

SIMULACRUM

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Issue 1

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Fiction

Angeline Hawkes-Craig

Lyda Moorehouse

Tim Pratt

Lavie Tidhar



Poetry

Zohar A Goodman



Author Interview

Angeline Hawkes-Craig



Featured Artist

Peter Kudriashov

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The Editor's Desk

Is this thing on...? (checking microphone) Ahem...

Welcome all to the first issue of Simulacrum. Hope you're comfortable, there we go...sit back, relax and enjoy.

Like all good things, the idea for the magazine came about during the early, red-eye hours of the morning on a whiff of impulsivity. There are so many gifted creative spirits, published and not, that are not receiving the necessary exposure they deserve. We need to change that, and I am happy to say that there are already a myriad of small publications whose aim is to do just that.

But what, you may ask, is speculative transformation?

Recently, there has been quite a movement amongst writers to move away from classifying any fiction in terms of 'genre'. Shouldn't we just be accepting fiction for what it is, for the specific tale it is telling? Isn't all fiction really, in essence, fantasy?

This then, will be one of Simulacrum's main efforts: to blur the line between genre, and bring together work from writers and artists alike across the spectrum. To present them to you, dear reader, for that which they are: Terrific Stories.

Expect to see a wide variety of themes amongst the stories in this issue, and future incarnations.

In this issue, feast your mind on the dark coming of age tale, **Werewolves And Princesses** by Tim Pratt, while Lavie Tidhar shows us a different spin on the age-old vampire tale in **Canopied In Darkness**. Lyda Morehouse fans will no doubt be thrilled by **The Case Of The Missing Devil Child**, a prequel story set in the AngeLink Universe featuring Deidre McMannus. And in **Things That Go Bump**, Angeline Hawkes-Craig will inspire a good old-fashioned Victorian chill up the spine – haunted castle and all. Read about her thoughts on writer's block, stuffed shirts and the Internet in the author interview.

The poetry section features unsettling poetry from **Zohar A Goodman**, while artist **Peter Kudriashov** illuminates his inspirations and technique as our first issue's featured artist.

We'd love to hear from you, good readers. If you have suggestions on how to make our future issues better, or just want to drop us a note, please do so.

Ready? Good. Put the kettle on. Settle in.

And welcome.

Lynne Jamneck is a writer, photographer and artist from Cape Town, South Africa. Her work has appeared in numerous publications, including City Slab, Best Lesbian Erotica 2003, Curve, The Dream People and Strange Horizons. Forthcoming work will appear in H.P Lovecraft's Magazine Of Horror, Raging Hormones, Darkways Of The Wizard and Naughty Tales From A-Z 4.

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Werewolves and Princesses

Tim Pratt

About the story: *I don't really have much to say about it, I'm afraid. I wrote it a long time ago. Its origins are mostly lost in the mists of time, etc., apart from the fact that it takes place in the trailer park in rural North Carolina where I grew up.*

Brenda played chess with the leprechaun. They used a black wooden board, inlaid with gold. Brenda used bits of amber, shiny rocks, and buttons as pieces. The leprechaun, Seamus O'Shaugnessy, played with tiny golden figurines. Originally, a set of silver pieces opposed the golden ones, but Seamus had long since lost those.

Brenda moved a piece of quartz shot through with fool's gold. That's what Seamus called the shining flecks. He'd licked the rock and snorted and called it worthless. Brenda found it beautiful, and she'd made it her queen. "Check," she said tentatively. They'd played perhaps a hundred games that summer, and she'd never won.

Seamus squinted and chewed his pipe. He wore a green vest and clunky green shoes. He scratched his pointy ear and said "Humph. It's checkmate, girl. See, I can't move here, either, because of your bishop-pebble."

"I thought I won," Brenda said, drawing her scabbed knees up to her chin and grinning. "I didn't want to say so and be wrong."

The leprechaun frowned. "You swear you're only ten years old? You're not a fey girl making mischief with me?"

Brenda laughed. Only a month into summer vacation, the days spread out endlessly before her. "You know I'm just a normal girl."

Seamus nodded dismally. "I'd teach you poker, too, but we'd have to bet, and you'd win my pot of gold. Ah, well. You won, so next game, you get to play with King Steven's pieces. He was a fair hand at chess." Seamus set up the chessmen.

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"Brenda!" a voice shouted, cutting through the air like scissors through denim. "Come get your supper!"

"Coming, Mama!" Brenda called. Seamus, along with his board and his golden chessmen, vanished. All her friends did when her mother called.

Brenda went through the scraggly weeds and into the trailer park. Her trailer stood at the back of the lot, next to the field and the woods where she spent most of her time.

They had frozen corn dogs for lunch. Mama wore makeup and an uncomfortable-looking red halter-top.

"Honey, I've got a date tonight," Mama said. Her face looked pinched-up and worried. Brenda couldn't remember her ever going on a date before.

Brenda munched her corn dog and gnawed the stick.

"I met him at the hotel." Mama worked the registration desk at the Harcourt, the nicest hotel in town, and met lots of interesting people on their way to interesting places. "His name's Jerry, and he's a writer, with books and everything."

Brenda felt a flutter of interest. "What kind of books?"

"I haven't read any, but I think they're fantasies. Unicorns and elves and all. Werewolves and princesses. I'm not sure."

"Werewolves and princesses," Brenda repeated, liking the sound of it. "I'd like to meet him."

Mama came around the scratched-up table and hugged Brenda. "I'm so glad to hear you say that, honey. I had lunch with him yesterday and I like him a lot. I don't want you to think I'm ignoring you, and if you ever feel left out, tell me. I wouldn't start dating someone... but I think Jerry's special."

Brenda hugged back, mystified. Why would she be mad at Mama for making a friend? Especially a writer, who told stories about unicorns and princesses and monsters. Maybe he'd be able to see her friends. Mama couldn't, and Brenda had given up telling her about them years ago.

"Have a good date, Mama," Brenda said, breaking the embrace.

"I've got to pick him up. He's in town for some book signings and he doesn't have a car.

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He asked me out to lunch yesterday, right out of the blue, and told me all about himself. Such an exciting life." She looked out the window and fingered the yellow curtains. The refrigerator coughed and shuddered, then returned to running smoothly. "How do I look?" Mama tugged at her shorts.

Brenda thought her clothes were too tight, but she said "Beautiful," because that was true, too, and it was always better to tell the nicer of two truths. That's what Seamus said.

Mama kissed her cheek. "Mrs. Rogers knows I'm leaving, so if you need anything, tell her. I'll be home by midnight. I want you in bed by nine."

Brenda looked at the clock. Almost seven. She had hours left. Brenda went outside while Mama got ready. Old Mrs. Rogers lived next door. She watched Brenda a lot, especially during summer vacation, but usually she fell asleep and never checked on her.

Brenda waved as Mama drove away in her little green Honda, the tailpipe spraying blue smoke like a genie's lantern.

"Want to play chess?" Seamus said, suddenly appearing at her elbow.

"Or tag, so I'm not lonely," said a tinkle-bell voice. A tiny woman, no taller than Brenda's hand, floated up on cobweb wings. She glowed faintly blue, and looked like a cross between Brenda's Mama and last year's Miss Georgia. Her name was Farrah. She was a spring fairy, the one responsible for dandelions.

"You always win tag," Seamus grumbled. He tilted back his three-cornered hat and scratched his forehead.

"Hide and seek," said a low voice, like river-water-mud from under the trailer. That was Bogue, the dark lurking thing that lived under the trailer and never emerged.

"I think not, Bogue," said Farrah. "You're good at hiding, but you never want to seek."

They argued, and the noise drew the others. Blue the Griffin favored a foot race; the speckled toad wanted to play leapfrog, and the spider king argued for a tree-climbing competition. Their voices rose until Brenda clapped her hands, calling their attention like a perfect shaft of lightning in a clear sky. "We'll play all of them!" she said, and danced away.

The sun blazed, and nine o'clock seemed a long way off indeed.

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"How was your date, Mama?" Brenda asked over a frosted-strawberry-Pop-Tart breakfast.

Mama hummed and bustled around the kitchen, straightening things and wiping counters. She usually slept until noon on Saturdays, but today she'd gotten up to watch cartoons with Brenda.

"Wonderful. Jerry paid for everything and opened doors and asked all about me, *and* you, and at the end of the night he didn't expect me to go up to his room, didn't even ask for a kiss. A man's never treated me so good without wanting something in return."

Brenda made a face. Kissing. Why would anyone want to?

"He read me a story in the park, all about towers and secret gold and brave ladies. For a little while, honey, I went away from here." She made a gesture that included the kitchen, the trailer park, the town, the world. "He wants to meet you tonight." She grabbed Brenda's arm, too hard. "I want you on your best behavior while Jerry's here. Say please and thank you and don't burp or pick your nose."

Brenda squirmed away, and her Mama shook her head and said "Sorry, baby. I just want him to like you. To like both of us."

Brenda snatched her Pop-Tart and ran for the back door.

"Tell me something I don't know, Seamus," Brenda said, watching tadpoles in the creek.

Seamus sighed like a tire deflating. "I've told you about the life cycle of the frog, taught you chess, explained the secret colors of the rainbow, and spoken to you in the language of earthworms, all since school let out for the summer. Do you have to keep learning?"

Brenda ignored him. "Nothing boring about different kinds of gold, either."

"I thought young ladies were supposed to like gold." He gnawed his pipe and wiggled his stubby toes in the water. "There are some things I haven't told you because they're scary... but for some reason I've been thinking about them lately. Like something scary is coming, maybe. Leprechauns are small,

not very strong, so we have a sense for things like that."

"Scary like Bogue?" Brenda's hair, brown as old wood, brushed the creek and made

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ripples. Her face hung inches from the water.

"Bogue's scarier in theory than in practice. I mean really scary things. Dangerous."

"Like what?" Brenda rolled over on her side, interested.

Seamus shrugged. "Banshees. Phoukas. Bogans, nasty ones, not like our Bogue. I keep thinking of monsters, but none of them are exactly right for what I feel. The closest thing... do you know the Wild Hunt?"

"No."

Seamus nodded. "I feel like the Wild Hunt's coming, which doesn't make sense, because that can come any time, without warning. I sense a chasing thing. A searching thing."

"Tell me about the Wild Hunt."

Seamus looked into the woods across the creek. "There's a Huntsman who leads it. Some say he wears antlers, and others say he has the head of an elk. I've never seen him up close. He has hounds, only some of them aren't dogs. Some are humans who got caught up in the hunt and forgot themselves, or

Elves who owe the huntsman service. They chase something, maybe something evil; maybe whatever crosses the Huntsman's trail. They chase."

"Like tag?" Brenda said doubtfully.

"No, princess. They chase their prey until it's dead." He touched Brenda's arm. She shivered. "I told you it was scary."

"Would they chase me?"

"I don't think so. Not much challenge in chasing a little girl, is there?" He tickled her, and she wriggled away, laughing.

"I bet you couldn't catch me, short legs," she said, and ran.

"Brenda, this is Jerry." Mom stood by the wall like a creeper vine.

Jerry didn't look like she'd expected. She thought writers should have glasses and white beards. Jerry had long red hair in a ponytail and clear blue eyes. He was tall but not gawky, standing comfortably in blue jeans and a tucked-in black T-shirt. He crouched in front of her, holding out his hand.

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His nose is very pointy, Brenda thought. She shook his hand.

"Pleased to meet you." Mama smiled.

"I'll go get drinks," Mama said. "You two get acquainted." Mama's dress, blue with yellow flowers, swirled when she turned away.

Jerry sat cross-legged on the carpet. "Hi Brenda. Your mom's told me a lot about you." He talked too fast, his voice nasally. His nostrils flared. "She says you're a very imaginative child." He rolled his eyes. "That's what they used to say about me."

"You write stories?" she asked, looking past him, at a spot beyond his shoulder. She didn't like the way his eyes slid across her face, never settling.

"Sure do. About magic things, magic creatures. Do you like magic creatures, Brenda? Ever met any?"

Brenda glanced at his face. He looked serious. Could he know about Seamus, Farrah, the others? Should she tell him? She remembered something Seamus had told her about playing chess. "Don't trust the obvious. Always look for the trick. If you think you can take one of my pieces, make sure it isn't a trap. Don't believe it if it's too easy." It had taken Brenda a long time to learn that lesson, but she'd learned it well.

"No," she said. "There's no such thing as magic creatures."

Jerry looked surprised, and he wrinkled his nose, as if smelling milk to see if it had gone bad. "There aren't? You aren't a secret princess with magical friends? Fairies, or talking cats, or anything?"

"Those are just stories."

Jerry narrowed his eyes. "Brenda." His voice was soft but dangerous, like a knife in a sheath.

"Lemonade." Mama carried three glasses on a tray and tottered on high heels. She never wore high heels in the house. She tripped on a loose flap of carpet and dropped the tray. Her mouth made an "O" as the glasses tumbled and lemonade splattered, dousing Jerry and sprinkling Brenda.

Mama apologized and fetched towels. She talked too fast, and blushed red. Jerry laughed and told her not to worry, but his eyes were flat and furious.

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Why couldn't Mama see that?

Brenda said she didn't feel well and went to bed early, shutting her door. She looked at the glow-in-the-dark stars stuck on her ceiling, and when the half-moon rose to fill her window she stared at that. She heard Bogue shifting beneath the floor and wondered for the first time how he could protect her from dark things when he never came out from under the house. She listened to Jerry and her mother laugh, and wished he would go away, then felt guilty for the wish. He made her Mama happy, didn't he?

Much later, still unable to sleep, she heard her mother's bedsprings squeak, and one short cry, choked off. She listened intently until she heard talking and laughing.

Mama wasn't hurt, then.

Eventually, Brenda slept.

Jerry came back the next day. Brenda went outside as soon as she saw him. She sat on the back porch, trading rhymes with Bogue (who murmured his from under the steps), but Bogue went silent when Jerry came out. He sat next to her on the steps. Brenda wove dandelions into a chain and ignored him.

"Your mother wants you and me to be friends," Jerry said. "We'll probably see a lot of each other. I've been thinking about moving here, and your Mom's just one more reason I should. You should get used to me."

Brenda didn't answer. She was making a bracelet for Seamus. He would grump and call it foolish, but he would wear it, and smile when he thought she couldn't see.

Jerry sighed. "I want us to be friends, Brenda. I think we have a lot in common."

Brenda waited.

"I see them too." He sat quietly, waiting.

"Who?" she said cautiously.

"I don't know who yours are, exactly. I've got a cat with rainbow wings named Cadhla, and a tiny dragon with purple scales named Rufus. He lies a lot, but never about anything important. Why don't you tell me about yours?"

"I don't know what you mean." Brenda sat perfectly still, as if playing hide-and-seek with

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Blue the griffin, the best seeker of all.

"I've seen them ever since I was little. I think people like us have too-strong imaginations, Brenda. We bring things to life. Without my friends, I wouldn't be a writer. They tell me stories, or sometimes I make up stories about them. I owe them a lot."

Brenda looked at the dark under the steps where Bogue had been.

"How did you know?"

"I smelled it on your mother." Brenda looked at his long nose. "You get a sense for these things. Your mother was too old, so I knew it couldn't be her. It had to be someone close to her."

"You're old as Mama, and you can see them. Why aren't you too old?"

He squirmed on the step. "Smart kid. It's because I'm a writer, I guess. I never stopped believing in my friends, so they never went away. They're my inspiration. It's as simple as that."

Brenda thought about chess. She didn't believe anything was simple as "simple as that." After a long time she said "Jerry, why do I hate you?"

She never understood why grown-ups got so surprised when you asked perfectly good questions. After coughing and clearing his throat for a while, Jerry said, "We hate things because we fear them, and we fear what we don't understand." He sounded like a teacher talking to a dumb kid. Brenda hated that. She liked talking to Seamus because he told her things without making her feel stupid for not knowing them already.

"Maybe you're afraid I'll take your Mom away, or hurt her, or try to hurt your... special friends. We fear people we don't know. You'll get to know me soon. We're the same, Brenda.

I'd like to meet your friends. Maybe they'll inspire me. All my friends are far away, at home. I'm a little lonely."

Jerry looked like a dog that hadn't been fed in a long time. Sweat glistened on his forehead.

"My friends don't like strangers," Brenda said. "They eat strangers."

"Is that what they do. Eat them." He laughed. "You'll change your mind, Brenda. Your friends will love me." He stood up, brushed his hands off on the front of his pants, and went inside.

Brenda crossed the creek and went into the woods. She wasn't supposed to go there.

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Mama said the woods went on for miles, and it would be easy to get lost.

She called and called, but Farrah wouldn't come, nor Seamus, nor any of the others.

"Jerry's going to spend the day over here," Mama said two weeks later. Jerry had been over almost every night, cutting short Brenda's time with her friends. They hid whenever he came. "He rented a car, and he'll be over about noon. He wants to spend more time with you." She knelt, wearing her work-suit, and brushed Brenda's morning-messy hair from her face. "You should give him a chance, sweetie. He's looking for an apartment in town. He's going to stay and work on a new book." Mama's eyes shone.

Ever since she'd met Jerry, she walked straighter and smiled more. She had bloomed like a thirsty flower in the rain.

Brenda couldn't make herself like him. Seamus didn't know if Jerry was the chasing thing, but he told Brenda to trust her instincts. "I'll give him a chance, Mama."

Mama kissed her forehead. "I know you will. See you later. Call me if you need anything."

Brenda didn't feel like going outside. Her friends would just leave when Jerry came. Brenda turned on the TV, then turned it off again. She rummaged in the kitchen without finding anything she wanted to eat. She checked in with Mrs. Rogers, who gave her a sugar cookie and sent her home. Brenda looked for something to read. Her Mama had brought over some of Jerry's books, and she started reading one about a king whose wife was cursed and turned into a centaur. It was a book for grown-ups, but Brenda didn't have any trouble with it. She was captivated, and she looked up, surprised, when the door opened. It was almost twelve-thirty, and Jerry had arrived. She'd spent three hours reading without realizing it.

"You like my book?"

Brenda put it down. "It's okay." She picked up the remote control and switched on the television. Jerry sat beside her. They watched soap operas. Neither of them broke the silence.

I should give him a chance, Brenda thought. "Do you know how to play chess?"

He looked surprised. "Want me to teach you?"

"I already know."

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"Where would a little girl learn to play chess?" His voice was fake-playful.

Brenda opened her mouth, then shut it. "Never mind."

"No, tell me. Was it one of your friends? One of your not-exactly-imaginary friends?"

Brenda didn't answer.

"Tell me. I'm tired of playing games with you. I want to see your friends."

Brenda closed her eyes. I'm hiding, she thought. It's hide and seek.

Jerry grabbed her shoulder and shook her, hard. Brenda squirmed away and ran for the back door. Jerry cursed behind her (she mentally filed the curse, so later she could ask Seamus what it meant), and tried to follow, but he was old and slow, and she ran.

She jumped over the creek and plunged into the woods, hiding under drooping branches. The leaves screened her. She watched her back yard. Jerry came out, looked around, and sat on the steps. He didn't call for her. He just waited.

Brenda went deeper into the woods, as deep as she dared, and waited. She hadn't been unfair to Jerry. He wasn't supposed to grab her that way. Seamus and Farrah came out of the trees warily, and Brenda told them what had happened. Farrah settled on her lap to listen. Seamus nodded grimly. "What do you think he wants?" he asked.

"More importantly, what can we do about him?" Farrah asked. "Brenda's mother won't believe her. Jerry would say he didn't do anything."

Brenda agreed. It hurt, but she knew it was true. In some ways, Jerry mattered more to her Mama right now than Brenda did. "I'm afraid for you," Brenda said. "Jerry wants to meet you, and I'm afraid."

"Maybe we should go away for a while," Seamus said.

"No! I don't want you to! You can't!"

"It may be best," Farrah said. Brenda subsided. Farrah didn't make decisions lightly. "But there's no point in any of us leaving unless all of us do. We would come back, Brenda, don't worry. We wouldn't leave you."

"I'll tell the others," Seamus said. "We'll have a meeting tonight, by the creek. We'll talk about Jerry, and decide what to do."

"I hate him," Brenda said, and stabbed the ground with a stick.

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The trees rustled, and Brenda sat very still. Seamus and Farrah vanished at the sound. The noise continued, like a heavy animal moving clumsily. Brenda crept forward, almost to the creek. Jerry stood in the back yard, facing the trailer, looking at the clouds. After a while he went inside.

Brenda sat by the creek, on the wooded side, talking to the speckled frog. When Mama drove up, Brenda went to see her.

"Did you have fun with Jerry?" Mama asked.

Before she could answer, Jerry stepped through the door. "Sure we did. We watched TV and played a little in the back yard. We took a walk in the woods, too."

Mama frowned. "As long as you kept a close eye on her. I don't like her to go past the creek. She could get lost."

Jerry put his arm around her and walked inside. "Don't worry, I watched her. There are interesting things in the woods. We both learned a lot."

Around 8:30, while they watched television, the phone rang. Mama answered it, listened, and said "I'll be right there." She hung up. "It's Mrs. Rogers. She's having chest pains, and she wants a ride to the emergency room."

"Will she be all right?" Jerry asked, lounging on the couch. He sounded genuinely concerned.

Mama rummaged in her purse for her keys and nodded. "I think so. This happens about once a month, and it's usually nothing. Last time they said she had gas. She'll outlive all of us. But I drive her as payback for watching Brenda." She looked at her watch. "I should be back in a couple of hours. Watch Brenda for me?"

"Sure thing." They kissed. Brenda looked at the TV.

"Can I go, Mama?"

"The emergency room is no fun, darling. And you have to be in bed in half an hour." She gave her a quick kiss and left.

Brenda waited for Jerry to say something, to do something, but he didn't. The show they were watching went off, and he said "Time for bed, kiddo."

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Brenda brushed her teeth and changed. She locked her door from the inside, but Jerry only called "Good night," from the other room. Brenda went to bed and looked at the ceiling.

About an hour later she heard footsteps, and the back door creaked opened.

Brenda looked out her window. Jerry walked through the back yard with something in his hand; something long and hooped like a tennis racket. He crouched behind some scraggly bushes, looking toward the creek.

Brenda hurried through the house, barefoot in a long nightgown. She opened the door in time to see Jerry slip through the bushes. She rushed across the yard and stopped behind the cover of a bush.

Jerry hid in a shadow just a few feet away. Farther down, by the creek, Brenda's friends had gathered. Seamus squatted there, smoking his pipe, and Farrah hovered in a faint blue glow. The spider king swung from a gossamer web, and Blue the Griffin perched in a tree. The dark lump-like thing in the grass might have been Bogue. They talked intently. Seamus gestured with his pipe.

Jerry jumped forward, swinging his arm. The hooped thing was a butterfly net. Seamus fell back as it swooped over Farrah, and the dark lump that must have been Bogue slithered away. Seamus hesitated, then darted for the trees. Blue followed, and the spider king scurried up his thread.

Brenda gasped. Jerry held the net close to his face, watching Farrah struggle. Brenda heard a faint, high-pitched babble of fear. Jerry reached into the net and took the squirming fairy in his fist. Brenda ran toward him, but before she got close, Jerry put Farrah in his mouth and bit down.

Brenda stopped, shocked. She saw Farrah's legs and the lower half of her wings in Jerry's hand. He chewed.

Brenda felt hot and cold all over, like the time she had had a fever and Mama had bathed her in ice.

Jerry looked up and swallowed. Seeing her, he dropped Farrah's legs. They dissolved before they hit the ground. "Brenda, it's not what you think. You don't understand,"

"You ate her." She stepped backward.

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"Not exactly." He dropped the butterfly net. "That's how you saw it, but I just... borrowed a piece of your imagination. They aren't real, you know. You made them."

"How could you eat her?"

He smiled, showing long teeth. "I'm a writer, Brenda. They're my inspiration. You can make more fairies. It's easy for you; you're still young. I can't do it anymore."

"You killed your friends." She felt like crying, but knew, distantly, that she needed to be brave.

"No." He waved his hand like a sword, slashing the air. "They just faded. Lots of things make them fade. Being hungry, especially. Try holding on to your friends when you're hungry, Brenda, and when you don't have anywhere to live. They fade fast in the real world. When I lost them, I lost my stories. I took enough of your imagination to write another book, that's all."

"You didn't borrow." Brenda clenched her hands into tiny fists. "You stole."

"I can't make you run out of imagination." The teacher-talking-down voice again. "Imagination can be burned out, and worked out, and saddened out, but I can't take it away. Experience does. The world takes it away."

"You took Farrah. Are you the world?" Brenda had never felt smaller, but she also felt like a princess, facing a monster.

"Go to bed, Brenda," he said sternly. "Your mother wouldn't like you being awake."

"You don't even like Mama." Knowing that hurt as much as seeing Farrah die. She pictured her mother-flower, wilting. "You followed her to eat my friends, to write more books."

"I like her fine," he said, irritated. "But yes, I followed her to you. I've got a scent for people like us." He touched the side of his nose. In the strange half-moonlight his nose seemed longer and sharper than before.

Monster, Brenda thought. A cloud moved, uncovering the full moonlight. Jerry's mussed hair stood on end.

"I'm not like you. You're a monster. The nice-looking-bad-man. Like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Like a werewolf."

Jerry's voice was hoarse. "Go to bed, Brenda. I have enough now, an idea for a book."

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Farrah will be in it. By the time I need another idea, you'll be older, you'll have lost your friends to the world. I won't take any more from you. I'll find someone else."

"I won't lose them," Brenda said, sounding surer than she felt. "You gave them up, but I won't. Go away, monster man."

She saw Seamus in the trees, and Bogue's shifting shadow, and Blue perched in a tree.

"Stop calling me that," he said, voice guttural. "I'm a writer. You liked my books." His shoulders seemed wider than normal. Another cloud drifted over the moon, transforming Jerry into a shadowed hulk.

"You killed Farrah," Brenda said vehemently. "You killed my Mama's *hope*." She ran forward and kicked him in the shin, hard. Jerry gasped, but it sounded more like a howl. She stepped back, afraid.

Jerry touched his face, a shadowed smudge in the dark. He bent over and breathed raggedly. "What's happening?" She barely understood him. His voice whined, like a whimpering dog's.

Brenda suddenly knew. "I don't know if I create them," she said slowly, "Or if I just help them be what they already are. Like I'm helping you be what you are. A monster."

The moon broke the clouds for an instant. Brenda only caught a glimpse of Jerry: yellow teeth, too much hair, twisted hands. He growled and stumbled into the woods. Brenda watched him, knowing him for a monster-- just as she knew Seamus had secrets, and that Bogue ruled the dark, and that Farrah was dead. She listened to the crashing in the woods, and after a moment Seamus came to her.

"The chasing thing, chased away." His voice was low and miserable. "But he'll return, Brenda. He'll transform himself, change back. He has power, even if he's forgotten. He'll come, and he'll ruin you."

Seamus lapsed into silence, waiting for something.

"Unless," Brenda said at last.

"Yes. Unless."

Brenda looked at the trees.

She believed in dark and necessary things.

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A figure stepped from the deeper shadows. He stood at least nine feet tall, his head topped by a rack of antlers. Other creatures joined him from the woods: Hounds, and little people, and dirty, ragged humans. One resembled her mother. One looked like Brenda herself, taller, older, with longer hair.

"Hunt," Brenda said.

The Huntsman lifted his head, sniffed the air, and loped into the woods. His pack followed, eerily silent. "Stop when you catch him," she said. It had to be spoken, defined, acknowledged in her mind. "Stop when you kill Jerry."

Brenda sat down in the grass. Her stomach felt full of rocks.

"Everything will be better now," Seamus said doubtfully.

"You don't know everything," Brenda said.

Bogue slithered over and nuzzled her hand. She didn't look at him. He felt like cool mud.

Brenda closed her eyes. She'd saved others, the boys and girls Jerry would have found later. But no one could save her mother, who would come home to find her boyfriend gone. No one to save Brenda herself, after she sent the hunt to kill Jerry.

Brenda was afraid she had become the world.

When she opened her eyes, Bogue and Seamus were gone.

Tim Pratt is a poet and fiction writer living in Oakland, California, where he works as an assistant editor for Locus magazine. He also co-edits slipstream 'zine Flytrap. His work has appeared in Realms of Fantasy, Strange Horizons, The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, and other nice places.

The story previously appeared in Chiaroscuro in 2001.

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Canopied in Darkness

Lavie Tidhar

About the story: I became interested in the idea of a Jewish vampire because most vampire stories rely very heavily on Christian iconography that, quite frankly, does nothing for me. This early story eventually prompted me to expand on the theme in a series of loosely-linked stories I am currently working on, featuring a kind of Jewish supernatural underworld.

He straightened his yarmulke with unsteady fingers, taking care to cover the bald spot - an unbecoming vanity, he knew, but it was the habit of more years than he could remember. He buttoned the heavy coat, black and fleece-lined, taking care with each ivory button like a jeweler cautiously handling semi-precious stones.

The Rabbi walked through the midnight streets of Brent Cross in a pool of silence. His lined face repelled moonlight, discouraged the electric light of street-lamps. Not a tall man, he seemed bowed by his Chasidic clothes, walking still the way Jews have always walked, cautiously, quietly, somewhat bent by the time and the place of their exile. Moving in silence, attracting as little attention as possible.

A man was lying on the pavement, greasy hair oozing out of a torn azure sleeping-bag. A tin can, still bearing a faded label for baked beans, was lying on the floor next to him, discarded pennies spilling in an arc around it like a halo.

The Rabbi bent down, gently pulled back the hem of the sleeping-bag, exposing the man's throat. He touched it gently with his forefingers, making sure the man was still, for tonight at least, alive. The man snorted and snarled, but the Rabbi murmured to him in a quiet tongue and he returned to sleep. The Rabbi carefully extracted a small purse, made of a dark and weathered leather, not unlike himself. He took out two one-pound coins, returned the purse to his garment. Frowning, he scooped the scattered pennies into the tin can, added his own

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two coins. He looked down for a long moment, at the sleeping man and the tin of baked beans. Then he walked on.

He passed rows of dark houses. Their glass windows appeared to be frozen, like sheets of ice that were hang over a bottomless dark. Row after row he traversed, walking like a shadow through Brent Cross, Golders Green and Hampstead, passing dimly-lit bus stops, boarded up shop fronts, occasionally aware of the sounds of other living things in the darkness around him, in snatches of song, riffs of music, the smell of tobacco and other drugs, shreds of conversations like pollen on the night's wind.

A scream woke him from his reverie. A scream that pierced the night, a high clear voice that spoke not in words but in ancient emotions. The scream was cut short, its absence sending cold like an iron stake through his heart. The Rabbi walked and walked, each step lengthening to encompass more earth, hurrying towards the scream and its sender.

In a grey pool of light from a weak lamp-post a naked child lay. His head lolled sleepily and his eyelids fluttered, yet his neck was a crimson bruise and his lips the colour of dark, overly sweet wine. The Rabbi made to kneel by the boy, when the patter of light footsteps halted him.

Four shadows danced in a circle around him, passing through light like insubstantial wraiths. Four youthful figures who beckoned to him and laughed in silent mirth.

- The boy will live, Rabbi.

The speaker, if the figure could be called that, stepped forward from its companions, became the clear face of a young man. He was smiling, white teeth shining in his face like daggers through a drowned corpse.

- He was only an *aperitif*, don't you know – laughed another youthful apparition. – *you*, however, my dear Rabbi... We've waited a long time to have you for a main course.

Ignoring them, the Rabbi bent down to look closely at the child. He took a white handkerchief from his pocket and gently swiped at the boy's wounds, the handkerchief transforming in moments into a crimson flag.

- leave him – the leader said. – he'll live. – His unvoice sounded husky, thirsty.

– Would you accept our gift to you?

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The Rabbi rose to his feet. ‘*Arpad.*’ He said, his voice expressing unearthly weariness tinged with acceptance.

The leader shrugged. – We prefer vampire. We’re English, not Europeans.

‘You’re Jewish,’ the Rabbi said. The leader shrugged again.

- Semantics, Rabbi – he said, – Are we defined by what our ancestors believed in? One can be a vampire and still an atheist, you know. – he paused. – Join us, Rabbi. – he invited. – Teach us. – the four youths laughed.

The Rabbi stood for a long moment over the body of the young boy. His face scarved in darkness, his expression hidden and unreadable. He began muttering in a low voice, reciting a prayer in a voice barely higher than a whisper. The Kaddish. The street lights seemed to dim, to withdraw themselves into tight balls of insubstantial illumination. Darkness engulfed the Rabbi like a velvet coat. The four *arpadim* – the four vampires – stood motionless, like flies in a darkened amber.

‘Jews should never be vampires,’ said the Rabbi. ‘Too many blood libels, too many pogroms, too many death camps. We must always, if possible, opt for life.’ Slowly, deliberately, he sank his teeth into the first speaker’s throat, as if performing a tasteless but necessary operation. ‘Consider this a circumcision, not an exorcism.’ He said. He let the speaker drop, its wraith-like body melting and oozing as it was released, melting into a dark liquid that fractured like crystallized blood, releasing a rank vapour that was borne on the wind. Almost leisurely, all the time reciting the Kaddish, the Rabbi released the three remaining *arpadim*, letting their bodies fall while praying for their souls.

When it was over, the Rabbi bent down and picked the still figure of the boy. Carrying him gently, he started walking back the way he has come.

It has been five hundred years since he has had a son.

Lavie Tidhar is the winner of the 2002 James Ragan Poetry Prize and the 2003 Clarke-Bradbury International Science Fiction Competition. He grew up in Israel and South Africa and travelled widely in Africa, Asia and Europe. His short stories are due to appear in several

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anthologies - including The Blackest Death Volume One, DeathGrip: Legacy of Horror and Dark Streets After Hours - and magazines in America and the UK, as well as in translation in France, Spain, Israel and China. He writes a regular review column for DuskSite.com and his non-fiction has appeared in The Fix, Nova Express and Foundation. He currently lives in London. Lavie's web site is at <http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~lavie>

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.....THE TWICE A WEEK SERIAL E-ZINE

The Case of the Missing Devil Child

Lyda Morehouse

About the story: *A prequel short story about Deidre in the AngeLink Universe.*

For Satanists, Mr. and Mrs. Marshall Fong looked extremely respectable. Sure, they dressed all in black, as I would have expected. However, if you ignored the understated, upside-down pentagram embroidered in neat, blood red stitches over the pocket of Mr. Fong's button-down shirt, the monochrome look could almost pass as haute couture. Delilah, the Missus, certainly sat primly enough in her blouse, tea-length skirt, and leather pumps, clutching her shiny black plastic handbag on her knees like an Asian June Cleaver.

The Fongs continued to smile at me patiently, pleasantly, as if they understood that it would take a moment for the shock of their announcement to wear off. Truthfully, I was still reeling, except in the last few minutes my silence had a new cause - I physically ached to arrest this well-dressed smiling couple. I used to be a cop, and being a Satanist was a crime. In fact, when the Fongs made their announcement, my first reflex had been for my hands to go to my hip, reaching for handcuffs that were no longer there. Then I tried to raise the precinct on the LINK, but I'd forgotten that that, too, had been taken from me.

"Uh," I said again. Unfortunately, that had been extent of my conversational skills since Marshall introduced himself and Delilah.

"We need a private eye," Marshall said.

That would be me. The paint had barely dried on my office door, but that's what it said: "Deidre McMannus, Private Investigator."

At first, I'd been thrilled to see the Fongs. I'd started to wonder if the stigma of my public dismissal from the police force was going to destroy any chance of having paying clients and making a living. I hadn't yet noticed the pentagram, so I cleared some parking tickets off a couple of chairs, offered them coffee, and cheerfully opened up my new, antique notepad. It hummed under my fingers, even now, nearly forgotten.

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"Miss McMannus? Are you quite all right?" Delilah asked finally.

It was strange to hear my name with the normal honorific. I'd gotten used to Officer, or Detective. "Just call me Deidre," I said.

"Yes, very well. Deidre," Delilah smiled warmly, but her delicately shaped eyebrows knit together as she spoke: "It's our son, you see. We've lost him."

"Yes," said Marshall. "He's gone missing now for days. The cops don't seem to care too much about his case because we're off the LINK, you know... outcasts, like yourself."

I wasn't sure I liked the comparison. Sure, I'd been excommunicated ever since my partner shot the Pope in front of a worldwide audience, but I used to be a fairly sincere Catholic.

Frowning hard, I rubbed the almond-shaped lump of the dead receiver that lay just under the skin of my right temple. I might not like the idea, but Marshall Fong was right about one thing. I was an outcast from the LINK. These days an excommunication was literal.

America was theocratic republic, and had been ever since the Great War, twenty years ago. Thanks to the Medusa bomb and the humanistic science that spawned that destructive technology, secularism had fallen so out of favor that it was now a requirement of citizenship to belong to an accepted religion. All citizens were connected by the LINK. The LINK was everything: commerce, business, entertainment, community... the works. I used to be in, just like I used to be a cop -- a LINK vice-cop, no less, but now I was out. Just like the Fongs. The law made no distinction between us.

That pissed me off. Deeply.

I'd been trying to do the right thing; these people flaunted their crime. They could change if they wanted to. Unlike me, the Fongs could take back what they'd done, renounce their sins, and the world would wash them clean and welcome them back as prodigal children. Then, the Fongs could get a LINK nexus, and join the righteous. I would kill for that opportunity. They squandered theirs.

I glanced at the door and imagined myself telling the Fongs they could stuff their case. I didn't want their illegal money. But, the problem was, of course, that I needed the cash. Desperately. I could hardly be picky about my clientele, since I had none. I'd just opened shop, having dumped my life savings into getting the private detective license, running a few LINK

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and print ads, and paying the rent on this office space. If I didn't start doing business soon, I was going to be out of it -- and sleeping on the streets -- before the end of the month. Was it worth violating my morals, my principles?

I glanced down at the electronic notepad. "Okay, so tell me about your son," I said. I heard the tension in the Fongs release with a soft sigh. They'd been worried I would turn them away. I wondered how many other places they'd tried after the police, or if I was the first.

"Azazel," Delilah said with a smile. "He's in his senior year at high school. We've brought a photo."

"Azazel," I repeated. Jesus, they'd even saddled their kid with a name that flaunted convention. Azazel is one of the names given to the serpent that tempted Eve.

"Yes, Azzie. Our son." Marshall removed a flat-print from the back pocket of his slacks and handed it to me over the clutter of my desk. Azazel Fong was as clean-cut as his folks, although he'd rebelliously chosen to wear a pastel blue shirt and a dark blue denim jacket. His hair was long and straight, and from what I could tell he kept it tied in the back. He had a black cowboy hat on and a rakish smile. A good-looking kid -- from the picture, you'd never know he'd been raised as a Satanist. I blinked rapidly twice, the command for recording on the LINK. I waited a full ten seconds before I remembered I was no longer connected.

"Shit," I muttered, angry with myself for forgetting. The LINK had just been so much a part of my life. It felt like a phantom limb. To them, I said. "Can I keep this?"

"Of course," the Fongs said in unison. Delilah added, "That's why we brought it."

I nodded. It made sense that they would have thought ahead, never having been LINKed. My eyes strayed to the pentagram on Marshall's shirt.

"How did you get across town without getting picked up?" I found myself asking. "Why do you even wear something so blatant?"

It was Delilah who answered in a soft, cultured voice. "As Satanists we worship individual expression. For us, it's all about flaunting convention, daring society to pass judgment."

I grunted in confusion. "I would have thought that as Satanists, you worshipped Satan."

"Only abstractly," said Marshall.

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"We actually consider ourselves atheists," agreed Delilah.

I rubbed the hard lump of the receiver. "Then, why not just be atheists?"

Being atheist was also illegal, but it was far more likely to be the kind of thing polite society would simply ignore. Most atheists could, for instance, pass. There was no "atheistic" costume. Unless someone asked, no one would have to know you were an atheist.

"It's not enough," Delilah said. Her voice had gained a sharp edge; she was clearly losing patience with me. "We are more than atheists. If you must know, we like the carnal aspect of Satanism and the autodeistic nature of the religion. But," she paused to sniff haughtily, "what this has to do with our son, I don't know."

I nodded. She was right. It wasn't really any business of mine, not any more -- not without the badge.

"Okay, so are you close to your son? I mean, do you get along? Any reason to think he left home because of some argument?"

The Fongs glanced at each other, but answered fairly quickly. Marshall spoke: "We've had a few arguments, like you would with any teenager, but I can't imagine he'd have run away. He's our only child. And Azazel had been excited about the birthday party we were planning with all his friends."

I tried to imagine a Satanists' birthday party and failed. Chicken blood cake? Party hats with horns?

"We were going to let him do the whole thing, however he liked," Delilah said. "At a hotel. He could invite whomever he wanted. No restrictions."

I felt compelled to write that down no restrictions, hotel. The stylus felt clumsy in my hands. It took forever to record a simple phrase, especially when I remembered the ease capturing images and sound using the LINK.

"Do what thou wilt, and hurt no one undeserving," Marshall agreed. "It's really our only law."

I ignored the creepy feeling that my stomach gave me when he said that so cheerily. I cleared my throat. "Was he planning on paying for this party himself, or...?"

"No, we gave him a credit counter," Delilah said.

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I was excited to hear that on many levels. One, it meant they'd be able to pay me in something other than barter and, two, there might be a money trail.

My hopes were dashed on the latter when Marshall said: "But he hasn't used it for a week. We've been getting the reports."

"Did he have a job? Money of his own."

"No, not really." Marshall said.

Even so, I wrote check credit counter, and asked Marshall if he'd be willing to share the reports. After his brief nod, I found myself asking a rather indelicate question that had been on my mind since they walked through the door: "How do you make your money? I mean, without the LINK."

Marshall shifted in his chair and glanced meaningfully over at Delilah.

"I'm a prostitute," she said. "Specifically a dominatrix for hire. It's extremely good money. Marshall is a visual artist. I support him. I support the whole family."

My jaws clenched. I had to hold onto my hand to keep from trying to reach for imaginary handcuffs.

"Oh," my voice was hard. "Does Azazel know what you do for a living?"

"Of course," she said with a little snort, as if I'd insulted her.

"How does he feel about it?"

Delilah opened her mouth to respond, but Marshall cut her off. "He has more problems with our religion than what mother does for a living. He's said so himself."

I was stunned. What kind of twisted kid doesn't care that his mother is a whore? All I could do was ask, "What?"

Marshall looked truly flustered, then spat out. "He's dating a Christian."

"We're afraid that boy is responsible for all of this," Delilah said. "That's he's taken our son off to..." her lips turned up into a sneer, "to brainwash him."

"That boy?" I repeated, not certain I'd heard rightly. Could this be any worse? Being gay was once again a crime in America, thanks to a series of New Right presidents and some passage in Leviticus about men lying down together.

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"Yes, that Christian boy Azazel has gone and fallen for... Robert or something -- he had a ridiculously forgettable name like that." Delilah said through pursed lips. She turned to her husband "Why couldn't Azzie have stayed with that Smith boy, Mephistopheles? He and Mephie made such nice, handsome couple."

She had to be joking. But from Marshall's equally distressed expression, I guessed not.

I wrote down: gay, parents okay with it. Wish he was dating Satan. Christian boyfriend. I looked at the words, then erased them with a swipe of my finger against the pad. I wasn't going to forget this turn of events. I looked at Azazel's picture again. His smile seemed so open and friendly. I wondered how Azazel managed to keep away from the law.

"You see why the cops weren't interested, Miss McMannus," Marshall said. "They think this whole thing is good."

I bristled. "Police officers take their jobs very seriously no matter who is involved, Mr. Fong."

However, that wasn't strictly true and I knew it. The guys I knew in Missing Persons very well might put a lost gay Satanist at the bottom of their to-do list, but they wouldn't do it completely with malicious intent. They were overworked, and affluent, LINKed kids got priority. It just worked out that way.

"Dark Lord only knows what their doing to him, what they're teaching him!" Delilah said with a snuffle.

I wanted to ask her not to invoke her "Lord" in my office, but I grabbed a tissue from the box at the corner of my desk and handed it to her instead. She daubed daintily at the corners of her eyes.

"I'm sure he'll be all right, my love," Marshall said, putting a hand on Delilah's lap. "We raised him well. He won't lose his faith."

"He was already starting," Delilah said, taking Marshall's hand into hers and clutching it. "I'm so afraid. Our poor, gentle boy." Turning to me, she said, "You've got to help us, Miss McMannus. Please. We'll pay any price."

"Please try not to worry," I said, mostly because I didn't know what do with a Satan-worshipping dominatrix's tears. "Why don't we start with some easy things. I'll need to know

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the name of the hotel, the boyfriend, his high school, and any names of any friends you can remember."

"Of course, of course," they nodded, clearly calmed and pleased with the fact that I was taking them seriously. We spent the afternoon like that, until I got a cramp in my hand from taking so many notes and thought I had a pretty good picture of Azazel. I sent the Fongs off with a promise to call, and then, after I realized I had no non-LINK way to get a hold of them, Mr. Fong gave me his wrist phone, "as a down-payment," he'd said. At that, Mrs. Fong had fished a credit counter out of her purse for my expenses, and when I looked at it, I nearly fainted with joy: ten thousand credits. Screw my moral qualms about working for Satanists, I'd finally be able to pay rent. And more.

In fact, the first thing I did with the Satanist's money was take my car to Saint Christopher's for an overhaul. Julian, the owner, gave me a suspiciously raised eyebrow when my Chevy came rattling in off the traffic tunnel.

"No barter, Jezebel," he shouted over the whine of the pneumatic jack. A lot of people called me Jezebel because that's what the press started calling me during my partner Daniel's trial. It was mistakenly assumed I'd slept with Daniel, even though he was married. Adultery was a big no-no. After all the media pressure I was a black sheep anyway, and the church was happy enough to buy into it. Out I went.

I tried not to take the name-thing personally, even though Julian and I went to high school together and he knew perfectly well what my given name was.

I rolled down the window and waved the credit counter at Julian. "I've got money. Real money."

He leaned over and took the plastic card from me and inspected it over the rim of his bifocals. Julian was a burly, potbellied Cuban, and one of the best mechanics I'd ever known. He knew classic cars like nobody else, and his relationship with mine bordered on the mystical.

Julian finished his inspection of the plastic and glanced at me with surprised eyes; "It looks legit."

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"That's because it is, Julian," I said, stepping out of the car and handing him the keys. "I've got a client."

"No kidding." He seemed happy for me and pocketed the keys and the plastic.

I told him what I wanted done to the car, and we haggled over how long it would take him to get things done. He revised the estimate by several hours fewer when he noticed the strategically placed six-pack of expensive, imported Irish lager that I'd set behind the front seat just for him.

I fished the plastic out of his pocket. "Later," I explained. "After the work is done."

"How will I know you'll still have it?"

"Try a little Christian charity."

He humphed, but opened the hood of my car and started work. I watched him idly for a moment, then asked, "You know any Satanists, Julian?"

"Yeah, sure, you know Tom from our class? I heard he got into that."

"Tom became a pagan, not a Satanist," I corrected. "There's a big difference."

Julian shrugged like he didn't believe me, or he didn't care. But the difference was important. Being a pagan was perfectly legal, being a Satanist was not. The Taft-Pallis act had guaranteed accreditation to religions that could prove a long history of practice in America.

It had been drafted with the intention of legalizing Native American religions, but the Wiccans of Salem were actually the first to profit from the act.

"Why, you thinking about joining the Satanists?" Julian asked. "Or them witches?"

"Couldn't even if I wanted to," I said, tapping my receiver. I leaned against a bright red tool cabinet with a number of thin, shallow drawers. It was true. Because I was officially excommunicated, I was still considered Catholic and not allowed to join another church. I'd actually gotten a bunch of offers after the trial and the very public excommunication. The Wiccans had wanted me, as did the Agnostics, but like it or not, I was a Catholic for life.

"Please don't tell me your new clients are Satanists," Julian said over his shoulder.

"Okay," I said.

He shook his head at me as I headed out the door.

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Walking into the police station was like returning home after a long vacation overseas. Everything had a familiar/unfamiliar feel to it. I noticed things I used to take for granted, like the strong odor of Chinese take-out emanating from behind the reception desk. The desk was larger and more forbidding than I remembered, and more dingy.

I waved at Howard, who sat in his usual place behind the smudged safety glass and pointed to the security door.

"Excuse me, ma'am," Howard said before I'd even reached for the handle. "You can't go in there."

I stopped. "Howard, it's me: Dee. Just buzz me in. I need to talk to Dominguez in Missing Persons about a case I'm working on."

"You need a pass. All civilian guests are required to have one," Howard repeated like didn't know who I was. I looked at the door, and then at Howard. Howard's face held a grim, determined cast. His eyes glittered darkly with stubbornness. From the tightness of my lips, I imagined I held similar look.

"Fine," I said. I took a seat in one of the plastic chairs that lined the edges of the reception area.

I pulled out Mr. Fong's wrist phone and tried to familiarize myself with it. The phones were the size and shape of old-fashioned watches. Mr. Fong's was, of course, black leather. The plastic faceplate was bright red. There were several buttons on the edges of the flat screen. None of them were labeled.

The phones had been developed for use by people who had legitimate reasons for being unLINKed -- medical issues or religious ones, like the Christian Scientists who wouldn't take part in anything that violated their bodies.

Luckily, one of the buttons was an obvious toggle switch. I flipped it. The phone beeped loudly, startling me - and Howard, who had been watching me intently from behind his desk. I held the phone closer to my lips, "Dominguez, José Garcia. Detective First Class, New York Police Department. Missing Persons."

I'd hoped that there was an automatic voice trigger that would hunt the LINK for Dominguez's personal address and patch me through to his avatar. No luck. I repeated my

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command holding down one of the buttons. I tried another one. Then another. I cursed myself for not thinking to ask for instructions from Mr. Fong when he first offered the phone. I started with the buttons on the right side, repeating my commands each time. Howard was starting to chuckle.

When I was ready to fling the phone against the glass in front of Howard's smirking face, the wrist phone flickered to life.

"Dominguez."

Dominguez's avatar looked exactly like him, which surprised me. Most cops were lazy with their LINK images; they simply used the standard badge. But, instead, Dominguez's avatar had his black curls, with just a touch of gray at the temples, and his same fierce Spanish features. Dominguez's family had immigrated from Barcelona, and he was fond of reminding all the other detectives that the language he spoke was Castilian - noble Spanish, not that corruption that he felt most Latinos uttered.

"McMannus," he said. Even though his tone was less than friendly, I smiled to hear my surname. Someone, at least, still remembered who I was.

"Hey, José," I said. "Did a couple of Satanists report a missing kid?"

His avatar squinted at me. Then it shook its head slowly. "You know I can't talk about police business with you, McMannus."

"Not even after all those nights I kicked your ass on the department bowling league?"

The avatar chuckled. "Not even then. Look, I'm sorry, Dee. It's department policy. You're a civilian now, like it or not."

Definitely not, I thought grimly. "Yeah, okay. Thanks, Jose."

"Nobody picks up a spare like you did, McMannus. It's a bloody shame the team lost you."

"Yeah, it was." I said, but I gave him a smile to let him know I understood what he was trying to say. Then, I got up, flipped Howard the bird, and walked out.

I probably had more information than the Department did, anyway, I decided as I stepped out into the busy afternoon. I wasn't sure why I'd even gone to the station, other than habit. Like

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reaching for phantom handcuffs, talking to other cops about the case I was working on was just routine, unconscious.

But I had to find new ways of attacking a case, I reminded myself. I stood inside the shelter of the entrance for a moment, and let the familiar noise flow around me. The pedestrian tunnel outside the station was clogged with my fellow New Yorkers. Most of the people who passed by had the far-away LINKed look in their eyes; they spoke commands out loud without bothering to sub-vocalize. They didn't appear focus on anything more than not running into other people, and so I felt free to stare unabashedly as I considered what I knew about my missing Satanist.

Fishing the pad out of my coat pocket, I reviewed my notes from my meeting with the Fongs. The thing that really resonated with me was the one thing I hadn't bothered to write down. Azazel Fong was gay.

I knew from my time as a LINK-Vice cop that the queer underground was extremely well-networked and well-organized. It was also an extremely difficult subculture for undercover cops to infiltrate. Something to do with "gay-dar," the undercover guys always said. Plus, GLBT people often talked about each other as "family" and they protected their own fiercely, especially after the law turned against them.

I imagined that Azazel would take advantage of that network to find couches to crash on. It's what I'd do. Cops were the same way, actually. There was a time when, if I were in trouble, I'd have no doubt who I'd turn to. Unfortunately, there wasn't the same kind of community of excommunicated Catholics whose partners shot the Pope.

But, I had to focus on finding Azazel, not my own troubles.

So, how did I get an in with the gay community?

Just then the Fong's phone rang. I stared blankly at the screen as it continued to buzz at me. Finally, I randomly pressed one of the buttons.

"Hello?" I said, hoping that I hadn't just disconnected whoever was calling.

"Girlfriend, what you need is a manual. I'll send one in the next post. Oh, wait. Do you read Arabic?"

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I recognized Mouse from his wanted poster. I used to have it pinned to the wall over my desk. Mouse was a criminal hacker, a Muslim, and... apparently, an electronic stalker.

"The digital video cameras," I said suddenly. "You hacked the police surveillance to watch me? How did you even know I was there?"

Mouse just smiled.

While still in Vice, I'd made it my personal goal to bring in Mouse. I'd gotten close several times, but he always just narrowly evaded capture. Apparently, after the fourth or fifth near miss, Mouse had decided my pursuit of him was flirtatious. He'd started sending me clues and taunts. When I was a cop, Mouse and I used to exchange barbs once a day.

Until I saw his trademark round ears sticking out from a tangle of black hair in desperate need of a shower and a trim, I didn't realize how much I missed his daily contact.

"How did you find this number?" I asked, trying to hide my smile.

"Genius," Mouse said. He lifted a finger to wag it at me accusingly. "Something, I might add, you seem a little short on. Your line has been on open-receiving since the police station. Any phreak with half a brain could totally exploit your air-time and rack up a massive bill. You're lucky I like you."

"Yeah, lucky me."

"Damn straight, girlfriend. Oh," he said, and he turned as if seeing something off-screen. "Found an English version. It's on its way to you."

"What are you talking about, Mouse?"

"I'm sending you an instruction manual for that new phone of yours. If you're going to finally start communicating with the LINK again, you ought to at least grok all the functions. It's a nice system this... " he glanced aside again as if reading something, "... Fong guy has. You can do a lot. Even build an avatar. Pretty sweet for a disconnect. Could come in handy."

I felt strangely grateful at his offer to help, minor though it was. I'd been hitting a lot of walls lately. "Thanks," I said, and meant it.

My sincerity seemed to take Mouse by surprise. "Uh, sure. It's no problem, Dee."

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Mouse and I stared at each other through the tiny window in the watch faceplate. His surprise slowly transformed into a funny little smile, like I'd just made his day and not the other way around.

I found myself saying, "Don't take this the wrong way, Mouse, but do you know where a gay teenager would hang out in New York?"

"No," he said. "But I could find out."

If anyone on the outside could, I imagined Mouse would be the one. If nothing else, he had the wire-wizard skills to break into the police database for the names of all the known gay hang-outs. But, more likely, being part of a different kind of underground, he probably knew someone who ran with the GLBT crowd.

"I'd appreciate it," I said.

Mouse smiled. "Let me get this straight. You're asking me to do a little info-job for you. You."

I nodded.

"You do realize that's a crime, don't you?" Mouse's smile was getting so large I wondered if his face would be able to hold it.

Though I knew what it cost me, I nodded.

"Capital. I'm on it."

I walked through the pedestrian tunnels all the way to the West Side where Azazel's boyfriend's parents lived. I'd found their listing from a LINK access terminal at the public library. Richard and Martha Forester's apartment was in a secure building. At first I worried that I might have to loiter around until someone came out of the building, but then I remembered Mr. Fong's wrist phone. I plugged in the Forester's name. After a long pause, I got a beep.

"Yes?"

Mr. Forester's avatar presented him as a middle-aged black man with long hair, twisted into thin dreadlocks. He was dressed in a brightly colored T-shirt that advertised some geezer rock band. "Hi," I said, my fingers itching to show a badge I no longer had. "I'm Deidre McMannus, private investigator. I was wondering if your son Robert was around."

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"A private eye?" He looked puzzled. "Is Robert in some kind of trouble?"

"Not necessarily," I assured him. "Is he around?"

"How did you get this address? Why don't you just LINK him directly?"

I cleared my throat, which had gotten clogged with embarrassment. I'd forgotten how unseemly I must appear. "I'm afraid I don't have LINK access presently. Uh, I'm using a phone."

"Are you one of those Satanists?"

"No!"

"Good, because I've forbidden Robert to talk to any of those freaks any more. I can't believe they let people like that into our high school. It's supposed to be private."

"Do you think I could talk to Robert? I'm actually trying to track down a high school student who's gone missing. He was a friend of Robert's." I didn't say boyfriend, because, well, although Mr. Forester seemed very nice, for all I knew he might be the sort to sign the waiver that would send his son off to a reformation camp. The camps were not part of the judicial system. They were privately run "detox" centers, where the aim was to "cure" a person of their homosexuality using whatever means necessary. From what I'd heard about those places, I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy.

"You are one of those freaks," Mr. Forester decided with a dark frown. "I'm calling the cops."

"I am the cops," I said without thinking.

"Oh, yeah? Let's see your badge."

They didn't issue badges for private detectives. I was forced to hang up.

It was Sunday before anything solid happened. I'd gotten my car back from Julian and was starting to feel guilty every time Marshall or Delilah called to ask about my progress. I'd exhausted all the usual avenues. I'd talked to all of Azazel's high school friends, but, as I predicted, the kids saw me coming and shut up tight. I might not carry the kind of badge that would satisfy Mr. Forester, but the criminal element could smell cop on me from a mile away.

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Without the LINK it was harder to track the credit counter. I'd spent several hours on the phone trying to convince the bank to release the newest information to me, but, even with Marshall Fong's permission, they claimed they could only send that information LINK to LINK. Something about encryption, but I knew they were hosed. I'd seen LINK criminals bust credit counter information with nothing more than a handheld and a tone modulator. As I lounged with my feet up on my broad wooden desk, I seriously considered hacking the bank myself, but decided that was a line I wasn't quite yet ready to cross.

The phone on my wrist buzzed. I was getting so used to it that I didn't even jump, and, thanks to Mouse's instruction booklet, I flicked it on deftly. "Go ahead," I said.

"It's me. I've got your connection."

I pulled my stocking feet off my desk, and sat up straighter. "Mouse."

"Yep," he said. "This guy I know knows this guy who says that the hot place in New York for boy-on-boy action is a Bible study."

"Bible study?"

"That's the cover story. The real scene is a bar called Barbarella's."

"Barbarella's," I repeated, writing it down, thinking it sounded like a leather bar. Finally, something I could do. I stood up, getting ready to grab my coat.

"So what are you going to wear, Dee?" Mouse asked. "I mean, are you going to go for the femme thing? I really think you'd make a better butch."

I looked down at my clothes. I hit the record button on the phone and flashed Mouse a quick scan of my body. "What's wrong with this?"

"You look like a cop."

"So?"

"Do you want to find this boy or make him run away faster?"

I frowned at my comfortable sweater. "No sequins."

Mouse laughed. "No, I don't think girls get to wear sequins, Dee, so that shouldn't be a problem. My suggestion? Find some pants and maybe a necktie."

It was a misdemeanor for a woman to go out of doors in anything that resembled men's clothing thanks to that line in Deuteronomy condemning cross-dressing. Of course, as a cop, I

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wore a uniform -- pants and all -- just like my male colleagues. These days, I compromised by wearing loose-fitting skirts that made it easy to hide a drop-down in an inner-thigh holster and that didn't restrict my ability to run. To that effect, I wore boots with good traction. It was an eclectic look at best. But my closet wasn't full of much else, so I shook my head.

"There's no way I can do a complete make-over to go undercover. I just need to talk to this kid. I'm going to have to risk it."

"Hey, it's your look-out," Mouse said. "But if they all scatter when they see you and go underground for a month, don't say I didn't warn you."

I was about to press the button to cut off our conversation when something in Mouse's eyes made me pause. "Why are you helping me, Mouse?"

"Because you need it," he said. "Besides, people like us have to stick together."

"I'm not like you," I said quickly.

Mouse's thin eyebrow rose sharply. "No?"

"No." I stressed the word, trying to make it stick, to convince him... to convince myself.

"Sure," was all Mouse said, but his tone mocked me.

Barbarella's wasn't exactly a leather bar, but it wasn't the kind of place you'd expect to find a Bible study group either. The sign above the yellowing newspaper-covered windows said ice cream parlor, but the place looked less than kid-friendly. The door was covered in blue-screen fabric. If I were LINKed, I'd be getting some kind of holoprojection from it, maybe an advertisement, or, from the looks of the place, maybe a warning to stay the hell away.

I tried the door. It was locked, so I knocked.

After a few minutes, an ancient Russian woman with a dark kerchief tied over a mess of white curls pulled the blue screen aside to stare at me. Her eyes were black and measuring, and they swept over my sweater, full skirt, and hiking boots. When she saw the boots she smiled. The door opened.

"Come in, come in, dearie. No LINK, I see," she said, though it wasn't necessarily obvious just by looking at me that I was a disconnect. "They took it from you at the camps?"

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"Uh, the camps? Uh, right," I said. It hadn't even been hard to convince this woman I was a lesbian. I looked again at my favorite, battered boots and made a mental note to start wearing fashionable pumps like Mrs. Fong's.

"It's okay. We're a family restaurant," she said, emphasis on family. She patted my hand, maternally. "Everyone is downstairs. You bring a Bible for cover?"

I shook my head.

"Well, make sure you get one before you leave," she gestured toward the corner where a wire wastebasket overflowed with Bibles. "Just in case people ask."

I agreed that I would, and the old lady took me past dust-covered plastic tables and chairs, through an empty kitchen, to a plain wooden door. The instant she opened the door, I was assaulted with the thunder of drums, even though all I could see was a staircase leading to a basement.

An underground gay bar. Literally.

My first.

I took a few cautious steps down the stairway. It felt strange not to have back-up to call, to know I was going in alone, not to arrest, but to try to mingle.

The rough concrete walls had been painted black. The further down I went, the darker it seemed. I found myself getting a little nervous. My palms started to sweat. I felt out of my element. I'd heard about these places from the other guys in regular Vice, but as LINK-Vice I busted wizard raves, which generally involved large quantities of heavily caffeinated soda, role-playing games, and young men with poor hygiene and questionable social skills - geek fests, nothing even remotely trendy like this.

At the bottom of the stairs someone had painted a large star in silver glitter on another door. I could barely see it in the dim light. The place smelled musty. I rubbed my sweating palms against the cotton of my skirt. I wasn't afraid of getting hurt; I was worried about passing. Geek I could do. I understood the wire-freak, but gay...?

I looked at my boots, and thought, well, I passed so far. I took in a deep, steadying breath and reminded myself that all I had to do was ask if anyone knew Robert or Azazel. I wasn't here to take anyone down. I just had to ask questions and leave. How hard could that be?

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Thus resolved, I turned the knob of the door. It swung open easily. The basement was almost as dark as the stairway had been. A disco ball hung suspended from a low ceiling. A spotlight shone on it causing dots of light to dance around the tiny space. People, men mostly, stood together in clumps near the walls, apparently talking, though I couldn't hear much over the sound of the thrumming music. A few people danced, some wildly, others clung to each other and shuffled slowly despite the insistent beat.

The smell of mold intensified. I almost sneezed.

The room was still clearly a basement, albeit a spacious one. Off to one side stood a water heater and a furnace, each decorated with metallic strips of fringe, like a pair of round, inanimate Soul dancers. A wooden workbench ran along the far wall, and people sat on barstools in front of it, even though the "bartender" appeared to be a young girl standing guard over a cooler full of ice and bottles off to one side. A heavy cloth kept all but a faint glimmer of light from shining through a shallow window well. The music came out of a boom box sitting on the floor.

Despite the eerie darkness, the bar wasn't as scary as I'd expected. I think it helped that there were no more than twenty-five people in the space, tops. Despite my fears, no one was naked. There was no funky bondage or even much kissing going on. A couple of men held hands, and a few danced closely. A pretty tame group, all and all; not unlike my geeks. My shoulder relaxed.

I scanned the room for Robert Forester or Azazel Fong, and was surprised to find them both. They were one of the couples slow dancing under the spinning dots. I recognized Azazel's cowboy hat. He kept adjusting the brim every time it whacked into the low-hanging ball. It seemed to be a kind of joke between the lovers. They'd get lost in the song, shut their eyes, sway too close to the disco light, the hat would tip back, and they'd laugh.

It was kind of cute.

It felt strange feel sympathy for Azazel and Robert. As a cop, my mission had been so much clearer: bring down the bad guys. Now I was working for them.

Stranger still, they no longer seemed quite so bad.

Still, I had a job to do, and any minute now, I'd walk over there and hustle Azazel home

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to Mom and Dad Fong, get paid, and live happily ever after. Except somehow I found myself over at the cooler that passed as a bar, ordering a cold one from a woman with a shaved head and tattoos covering both muscular arms. As I expected, the place dealt in barter so I traded my St. Michael medallion for a beer.

I grimaced as I slipped the necklace over my head and handed it over. I was going to hell now, for certain. But, the state of my soul wasn't why I frowned at the bottle's label.

I glanced up at the woman with the stubbly head. She smiled at me. It wasn't a come-on, either. It was just an open, welcome to our little club kind of smile.

"New here?" she asked.

I nodded, taking a drink. Though cheaper than the stuff I'd bought Julian earlier, it was ice cold. "Tell me something," I asked her without any preamble. "If you could change who you were, would you?"

She laughed, taking my personal question in stride. "Couldn't even if I tried."

Like me. I'd be a cop and a Catholic my whole life. I looked over my shoulder at the lovers. Their eyes were shut and they were holding on to each other tightly, almost white-knuckled.

I moved off to find a seat along the bar. I sat facing the dance floor so that I could keep my eye on Azazel. He didn't look like a guy who'd run away from home and was sleeping in the streets. His clothes were clean; his hair seemed washed. Just as I suspected, he was probably crashing on someone's couch. I wondered what was really going on between him and his parents.

I watched them dance for a while, growing more and more uncomfortable as I did. Being gay was a crime, but what could kids like Azazel and Robert really do about it if those were the cards they were dealt? I felt for Azazel most.

He got it coming and going - gay and a Satanist. Azazel's folks, on the other hand, could have made life easier on their kid if only they'd even just pretended to be something more conventional.

Finally, the lovers got tired and came over to the bar to rest and get something to drink. I lucked out. Robert went to fetch the drinks, leaving Azazel by himself for a moment.

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"Azazel Fong?" I asked him.

"I prefer Azzie," then he gave me a broad smile. "Or Cowboy."

I raised my eyebrows. Sounded sexual, so I figured I'd pass on that one. "Okay, Azzie. I'm a private investigator."

"A cop? I thought you were just really butch."

"Nice," I said feeling a little blush creep onto my cheek despite myself. "Listen. I'm not a cop," I said, keeping my voice down so as not to alarm anyone nearby. "I'm a private eye. Your folks have hired me. They seem to think you've gone missing."

He laughed. "A guy blows off school for a couple of days and they call out an all-points bulletin?"

"They seem to think it's been a week."

Azazel shrugged his shoulders. "Whatever."

"They seem like nice people, your folks," I lied. The longer that I thought about them the more I disliked them for adding to Azazel's grief. "I'm sure they're worried about you."

He rolled his eyes. "I'm surprised they even remember me. They're probably too busy having an orgy to even notice I'm gone."

Sounded like the pot calling the kettle, I thought looking around at the bar. But, instead, I reminded him: "They wanted to spend your birthday with you."

"Oh," he said, his expression softening.

"It's Tuesday, isn't it?"

Azazel sighed. "Yeah. Look, I'm sorry about that, but if I'd stayed I'll never get what I really want for my birthday."

I wasn't sure I wanted to know what that was, so I said nothing.

Azazel turned away from me as if he was done talking, and I noticed the hard lump of a LINK receiver at his temple. As a Satanist, he shouldn't have one at all. Members of outlawed religions, like Satanism or atheism, never got a nexus at birth. Most of the rest of us did. It was a piece of hardware that contained a bunch of nanobots programmed to build a person's LINK receiver on government command. Licensed doctors and midwives usually placed the nexus in a

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baby's soft skull right after birth, although it was possible to get one implanted later with proof of membership in an approved religion.

For the majority, the nexus was activated when a person reached the age of fifteen. You could get it done any time after that, but most people didn't want to wait to get connected to the riches of the LINK. They hurried off as soon as possible to the DRL, the Department of Religious License. There they took a test to see how well they understood the basic tenants of their religion of choice, and, provided they passed, the government gave the sleeping nanobots their marching orders. You also had to provide a bunch of paperwork that proved you were a dues-paying member of some congregation and, depending on who you were or what you practiced, sometimes you even had to bring an elder to vouch for you. A hassle, but most things related to the government were.

The change took about a week. Then you were connected. You could get a job, make money, waste hours with online games, and all the other fun things adult citizens got to do. But, despite the fact that DRL was a federal government office, they were not easy to scam. Only serious pros got away with hoodwinking the nanobots. And only crazy people went to a back-alley cutter for the brain surgery necessary to have a black-market nexus put in.

Azazel didn't look like a pro, and he didn't have the tell-tale scars of a hack job either. Which left me stumped on the question of how he'd gotten the nanobots to do their job without an official password from the government.

In my time in LINK-Vice, I'd heard of people who'd done it. It wasn't impossible to fool the DRL. Usually religious license scams involved a complex ring of counterfeiters, forgers, wire-wizards, and clergy impersonators. I wondered if Azazel had that kind of networking power behind him. Looking around the gay bar, it occurred to me that he did know a thing or two about being underground and hanging with a fairly tight-knit community of outlaws.

But then why do a runner, as they say in England. I mean, you'd think his parents' money would help considerably. And you wouldn't think their religious morals would get in the way of a little criminal activity. What was it Marshall Fong had said?

"Do what you will."

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Perhaps the Fongs were against Azazel LINKing up. Although why, I couldn't fathom.

"How about you just give your dad a call," I suggested to Azazel's back. "Just to let him know you're okay. I've got his phone."

Azazel snorted and shook his head. "No."

"Why not?"

"He'll come and get me. He doesn't care what kind of scene he makes. In fact, the bigger, the better. I'm kind of surprised he didn't sic the cops on me. My parents would love it if I got arrested."

"You're not being fair," I said, although, remembering the Fong's attitude toward civil disobedience, I wondered. Maybe that might be their objection to his LINK. It would make Azzie more normal.

"I'm serious," he said. "My mom keeps wanting me to try on her dresses. I'm not a cross dresser. I just want to live quietly, with Robert."

I was with him until that last one. But, looking over at the pleasant-looking man bringing over sodas, I could understand the impulse, at least.

"I'll be calling your father, anyway," I said, regretfully. I liked the kid better than the parents, but what could I do? "It's my job, you know. To let him know I found you."

Just then Robert came back with the drinks. When he frowned at me, Robert looked like a younger version of his father, except that instead of dreadlocks he had a closely shaved scalp. "Who's this?" he asked Azazel.

"A cop," Azazel said casually. "Ignore her. I'm trying to."

"I'm not a cop," I said for the second time today.

"You're still a bitch," Azazel said.

"That's awfully rude," I said. "Even for a Satanist."

Azazel spat on the floor near my feet, and Robert made a sign against the evil eye. Noticing his boyfriend's piety, Azazel did the same.

Then I got it. He'd converted. I almost smacked my head it was so obvious. There was one thing I didn't get, though. "But you're gay? How is Christianity any better? At least your folks were okay with your boyfriends."

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"We both converted," Robert said with a smile.

"Wiccan," Azazel explained.

"Azzie's Mom will go ballistic if she finds out. She hates witches more than Christians. She thinks there's nothing worse than getting to be free-spirited and legal," Robert said.

"I'll bet Mr. Forester won't be very happy either."

"He's the one we're trying to avoid," said Robert sadly. "He's already threatened me with camp. If he found out I was a witch he'd kill me."

I could see that.

We sat in silence for a moment. "The High Priestess is going to marry us on Tuesday," Robert beamed.

Azazel smiled excitedly, although his voice held a trace of nervousness. "Yeah. I turn eighteen in two days. Then, I can get a job and support us properly. I just have to stay away from my folks until then."

His sincerity showed on his face. I could tell he wanted to do right by Robert, despite the odds they faced. He wasn't like his folks, at all. He wasn't in it for himself. All Azazel seemed to want was to make a decent life for Robert and himself.

It was just what I was trying to do.

I had to respect that.

"Is that so," I said. "Congratulations."

Being a police officer had been about black and white, but being a detective was a new paradigm, I thought as I passed the incense to the next person in the circle. What was two days in the great scheme of things? I'd still get paid, and the boys would be happy. The commitment ceremony was very tasteful. I wished them a happy and long life together when the bowl of salt water came to me. It wasn't very cop of me to support their lifestyle, but I decided that was okay.

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Lyda Morehouse writes about what gets most people in trouble: religion and politics. Her first novel Archangel Protocol, a cyberpunk hard-boiled detective novel with a romantic twist, won the 2001 Shamus for best paperback original (a mystery award given by the Private Eye Writers of America), the Barnes & Noble Maiden Voyage Award for best debut science fiction, and was nominated for the Romantic Times Critic's Choice Award. She followed up Archangel Protocol with three more books in that "universe," Fallen Host (Roc, 2002), Messiah Node (Roc, 2003), and Apocalypse Array (Roc, 2004). Lyda lives in the Saint Paul, Minnesota (USA) with her partner of nineteen years, their son Mason Gale, and four cats.

Things That Go Bump

Angeline Hawkes-Craig

It was an ordinary castle surrounded by an ordinary, but much overgrown garden of green and cream luscious ivy and twisting, climbing roses with their prickly thorns and fragrant blossoms. Okay – It wasn't an ordinary castle. There wasn't anything ordinary about it at all. In fact, the castle had been nothing but trouble ever since Lord Victor had put it on the market. The real estate agency he had listed the historical property with had sold it twice – only to have both buyers back out of the sale after only a few weeks in the castle. It seems something had the buyers absolutely terrified out of their wits and they didn't want any part of the obviously cursed property. One potential buyer had only stayed in the castle twenty-four hours before hitting the road. Seems he had picked the most haunted room in the castle to settle into a wingback chair for his nightly reading and nightcap. Now, Lord Victor was back in one wing of the place trying to sell it himself through this paper or that. He even came right out and listed it as a haunted castle hoping to interest the more morbid buyers in the world who would appreciate a ghostly abode.

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The property was in prime condition, with the exception of the garden. It had been in the possession of just two families throughout the centuries and had been lovingly cared for and kept up. The wonderful gray stone gave the castle a completely picturesque look just as if someone had taken it right out of a fairy tale. Lord Victor hated to part with the castle as it had been his home for his entire life and had been in his family's possession for three hundred years – But, the taxes and upkeep were killing him financially and he simply could not pay for it anymore. He had opened up the castle for tours for a few years but that had actually cost him money in the long run what with all of the safety codes and privy requirements and such, so all of those revenues didn't detract from his expenses. All of his savings had been depleted and now he was finally forced to put the place up for sale. The problem was, he couldn't sell it. He had lowered the price way below any respectable amount and still there were no buyers. The problem with the castle was The Blue Room. He had even had it re-decorated in a wonderful tartan and had the walls stained a dark, rich brown. The room was gorgeous! It had taken him much longer than he had anticipated to complete the decoration, as he kept having to replace the craftsmen. Seems no one would stay in the room alone or for any long length of time even in groups. No sooner would one company start the job, then they would be leaving, ladders over their shoulders and a no-way-are-we-staying-here look of fear spread across their faces. Little by little the room finally was completed. The new look didn't seem to help much unfortunately. It didn't mask the real issue.

The Blue Room had been a major source of contention since before his family had acquired the castle in 1703. No one would stay in that room overnight so it couldn't be used as a bedroom. Nor could it be used as any sort of sitting room or as some room where things would be generally quiet, so mostly it just sat vacant except for the occasional maid who was sent in somewhat nervously to tidy up.

The first record of the trouble was discussed in the Duke of Covington's diary. He was the owner in 1650. That is the first year that the noises were discussed or recorded. Whether or not the noises were present before that year, Victor had no way of knowing; but Covington's diary unlocked some of the room's mysteries. Covington had theorized that some time earlier a relation of his had killed a man in some sort of brawl within the confines of The Blue Room.

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Sketchy details were provided, naturally, as Covington wouldn't want to be implicated in the situation should his private diary ever come to light. From the reference to this incident, Victor had always assumed the room to be haunted by the spirit of the dead man. Who had done the killing and who had been killed he never knew. All he knew was the room was haunted; in particular one wall was haunted.

This is what Covington had surmised as well. He had called in a locally known "seer" as he referred to her in his texts, all of which had to be done in the utmost of secrecy lest both he and the woman be charged with witchcraft during the turmoiled times in which he lived. She came with great recommendations and supposedly had the powerful gift of sight. She entered The Blue Room and had instantly been drawn to the wall near the fireplace. She approached it with rapid steps and touched it gingerly, as if it were red hot. Covington recorded that she seemed to jump in horror upon contact with the wall and turned and ran to the door – frantically rubbing an amulet that she wore around her neck for protection. She wouldn't tell Covington what horrors she saw in the vast spirit world that she had access to, but she did warn him, crooked finger jabbing at him for emphasis: "Open not the wall, but hang a holy rood upon it and leave the wall undisturbed." Covington had done exactly as she had told him to do. His impulse had been to tear into the wall to discover the source of the sounds, but after the Seer's warning he decided whatever her powers had allowed her to see must have been so horrific that he should do as she said. So, a huge cross had hung on that wall for centuries up until the early 1800's when the cross had been removed while the room was being repainted. That is when more notes came to surface concerning the bumps and rapping deep inside the wall.

Lady Margaret Sommersville's journal talked about the going-ons in much more detail than Covington had revealed. Maybe because she was a woman. Maybe because it was about two hundred years later and the threat of being burned at the stake as a witch had passed, but whatever the reason she provided Victor with many more helpful details. Apparently, her mother had decided to turn The Blue Room into a guest room – an idea that proved none too bright and the guest room soon fell into disuse when the lucky guests were frightened out of their wits during the night of their stay and subsequently then refused to stay in the chamber another minute. Lady Margaret went on to say that there were much more than just bumps and raps as

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previous family lore had revealed. Guests reported heavy, raspy breathing, squeaks and shrieks of something seemingly small, and a noise that sounded like something scurrying about to and fro, loud thumps, and some sort of cracking noise as well. Lady Margaret had a friend who was heavy into spiritualism, which was coming into fashion at the time. A séance was arranged in hopes of communicating with the spirit of the dead man who was suspected of haunting the room. That dead man, of course, being the one that Covington had guessed might be the source of the hauntings. Hopes were pinned on guiding the poor trapped tragic soul to his final realm and out of the wall in The Blue Room.

Well, not much happened during the séance until the woman conducting the whole affair, Madame Clancey, commanded the specter to reveal himself to the gathered circle around the round table they had hauled into the room just for the occasion. The wall began to quake, knocking mortar and crumbs from the stone fireplace with its magnitude. Then Madame Clancey's eyes suddenly rolled into her head with great force showing only the glassy whites of her eyeballs, she let out a blood-curdling shriek and fainted dead away landing with a thump in the arms of a certain Mr. Jim. Whatever she had seen had so terrified her that she lost all powers of speech and as far as Lady Margaret's diary was concerned the unfortunate woman never spoke again. The participants of the séance quickly dismissed the happenings as the work of an evil ghost, the room was painted and the cross re-hung, and all was quiet again for a time. Of course, no one ever stayed in that room overnight again, so Victor couldn't be certain that things actually had been peaceful for all of those years.

Before he placed the castle on the market, he had renovated certain areas, most importantly The Blue Room, to make the place more appealing to potential buyers. He had spent the most time and money on The Blue Room maybe hoping to appease the restless spirit with fancy dressings. It was mostly just psychological. By lavishly decorating the room he had convinced himself that it would have to be desirable now no matter what occurred therein. He had covered the room in a deep blue and green tartan with a good many stag heads lining the walls. It was a very "highlandish" visually appealing room. Naturally, the heavy ornate cross proved a huge eyesore to the new décor, so Victor had had it stashed in the attic along with other cast-offs too valuable to simply be gotten rid of. And now, the troubles began anew. With the

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cross in place, the noises came frequently enough. More so at night, but still whenever anyone was in the room the presence seemed to sense human beings and would act up. When the cross was removed, the presence seemed to act up constantly. The tales he had heard told from the previous buyers and those staying in the castle to see if they were interested in buying the place, all closely resembled Covington's and Lady Margaret's diary entries. The people reporting the events could not have been fabricating the tales, as the diaries had not been made available for their reading nor had they been included with the sale of the property. The diaries and other household documentation had remained in Lord Victor's possession.

Apparently, the noises in the wall were a bit quieter now, but the raspy, rattling breathing had grown more pronounced. Victor had no explanation for this shift in events, but it proved disturbing nonetheless. Lord Victor had a friend who, jokingly, told Victor that he should call a ghost exterminator. Laughing the suggestion off as Hollywood nonsense, Victor hadn't given the jest another thought – that had been years ago – now, Lord Victor was scrambling through the phone books to locate just such a service. He had but one last resort and that was to notify a priest that he needed an exorcism; and, not being Catholic, Lord Victor wasn't exactly sure how that whole process would work.

The ghost removal service was reserved and an appointment set for ten o'clock on Thursday morning. Promptly on Thursday morning, the men in their baggy jumpsuits appeared with all sorts of odd-looking contraptions and gizmos. The ghost locators, as the one man referred to himself, went about installing a number of different blinking, buzzing and whirling traps around the room and within the hall leading to and from The Blue Room. The ghost hunters stayed in shifts for a week without any results. They had heard all of the noises, the breathing and such, but the supervising ghost locator announced that they had not picked up any paranormal activity whatsoever on any of their equipment, and so he was confident that whatever was making its presence known within The Blue Room most certainly was not a ghost of any kind.

That left Lord Victor back where he had started and just a tad closer to any progress. So far he knew a ghost did not haunt the room. Failed séances and the modern ghost hunters had ended that possibility.

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So – a demon? Lord Victor sighed. He felt like he had just walked onto the set of some summer horror movie! Time to call the priest. He contacted the local priest who informed Victor that, basically, exorcisms were way out of his league and that it was such a rare service provided by the present day church and a decidedly complicated one at that, only certain priests were licensed by the church to perform the service now. Therefore, he gave Lord Victor another phone number to call, blessed him, and hung up. Click. That was that.

Victor called the number, explained his problem, and arranged for the good Father to be at the castle bright and early on Monday morning. Sure enough, he was there when he said he would be. The priest went into the room armed with various religious paraphernalia and left Victor waiting out in the hall to twiddle his thumbs and hope for the best. Obviously, the priest wasn't of the opinion that the demon could escape down the hall, as no traps had been set up like the ghost hunters had done in the past week.

The Father was in the room for a good while, when at last he emerged, tired-looking, but quite sure there was no demon in the room. He did say there was “something” in the room, a presence of some sort that made quite a lot of noise as he was performing some of the prayers and such. He recommended that Victor look into a paranormal expert. Victor smiled. The priest had blessed the room repeatedly, but he swore he could hear very weak, faint peals of laughter while he was doing so which he found unnerving and could not explain. So, no ghost – no demon – and a priest who suggested that, perhaps, it was a ghost. Nothing left to do but put that blasted huge cross back up on the wall – But after the party Victor had planned for Friday. He had spent a bundle redecorating The Blue Room and noises or no, he had planned to move the Billiards table into the room because the current Billiards room had terrible ventilation and he knew that most of the guests on his party list were smokers. So, the workmen moved the massive, heavily engraved wood Billiards table into The Blue Room, commenting on the lavish comfort of the room as they installed the table.

Lord Victor had another call from a former real estate agent that had been in his employment asking him if he had corrected whatever the problem had been and if he planned to put the castle back on the market. The agent had another potential buyer but only if the noises in

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the wall in The Blue Room had been taken care of and would not be heard again. Victor told her that he was working on the situation and that he'd get back to her the next week with an update.

Friday came and brought with it a horrific storm. Great bolts of lightening lit up the sky and a torrential downpour provided a watery curtain across the lawn. The guests arrived cheerfully, despite the gray weather, and they all had a grand meal in the formal dining room. Afterwards, Victor moved them all upstairs for drinks and amusement in The Blue Room. Silently, Victor hoped nothing would go wrong tonight and that whatever insisted on making his life complicated would remain in hibernation until his guests went home.

Victor recounted the ghostly tales to his amused guests. He told of the diaries and of all the recorded attempts to cleanse the room of its unholy persistent un-hauntings. His guests laughed and each had their own seemingly logical explanation for the noises or for the discovery of what the noises might be.

"You ought to bloody well knock the damn wall down, Victor, Old Chap," one whiskey saturated be-mustached man joked, whiskey in hand, glass swinging nonchalantly as he laughed.

Victor having had more than his share of liquor for the night, jumped up from his chair with fists clenched. "By Jove, man, I think you're right! I've had it up to here with these idiotic clatters! And, I can't unload this place because of them and this place is eating up my bloody money!" Victor shouted, slurring more than a few words as he did so.

He looked around the room excitedly. "Bugger the old warning! I'm busting through this wall tonight!" he said, and yanking a large antique battle-axe off of a wall he lunged at the spot where the noises emanated. Soon, a hole began to form and Victor's curious buzzing friends clustered around eager to see if Victor had found anything besides a need for a repairman and his interior decorator. The hole widened and small white fragments began to pour onto the ground in a stream, like sand pouring from a funnel.

Victor stopped and stared at the growing pile of white fragments on the floor. Several of the men crouched down and began examining the pieces turning them over and over in their palms, staring at them intently.

"They're bones!" one man exclaimed.

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“More precisely, they’re RAT bones. Hundreds of them. Look at them pouring from the wall!” The man pointed to the hole Victor had created as the stream of small white bones continued to pour onto the floor with a sort of clacking sound as bone fell onto bone.

“Rat bones?” one woman in a transparent blue top questioned. “Is that all?”

Victor jumped up from his squatting position near the pile of bones and began to swing the axe once again. “My dear, we shall soon find out!”

The hole was big now and the men began to grab the edges and pull layers of plaster, wood and such off in great hunks. The wall was literally packed with rat bones, and then little by little rat carcasses in various states of decomposition began to tumble out onto the pile of clean white bones. One of the women screamed loudly and shrilly. Victor turned in her direction and looked at her, and then –

“My God! What is it?” Giles, to the left of Victor, let out in a fearful yell.

Victor’s head snapped back in the direction of the wall and then he jumped backwards at the sight.

Before them, lying half within the wall, and half way on the floor over the rat bones, lay something vaguely human, shriveled and emaciated like an unwrapped Egyptian mummy, skin tight and parchment colored, arms held close to its skeletal body, a few tattered fragments of cloth clinging to its – to its- to its whatever it was.

Victor stared horrified.

Suddenly, the creature’s eyes opened and the being seemed to grow somewhat excited. It was obvious that the creature could not see, having spent God knows how long imprisoned within the pitch-blackness of the wall. The eyes stared out at them, but could not focus or see who or what had set the creature free.

“Good Lord!” Giles exclaimed in a horrific gasp. “What in the Hell is it?”

Victor held up a hand to quiet Giles who seemed to be getting rather worked up. One of the women stepped forward and placed a hand on Giles’ elbow, pulling him back into the small gathering and calming him down. All of them stood in a silent semi-circle surveying the raspy, breathing mummy-like creature that lay motionless on the floor. Its hands began to move about

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searching the floor beneath him slowly, tossing rat bones aside as if they were already familiar to it, as it continued to search for something new.

It gurgled as if it were trying to speak.

A unified gasp came from the crowd and everyone instinctively stepped back all bumping into one another as they did so.

More raspy breathing. Giles stepped over to Victor's side and whispered close to his ear. "Any idea what it is?"

Victor shook his head no and continued to stare at it wide-eyed like everyone else.

Giles, having overcome some of his terror and now finding himself unquenchably curious, drew nearer to the shrink-wrapped-in-skin skeletal being and crouched down hovering above it, studying it.

He cleared his throat. "Uh-hum. Do you speak?" he asked the creature.

It shook its head in the affirmative. Well, they knew it could hear and that it understood English that was a start.

"Can you still speak – now – I mean?"

The creature shook its head in the negative.

"Hmm," Giles said as if he were thinking. He bent closer and looked at the creature's face like he was trying to identify a long lost friend.

"I don't know if you should do that, Old Chum," Victor said hoarsely, barely above a whisper. "We don't know what ..."

As quick as a flash the creature's long bony arms shot out and grabbed Giles by the throat. The arms yanked him downward to the creature's face and open mouth and the being sunk its, now clearly visible, sharp fangs into Giles soft neck. Giles screamed and fought but the creature that had looked so weak managed to keep an iron grip on Giles' neck and began to slurp hungrily at the crimson blood that spurted from the gash in Giles' jugular.

"God!" Victor sprang backwards, surveyed the room, grabbed a spindle-backed wood chair and broke it into pieces like a child's toy. Seizing the spindle he wildly jumped towards the creature and rammed the shattered wooden spindle into the creature's heart.

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Its arms dropped. Its eyes rolled into its head and the raspy, rattling breathing ceased.

Giles fell away from the parchment-skinned creature that looked like an antique wax doll gone hideously wrong, and clasped a hand to his spurting neck.

Hands pulled him away and somewhere a call was placed to the hospital. Scarves and shirts were haphazardly thrown in Giles' direction to stem the fountain of gushing blood.

Victor stood over the creature, now very much dead, and stared from the hole in the wall back to the being's staked body. "I didn't know they really existed!" he said absently, entranced, staring at the dead thing in a befuddled manner.

Lord Kendall walked around the scene in deep concentration. "And what would 'they' be, exactly?" he asked Victor, finger on his chin.

"Vampires," Victor said shortly.

Kendall let out a loud peal of laughter. "Have you gone mad, man? Vampires? Living in this house has made you daft."

Victor looked at Kendall. "Look at it!" He grabbed Kendall by the back of the head and directed his head to the creature at their feet. "Look at the hole in the wall. Whomever walled this bloody bastard up in there knew what they were doing!" Victor pointed inside the narrow space within the wall.

The opposite side of the wall was lined with nailed-on iron crosses of different sizes. Further examination revealed the same crosses nailed to the inside of the portion of the wall that they had ripped down. Directly above where the vampire had lain was a narrow, but heavy iron cross the same length as the vampire.

"Look! He couldn't move in either direction. And he couldn't die without a stake in the heart or decapitation, which he had no access to being walled up in this wall. Whomever did this to him wanted a long, drawn-out, torturous existence for this thing!" Victor shouted.

"Don't vampires need blood to live or something?" Kendall rolled his eyes, and stated sarcastically while laughing.

"The rats!" a woman said suddenly.

Victor nodded. "Precisely. The rats. Over three hundred years worth of rats. Look there are so many rat skeletons in here he must not have been able to hardly move. He just lay in there

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trapped forever with his own thoughts until the thirst for blood drove him so mad that he would wait for a rat and then..."

"Snap, crackle, pop?" someone suggested.

"Lunchtime," Victor said.

"I thought Vampires were just old horror stories and movie fodder," Kendall said rubbing the back of his head where Victor had grasped it tightly and roughly.

Victor frowned. "As did I. Apparently, the myth is based on fact."

"I wonder who he was?" Kendall kicked at the tattered remains of clothing attached to the vampire.

"You can bloody well wonder later, damn it! How 'bout some concern for me over here!" Giles squawked as the medics worked on his neck. "Remember me, the one who got made into a chew toy?"

"Just think – stuck in there for god knows how long wishing he could be free or at the very least, be staked and free from there that way – and then, suddenly, he gets his first wish, and then certainly not still wanted, boom! He gets his second wish right on the heels of his emancipation!" Kendall said and whistled a low whistle. "Ironic, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Cry him a river. Is someone coming with me to hospital?" Giles moaned.

The woman in the transparent blue blouse stepped forward and patting Giles on the arm left with him and the medics.

"Sure to be an inquest," Victor mumbled.

"About what? You staked the bloody thing! No one in their right mind would believe a word of it if they read it anyway. Why bother with the cost and time of an inquest. I mean look at it. It's not human." Kendall laughed.

"Explains all your things that go bump, mate," another man said, laughed and slapped Victor on the shoulder. "We're heading out. Had enough excitement for one night!" He glanced at Kendall nervously, waved towards the staked corpse and then he and a group of semi-drunk women scurried out chattering wildly as they left.

Victor lifted a piece of what appeared to have been a kilt up with the toe of his shoe. He scratched his head.

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“Not exactly,” he said and frowned at the crumbling, rapidly deteriorating form of the three hundred year old “noise in the wall” lying on the floor before him.

Angeline Hawkes-Craig's stories appear in several 2003/04 anthologies: Femmes de La Brume [Double Dragon Publishing], The Blackest Death [KHP Industries], Cyber-Pulp's Halloween Anthology 2.0, Fantastical Visions Volume II [Fantasist Enterprises], Scriptures of the Damned [DDP], The Unknown: Otherworlds Sci-Fi 2003 Anthology [Branch & Vine Publishers], E-Macabre: Tales of Horror and Dark Fantasy [SpecFicWorld], Monstrous! [Cyber-Pulp], and F/SF Volume II [Cyber-Pulp]. In May 2003, Scars Publications released her latest book, entitled, Momento Mori: A Collection of Short Fiction. Double Dragon Publishing will release the book in e-book format in 2004. Hawkes-Craig's fantasy novel, The Swan Road, [Scars] was released in 2002. Her work also appears in several online/print publications as well as past anthologies. She is a member of the Horror Writer's Association and of The Writer's League of Texas. Angeline Hawkes-Craig received a B.A. in Composite English Language Arts from East Texas State University in 1991. Visit her works at her website www.angelinehawkes-craig.com

Interview: Angeline Hawkes-Craig

Interviewed By Lynne Jamneck

Speculative Fiction has become an umbrella term for many genres. Do you think we should be moving away from trying to classify fiction in terms of specific varieties?

I think, perhaps, we're trying to break it down too much. I encounter guidelines all of the time with new sub-genres that I have no idea what they are. And, considering my education, if I don't know how to define the sub-genre, I know there have to be a lot of other confused writers

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out there as well. I think more and more writers are writing in the field of “cross-genres” now. I know I tend to. I write more Historical Horror than anything else. Basically, the original genres are still there, we’re just seeing a tendency to want to further break them down and individually define them and I don’t think that is necessary.

What are you currently working on?

Whew, that’s a question begging for a long answer! I’m about 10,000 words away from wrapping up a Literary novel entitled, *Far From The Tree*. I’ve been working on this novel all year and am excited to be wrapping it up now. I had aimed for December as my finishing date and it looks like I’ll be done a little before that. I am also working on a Horror fiction collection entitled, *The Commandments*, which I hope to have finished by the end of the year as well. Then I have a Time Travel/Historical Fantasy/Alternate History [there’s those sub-genres we were talking about earlier!] 800 page novel completed that is just WAY too long. So, I’m in the process of whacking away at it. In the down time between these projects, I am also working on a Fantasy fiction series that will be novel length entitled, *The Isgor Chronicles* and am half way through a sequel to my Historical Fantasy novel *The Swan Road*, which is entitled *Pasha of Ghazni*. It is set in 990 AD in what is now modern Afghanistan. Ironically, the concepts for both *The Swan Road* and *Pasha of Ghazni* were written way before any of the terrorism situations that we’ve been seeing. And to ensure that I remain insane around the clock, I am also in the beginning stages of an Alternate History novel entitled, *The Throne Secure*, set in Tudor England.

I am also in the process of shopping around for a publisher for a children’s book series I have collaborated on with illustrator, Bonne Everett-Hawkes. Bonnie is a children’s book illustrator and she also happens to be my mother. It is entitled, *The Adventures of Ratty Rat*. It’s quite a deviation from my normal fiction for adults, but it was fun to do and is the realization of a dream my mother and I have had since I was a teenager.

How has the existence of the Internet influenced your relationship with reader?

The internet is the heart of my relationship with my readers. When I decided to return to the writing world after teaching, I devised a plan on how I felt it was best to go about things. I flooded the online publications with my work in order to establish a name familiarity. I

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approached it the same way advertisers do. I figured no one would buy my “stuff” if they hadn’t heard of my name before. So, it was important to me to try to establish that name recognition.

My readers often email and comment on various stories they’ve read here and there. I encourage that. I also encourage readers to let the editors of the publications know which authors they enjoy. That gives the editors an idea of what type of writing their readers want more of.

Do you think the Internet is a help or hindrance to aspiring writers?

That depends on what the goal of the writer is. If the writer is wanting to write solely to see their name in print and have the satisfaction of knowing they are published, then the internet is a perfect outlet for that as there are hundreds of non-paying publications that have varying standards for accepting manuscripts. However, if a writer aspires to be a professional writer, translation get paid regularly for their work, then the writer will have to learn patience in selecting only those publications that pay their writers. Most professional writers have handful of non-paying publications that they contribute to in order to benefit the expansion of the small press and to keep their name out in the public sector. I, myself, tend to support Scifantastic [a UK based publication], House of Pain, The Murder Hole, Distant Worlds and SpecFicWorld and a few others because I know the editors and I know how hard they work to try to deliver a quality free publication to readers out there who may not have the extra money to go pick up an author’s latest book. Books are expensive. Always have been. For a lot of readers, books are a luxury they sometimes just can’t afford. There should be quality writing out there on the web for those devoted fans who support their favorite authors.

What are some of the best books you've read this year?

I read primarily nonfiction as I’m always researching for the stories I’m writing. However, when I get a chance I do like to read within my own genres. *Shara* by Steven E. Wedel, published by 3F Publications, is a great werewolf tale. I couldn’t put it down. Double Dragon Publishing will be releasing *Shara* in e-book format this year as well.

I also recommend anything by author Jason Brannon. Again, you can find a lot of his work at Double Dragon Publishing. *Puzzles of Flesh* was an amazing collection of his – I recommend checking it out. I’m also just now getting around to Ann Rice’s *The Mummy*.

I’m confident it will not disappoint!

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Ever suffer from writer's block?

Most definitely. That's why I keep so many different projects going at the same time. Laugh here. When I hit a wall or just plain get tired of this character or that, I just hit save and bring up a different project. Sometimes my mind goes blank entirely...that's pretty much a clue to me that I need more sleep and I need to take a week off and do something else. No writing allowed. The occasional breaks are good for my brain. I like to sew and quilt and I like to do the new "scrapbooking" with my photo albums, so I always have something I can do during my breaks. I think it's necessary to refresh my imagination by giving it some time off for a little bit.

How important are the small presses in terms of showcasing talent that don't fit into a 'mainstream' sensibility?

I think the small press is very important and not just for those that don't fit into the mainstream sensibility. The bigger, huge publishers have gotten so far removed from the writers that it is insane. A writer can see his or her work in a slush pile for up to two years before someone even picks it up and looks at it. Then the odds of getting a form letter without a shred of helpful criticism are pretty high. The methods of submission are archaic and publishers still want the whole, hulking 20 lb manuscript rather than an electronic version of it. I find it a waste of postage and paper. Utilization of modern technology seems to be poor in the publishing world. Hopefully, that will change at some point. Most of the small presses have come to realize the benefit of submitting electronically. Small presses have the ability to review the work submitted, get back to the author in a reasonable amount of time and see publication often faster than the big publishing houses. Of course, it is still every writer's dream to get a contract with one of the big guys...but realistic writers know that doesn't always happen.

Many people refuse to see literary merit in horror as a genre. Why do you think this is?

Stuffed shirts. The academic world is one of the biggest offenders in this department. Many people think that literature must be boring and pointless to be intelligent and "academic". You know the kind of story I mean...three guys sitting around a table talking....and you keep reading waiting for a twist or something to happen and you get to the end of the story and the three guys are still sitting in the same chairs, talking, and that's the end...the reader sits there going, "Okay,

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did I miss something?" then thumbs back about four pages to reread, only to get to the end again to find out, no, nothing was missed...THAT was the whole story. Pointless. Nothing happens. Horror has been with us since the dawn of time. You'll find it in all of the myths and early religions. You find it in the Bible. I always say that the Bible is the ultimate horror story. Just read it. You've got murder of every form, there's baby sacrificing, tongues being cut out, people being burned in fiery furnaces, people being thrown into lion's dens, crucifixions, babies being thrown into rivers, incest, death, destruction, talking donkeys, dragons, people vanishing into thin air, devils being paraded through the streets....must I continue? If you can read the bible, then horror as we know it seems pretty bland in comparison. I was raised with the bible...I spent half my life terrified of Hell and demons and all that. To this day I refuse to watch *The Exorcist*...hits too close to home!

Any specific trends that you've noticed in horror fiction these days?

Too many horror films are aimed towards a teen market...I'd like more sophisticated movies...and more old fashioned monster tales! I loved Underworld.

What would you like your epitaph to read?

She loved life. She will be back.

The Stare

Zohar A Goodman

I have a little horror which
I call The Stare.
It plagues me all the time it
hounds me everywhere;
ever Now it filters through
my prism prison brain-
observant yet
oblivious to cruelty & pain;
it
just
stares

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whether I'm awake or dreaming.
 Looking up down right or left
does not affect its beaming-
it sees dark when my eyes close
it sees nightmares when I doze;
 still & steadfast yet
 it doesn't have a form or weight-
it's here no matter where I steer
today without a date.
The Stare know-glow beyond my skin
 (shining somewhere from within)
witnessing my give & take
free from every move I make!
I used to try to shut its eye I used
 to try to run-
but even in a dreamless sleep
it is Oblivion.
Through my sockets stares The Stare without
 bloodstain or blink...
stubbornly it stays aware
 (my spiritual underwear)
no matter what I think...even when I don't think
it stares every bit as clear no matter
 what the weather it remains
 the Atmosphere-
the stillness in which movement swims
the brightness in which daylight dims
the silence singing constant hymns.
 It's so unfair this Stare.
It has the nerve to observe my senses
free from any consequences. Once
I tried to fight The Stare, that did no damn good.
Now I just sit & let it
 wear
my wrinkling personhood...
 The Stare doesn't care if I get old
 The Stare won't age a day.
I'm just another mold The Stare
 will witness
 waste
away.

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Service Momentous

Zohar A Goodman

In a public walkway
the woman whose job it is
to wipe away
sole scuff marks from the floor
with a red rag under heel
doesn't mind, it seems
as more & more people walk & more & more
black marks scuff-
she just keeps wiping away
doing her little twisty dance
I see obviously she's the Angel
of death.

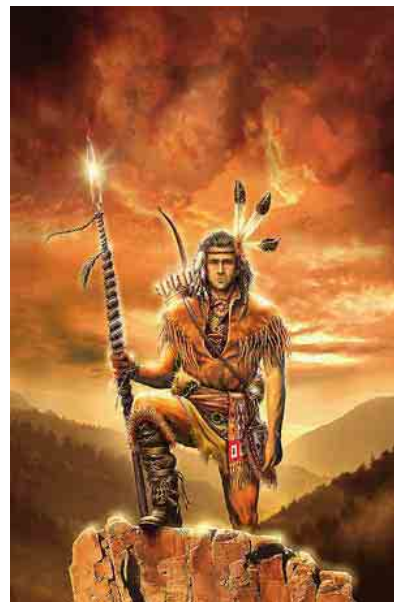
Zohar A Goodman: Lives for poetry in Cleveland, Ohio. Semi-reclusive, almost-vegetarian, Zen-Jew. Has poems and stories published in Twilight Zone Magazine, New Genre, TransVersions, North of Infinity, Raging Hormones, Forbidden Texts and several other publications. Has stood, alone, in Emily Dickinson's bedroom.

Featured Artist

Peter Kudriashov

Vital Stats:

Married with one son. I work in the firm engaged in development of computer games. My specialty - artwork for games.



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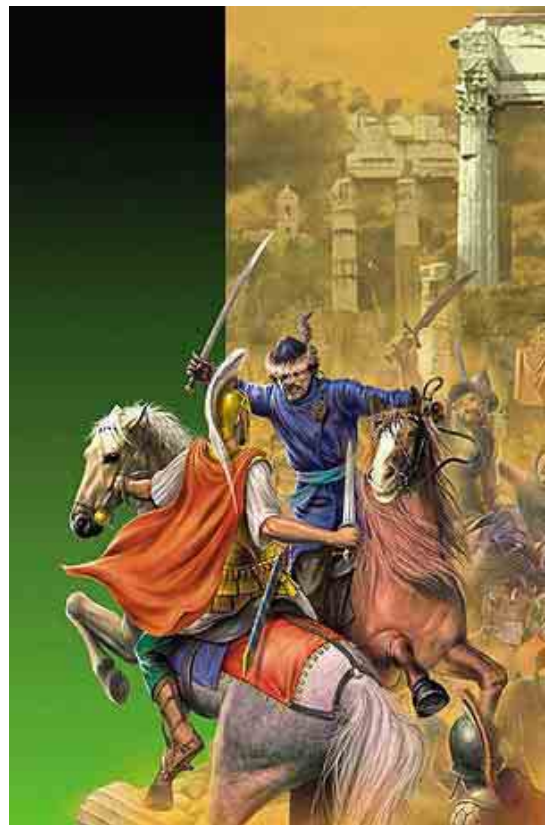
- Age :** 35
- Country :** Saint Petersburg, Russia
- Training:** Youth art school, art college, Muhina's Academy of Art and Design
- Medium :** Computer graphics. Oil, inks, water-color, tempera.
- Influences:** I like such artists - illustrators: Jim Burns, Michael Whelan, Keith Parkinson and many others.
- On The Web:** www.peter-gallery.narod.ru
www.d-inter.ru/peter
- Contact:** e-mail: peter@d-inter.ru
e-mail: pit35@mail.ru

Tell us about your creative process – Where do you find inspiration and ideas for a new drawing?

Many sources. Literature, art, movies; but mostly music. I enjoy listening to World and ethnic music. This inspires me the most for my fantasies. For me, it is similar to meditation.

How long have you been illustrating – and why fantasy art?

I have been painting since I can remember. When I was young, I liked fairytales. I can hardly imagine what else I could be other than an artist. It must be my destiny. I am not a fatalist, but it seems to me sometimes that events happen without me



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having any control over it. In reality, nothing has changed, I still paint and still like colorful stories.

Do you prefer working in traditional mediums like oils as opposed to computer art?

For illustration books or for other artwork I prefer to work on a computer. The computer is extremely versatile in various mediums. It enables you to return on steps taken, and continuously better and change your work. Therefore drawing turns out faster and more effectively. But in some cases I prefer traditional mediums. And certainly, I prefer oils when painting for myself.

When creating computer art, which software are you most fond of using?

I use a rather big list of programs. But there is software which I use more often and more fondly. Photoshop, Painter, Poser, 3DstudioMax.

Tell us a bit about the cover illustration – what was the inspiration?

The illustration on a cover was made for Russian publishing house *Nord-west*, for a series of books under the general name *Seignioral One Hundred*. In the books it is told how modern people, participants of a club of historical reconstruction, went through a time warp back to the era of the Russian tsar Ivan the Terrible, around the end of the 16th century. But they are not only historical novels, and include characters from Russian fairy tales and myths. As in all fairy tales and novels of fantasy, there are kind and malicious forces, and sometimes they clash. After reading the books, I drew some pictures devoted to the plot and subject matter. I tried not to become attached to the plot, but rather tried to transfer an atmosphere of action.



Where else can your be seen?

Fantasy and science fiction books by many large Russian publishers.

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Would you encourage aspiring artists to enter the field of illustration?

To be the artist or to not be the artist? This is a question only an individual can answer for him\herself. If someone has chosen to become an illustrator, that's a personal choice. I can only speak for myself. But that's just my personal point of view. Whatever the case, aspire to become something praiseworthy.

What do you think the future holds for SF and Fantasy art?

On one hand, it seems to me that science fiction and fantasy is becoming more and more diverse, and maybe more literary, if such a comparison is appropriate. People's concept of life, art and literature is changing. Social and ethnic standards are changing. New themes and situations crop up, things which we had never thought of before.

All these factors effect the science fiction/fantasy genre in all its multitude of representations

Contribute: Simulacrum Submission Guidelines

Simulacrum: The Magazine Of Speculative Transformation

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Western Cape, South Africa - Email: simulacrum@specficworld.com

Needs: Fiction\Poetry\Artwork – most speculative genres (H/F/SF/MR). (Quiet, gothic horror as opposed to gore and violence.)

Will look at articles, reviews and interviews on request. Pays in copies. Format – pdf.

Fiction – between 1000 and 8000 words. Bi-monthly.

SIMULACRUM

Aim of the magazine is to expose new talent in writing and artwork alongside established writers. No fan fiction. Professionally formatted manuscripts only, please.

Established and new artists\writers welcome. Prefers snail mail subs, although email subs will be accepted in MS Word .doc/rtf. file format. Please scan attachments for viruses before sending. For further information, please contact me at the email address above.

