

SARAH AT THE TIDE POOL

By Marina Fitch

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SARAH CROUCHES BESIDE THE tide pool, her water bottle beside her knee. She tugs the brim of her straw hat, tucking a lock of her brown hair under its band, and smooths the sleeves of her cotton blouse in hopes they will help protect her from the sun. An hour's exposure, wearing a forty-two sun block, is considered an acceptable risk for people in their twenties; Sarah is thirty-seven. She glances over her shoulder at the expanse of yellow sand stretching behind her, at her footprints wandering in and out of the surf. No one in sight. Only fools risk the late May sun at noon — fools and desperate people.

She hesitates, then dips her hand beneath the surface of the tide pool, bracing herself against the chill. But there is no chill, just the coolness of the water as it chums briefly with the runoff of a wave. She makes a mental note to record this observation when she returns to her lab, then remembers. She may never see the lab at MediChem again.

She squints down the beach. Where is he?

She turns back to the pool. Framed by algae and rock, the tidal world shimmers below her. A hermit crab, startled by Sarah's shadow and her hand, scuttles into a protective niche between two green anemones. The pool drains. Exposed to the air, the anemones squeeze shut so that they look like plastic tubes with tufts of yam sticking out. A decorator crab heads for a fissure, its shell drably ornamented with barnacles, a tiny anemone and a fringe of algae. Mussels and starfish cling to the rock. Sarah smiles wistfully. She hadn't really expected to see a nudibranch in the narrow pool.

On a Sunday morning in February, Sarah unlocked her lab and found a stranger waiting for her, bent over the aquarium. He straightened, towering over her five feet. "What are you doing here?" she demanded.

The tall man tapped the aquarium wall. The security badge clipped to his collar jiggled. "Are these the nudibranchs? They look like slugs."

"Please don't tap the glass," Sarah said, grasping his hand between her thumb and her index finger. She guided his hand away from the glass, then dropped it.

The man folded his lean body into a crouch. The shadows of the aquarium bubbles played across his features, across the broad cheeks and the nose flattened as if pressed against invisible glass. "I can't believe how many requisitions you've put in for these things."

Sarah fisted her hands and scratched her palms with her fingernails. "I use

them in my research.”

The man turned, watching her for a second. “I make you nervous.”

“Strangers in my lab always make me nervous.”

The man stood. He stroked the base of the STM settled on the counter next to the aquarium. “Dr. Huron, I’m hardly a stranger — well, not to the company.” He extended a hand. “Jason Whitcomb. I’m also with MediChem.”

She shook his hand, then pulled her own away.

“You’re developing an artificial skin,” he said.

She leaned against the far counter, pressing against it as if she could embed herself into the pine cabinets. “An organic skin, to replace damaged skin,” she said.

“And a temporary one people can apply instead of sunscreen,” Jason Whitcomb said. He pursed his lips. “You know, I’ve found that a lot of researchers have a personal motive behind their work. What about you? What would this skin allow you to do that, say, a sunscreen wouldn’t? Swim?”

Sarah studied him; she didn’t trust him, not with knowledge as personal as her mother’s cancer. “Swim, yes. And I, uh, I miss visiting the tide pools at Thieves’ Point.”

“Thieves’ Point.?”

“I used to go there a lot as a child. I still go there once in awhile when I need to think or when I’m stressed.”

He nodded, eyebrows raised. “I understand your research is coming along very well.”

Sarah reached behind to steady herself. Her fingers tightened on the lip of the steel sink. “My project is classified.”

“I have top security clearance.”

“You haven’t proved that, your clearance.”

He smiled; a broad grin further flattened his nose and narrowed his gray eyes. “No, I guess I haven’t,” he said. He unclipped his badge and handed it to her. She scrutinized it, then handed it back.

“Why so many nudibranchs?” he said.

“I like them. Each species is different. Each has its own defense.”

“You like that.”

“Everything should have a defense,” Sarah said softly.

STILL AND quiet, Sarah watches the tide pool. Her knees are a little unsteady; she places a hand carefully on the rock, avoiding the sharp edges of the mussels and barnacles. A wave breaks over the far rocks in a plume of spray, the froth surging to beat against the outcrop where Sarah waits. It sluices into her tide pool, washing over the anemones so that they bloom into mums of tiny, undulating fingers. Timidly, the hermit crab creeps from between their stalks.

Sarah exclaims and leans forward. The hermit crab’s shell glistens, as black as Richard’s eyes.

Sarah looked anywhere but at Jason Whitcomb as he spoke. Her gaze traveled the lab: a fifty-gallon tank of nudibranchs, two STMs with fractal display screens, a multitude of cupboards, clean white counters, the coffin-shaped glass flotation tank, the refrigeration room. And that was just what she could see. Behind the counter and cupboards where Jason Whitcomb perched sat the Mitsubishi molecular computer, laser diode spectrometer, a centrifuge surrounded by rows of test tubes and pipettes; beyond that a door leading to a hall lined with the other labs and the tiny windowless rooms that housed shared equipment.

The only world Sarah knew.

“— is vital to the company,” Jason Whitcomb said. “We need that skin to keep us afloat — keep us competitive. Dr. Huron?”

Sarah blinked, turned to meet his gaze. “Mr. Whitcomb?”

“Jason, please,” he said.

Sarah nodded absently.

“Anyway, as you know there has been maximum security around your project —”

“What do you want from me?”

“Sarah —”

“Dr. Huron, please.”

He pursed his lips. “Dr. Huron,” he said distinctly. “One of our competitors, Hansen Biomedicals, is on the verge of developing their own arti — uh, ‘organic’ skin, despite the fact that a year ago they had no such project on record.”

Sarah shook her head. “If they can create an organic skin, more power to them. Without it, people aren’t going to be able to lead normal lives. What we’re talking about is survival, Mr. Whitcomb.”

“Jason.” He straightened. With his shoulders squared, he looked even more threatening. “Yes, Dr. Huron. Survival. The survival of this company. And, need I say it? The survival of your research.”

Sarah looked away.

“If Hansen succeeds first,” he said coolly, “MediChem has no reason to fund your research. MediChem would probably be forced to shut down your lab.”

Sarah winced as her stomach clenched.

“What we want from you is a skin, one that can secrete a toxin that will kill anyone the wearer touches.”

Sarah’s mouth went dry. “My God.”

“Just like the nudibranch that dissolves its enemy.” Jason’s voice softened. He tapped at the aquarium again. “Which one is it? The pinkish, ragged one? Or that yellow one?”

Sarah held onto the counter for support. “I can’t do that.”

“Sure you can,” Jason said. “You’ve already made a prototype skin. Now you just create one with microscopic glands that secrete a neurotoxin. One that can be released at will.”

“I can’t.”

“You like your job, don’t you, Dr. Huron? But you must. You spend all of your time here. You have no friends outside this building, no one you spend time with”

Sarah’s hands tightened on the counter. “Did it ever occur to you what the neurotoxin might do to the wearer?”

He shook his head. “The nudibranch doesn’t die. Why should the assassin? You can insure that, Sarah.”

Her stomach knotted. “I don’t want to see my research used— Who are you planning to . . . ?”

“Someone who used to work here. Someone who took classified documents to Hansen.”

Sarah closed her eyes. She pinched her temples, trying to ease the sudden pounding in her head. “Who?”

“Dr. Richard Madera.”

Sarah released her temples. A surge of blood slammed her heart to a stop; her pulse raced when her heart began beating again. She opened her eyes. Jason’s face floated across from her on a tide of actinic flashes.

He smiled. “So you see,” he said, “not only would it be an act of loyalty, but one of revenge.”

The hermit crab scabbles across the floor of the tide pool, pausing to shove aside a pebble in its path, then darts over the uneven stone to a pocket of sand just beyond Sarah’s sight. She leans further over the pool. The hermit crab trots into the fissure only to back out quickly, followed by the claw-waving decorator crab. Sarah smiles.

Richard liked hermit crabs. He refused to let her keep a tank of nudibranchs at home, but he encouraged her to keep hermit crabs. He liked to watch them change shells. He brought home shells for her hermit crabs the way some spouses brought home flowers for the piano. Perhaps if she could remember when he stopped bringing home cowries and conches, she could figure out when and why the marriage went sour.

But maybe not.

Sarah reaches for the hermit crab, careful to touch only the shell, not the tender body. The crab tucks itself deeper inside its fortress. Sarah lifts it from the water. Frantic, it shakes a claw at her.

SARAH LOOKED up from the microscope and stared at the cupboards and equipment around her, a habit she’d fallen into since Jason Whitcomb’s visit five days ago. She could call the police, but no one would believe her. And even if they did, MediChem would cover it up, Richard would die in some “accident,” and she would lose the lab.

She placed her hand against the cool wall of the tank. The lab was her world. And now that world had been invaded by Jason Whitcomb — and Richard’s voice.

Whenever she relaxed, her mind replayed the night Richard left. Maybe I just need a fling, maybe I'll be back, he'd said. But right now, I need someone with a real life, someone alive.

My work is too important right now, she'd said. I need to develop that skin so my mother and people like her can live.

Sarah, you work seven days a week, twelve, fifteen hours a day. You don't care about people — you don't see your mother anymore, or anyone else. You don't even see me, and I live with you.

I see you when I get home from the lab.

For a whole half hour before you drop into bed. You're hiding in that lab, closing yourself off.

I'm getting results. What are you getting?

He'd glared at her through hateful, narrowed eyes. God, I'd love to smash your lab, force you out of your insulated little cave.

But the next morning it was Sarah who did the smashing. Lining up his prized Waterford crystal on the concrete patio, Sarah had taken Richard's hammer and shattered each tumbler, each wine, sherry, and champagne glass. "Just try to use these with her!" she'd shouted. "Just try!"

A giddy elation bubbled through her all day, sustained her whenever a pang of loss clawed at her in the lab. Sustained her — until she went home to the wink and sparkle of splintered crystal.

By the time Richard returned two days later to collect his things, she had replaced each glass — after twenty-seven phone calls and a hundred and thirty-three mile round trip to three specialty stores in San Francisco.

Sarah blinked and turned to watch a spotted nudibranch creep along the bottom of the tank that stood beside the microscope. Her temples pounded. God, I'd love to smash your lab, force you out of your insulated little cave. She rubbed her eyes. Was that what Richard was doing — smashing her lab by beating her at her own research? A cold anger built in her. He had his airhead lab tech, why couldn't he just leave her alone? Why destroy the only thing she had left?

Sarah winced. The only thing?

She remembered the day her father called the lab. No one else had come in that day; Sarah answered the phone. At the sight of her father's face, she tensed. Staring at the palm-sized videoscreen, she prayed her mother hadn't found another

melanoma. “What is it, Dad?” she said. “Is Mom all right?”

“She’s fine. She’s right here beside me, Pumpkin,” her father said. Her mother leaned into view. “We just wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas.”

Her eyes suddenly focused on the lab. Snowflakes cut from old memos flurried across the window while garlands of colored pipette tips hung from the overhead cupboards. Undoubtedly the work of Freda and Sam, the lab techs. “Is it Christmas, Dad?” she asked.

“Ho ho ho! Sure is, Pumpkin,” her father said.

Her mother smiled. “Merry Christmas, darling.”

She hung up the phone, walking to the window to peer out at the woodland beyond. Richard had always dragged her from the lab on Christmas Eve, bodily if necessary, and driven her to the snow. Then at midnight they had toasted with the Waterford champagne glasses. But this year Richard and his airhead toasted in some alpine cabin.

She’d turned away from the window and gone back to her work. She had her research; there was nothing she’d rather be doing. Nothing else worth doing.

Sarah pressed her hand against the side of the aquarium. “Damn you, Richard,” she said. “You could at least leave me this.”

One of the lab techs leaned toward her. “Dr. Huron?”

“Nothing, Freda,” Sarah said, forcing a smile. “Just talking to myself.”

“I’ll be back next week,” Jason Whitcomb had said that first Sunday. Sarah imagined Richard wielding a sledge hammer, shattering the aquarium and the microscopes. Then she imagined him in a heap, his limbs partially eaten away by acid. A chill satisfaction filled her, followed by an aching loneliness.

Sarah sets the hermit crab down carefully. It skitters toward the fissure, scrambling over the top of the decorator crab. The larger crab raises its claws and sidesteps in pursuit of the intruder.

“Someday you’ll get out of the tide pool,” Sarah tells the hermit crab. “Just don’t get caught in another one.”

The following Sunday Sarah walked into the lab to find Jason Whitcomb perched on the counter by the sink. “Been to Thieves’ Point lately?” he asked.

Sarah looked away. “Yesterday.”

“Ah, been thinking. And what have you decided?”

Sarah rubbed her temples to keep the headache at bay. “Why this? Why go to all this trouble?”

Jason shrugged. “Because not only do we want to kill him, we want to discredit his research. If he dies of some weird, mysterious neurotoxin— one which, incidentally, we’ll also use to contaminate his cultures —the public will never trust his nano-engineered skin.”

“If someone finds out about it.”

“We’ll make sure someone does.” He smiled at her. “The public loves a mystery and the media loves to give it to them.”

The headache blinded Sarah momentarily. She closed her eyes. “Wouldn’t it be enough to destroy his lab?”

“We could leave him a vegetable.”

She opened her eyes. “So whatever I decide, Richard is dead.”

“Looks that way.” Jason studied her. “You know, Dr. Huron, at your age it’s tough setting up a new lab with a new corporation . . . providing anyone hires you. MediChem would never be able to recommend you, of course.”

He nodded thoughtfully, almost sadly. “I met a man with a Ph.D. in biochemistry the other day. He was working at a men’s clothing store. Said he couldn’t get a research position. Tried for years. Dried up, bitter man.”

Sarah shuddered. “I wouldn’t have to wear the skin?”

“No. We’ve got someone lined up for that.”

“And this person is going to shake Ri— the victim’s hand repeatedly or something?”

Jason’s smile deepened. “Seduce him. You know, don’t you, that he left the lab tech?”

Sarah straightened, her shoulders rising.

“Oh, yes,” Jason said. “She didn’t last long, just a couple of months. He’s been, how should I put it? ‘Sleeping around’ quite a bit.”

Her shoulders collapsed. Maybe I just need a fling Or maybe a hundred flings. Or maybe he would never come back. “He was working on a cure for lung cancer when he worked for MediChem.”

Jason’s eyes narrowed, but not with a smile this time. “That’s what he wanted us to think.”

Sarah laughed incredulously. “You can’t believe he was an industrial spy from the start!”

“He left suddenly, didn’t he? Both you and the company. Maybe he got what he needed from both of us.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “He used you, Sarah.”

Her stomach knotted. Used her, then thought so little of her, he’d set about to destroy the most important part of her life, the only thing left of her life. In her mind she swung the hammer, not at Richard’s Waterford crystal, but at his head.

The cold glint in Jason’s eyes grew icier. “Are you going to help, Dr. Huron?”

Sarah flushed.

Jason scraped his foot across one of the cabinet doors. “Of course, if you refuse, you may prove too dangerous”

Sarah stared at the floor, imagining it opening up to swallow her. The chasm rumbled wider, one side stretched by Richard, the other by Jason.

Sarah looked up at Jason slowly, her gaze taking him in from foot to face. She paused at his crotch, wondering if the man was devoid not only of a heart but of other traces of humanity as well. She looked him in the eye. “All right,” she said. “I’ll develop the skin for you. But I’ll need to run tests on the person I’ll be grafting.”

Jason hopped from the counter. His shoes slapped the linoleum. “She’s waiting in the lounge down the hall.”

“Wait, how soon —” Sarah caught at his arm, then pushed him away, startled at the contact. Jason wheeled to look at her, surprised. Sarah curled into herself, lifting her chin. “How soon do you expect me to have this finished?”

“Not till early summer. Say, end of May, early June.”

“I don’t know if I can —”

“I know about your prototype, Sarah.”

She shook her head. “But two months —”

“You can do it, Sarah. You will do it.” He walked briskly to the door.

Sarah paced before the aquarium. Her mind sped through every process and experiment that had produced the skin. Yes, she could do it. The prototype needed few improvements and the glands —

She turned when the lab door clicked open. Jason escorted a young woman in by the elbow. Sarah scored her palms with her nails. A tall woman, the assassin strolled into the room, her thick waist and round, pert bottom accentuated by her stride. In stature and in build, she was similar to Richard’s lab tech — except for her mane of red hair.

Sarah glances over her shoulder again. A lone figure appears on the horizon, wavering like a mirage. Sarah turns again to the tide pool. She hugs her knees, resting her chin between them as she stares into the water. A transparent fish no bigger than her little toe darts across the pool, brushing the tentacles of the larger anemone. The anemone closes on the fish, clasping its prize in its fist of stinging fingers.

Celeste sat beside the flotation tank, her right arm submerged in the buoyant fluid. Wired dermals dotted her forearm like moles. “So why did he leave you, he ever tell you?” she asked.

“Sort of,” Sarah said. She liked Celeste’s Sunday visits, even though the other woman insisted on bringing up painful topics. Sarah touched Celeste’s arm above the elbow. “Move your arm. I want to see if the graft is taking.”

Celeste twisted her arm, the gel coating her forearm translucent, glistening. “How long before it becomes skin?”

“Another half hour.” Sarah touched the edge of the graft, a bit of the gel sticking to her fingers. “Celeste, are you putting on weight?”

Celeste shrugged her left shoulder. “A little. So, anyway, why did he leave?”

“He said he wanted more out of a life,” Sarah said, checking the monitors. Everything looked good. There was no sign of tissue rejection. “I’ve told you this.”

“So he went after some blonde twit. He have a thing for blondes?”

“Yeah. I mean, that’s what he always seemed to notice. You know, when we were out to dinner or out to a movie.” Sarah smiled, shaking her head. “I used to tease him that his ideal woman was a blonde of about five eleven with no waist, thick

hips, and a wide bottom.”

“A fat ass, huh? And is that what this lab tech was like?”

Sarah winced. “Yeah. Yeah, she was.”

Celeste shifted a little. She glanced over at the aquarium. “Those little nudibranchs are kind of ugly. Cute ugly. You ever think about adding sea horses to the tank?”

“Too much trouble.” She avoided Celeste’s gaze. “I need another blood sample.”

Celeste offered her left arm. She grunted at the prick of the syringe. “He really hurt you,” she said.

Sarah smeared blood across a slide, then set the slide on the counter. She robbed the bridge of her nose with the back of her hand.

Celeste touched Sarah’s face. Sarah blinked as the other woman erased a tear from her cheek with the tip of a finger. “You really loved him,” Celeste said gently. “He was your only real connection to the world outside of this lab.”

“I had no idea he was unhappy. One night he came home and told me he was leaving me. He’d accepted the job at Hansen without even telling me he’d applied.” Sarah’s voice quavered. “I had no idea.”

Celeste caught the second tear. “What was he like, Sarah?”

“Oh, a kind man.”

“Kind, after what he did to you?”

“He — he seemed kind. And intelligent. A good sense of humor.”

Celeste studied her. “Yeah?”

Sarah shrugged helplessly. “He . . . loved to go for walks in the evening after the UV levels dropped. He was careful about stuff like that, a health nut. And he loved Waterford crystal.”

Celeste nodded, resubmerging her right arm which had risen above the surface of the fluid. “He liked Waterford crystal,” she said.

“Yes, the way it sparkled. And he liked reading” Sarah stared into her hands. But what had Richard read? Had she ever asked, ever bothered to find out?

Sarah sank to the floor next to Celeste's chair, her legs tucked under her. What had Richard liked? Which sports, which foods? Well, broccoli, but when they went to dinner what sort of dishes did he order? Sarah began to tremble. She knew about his research, about his experiments in molecular assemblers, but what was his favorite dessert? His favorite flower? She buried her face in her hands. What was his favorite color?

Her hands filled with tears. "God, oh God."

Celeste's left arm wound awkwardly around her, pulled her close. "He really hurt you, the bastard. And now he's trying to discredit your research by making it obsolete. Fucking bastard."

Sarah tried to protest, but the words dissolved beneath the weight of her tears. Celeste rocked her, stroking her hair. "Hey," Celeste crooned. "We'll fix him, Sarah. We'll fix him."

Sarah screamed around her fist.

And thought about Richard, and who he was. Thought about those two things all week long, wandering through the house late at night, touching the few books Richard left behind, laying out the jewelry he'd bought her, the delicate wire rings and earrings, the thin gold chain with the three diamonds and the gold star. She played the albums he'd forgotten. And she waited for Sunday so that she could tell Celeste about Richard.

"He likes Chopin and old nineties metal and —" The words died on Sarah's lips as Jason walked through the lab door behind Celeste. Sarah's hands knotted, then fell open in surprise. Celeste strode into the room, dressed in an old black leotard and pink tights. Her hair, once so red, was a pale, sun-kissed blonde. In the past month and a half, her hips and waist had thickened, her bottom ballooned. She was Richard's dream woman come to life.

Sarah's shoulders folded inward. Her chest felt as though it would crack with the pressure. Jealousy weighted the edge. As soon as Richard met Celeste, as soon as — The image of Celeste and Richard entwined, tangled in fresh white sheets burned through her. Sarah's hands clenched and unclenched.

"What do you think?" Celeste said, spinning.

"Perfect, isn't she?" Jason said. "With bait like this, we should have no trouble landing him."

"Piece of cake," Celeste said. Her eyes glowed with satisfaction. But not just satisfaction — pity stared back at Sarah, and scorn. Sarah searched Celeste's face for the kind, empathic person who had worked so hard at opening her up . . .

worked so hard

Sarah hugged herself to ward off the sudden chill. Of course it was work. Celeste needed all the information she could get so that she could kill Richard. Kill him. Ice filled the void in Sarah's heart as the reality of it hit her. Not some fantasy, some childish revenge— dead. And there would be no putting Richard back together, no calling around to replace him.

Driven by the excitement and the fear, she had lost sight of the goal, had only paid it lip service. As she had with her research

“When will the skin be ready?” Jason said.

Sarah stared at him blankly, then shook herself. “Two weeks.”

“Do you have any further need of Celeste?”

“No. I don't think so.”

Celeste smiled at her, a smile tinged with scorn. “Well, Dr. Huron, if that's the case,” she said, and turned to leave the room. She paused at the door. “Let me know when you need me for the final graft, Jason.”

The door thumped shut. Sarah robbed her arms.

“We managed to get some information from the lab tech,” Jason said. Numb, Sarah nodded.

“Oh, and MediChem is delighted with your progress. I understand the company is going to budget more money for your research. That should give you something to think about. Time for another trip to Thieves' Point, ch, Sarah?”

She stared at him. He crouched before the aquarium, a smirk tainting his lips. Celeste wasn't the only one who had worked hard to reach her.

The mirage solidifies into a man. Sarah watches him for a while, then removes her shirt and her hat. Her body flushes with the unfiltered heat, her bikini top damp with perspiration. She dips her hand in the tide pool, hoping the cold water bubbling over her wrists will cool her. The sea anemone reopens at the disturbance of the water.

Sarah worked on the skin. When it came time for the graft, she spread the gel over Celeste's body, set the sensors, then helped Celeste into the flotation tank. After injecting the cultures into the gel, Sarah sat down to watch the monitors.

Hours later, Celeste toweled off, the chafe of the terry cloth adding a healthy

glow to the new skin. Sarah's voice broke as she explained how to activate the neurotoxin glands linked to Celeste's nervous system. She fell silent.

Celeste tossed her ice-blonde hair with a laugh of triumph. "Don't worry, Dr. Huron. I'm a professional. And I enjoy my work."

"Enjoy it?" Sarah whispered.

"Killing is exciting," Celeste said.

Jason grinned.

Sarah took a deep breath and began her explanation again.

AS JASON strolls toward her, his unbuttoned shirt flapping in the breeze, Sarah rises. Her right leg tingles awake; she sinks again into the squatting position. She takes a long draught from her water bottle, the liquid tantalizing her parched throat. She hesitates, then chugs the last of it.

Jason stops, staring at her, a frustrated, angry cast to his features. "I knew I'd find you here," he says. "Something went wrong, Sarah."

The blood drains from Sarah's face. She swallows.

Later, Sarah repeated the explanation. "The glands are activated by a pulse rate of 200 or higher. A strong dose of adrenaline will do it."

"And you've given her an adrenaline tablet?" Richard said.

"Yes. Watch her. When you get to the hotel room, she'll probably ask for a glass of water. I made sure the tablet was too big for her to swallow without water."

Richard's lower lip trembled. "You're sure, Sarah?"

Sarah turned away, unable to meet his black eyes. "I'm sure, Richard. I designed the skin. Be very careful. Please."

She expected him to walk away without saying a word, to leave her in the coffee shop alone. At the very least. A string of obscenities seemed likely, too, or even a slap or a punch. Any of them seemed likely considering what she had just told him — that she had helped plan his assassination.

But Richard took her hand under the table, squeezed it, and said, "Thank you."

Sarah looked up. Horror and anger colored his face, but gratitude muted

them. "I'm sorry," she said.

Richard coughed. "You hated me that much?"

"I thought I did." She turned away. "I thought you were — were"

Richard cleared his throat. "You thought I was trying to destroy your research."

She pressed her lips together, nodded. She could only guess at the other lies Jason had told her, keeping her lab was probably one of them. She forced a smile. "I thought you were taking away my reason for living. I have nothing else left, Richard. You know that."

"Sarah," he murmured.

Silence stretched between them. Richard sat up suddenly. "Did anyone follow you?"

"No. I made sure."

"You're positive?"

"I left the lights on in the lab and climbed out the window. And no one's following you. You have a date with her tonight. That's all they need to know about your whereabouts." She flicked her hand free and slid from the booth. "I better go."

"Sarah?"

She looked at him.

"Sarah, be careful."

Sarah's heart pounds. Jason climbs the rock and looms over her. "What?" Sarah says. "What happened?"

"Something went wrong with the skin," Jason says.

"No, it couldn't have," Sarah says. She stands quickly. Her right leg, still a mass of tingles, collapses under her and she pitches forward. Jason catches her. She clings to him, taking the weight off of her throbbing leg. "No, Jason," she says to his bare chest. "No, nothing went wrong."

He steadies her, his fingers digging into her arms. His voice is low and accusatory. "Bullshit. The whole thing went wrong."

She shakes her head. Her temples hammer as if the veins will burst. “No,” she says.

“You lying bitch!” Jason holds her away from him and shakes her. “We know, Sarah. We brought Celeste’s body back to MediChem. The glands secreted inward, into Celeste, not outward into Richard.”

Sarah pulls away from him. His trembling fingers rake her arm as he tries to hold onto her. She steps out of reach. “Yes,” she says, “as they were supposed to.”

He quivers, his eyes narrowed with contempt. He sets his feet wide apart to brace himself, then lunges toward her, only to close as a spasm folds him around his chest and stomach. His eyes open wide with shock and understanding. He crumples slowly at her feet, tearing at his rib cage with his fingers, the skin shredding beneath his nails. A strangled scream escapes him before his eyes roll up into his head.

“I set my glands to secrete outward,” Sarah says. She turns away from him. It will be an hour before she can remove the skin safely. She sits beside the tide pool, peering down into the watery world. At the lip of the pool, the hermit crab claws its way out of the water and onto the rock. It races away from her until a wave foams over the rock and sucks the little crab out to sea.

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Marina Fitch has become a favorite in these pages. In addition to F&SF, her short fiction has appeared in *Writers of the Future*, *Pulphouse: The Hardback Magazine*, and *Marion Zimmer Bradley’s Fantasy Magazine*. She has stories upcoming in *Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine*

Marina wrote “Sarah at the Tidepool” as the result of a challenge. All o! the attendees at the Rockaway Beach Writing Retreat were to write science fiction stories. Inspired by the Oregon Coast, Marina’s story features an interesting little creature, the nudibranch.