
Marion Zimmer Bradley Literary Works Trust
www.mzbworks.com

Copyright ©1994 by Mercedes Lackey

First published in Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine #23, 1994

Killer Byte
Mercedes Lackey

Diana Tregarde stared at her lover's back for five full minutes while his long, graceful fingers flew over the keyboard of her computer. For all she could tell, he was completely oblivious to her presence. That was not like him at all—a two-hundred-year-old vampire does not abandon himself in a task so completely that he ignores his immediate environment. Not if he wants to see his third century, at any rate.

Oh well. At least he was safe enough here in the apartment. She had enough mystical shielding on the place to stave off a psychic nuke.

"I've created a monster," Di muttered to herself. "I should never have shown him the modem."

"*Cherie?*" he replied, absently—still typing. He didn't even take his eyes off the screen.

"Nothing," she sighed. Well, her office was effectively occupied for the rest of the evening, and so was her computer. It wasn't as if she *needed* the desktop computer to work on the romances that paid the bills. Compared to her laptop, it was archaic, only a 286, so slow it barely kept up with Andre LeBrel's flying fingers. She actually preferred the laptop, if it came down to it. "Just—tell me you aren't hacking again."

"I am not hacking again," he said, then stopped typing long enough to flash her an insouciant smile over his shoulder, tossing a lock of hair out of his eyes with a flick of a finger. She smiled back; it was impossible not to. *Sara says he looks like Timothy Dalton. Ha. Timothy Dalton should look so cute.* He didn't turn right back to the keyboard. "I must admit, I fail to see why you should be concerned about my intrusions into cyberspace when they do no harm. I have simply established myself in your world using the only tools at my disposal."

"Cyberspace?" she replied incredulously, as his dark brown eyes gazed at her solemnly. "*Cyberspace?* Have you been overdosing on *Spin* magazine again?"

"After all," he continued, never missing a beat, "How else was I to acquire a driver's license and a Social Security number? We are in the 90s, *cherie*. I cannot simply present myself at Ellis Island as an immigrant from some obscure nation."

Di nodded reluctantly. She hadn't asked how he'd gotten that Social Security number, but she knew he had a lot of friends on the computer nets that were dubious at best ... "But it's not legal," she protested weakly.

"Neither am I," he pointed out. "I am certain that laws condemning my kind are still extant; a century ago people believed in vampires enough to legislate against their mere existence. I *know* there are laws still in effect against *yours*."

Well, he had her there. There were laws against witches on the books all over the country that had never been repealed. "Just don't get caught," she pled. He only smiled.

"Anything that might be illegal I do on the terminals in the offices of many different professors at the university," he reassured her. "Nothing can be traced back to you."

Thus adding breaking-and-entering to his sins. She only shook her head. "I don't want to know any more," she replied. "I'm going to be working in the living room, let me know if you find something interesting on those bulletin boards of yours."

Andre had taken to the computer nets and bulletin boards with the facility of someone a tenth his age. Why? Di had no idea—except that to survive as long as he had, there was no choice but to be flexible enough to adapt to anything. And since her energy usually gave out about 3 A.M., the boards and nets gave him people to talk to, even at that late hour, people who he need never fear would learn his true nature.

Not that Andre's "addiction" was without its benefits to her. He always checked the "romance" topics on the various boards for her, and now and again there was something flattering there about one of her books. And her literary agent Murray had gotten modern enough to use electronic mail, which meant that even though her schedule didn't overlap much with his, now he could always "reach" her. Andre's hobby paid for itself in that alone.

She left him tapping away in the spare room she had converted to her office, and went back to her laptop in the living room. Her favorite corduroy chair was more comfortable than sitting at the desk, anyway; the light was better here, and the stereo in the living room infinitely superior to the old one in the office. She lost herself in the intricacies of plot for some time, and actually let out a yelp of surprise when Andre tapped her shoulder.

"*What?*" she barked at him, irrationally annoyed because he'd frightened her. He ignored the tone, his dark eyes shadowed with a vague worry.

"I'd like you to come look at something, if you would, *cherie*," he said instead of making an angry retort. "I—it might be important/but I do not trust my own judgment on it."

With a sigh, she saved the chapter she had been working on, turned off the machine, and followed him back into the office.

"I have a file I made of this topic from one of the bulletin boards," he said, "It is a local board, but it can be accessed from the Internet. Those posting to it are mostly local." He shrugged, with a hint of embarrassment. She wondered why, as she took the chair.

"So what's the topic?" she asked as she took over the chair.

He looked even more embarrassed. “Vampires,” he replied shortly, then reached over her shoulder and called up the file.

She raised an eyebrow. “What, looking for someone to double-date with?” Then, as she scrolled through the messages posted to the board, she understood his embarrassment. For the most part, the writers seemed to be young, many female, and all so enraptured with what they supposed to be the vampiric lifestyle that she could only think of them as “vampire groupies”.

After one passionate paean that began with the vehement assertion that Anne Rice was a goddess and ended with the longing for a boy who was presumably ignoring the writer to come to his senses and whisk her away to New Orleans where they would find someone to bite them and lead an idyllic nocturnal existence, she chuckled. “Oh heavens. They're missing Anne Rice's points completely. I hope this wasn't what you were worried about,” she told Andre as he leaned over her shoulder to keep track of where she was in the file. “Next year she'll be into neo-hippies and reading Tom Wolfe and Ken Kesey, wishing someone would drive up to her in a paisley bus and whisk her away to baffle and befuddle Middle America with the Merry Pranksters.”

But Andre shook his head. “Not that,” he replied. “I simply wanted you to get the flavor of the postings. There are many young ladies like this one, some few people attempting a kind of episodic fiction which everyone knows is fiction, and many recommending books or discussing vampirism, hotly defending one author's depiction over all others. No, this is not what I am worried about. You will reach the point where it starts, shortly.”

She continued to skim through the messages—

Then she suddenly paged back, and read one of them more carefully.

It was, ostensibly, a posting from a young man with some sort of job—never specified—that required him to travel with a laptop computer. He claimed that because of his lifestyle, it was impossible to make friends or keep them. He was deliberately mysterious, never even describing what it was he did, only that it fit his “needs” for a nocturnal life. Whoever he was, he was quite articulate as he described his attempt to contact an old girlfriend, and discovering that “more than years had parted them irrevocably.”

“What is this,” she muttered to herself, rereading the posting, “Some kind of electronic High Plains Drifter?”

Andre made a little approving sound in the back of his throat but said nothing.

She frowned, when she got to the end. Bulletin boards tended to allow people to take whatever names or callsigns they wanted. His was “Shadow-walker”.

She frowned even more as she encountered further postings from this

“Shadow-walker”. Without actually coming out and saying anything, he implied that his job was very important and mysterious, possibly high-security—and he implied that he was a real, live vampire, or something like one.

And he had everyone who posted to this topic enthralled. All the other threads of conversation stopped dead; there were no more attempts at serialized fiction or even poetry. Even the Anne Rice devotee was silenced. The only topics now concerned “Shadow-walker” and his travels and misadventures.

The topic ended with “Shadow-walker” supposedly in a hospital, suffering from the effects of a beating after defending a gay man from a group of fag-bashers. The outpouring of sympathy was actually rather touching, except—

"What's wrong with this picture?" she asked aloud.

"Taken as a story?" Andre replied. "Inconsistencies, for one. In this last posting, he claims that the nurse is never there to aid him because she is afraid of him—yet two postings ago, the nurse was supposedly helping him to type because his wrist was broken. Perhaps he has true vampiric healing powers, in which case, *why* has he permitted anyone to take him to a hospital where he might be uncovered? If he does not, he is lying. Also, I do not believe that it is a very easy thing to use hospital telephones for access to computer nets. Nor do I believe they would encourage such a thing."

"That's true, most of them go through some kind of switchboard because there are only a limited number of outside lines," she replied, chewing on a fingernail. "And if *I* were someone in Intelligence I certainly wouldn't keep anyone around who is as mouthy on boards as *this* bozo is. Oh, he's a fake, all right. And I wouldn't worry about it, if he was just some fat slob living in his mother's basement, trying to score with girls electronically. But I don't think he is..."

"Ah!" Andre's expression cleared. "Good, then I am *not* being paranoid and suspicious?"

"Oh, you're being paranoid and suspicious all right, but in your case, that's healthy, and your instincts have him targeted right," she told him, taking one of his cool hands in hers. "Let me go back to his first entry—"

She paged back through the entries, this time looking at the replies. "Look, he gets a lot of responses, but look at the ones he answers—no one you can tell from the callsign or the language is male, no one who seems to be much over the age of seventeen. *Those* he answers personally, with little warm salutations and thanks for their concern. I don't like it, Andre. I don't like it at all."

He squeezed her hand, and covered her fingers with his free hand. "There is this—naiveté in this world of pixels," he said soberly. "These children—children and those who are unworldly—seem to be under the impression that everyone who has access to this place is a good person, and that they really know someone just

because they have had conversation with him here."

She shivered. "You just painted a stalker's dream come true," she replied, slowly. "The only safety on those boards is the fact that the postings and ident-records only show what city you're posting from, and not your real name or address—"

"And what if one of these children were to give that information to this Shadow-walker?" he asked sharply. "He is *not* limited to posting, you know. Read the later postings, there is a hint that he has been exchanging electronic mail with one or more of them."

Feeling the blood draining from her face, she paged back to the end, and saw exactly what he was talking about. "Oh my gods—" she whispered.

He pulled a second chair up to the terminal, and pushed her gently out of the way. "I wanted you to see this, *cherie*," he said, hands flying over the keyboard as he exited the file and began to log on to the bulletin board again. "I wanted you to know why I feared, to show you all this precisely because what I am about to do is illegal. I do not believe I will be caught, but still—imagine Ted Bundy with such a tool at his command. He would not need to hunt his victims—they would tell him everything he needed to know, and might even have gone to him willingly!"

"What are you going to do?" she asked, a chill running down her backbone.

"Use the password and ID of a systems operator who is on a cruise and not likely to find out what I have done," he said succinctly. "I stole it; I have similar passwords and IDs on most of the boards I frequent, in case I need to—alter something. An advantage is that this is a local board and I know most of the sysops by first name, so I know when they are going to be out of the way. I wish to get into this Shadow-walker's electronic mail files. I wish to see who he has been talking to—and what was being said!"

Di couldn't even begin to follow what Andre was doing. He flitted from one command-screen to another, occasionally noting down a number or a word. Finally, though, he gave an exclamation of satisfaction, and the hard-drive began to whir as he downloaded something.

He quickly closed the session out and logged off. "I have not been able to make this session invisible," he muttered to himself as much as to her, "But with any luck, my unwitting accomplice will think that one of the other sysops used his account to check on the Shadow-walker—"

While he spoke, he keyed in the name of his file, and brought it up onto the screen. "There!" he said with grim satisfaction. "Now we will see who he truly is and where he is from, then what this one says when he does not think he is observed!"

The first file was supposed to be the real profile on this "Shadow-walker." It held—nothing of any use. Only the ironic name "John Smith", and a mail-service

drop-box. Unfortunately, this particular computer board was a free service, which meant there was no real information—like a credit-card number.

If she had been chilled before, she was frozen before they reached the end of the file. “Shadow-walker,” whoever he was, had been doing more than just toy with a few select girls. He'd been playing skillfully on their emotions and extracting information from them. Most of them had evidently gotten frightened at some point and stopped responding—but one came fully under the spell of his words.

He was telling the truth about one thing, at any rate. He *was* traveling; he had posted from a dozen different cities over the last year or so.

That did not make her feel any better.

"One wonders how many other boards he is prowling," Andre said in a flat voice, breaking the silence, "In how many other cities."

Di didn't respond; she was too busy reading the latest set of e-mail exchanges. Finally the one she had been dreading and expecting scrolled up onto the screen. “Shadow-walker” was coming to Hartford.

And now that the little fish had his hook firmly in her mouth, he set it.

"*Merde*," Andre hissed as he read the exchange of letters, all posted within the last few days. Well he might swear. “Nightshade,” aka Brenda Doyle, age fifteen, had given “Shadow-walker” her real name, address, and phone number.

But worse was to come.

"Shadow-walker” professed wanting to meet her, to talk with her, told her that she was older by far than her years and that she was the first woman (not girl, *woman*, and what fifteen-year-old could resist that blandishment?) to really understand him. “*But your parents aren't going to approve of me,*” he went on.

"With reason,” Di growled.

"*They'll say I'm too old for you, and I don't exactly look like a solid citizen. I can't help that; I've told you how my bosses want me to look like a street-wise kind of dude, to keep people from noticing me.*” He went on at some length how it was necessary that she not tell her parents of his interest in her, urging her even to purge her own files of any copies of his letters she might have kept. “*It might put you and them in danger,*” he wrote, as if he cared. “*You make a lot of dangerous enemies in my line of work, and they wouldn't hesitate to try to hurt me by hurting you.*”

"Oh, indeed,” Andre said sardonically. “I believe I can predict what he will ask for next.”

Di nodded, and went to the next screen-page.

"*I'd like to meet you somewhere alone.*”

And Brenda agreed, in a letter posted just this evening, suggesting a pizza-parlor just across from the university.

"*Sacre merde.*" Andre leapt to his feet as if he was ready to go out then and there and try to stop the girl.

"Hold your horses, D'Artagnan," Di cautioned him, placing one hand on his shoulder to restrain him. "He hasn't seen this letter yet—"

"That we *know* of," Andre protested, his eyes flashing with emotion, his fists clenched. "He could be calling her on the telephone at this very moment!"

"Not if he's that insistent that she not let her parents know he exists," she replied, chewing on her thumbnail thoughtfully and leaning back in her chair. "No, I don't think he'll risk calling and having her parents pick up the phone instead of Brenda. He's a sharp cookie, this one. He'll set up the meeting via e-mail."

"Which means *I* must needs play electronic sleuth and watch for it." Andre let out his breath slowly. "This, I can do. Then what?"

"Then he meets with Brenda," Di told him, with ice in her veins, and steel in her voice. "But not the way he thinks. And not alone."

* * * *

Brenda was just as young and vulnerable-looking as Di had guessed, and unfortunately, was just as attractive as she had feared. She affected the pale makeup and all-black clothing that seemed to be a uniform for the "vampire groupies", but her healthy, slender figure and long, immaculately-styled dark hair made her look more like one of the vampire's victims than a vampire herself.

"Shadow-walker" had rejected the pizza-parlor as being too public, warning her that his "enemies" made such public meetings dangerous. Finally she agreed to meet him in this unlikely spot, a little park in the midst of office buildings, a place that he himself suggested. Here she sat on a cold cement bench, illuminated by the single strategically-placed light that served the entire courtyard, bundled in the black cloak she had probably made herself, starting at every sound, looking around anxiously.

There weren't many sounds for her to start at; although it wasn't even eleven o'clock yet, the place was as deserted as a graveyard. The buildings here were guarded by electronic security, not human guards, and once quitting time came, you probably could have set off a bomb here and not hurt anyone. It was a perfect place for someone to go who didn't want to be seen. That in itself suggested that this wasn't the first time Shadow-walker had met someone here. The only living beings Di and Andre had spotted were the incurious personnel of a cleaning service, whose blank gazes told her they deliberately noticed nothing that did not immediately concern them.

Di had taken up a station in a shadowy little alcove within sprinting distance of the

street and her car, in full view of a security camera, but not of anyone in the courtyard. Andre was somewhere just above the street outside the courtyard. *Above* it, not on it; his vampiric nature gave him some rather interesting abilities that came in handy in situations like this one. Di had wanted to wait in her car, but there was no place for Andre to perch on the walls that faced the courtyard, and they *had* found the alcove where she could hide. It was a division of strength she didn't like, but it couldn't be helped.

Other than finding places to wait and watch in, they had no other plans, there hadn't been time or information enough to make any. So far as Di was concerned, the very best thing that could happen tonight would be that Brenda would sit here, getting colder and colder, until she finally gave up and went home. Her heart would be broken, briefly, but she'd learn a painless lesson.

The worst thing that could happen—

That he'll grab her and hurt her before we can get to her. He can do it, if he's fast. He could even kill her...

The trouble was, they only had suspicions, no facts—paranoia, but nothing solid to base it on. So they could only watch and wait, and hope they were being foolish and alarmist. And they dared not act until Shadow-walker himself had done something to prove he was as sinister as they feared. After all, the man could *still* be some asocial nerd living in his mother's basement, or a harmless vampire-groupie with a glib line and an overactive imagination.

Di caught the sound of a small car pulling up before the girl did. Brenda jumped to her feet as she had a dozen times before as the car-door shut quietly. Her cape swirled around her as she turned to face the street entrance of the courtyard, one hand going to her throat, color rising in her cheeks.

She looked just like one of Di's Gothic romance covers.

But the man who walked across the cement toward her was no Fabio, although he wasn't bad-looking. He'd done himself a disservice with his description of himself; he was no overweight couch-potato, and he had a decent-looking face. Except for the longish hair and the slightly sinister black duster he wore, he didn't look anything like the streetwise tough he'd called himself. But there was something about that blandly attractive face that disturbed Di, the feeling that the face was nothing more than a façade that covered something else entirely.

But Brenda was thrilled to see him, that much was obvious from her body language. She stared up into his face as he spoke briefly to her, in tones too low for Di to make out what he said.

He was in a hurry, and impatient. It was clear from his gestures that he wanted to leave this courtyard and he wanted Brenda to go with him. She shook her head reluctantly.

"I can't; the buses stop running after midnight, and how would I get home? We can stay here as long as you want," she said plaintively, raising her voice enough that now Di heard her. "No one is ever here after five. I don't mind the cold, not really..."

"There could be security people, cleaning crews—" He shook his head angrily. "You know I can't risk being seen! Let's get out of here, *now*."

But Brenda pulled away from him a little, and glanced down doubtfully at her watch. "You said you'd be here an hour ago—it's getting really late, and my parents are going to wonder—"

Without warning. He backhanded her across the face, clearly as hard a blow as he could deliver. She let out a strangled squeak and fell against the cement bench she had been sitting on, hitting her head. As she sat there in a heap, stunned, he grabbed her hand and hauled her to her feet, dragging her towards the street. He moved incredibly fast; he was already out of sight and Di heard the car doors slamming before she was even halfway across the courtyard!

The car started as she reached the sidewalk and she reached towards it, ineffectively; it was a brown Ford Escort, the most completely forgettable car in the universe, with the numbers of the license-plate artistically obscured with mud and dirt. His tires screeched as he started to pull away from the curb; there was no way she was going to reach her car in time to catch him.

Then again, she didn't have to.

Andre materialized out of the darkness above the street, landing on hands and knees on the Escort's hood with a crash.

That was followed by a second crash, this time of breaking glass, as he smashed the glass of the windshield, reached through the hole, and pulled the driver through out onto the hood.

As Andre dragged Shadow-walker across the broken glass, the Escort swerved, hit the curb and jumped it. The engine died as it ended up with its nose up against a lamppost.

Andre rolled off the hood with his hand around Shadow-walker's throat, taking the man with him. Di ran to the car and tried to pull open the passenger's side door as he stood up and lifted Shadow-walker off his feet; the door was locked, and Brenda stared at her through the glass in a state of wide-eyed shock. A huge bruise mottled the girl's cheek, and her tears streaked her makeup. Di didn't waste any time trying to get her to respond; she smashed the glass of the window with her elbow and unlocked the door, dragging the girl out, covered in safety-glass pellets.

Brenda ignored her; her eyes were locked on Andre, and she whimpered softly, trembling in Di's hands.

Andre took his eyes off Shadow-walker for a scant instant, staring at Brenda and

making certain she saw him clearly—the glowing eyes, the unmistakable fangs—“*No one hunts in my territory and lives,*” he growled, in a completely unhuman voice. There was a sound of breaking bones, and the man's whole body shuddered and danced in Andre's grip.

Then he lowered Shadow-walker to the ground, and slowly, deliberately, put his fangs to the man's neck.

Di stared herself, held by a mixture of revulsion and fascination, as Andre fed. This was a side of him she knew existed, but had never seen. Brenda made a mewling sound and hid her face in Di's shoulder.

Then, as suddenly as he had appeared, Andre was gone, and Shadow-walker was nothing more than a crumpled heap of cloth and slack flesh in the middle of the sidewalk.

It was time to call the police.

* * * *

"I never knew you could be such a messy eater," Di said, finally, breaking the too-heavy silence in the car.

"It is not something I—indulge in often, cherie," the vampire replied, finally. "You know my senses are more acute than yours—in the instant before I pulled the bete through his windshield, I saw he had rope, guns, tape and knives in the rear seat. Wherever he was taking the girl, it was not to a midnight picnic." He touched her arm. She was proud of herself; she wasn't shaking. "The police?"

"Bought my story that I was doing some late work at the bank." She sighed. "Whether the girl will ever tell them how she met Shadow-walker, or even that he *wasn't* a random stranger, I don't know. I hope she does—but since she has no real sense of what she escaped, I don't know if she will."

Andre brooded over that. "In a way, I hope that she will—and I also hope that she will not. There are intrusions enough into the nets without having electronic police watching everything that is posted, and assuming the worst of every remark. But—"

"But how many other girls did that bastard murder that he found on the nets?" Di retorted angrily. "One or more in every city he posted from? If you people won't police and protect your own, then—"

Andre held up a hand to forestall her. "You preach, as they say, to the choir, *cherie*. I agree with you. This—this sea of pixels that we swim in represents power, and with power comes responsibility. We are children playing at the edge of the ocean, making castles of sand, except that *we* control that ocean to a very real extent. If we do not exercise some responsibility, that control *will* be taken from us." He sighed, then uttered something Di had not expected—a dry chuckle.

"Hmm?" she said, turning the car into the entrance of her parking-lot.

"Oh, only this. That dramatic presentation for the girl's sake. I wanted to be certain she would not see me as a romantic rescuer. After seeing me, hearing me—there will be one less vampire groupie upon the nets."

She echoed his ironic chuckle. "I doubt she'll ever be able to face an Anne Rice novel again. Do you suppose *I* might gain a new reader out of this?"

He raised an eyebrow. "It could happen. I left e-mail to her suggesting she read THUNDER AND ROSES. She could do worse."

Di looked closely at him before she exited the car. There was no trace of the violent, terrifying creature she had seen kill Shadow-walker. She might have imagined him...

Perhaps, in a way, she had. Andre had played many parts to survive in his time, and he was a consummate actor. It could be that the horrifying killer she had glimpsed for a moment was nothing more than one of those parts he played.

One thing she knew; the real Andre was the one who had just spoken of power and responsibility, the one who had moved ruthlessly to protect an innocent. *That* was the Andre she loved.

"There's still plenty of night left," she said, as she came to that conclusion. "I have work—"

"And I have the nets." He grinned crookedly. "Policing my own, if you like?"

In the end, that was the answer that mattered.

Visit www.mzbworks.com for information on additional titles by this and other authors.