.

By the time I reached him, Aled had drowned. Wave-battered, tear-sodden, I could barely see as I put an arm around his neck and pulled him to me. In a desperate crawl, I brought him to the shore, choking apologies and snot, gulping down mouthfuls of salt.

In death, it was the closest we'd been. Skin on skin slippery. He was still warm, still soft.

I might have tried mouth to mouth if it wasn't for his head, blood diluted and trickling down his cheek, down his chest...

I was just a confused kid. I didn't know what to do for the best.

But now I go to him.

I can see his jaw, set and determined. He shuffles his feet as I climb, disappears from view as I round the headland.

"Aled."

He looks panicked, searching around for the source of my words.

"I'm here," I try to reassure. I reach out to him but he is gone and I gasp at his leap. Once again, he's beyond my fingertips.

On the bay a family are paddle boarding, an older couple in matching deck-chairs sit ignoring one another in favour of paperbacks. They're oblivious to his supernatural splash. I can see my clothes, a tiny cairn of cloth. A gravestone, I think, and shudder.

It doesn't take long for Aled to return and when he does, I'm ready for him. Despite the warmth to the day, the hair on my naked arms stand alert as skin becomes gooseflesh.

"I'm here Aled. Let me show you. Let me," and I walk right through him, taking a run at it, pushing down on the rock, launching myself from the ledge. I haven't done this for years. The days Jim, Gav and I would loop round and round, laughing lemmings, enjoying the thrill and the flight - however temporary.

Somehow I feel Aled at my back, the sensation of his touch is an electric shock, and then he is gone again.

Water rushes up and covers me. There is the sound of the sea, a pull and drag. Currents of the past.

Thank you, the freezing impact of the water pushes the words from my head and I emerge gasping and crying.

“Thank you Aled,” I call out.

I turn but on the clifftop there is no one. There is no one as I towel off by the car park.

I smile.

He was just waiting for me to dive.

COMING SOON FROM
PSYCHOTOXIN PRESS

6/15 OPEN HOUSE BY NICO BELL

6/29 OUTBACK BY STEPHEN W. CHESHIRE

7/1 EIDOLOTRY DIGITAL #8

7/15 666 FLAGS: A FUNDRAISING ANTHOLOGY

7/22 THE STEPNEY GREEN KILLER BY ERIC HANSON

ALL STORIES ©2023 THEIR RESPECTIVE AUTHORS

INTERIOR ART ©2023 JANIS HOLM & SKY MYERS



WWW.PSYCHOTOXIN.COM