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The Tale of Junko and Sayuri

by Peter Beagle



Artwork by Dean Spencer

In Japan, very, very, long ago, when almost anybody you met on the road might turn out to be a god or a demon, there was a young man named Junko. That name can mean "genuine" in Japanese, or "pure," or "obedient," and he was all of those things then. He served the great *daimyo* Lord Kuroda, lord of much of southern Honshu, as Chief Huntsman, and was privileged to live in the lord's castle itself, rather than in any of the outer structures, the *yagura*. In addition, he was handsome and amiable, and all the ladies of the court were aware of him. But he had no notion of this, which only added to his charm. He was a very serious young man.

He was also a commoner, born of the poorest folk in a poor village, which meant that he had not the right even to a family name, nor even to be called Junko-*san* as a mark of respect. In most courts of that time, he would never have been permitted to look straight into the eyes of a samurai, let alone to live so intimately among them. But the Lord Kuroda was an unusual man, with his own sense of humor, his own ideas of what constituted a samurai, and with a doubtless lamentable tendency to treat everyone equally. This was generally blamed on his peculiar horoscope.

Now at this time, it often seemed as though half of Japan were forever at war with the other half. The mighty private armies of the *daimyos* marched and galloped up and down the land, leaving peasant villages and great fortresses alike smoldering behind them as they pleased. The *shogun* at Kyoto might well issue his edicts from time to time, but the shogunate had not then the power that it was to seize much later; so for the most part his threats went unheeded, and no peace treaty endured for

long. The Lord Kuroda held himself and his own people aside from war as much as he could, believing it tedious, pointless and utterly impractical, but even he found it wise to keep an army of retainers. And the poor in other less fortunate prefectures replanted and built their houses again, and said among themselves that Buddha and the *kami* -- the many gods of Shinto -- alike slept.

One cold winter, when game was particularly scarce, Junko went out hunting for his master. Friends would gladly have come with him, but everyone knew that Junko preferred to hunt alone. He was polite about it, as always, but he felt that the other courtiers made too much noise and frightened away the winter-white deer and rabbits and wild pigs that he was stalking. He himself moved as quietly -- even pulling a sledge behind him -- as any fish in a stream, or any bird in the air, and he never came home empty-handed.

On this day, as Amaterasu, the sun, was drowsing down the western sky, Junko also was starting back to the Lord Kuroda's castle. His sledge was laden with a fat stag, and a pig as well, and Junko knew that another kill would load the sledge too heavily for his strength. All the same, he could not resist loosing one last arrow at a second wild pig that had broken the ice on a frozen stream, and was greedily drinking there, ignoring everything but the water. It was too good a chance to pass up, and Junko stood very still, took a deep breath -- then let it out, just a little bit, as archers will do -- and let his arrow fly.

It may have been that his hands were cold, or that the pig moved slightly at the last moment, or even that the growing twilight deceived Junko's eye, though that seems unlikely. At all events, he missed his mark -- the arrow hissed past the pig's left ear, sending the animal off in a panicky scramble through the brush, out of sight and range in an instant -- but he hit *something*. Something at the very edge of the water gave a small, sad cry, thrashed violently in the weeds there for a moment, and then fell silent and still.

Junko frowned, annoyed with himself; he had been especially proud of the fact that he never needed more than one arrow to bring down his prey. Well, whatever little creature he had accidentally wounded, it was his duty to put

it quickly out of its pain, since an honorable man should never inflict unnecessary suffering. He went forward carefully, his boots sinking into the wet earth.

He found it lying half-in, half-out of the stream: an otter, with his arrow still in his flank. It was conscious, but not trying to drag itself away -- it only looked at him out of dazed dark eyes and made no sound, not even when he knelt beside it and drew his knife to cut its throat. It looked at him -- nothing more.

"It would be such a pity to ruin such fur with blood," he thought. "Perhaps I could make a tippet out of it for my master's wife." He put the knife away slowly and lifted the otter in his arms, preparing to break its neck with one swift twist. The otter's sharp teeth could surely have taken off a finger through the heavy mittens, but it struggled not at all, though Junko could feel the captive heart beating wildly against him. When he closed his free hand on the creature's neck, the panting breath, so softly desperate, made his wrist tingle strangely.

"So beautiful," he said aloud in the darkening air. He had never had any special feeling about animals: they were good to eat or they weren't good to eat, though he did rather admire the shimmering grace of fish and the cool stare of a fox. But the otter, hurt and helpless between his hands, made him feel as though he were the one wounded, somehow. "Beautiful," he whispered again, and very carefully and slowly he began to withdraw the arrow.

When Junko arrived back at his lord's castle, it was full dark and the otter lay under his shirt, warm against his belly. He delivered his kill, to be taken off to the great kitchens, gravely accepted the thanks due him, and hurried away to the meager quarters granted him at the castle as soon as it was correct to do so. There he laid the otter on a ragged old cloak that his sister had given him when he was a boy, and knelt beside the creature to study it in lamplight. The wound was no worse than it had been, and no better, though the blood had stopped flowing. He gave the otter water in a little clay dish, but it sniffed feebly at it without drinking; when he put his hand gently on the arrow-wound, he could feel the fever already building.

"Well," he said to the otter, "all I know to do is to treat you as I did my little brother, the time he fell on the ploughshare. No biting, now." With his dagger, he trimmed the oily brown fur around the injury; with a rag dipped in *hotnihonshu*, which others call *sake*, he cleaned the area over and over; and with herbal infusions whose use he had learned from his mother's mother, he did his best to draw the infection. Through it all the otter never stirred or protested, but watched him steadily as he labored to undo the damage he had caused. He sang softly now and then, old nonsensical children's songs, hardly knowing he was doing it, and now and then the otter cocked an ear, seeming to listen.

When he was done he offered the water again, and this time the otter drank from the dish, cautiously, never taking its eyes from him, but deeply even so. Junko then lifted it in the old cloak and set all upon his own *tatami* mat, saying, "I cannot bind your wound properly, but healing in open air is best, anyway. And now you should sleep." He covered the otter with his coat, then lay down near it on the *tatami* and quickly fell asleep himself. The otter was awake longer than he, its wide eyes darker than the darkness.

In the morning the gash in the otter's flank smelled far less of fever, and the little animal was clearly hungry. Knowing that otters eat mainly fish, along with such things as frogs and turtles, Junko dressed hurriedly and went to a river that was near the castle (the better for the *daimyo* to keep an eye on the boats that went up and down between the distant cities), and there he caught and cleaned several small fish and brought them back to his quarters. The otter devoured them all, groomed its fur with great care -- spending half an hour on its exposed wound alone -- and then fell back to sleep for the rest of the day, much of which Junko spent studying it, sitting crosslegged beside his *tatami*. He was completely captivated to learn that the otter snored -- very daintily and delicately, through its diamond-shaped nose -- and that it smelled only slightly of fish, even after its meal, and much more of spring-warmed earth, as deep in winter as they were. He touched its front claws and realized that they were almost as hard as armor.

When a highly-placed serving woman suggested through another servant that she might possibly enjoy his company for tea, Junko made the most courteous apology he could, and went on staring at the otter on his sleeping mat. Towards evening the little creature woke up and lay considering him in its turn, out of eyes much brighter and clearer than they had been. He spoke to it then, saying, "I am very sorry that I hurt you. I hope you are better today." The otter licked its whiskers without taking its eyes from his.

During the days that passed, Junko told no one about the otter: neither the Lord Kuroda nor his wife, the Lady Hara, nor even his closest friend, the horsemaster Akira Yamagata, who might have been expected to understand his fascination. He fed and cared for the otter every day, cleaned and aired out his quarters himself, and saw the arrow-wound closing steadily from the inside, as every soldier knows is the proper way of healing. And the otter lay

patiently under his hands as he tended it, and shared his *tatami* at night; and if it did not purr, or arch itself back against his hands, as a cat will, when he stroked its beautiful, rich fur, nevertheless it never drew away from the contact, but looked constantly into his eyes, as though it would have spoken to him if it could. He fell into the habit of talking to it himself, more and more, and he named it Sayuri, because men have to name things, and Sayuri was his sister's name.

One morning he told the otter, "My lord will have me guide a hunt meeting with the Lord Sugihara, down on holiday from Osaka. I am not looking forward to it, because neither trusts the other for an instant, and it could all become very wearying, though certainly educational. But when I return, however late it may be, I will take you back to your stream and release you there. You are fully recovered now, and a castle is no place for a wild creature like yourself. Stay well and warm until I come back."

The meeting between the two lords was indeed tiresome, and the hunt itself extremely unsatisfactory; but it had at least the virtue of taking less time than he would have expected, so the sun was still in the sky when Junko climbed the stair to his quarters. He went slowly, remembering his promise to the otter, and finding himself curiously reluctant to keep it. "It will be lonely," he thought. "I will miss . . . what is it that I will miss?" He could not say, but he knew that it was a real thing. So he sighed and went on to his quarters and opened the door.

The otter was gone.

In its place there stood, waiting for him, the most beautiful young woman he had ever seen. She stood barely higher than his heart, wearing a blue and white kimono, and her face was the dawn shade of a tea-rose, and as perfectly boned and structured as the kites that children were competing with every spring even then. Junko stood gaping at her, not even trying to speak.

"Yes," she said quietly, smiling with small white teeth at his bewilderment. "I am indeed that otter you shot, and then nursed back to health so tenderly. I am quite well now, as you see."

"But," said Junko. "But."

The young woman smiled more warmly as he stumbled among words, finding only that one. "This is my true form, but I take other shapes from time to time, as I choose. And it is so pleasant to be an otter -- even as they hunt and mate, and raise their children, and struggle to survive, they seem to be having such a joyful time of it. Don't you think so, my lord?"

Junko said, "But" again, that being the only word he was quite master of. The woman came toward him, her long, graceful fingers toying with the knot of the *obi* at her waist.

"I could not return to my own form until today," she explained to him, "because I was wounded, which always keeps me from changing. I might very well have died an otter, but for your devoted care. It is only proper that I make you some little recompense, surely?"

She seemed so hesitant herself that the last words came out a shy question. But the *obi* had already fallen to the floor.

Later, in the night, propped on her elbow and looking at him with eyes even darker than the otter's eyes, she said, "You have never lain so with a woman, have you?"

Junko blushed in the darkness. "Not exactly. I mean, of course there were . . . No."

The young woman was silent for a time. Then she said, "Well, I will tell you something, since you have been so honest with me. Nor will I lie to you -- I have mated, made love, yes, but never in this form. Only as a deer, or a wildcat, or even as a snow monkey, in the northern mountains. Never as a human being, until now."

"And you *are* human?" Junko asked her. "Forgive me, but are you sure you are not an animal who can change into a woman?" For there are all sorts of legends in Japan about such creatures. Especially foxes.

She chuckled against his shoulder. "I am altogether human, I promise you." After a moment, she added, "You named me Sayuri. I like that name. I will keep it."

"But you must have a name of your own, surely? Everyone has a name."

"Not I, never." She put a finger on his lips to forestall further questioning. "Sayuri will suit me very well."

And the beautiful young woman who had been an otter suited Junko very well herself. He presented her formally as his fiancée to the Lord Kuroda the next day, and then to the full court. He was awkward at it, certainly, never having been schooled in such regions of etiquette; but all were charmed by the young woman's grace and modesty, even so, despite the fact that she could offer nothing in the way of family history or noble lineage. Indeed, Lord Kuroda's wife, the Lady Hara, immediately requested her as one of her ladies-in-waiting. So all went well there, and Junko -- still as dazed by his sudden fortune as the otter had been by his arrow -- was proud and happy in a way that he had never known to be happy in all his life.

He and Sayuri were married in short order by the Shinto priest Yukiya, the same who had married Lord Kuroda to Lady Hara, which everyone agreed was good luck, and were given new quarters in the castle -- modest still, but more fitting for so singular a couple. More, his master, as a wedding gift, saw to it that Junko was given proper hunting equipment to replace the battered bow and homemade arrows with which he had first arrived at court. There were those present at the ceremony who bit their lips in envy of such favor to a commoner; but Junko, in his desire that everyone share in his joy, noticed none of this. The Lord Kuroda did.

Early on the morning after their wedding, when few were yet awake, Junko and his bride walked in the castle garden, in the northeast corner, where the stream entered, and which was known as the Realm of the Blue Dragon. The days were cold still, but they walked close together and were content, saying very little. But the stream made Junko think of the strange and nearly fatal way in which he had met his Sayuri, and he asked her then, "Beloved, do you think you would ever be likely to change into an otter again? For I hurt you by mischance, but there are many people who trap otters for their fur, and I would be afraid for you."

Sayuri's laughter was like the sound of the water flowing beside them, as she answered him. "I think not, my lord. There are more risks involved with that form -- including marriage -- than I had bargained for." Then she turned a serious face to her new husband, holding his arm tightly. "But I would grieve were I forbidden to change shape ever again. It is a part of whatever I am, you must know that."

"Whatever I am," Junko repeated slowly, and for a moment it seemed as though the back of his neck was colder than it should be, even on a winter morning. "But you assured me that you were altogether human. Those were your words."

"And I am, I am certain I am!" Sayuri stopped walking and turned him to face her. "But what else am I? No name but the one you gave me . . . no childhood that I can recall, except in flashes, like lightning, here and gone . . . no father or mother to present me at my own wedding . . . far more memories of the many animals I have been than of the woman I know I am. There *must* be more to me than I can see in your eyes, or in the jeweled hand mirror that was the Lady Hara's gift. Do you understand, husband?"

There were tears on her long black eyelashes, and though they did not fall, they reassured Junko in a curious way, since animals cannot weep. He put his arms around her to comfort her, saying, "Do as you will, as you need to do, my wife. I ask only that you protect yourself from all injury, since you cannot regain your human form then, and anything could happen to you. Will you promise me that?"

Then Sayuri laughed, and shook her head so that the teardrops flew, and she said, "I swear that and more. You will never again share your sleeping mat with anything furred, or with any more than two legs." And Junko joined in her laughter, and they went on with their walk, all the way across the garden to the southwest corner, which is still called the Realm of the White Tiger.

So they lived quite happily together for some years at the court of the *daimyo* Lord Kuroda. Junko served his master with the same perfect loyalty as ever, and went on providing more game than any other huntsman for the castle kitchens; while Sayuri continued to be much favored by the Lady Hara, joining her in her favorite arts of music, brush-painting, and especially *ikebana*, the spreading new discipline of flower-arrangement. So skilled was she at this latter, in fact, that Lady Hara often sought her assistance in planning the decorations for a poetry recital in her own quarters, or even for a feast on the green summer island in the stream. Watching the two of them pacing slowly by the water together, the fringes of the great lady's parasol touching his otter-wife's thick and fragrant hair, Junko was so proud that it pained him, and made it hard to breathe.

And if, now and then, he awoke in the night to find the space beside him still warm but empty, or heard a rustle in the trees outside, or a sigh of the grass, that he was huntsman enough to know was no bird, no doe teaching her fawn to strip bark from Lord Kuroda's plum trees, he learned to turn over and go back to sleep, and ask no questions in the morning. For Sayuri was most often back by dawn, or very soon thereafter -- always in human shape, as she had promised him -- usually chilled beyond the bone and needing to be warmed. And Junko would warm her and never ask her to say where -- and what -- she had been.

She did not always leave the castle: mouse and bat were among her favorite forms, and between those two she knew everything that was taking place within its walls. More than once she shocked Junko by informing him that this or that high-ranking retainer was slipping into dusty alcoves with this or that servant girl; he learned before Lord Kuroda that the Lady Hara was again with child, and that he could safely predict to the *daimyo* that this time it would finally be a boy. Animals know these things. As an owl, she might glide silently over the forest at night, and tell him if the deer had shifted their grazing grounds, as they did from time to time, or were lying up in a new place. In fox-shape, she warned of an approaching forest fire without ever seeing a flame; Junko roused the castle and gained great praise and credit thereby. He wanted earnestly to explain that all honor was due to his wife Sayuri, but this was impossible, and she seemed more than content with his gratitude and their somewhat unlikely happiness. So they lived, and the time passed.

One night it happened that she returned to their bed shivering, not with cold, nor with fear -- there were several cats in the castle -- but, as he slowly realized, with anger, which was not something he was used to from Sayuri. She might be by turns as calm and thoughtful as a fox, as playful as an otter, as gentle as a deer, fiercely passionate as any mink or marten, or as curious and mischievous as a red-faced snow monkey. All these moods and humors he had come in time to understand -- but anger was a new thing entirely. He held her, and asked simply, "What is it, my love?"

At first she would not speak, or could not; but by and by, when the trembling passed a little, she whispered, "I was in the kitchen --" by this Junko knew that she had been in mouse-shape -- "and the cooks were talking late over their own meal. And one said it was a shame that you had been passed over for the lord's private guard in favor of Yasunari Saito, since you had surely earned promotion a dozen times over. But another cook said --" the words were choking her again -- "that it made no difference, because you were a commoner with no surname, and that it was miraculous that you were even in Lord Kuroda's home, let alone his retinue. *Miraculous* -- after all you have done for them!" The tears of rage came then.

"Well, well," Junko said, stroking her hair, "that must have been Aoki. He has never liked me, that one, and it wouldn't matter to him if I had a dozen surnames. For the rest of it, things are the way they are, and that is . . . well, the way it is. Don't cry, please, Sayuri. I am grateful for what I have, and most grateful for you. Don't cry."

But later, when she had at last fallen asleep on his chest, he could not help brooding -- only a little -- about the unfairness of Saito's promotion. *Unfair* was not a word Junko had allowed himself even to think since he was quite small, and still learning the way things were, but it seemed to slither in his mind, and he could not get to grips with it, or make it go away. It was long before he slept again.

As has been said, the Lord Kuroda was a wise man, though not at all handsome, who saw more at a single dinner than many were likely to see in a week or a month. Riding out hunting one day, with Junko at his elbow, and the two having drawn a little apart from their companions, he said to him briefly and directly, "Saito is a fool, but his advancement was necessary, since I may well need his father's two hundred and fifty samurai one day." Junko bowed his head without answering. Lord Kuroda continued, "But it means nothing to me that you bring no warriors with you -- nothing but your strength and your faithfulness. The next opening in my guard you shall fill."

With that he spurred ahead, doubtless to avoid Junko's stammering thanks. Junko was too overcome to be much of a hand at the hunt that afternoon; but while the others teased and derided him for this, Lord Kuroda only winked gravely.

Of course Sayuri was overjoyed at the news of the lord's promise, and she and Junko celebrated it with *nihonshu* and love, and then *shochu*, which is brewed from rice and sweet potatoes and a few other things. And afterward it was her turn to lie awake in the night, with her husband in her arms, and her mind perhaps full of small-animal thoughts. And perhaps not; who knows? It was all so long ago.

But it was at most a month before the horse of the samurai Daisuke Ikeda shied at a rabbit underfoot, reared, fell backwards and crushed his rider. There was much sorrow at court, for Ikeda was the oldest of the *daimyo's* guard, and a well-liked man; but there was also a space in the guard to fill, and Lord Kuroda was as good as his word. Within days, Junko was wearing his master's livery, for all the world as though he were as good as Ikeda, or

anyone else, and riding at his side on a fine, proud young stallion. And however many at court may have thought this highly unsuitable, no one said a word about it.

Junko also grieved for Ikeda, who had been kind to him. But his delight in his new position was muted, more than he would have expected, by his odd disquiet concerning that rabbit. Riding in the rear, as befit a commoner (it had been a formal procession, meant to impress a neighboring lord), he had seen the animal shoot from its hole, seemingly as blindly as though red-eyed Death were on its heels; and he had never known Ikeda's wise old horse to panic at an ambush, much less a rabbit. One worrisome thought led to another, and that to a third, until finally he brought them all to his wife. He had grown much in the habit of doing this.

Sayuri sat crosslegged on the proper new bed that the Lord Kuroda had given them to replace their worn *tatami*, and she listened attentively to Junko's fears, saying nothing until he was finished. Then she replied simply, "Husband, I was not the rabbit -- I was the weasel just behind it, chasing it out of its burrow into the horse's path. Can you look at your own new horse -- at your beautiful new livery -- at this bed of ours -- and say I have done wrong?"

"But Ikeda is dead!" Junko cried in horror. "Ask rather how I can look at his widow, at his children, at my master -- at myself in the mirror now! Oh, I wish you had never told me this, Sayuri!"

"Then you should not have asked me," she answered him. "The weasel never meant for the good Ikeda to be killed -- though he was old and should have retired from the guard long ago. The weasel only wanted the rabbit." She beckoned Junko to sit beside her, saying, "But is a wife not supposed to concern herself with the advancement of her husband's fortunes? I was told otherwise by the priest who married us." She put her arms around Junko. "Come, my love, take the good luck with the regrettable, and say as many prayers for Ikeda's repose as will comfort you." She laughed then: the joyous childlike giggle that never failed to melt even the sternest heart. "Although I think that I am more skilled at that than any prayer."

But Junko paced the castle all night, and wandered the grounds like a spirit; and it was dawn before he could at last reassure himself that what she had told him was both sound and sensible. Ikeda's death had clearly been an accident, after all, and there was nothing in the least shameful in making the best of even such a tragedy. Sayuri's shapeshifting had brought about great good for him, however unintentional; let him give thanks for such a wife and, as he rode proudly beside the Lord Kuroda, bless the wandering arrow that had found an otter instead of a wild pig. "She is my luck," he thought often. "I should have given her that name, *luck*, instead of *little lily*."

But he did, indeed, pray often at the family shrine erected for Daisuke Ikeda.

Now, in time Junko came to realize that, while he had certainly been honored far beyond his origins in becoming part of Lord Kuroda's private guard, he had also attained a kind of limit beyond which he had no chance of rising. Above the guard stood his master's counselors and ministers: some of them higher in rank than others, some higher in a more subtle manner, unspoken and unwritten. In any case, their world was far out of reach for a nameless commoner, no matter how graciously favored by his lord. He would always be exactly what he was -- unlike Sayuri, who could at least become different animals in her search for her true nature. And, understanding this, for the first time in his life Junko began to admit aloud that the world was unjust.

"Look at Nakamura," he would say resentfully to his wife over the teacups. "Not only does he review the guard when Lord Kuroda is away or indisposed -- Nakamura, who barely knows a lance from a chopstick -- he advises my master on diplomacy, when he has never been north of the Inland Sea in his life. And Hashimoto -- Finance Minister Hashimoto, if you please -- Hashimoto holds the position for no other reason than that he is Lady Hara's second cousin on her father's side. It is not correct, Sayuri. It is not *right*."

Sayuri smiled and nodded, and made tea. She had become celebrated among the ladies-in-waiting for the excellence and delicacy of her *gyukuro* green tea.

And a few weeks later, Minister Shiro Nakamura, who loved to stroll alone in the castle gardens before dawn, to catch the first scent of the awakening flowers, was found torn in pieces by what could only have been a wolf. There were never many wolves in Japan, even then, but there was no question of the killer in this case: the great paw-prints in the soft earth were so large that Junko suggested that the animal might well have come from Hokkaido, where the wolves were notably larger. "But how could a wolf ever find its way from Hokkaido Island so far south to Honshu?" he asked himself in the night. "And why should it do so?" He was very much afraid that he knew the answer.

The hunt that was immediately organized after the discovery of Minister Nakamura's still-warm body found no wolf of any species, but it did find blood in one of the paw prints, and on the blade of the antique dagger that Nakamura always carried. Sayuri was not at home when Junko returned; nor did she appear for several days, and even then she looked pale and faint, and spoke little. Junko made the excuse of illness to the Lady Hara, who sent medicines and dainties, plainly hoping that Sayuri's reported condition might betoken a new godchild. For his part, he asked no questions of his wife, knowing that she would tell him the truth. She always did.

It took more time, and a great deal of courteously muffled scandal and outrage at court before Junko ascended into the ranks of Lord Kuroda's advisors. He did not replace Minister Nakamura, but a station was created for him: that of Minister to the Lower Orders. When Junko's first speechless gratitude began to be replaced by stumbling bewilderment, Lord Kuroda explained to him, thus: "By now, my friend, you should know that I am not one of those nobles who believe that the commoners have no reason to exist, except that we give them the privilege of serving us. Quite a few, in fact --" and here he named a good eight or ten of the castle servants, ending with Junko himself -- "show evidence of excellent sense, excellent judgment." He paused, looking straight into Junko's eyes. "And where there is judgment, there will be opinions."

By this Junko understood that he had been chosen to be a liaison -- what some might call a spy -- between the *daimyo* and all those who were not nobles, priests, or samurai. The notion offended him deeply, but he had not attained his unusually favored position by showing offense. He merely bowed deeply to the Lord Kuroda, and replied that he would do his best to give satisfaction. The Lord Kuroda looked long into his eyes without responding.

So Junko, surname or no, became the first commoner ever accepted into a world his class had long been forbidden even to dream of entering. His and Sayuri's quarters were changed once again for rooms that seemed to him larger than his entire native village; they were assigned a servant of their own, and a new bed that, as Sayuri giggled, was "like a great snowdrift. I am certain we will yet find a bear sleeping out the winter with us." The haughtiness of Lord Kuroda's other counselors, and the sense that their servant despised them, seemed a small price to pay at the time.

Out of respect and gratitude to his master, Junko served him well as Minister to the Lower Orders. He provoked no disloyal or rebellious conversations, but only listened quietly to the talk of the stables, the kitchens, the deep storerooms and the barracks. What he thought Lord Kuroda should know, he reported faithfully; what seemed to him to be no one's business but the speakers' remained where he heard it. And Lord Kuroda appreciated his discreet ability to tell the difference, and told him so, even calling him Junko-*san* in private. And once -- not very long before at all -- that would have been more than enough.

But again he had collided with an invisible barrier. Precisely because the post had been invented especially for him, there was no precedent for promotion, nor any obvious position for him to step into whenever it should become vacant. Those who had always been kindly and amiable to Junko the castle's chief huntsman, now looked with visible contempt on Junko the Minister, Junko the jumped-up pet of the Lord Kuroda. Those below him took great pleasure in observing his frustration and discomfort; when they dared, they murmured as they passed him, "Did you think you were better than we are? Did you really believe they would let you become one of *them*? Then you were a fool -- and now you are no one. No one."

Junko never spoke of his unhappiness to Lord Kuroda, but he expressed it once to his friend Akira Yamagata. The horsemaster, being a silent man, much more at ease with beasts than people, replied shortly, "Let demons fly away with them all. You cannot win with such folk; you cannot ever be even with them in their minds. Serve your master, and you cannot go wrong. Any horse will tell you that."

As for Sayuri, she simply listened, and arranged fresh flowers everywhere in their quarters, and made green *gyokuro* tea. When she walked with Junko in the castle gardens, and he asked her whether she felt herself any nearer to perceiving her true nature, she most often replied, "My husband, I know more and more what I am *not* -- but as to what I *am* . . ." and her voice would trail away, leaving the thought unfinished. Then she would add, quickly and softly, "But human -- that, yes. I know I am human."

Now the most clever and ambitious of the Lord Kuroda's counselors, recently become Minister Of Waterways and Fisheries, was a man named Mitsuo Kondo. Perhaps because he was little older than Junko, only now approaching his middle years, he went well out of his way to show his scorn for a commoner, though never in the presence of the *daimyo*. In the same way, Junko responded humbly to Kondo's poorly-veiled insults; while at home he confided to his wife that he often dreamed of wringing the man's thin neck, as he had so often done with chickens in his childhood. "Being of low birth, I am naturally acquainted with barnyards," he remarked bitterly to Sayuri.

It happened that on a warm night of early summer, Junko woke thirsty to an empty bed -- he was quite used to this by now -- and was still thirsty when he had drunk the last remaining green tea. Setting off to find water, barefooted and still drowsy, he had just turned into a corridor that led to the kitchens, when he heard the scraping of giant claws on a weathered *sugi*-wood floor, and flattened himself against the wall so hard that the imprint of the molding remained on his skin for hours afterward.

A huge black bear was lumbering down a passageway just ahead. It must surely have smelled his terror -- or, as he imagined, heard the frantic beating of his heart -- for it hesitated, then rose on its hind legs, turning toward him to sniff the air, growling softly. He saw the deep yellow-white chevron on the creature's breast, as well as the bright blood on its horrific fangs and claws, and he smelled both the blood and the raw, wild, strangely sweet odor of the beast itself. Even armed he might not be the creature's match; weaponless, he knew this was the moment of his death. But then the bear's great bulk dropped to the floor again, turning away, and his forgotten breath hissed between his teeth as the animal moved slowly on out of his sight, still growling to itself.

Junko did not go back to his quarters that night, but sat shivering where he was until dawn, tracing a trail of dead moss between two floorboards over and over with his forefinger. Then at last he slipped warily back into the new bed where Sayuri had laughingly imagined a bear keeping them company. She was sound asleep, not even stirring at his return. Junko lay still himself, studying her hands: one partly under her head, one stretched out on the pillow. There was no blood on any of the long fingers he loved to watch moving among her flowers. This was not as reassuring to him as it might once have been.

The hunt for Minister Kondo went on for days. The blood trail was washed away by a sudden summer rain, except for the track leading from his private offices, and other indications that he had been carried off by some great animal, or something even worse. For all his dislike of Kondo, Junko took a leading part in the hunt -- as did Lord Kuroda himself -- from its earliest moments to the very last, when it was silently agreed that the Minister's body would never be found. Lord Kuroda commanded ten days of mourning, and had a shrine created in Minister Kondo's memory on his own summer island. It is still there, though no one today knows whom it was meant to honor.

Even after the proper period of remembrance had passed, the empty place among the *daimyo*'s counselors remained unfilled for some considerable while. Few had liked Kondo any more than Junko did; all had feared his ambition, his gifts, and his evil tongue, and many were happy that he was gone, however horrified they may have been at the manner of his departure. But Lord Kuroda was clearly grieved -- and, more than that, suspicious, though of what even he could not precisely say. Wolves and bears were common enough in Honshu in those days, but not in Honshu gardens and palaces; nor was the loss of three important members of his court, each under such curious circumstances, something even a mighty *daimyo* could easily let pass. The tale had already spread through the entire province, from bands of half-naked beggars huddled muttering under bridges to courts as great as his own. There was even a delicate message from the Shogun in Kyoto. Lord Kuroda brooded long over the proper response.

Junko came to feel his master's contemplative eyes on him even when he was not in Lord Kuroda's presence. At length, to ease his mind, he went directly to the *daimyo* and asked him, "Lord, have I done wrong? I pray you tell me if this is so." For he knew his own silent part in the three deaths, and he was afraid for his wife Sayuri.

But Lord Kuroda answered him gently, "Your pardon, loyal Junko, if I have caused you to be more troubled than we all are, day on day. I think you know that I have often considered your country astuteness to be of more plain practical aid to me than the costly education of many a noble. Now I wonder whether you might have any least counsel to offer me regarding the terrible days through which we are passing." He permitted himself a very small, sad chuckle. "Because, just as everyone in my realm knows his station, my own task is to provide each of them with wisdom, assurance, and security. And I have none to offer them, no more than they. Do you understand me, Junko?"

Then Junko was torn in his heart, for he had never lost his fondness for the Lord Kuroda, and it touched him deeply to see the *daimyo* so distressed. But he shook his head and murmured only, "These are indeed dark times, my lord, and there is nothing that would honor my unworthy self more than to offer you any candle to light your way. But in all truth, I have no guidance for you, except to offer sacrifice and pay the priests well. Who but they can read the intentions of the *kami*?"

"Apparently the gods' intentions were for my priests to leave me," the Lord Kuroda replied. "Half of them ran off when Minister Nakamura's body was discovered, and you yourself have seen the rest vanishing day by day since Kondo's has *not* been discovered. In a little while the only priest left to me will be my old Yukiya." He sighed deeply, and turned from Junko, saying, "No matter, my friend. I had no business to place my own yoke upon your shoulders. Go to your bed and your life, and think no more of this. But know that I am grateful . . . grateful." And

as he shuffled away, disappearing from sight among his bodyservants, it seemed to Junko for the first time that his master was an old man.

He repeated the conversation to Sayuri, generally satisfied with the way he had responded to the *daimyo's* queries, but adding in some annoyance, "I expected him to offer me Kondo's position, but he never mentioned it. It will surely come, I am certain."

Sayuri had grown increasingly silent since the night of the black bear, more and more keeping to their quarters, avoiding her many friends and interests, shirking her duty to the Lady Hara when she dared; most often taking refuge in sleep, where she twitched and whimpered as Junko had never known her to do. Now, without looking at him, she said, "Yes. It will come."

And so it did, in good time, and with little competition, whether direct or stealthy, for rising to high rank at the court of Lord Kuroda more and more clearly involved risking a terrible end. There was no one who openly connected the deaths with the steady advancement of the peasant Junko -- Junko-*san* now, to all, by special order -- nor, certainly, with his charming and modest wife -- but there were some who pondered, and one in particular who pondered deeply. This was Yukiya.

Yukiya was the Shinto priest who had married Sayuri to Junko. As the Lord Kuroda had predicted, he was the only priest who had not fled the court, and the only person who seemed able to rouse Sayuri from her melancholy torpor. Out of his hearing, he was called "The Turtle," partly due to his endlessly wrinkled face and neck, but also because of his bright black eyes that still missed nothing -- not the smallest change in the flowing of the sea or the angle of the wind, not the slightest trembling of the eyelashes of a woman fearing to show fear for her husband far away in battle. If age had slowed his step, it seemed to have quickened his perceptions: he could smell rain two days off, identify a Mongolian plover before others could be sure it was even a bird, and hear a leaf's fall or a fieldmouse's squeak through the castle walls. But he did look more and more like a turtle every season.

Junko instinctively avoided the old priest as much as he could, keeping clear of the *inari* shrine he maintained, except during the *Shogatsu Matsuri*, the New Year's festival. But Yukiya visited with Sayuri almost daily -- in her quarters, if she did not come to the shrine -- reading to her from the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki*, teasing and provoking her until she had no choice but to smile, often remarking that she should one day consider becoming a Shinto priest herself. She always changed the subject, but the notion made her thoughtful, all the same.

"Today he said that I understood the way of the gods," she reported to Junko one spring evening. "What do you suppose he meant by that?"

They were walking together in the Realm of the Blue Dragon, still their favorite part of the castle gardens, and Junko's attention was elsewhere at the moment, contemplating the best use of the numerous Waterways and Fisheries that ran through the Lord Kuroda's vast domain. Now, his notice returning to his wife, he said, "The *kami* have always been shapeshifters; look at the foxes your friend's shrine celebrates. Perhaps he senses . . ." He did not finish the sentence.

Sayuri's grip on his arm tightened enough to hurt him. "No," she said in a small voice. "No, that cannot be, cannot. I change no longer. Never again" Her face had gone paler than the moon.

"The bear?" He had never meant to ask her, and immediately wished he could take back the question. But she answered him straightforwardly, almost in a rush, as the melting snows had quickened the measure even of Lord Kuroda's gentle stream.

"I was so frightened to be the bear. I didn't like it at all. It was a terrible thing."

"A terrible thing that you were -- or a terrible thing you did?" He could not keep his own words from tumbling out.

"Both," she whispered, "*both*." She was crying now, but she resisted strongly when Junko tried to hold her. "No, no, you mustn't, it is too dangerous. I am sorry, so sorry, I so wish your arrow had killed me. Then Ikeda would be alive, and Nakamura, and Kondo --"

"And I would still be what I was born," Junko interrupted her. "Junko the hunter, lower than any cook -- because a cook is at least an artist, while a huntsman is a butcher -- Junko, with his peasant ways and peasant accent, barely tolerable just as long as he keeps to his place. If it were not for you, my otter, my wolf --"

"No!" She twisted away from him, and actually ran a few paces off before she turned to stare at him in real horror. It was long before she spoke again, and then she said quietly, "We have quite traded places, have we not, my husband? You were the one who grieved for the poor victims of my shape-changing, and it was I who laughed at your foolish concern and prided myself upon the improvements I brought to your fortunes, as a good wife should do. And now . . ." She faltered for a little, still looking at him as though *he* were the strange animal she had never seen before. "Now you turn out to be the shapeshifter, after all, and I the soft fool who'll have none of it, no more. Not even for love of you -- and I loved you when I was an otter -- not even for the sake of at last learning my own being, my own soul. That can go undiscovered forever, and welcome, and I will remain Sayuri, your wife, no more and no less. And I will tend three graves, and pray at the shrine, and live as I can with what I have done. That is how it will be."

"That is how it will be," Junko mimicked her. "And I? I am to rise no higher at this court, where the old men despise me and the young ones plot against me -- all because you have suddenly turned nun?" He moved toward her, his eyes narrowing. "Yukiyasa," he said slowly. "It's the Turtle, isn't it? That horrible antique, with his foul-smelling robes and his way of shooting his head out and blinking at people. It's Yukiyasa who has put all this into your head, I know it. I swear, if I really *could* change my shape --"

But Sayuri covered his mouth with her hand, crying, "Don't! Don't ever say that, I beg you! You have no idea what that is like, what that *is*, or you would never say such a thing." In that moment, the look in her beautiful dark eyes made Junko think of the black bear rising on its hind legs and turning to sniff the air for him, and he was afraid of her. He did not move, nor did he try to speak, until she took her hand away.

Then he said, not mockingly this time, but as soothingly as he knew how, "Well, we have come a very long way together -- too long a way for us to turn on each other now. I ask pardon for my thoughtlessness and my stupidity, and I promise never to speak of . . . what we will not speak of, ever again. Such advancement as I can win on my own, that will I do, and be well satisfied with my own nature, and my own fate. Will that content you, my wife?"

"That will content me, husband," she whispered after a little. She did not resist when Junko put his arms around her, but he could feel the fear in her body, and so he added lightly, "And I promise also never to say another word concerning your Turtle, for I know how much his wisdom and kindness mean to you. Not a word -- not even if you were indeed to become a priest, as he wishes you to do. So." He stroked her hair, as she had always liked him to do. "Shall we go on with our walk?"

And Sayuri laughed for the first time in a long while, and she nodded and put her arm through his, and they walked on together.

But it was not true; though, to do him justice, Junko tried earnestly, for a while, to believe it so. Even while taking his new post as Minister of Waterways and Fisheries with all seriousness -- descended as he was from river people who had manned weirs, dams and sluices throughout Honshu and Shikoku for generations -- he could not help coveting another position: that of Masanori Morioka, Chief Minister for Dealing with Barbarians. This ranked just under the Lord Kuroda himself -- in another country, Morioka would have been called Prime Minister -- and where the *daimyo* was aging visibly, Morioka was only a year or two older than Junko himself. Far more important, he came of a high samurai family, and, since Lord Kuroda and the Lady Hara had no children, he might already have been chosen to succeed his lord when the time came. Junko was increasingly certain of this: the Lord Kuroda was no one to leave his lands in chaos while his relatives went to war over so rich a prize. It must be Morioka; there could be no doubt of it.

In the past, this would have mattered little to the Junko whose only concern was whether the rains had brought enough new grass for the deer, and if the snow monkeys' unusually thick coats might foretell an evil winter. But it mattered now to this Junko, and -- again to be fair -- he did his best to conceal his jealousy from his wife. In this he failed, because he talked in his sleep almost every night, and Sayuri's heart shivered to decipher his mumblings and his whispered rants. She would lie as close to him as she could then, hoping somehow to absorb his aching resentment into her own body, and wishing once again, deeply and dearly, that she had died an otter.

As the Lord Kuroda grew more frail, and Morioka steadily assumed a greater share of the *daimyo's* responsibilities, Junko's anger and envy became more and more plain to see, and not only by his wife. Lady Hara spoke of it with some disquiet to Sayuri; and Akira, the taciturn horsemaster, told Junko that he needed to ride out more, and to spend more time in the company of horses than of courtiers, and less time fretting over childish matters that he could not control in any case. And it was Lord Kuroda himself, having summoned Junko to him in private, who was the one to ask, "Have I done wrong, then? What troubles you, Junko-san?" For he always showed a tenderness toward Junko that made certain spiteful folk grumble that the *daimyo* had fathered him in secret on a peasant woman.

Then Junko, for a moment, was ashamed of his bitterness, and he knelt before Lord Kuroda and put his hands between the hard old hands that trembled only a little, even now, and he whispered, "Never have I had anything from you but goodness beyond my worth. But I would have enjoyed the opportunity to serve you that others have earned -- perhaps through ability, perhaps . . . not."

By this Lord Kuroda knew that he was speaking of Masanori Morioka. He responded with unaccustomed sternness. "Minister of Waterways and Fisheries you are, and I would never permit even Morioka to trespass on a single one of the duties and privileges that your honorable service has won for you. But we must always remember that all barbarians believe themselves to be civilized, and dealing with such people while keeping the dangerous truth from them requires a subtlety that few possess. You are not one of them, Junko-san."

He smiled at Junko then, leaning stiffly forward to raise him to his feet. "Nor am I, not really. It is a matter of training from one's childhood, my friend -- learning to sense and walk, even in the dark, the elusive balance between humility and servility, candor and courtesy, power and the appearance of power. Masanori Morioka is far better at this game than I ever was, even when I was young. Let the worst come, I will have no fears for my realm in his hands."

With those words, the worst had indeed come to Junko; with those words Morioka was doomed. Yet he managed to keep his answer calm and slow, saying merely, "In his hands? Is it so decided, Lord?"

"It is so decided," his master replied.

Junko drew himself to his full height and bowed deeply, holding his arms rigid at his side. "Then I also must retire from the court, since Minister Morioka and I dislike each other too greatly to work together after you are gone. While you remain, so will I."

But the Lord Kuroda smiled then: not widely, which was not his way, but with a certain sad warmth that was new to his kind, ugly face. He responded only, "In that case I will stay alive just as long as it befits me to do so," and with a small flick of his fingers gave Junko leave to withdraw.

On the way to his quarters, he briefly encountered Morioka, who bowed mockingly to him, saying nothing until Junko had returned the bow and passed on. Then he called after him, "And how go the mighty consultations with our *daimyo*?" for he knew where Junko had been, and he had his own envy of the Lord Kuroda's feeling for Junko.

"As well as your great battles," Junko answered him, and Morioka scowled like a demon-mask, since he had never borne arms for Lord Kuroda or any other, and everyone at court knew *that*. So they went on to their separate destinations; and Junko, reaching home, flung himself down on the bed and wept with a terrifying ferocity. Nor could he stop: it was as though the tears of rage that had been building and swelling within him since his stoic childhood had finally surged out of his control, and were very likely to flood him as the cyclones still did every year to his family's sliver of farmland. He was all water, and all bitterness, and nothing beyond, ever.

He continued biting the bedclothes to muffle his weeping, but Sayuri heard him just the same, and came to him. At first she drew back in something close to fear of such violent anguish; but in a little she sat on the edge of the bed and put her hand timidly on his shoulder, saying, "Husband, I cannot bear to see you so. What in this world can possibly be such an immeasurable grief to you? Speak to me, and if I cannot help you, I will at least share your sorrow. Share it with me now, I beg you."

And she said all else that good wives -- and good husbands, as well -- say at such moments; and after a long while Junko lifted his head to face her. His eyes and nose and mouth were all clotted with tears, and he looked as children look who have been punished for no reason they can understand. But behind the tears Sayuri saw a hot and howling anger that would have turned him to a beast then and there, if it could have done. In a thick, shaking voice he told her what the Lord Kuroda had told him, ending by saying, more quietly now, "You see, it was all for nothing, after all. All of it, for nothing."

Sayuri thought at first that he was speaking of his long, difficult climb up from his poor peasant birth to the castle luxury where they sat together on a bed whose sheets were of Chinese silk. But Junko, his voice gone wearily flat and almost toneless, went on. "Everything you did for me, for us -- Ikeda, Nakamura, Kondo -- it was all wasted, they might just as well have been spared. Yes -- they might as well have remained alive."

"Yes," Sayuri repeated dazedly. "They might have remained alive." But then she shook off the confused stupor that his words had brought about, and she gripped his wrists, saying, "But Junko-san, no, I never killed for your sake. I

was a bear, a wolf, a weasel after a rabbit -- I was hungry, not human. In those beast forms I did not even know who those men were!"

"Did you not?" the fierce question came back at her. "Be honest with yourself, my wife. Did the wolf never know for a moment that tearing out the throat of Isamu Nakamura would benefit a certain peasant who dreamed of becoming a counselor to a *daimyo*? What of the bear -- surely the bear must have known that carrying off the previous Minister of Waterways and Fisheries would open the way --"

"No! No, it is not true!" Still holding his wrists tightly, she shook him violently. "The animals were innocent -- I was innocent! It was coincidence, nothing more --"

"Was it?" They stared at each other for a moment longer, before Sayuri released Junko's wrists and he turned away, shaking his head. "It doesn't matter, it is of no importance. Whatever was true then, you will take no more shapes, and I . . . I will stay not one day after Lord Kuroda is gone. We will retire to my home village, and I will be a big man there, and you the most beautiful and accomplished woman. And why not? -- we deserve it. And they will give us the very grandest house they possess, in my honor, and it will be smaller than this one room, and smell of old men. And why not? We have served the great *daimyo* faithfully and well, and we deserve it all."

And saying this, he walked away, leaving Sayuri alone to bite her knuckles and make small sounds without tears.

The old priest Yukiya found her so when he came to read to her, since she had not appeared at the shrine. Having performed her wedding, he regarded her therefore as his daughter and his responsibility, and he lifted her face and looked long at her, asking no questions. Not did she speak, but placed one hand over his dry, withered hand and they stood in silence, until her mind was a little eased. Then she said, in a voice that sounded as ancient as his, "I have done evil, and may do so again. Can you help me, Turtle?" For he knew perfectly well what he was called, but she was the only one permitted to address him by that name.

Yukiya said, "Often and often does evil result where nothing but good was meant. I am sure this is true in your case."

But Sayuri answered, "What I intended -- even if it was not quite I who intended it -- is of no importance. What I did is what matters."

The priest peered at her, puzzled as he had not been in a very long time, and yet with a curious sense that he might do best to remain so. He continued. "I have many times thought that in this world far more harm is wrought by foolish men than by wicked ones. Perhaps you were foolish, my daughter. Are you also vain enough to imagine yourself the only one?"

That won him a fragment of a smile, coming and going so swiftly that it might have been an illusion, and perhaps was. But Yukiya was encouraged, and he said further, "You *were* foolish, then," not making a question of it. "Well, so. I myself have done such things as I would never confess to you -- not because they were evil, but because they were so *stupid* --"

Sayuri said, "I change into animals. People have died."

Yukiya did not speak for a long time, but he never took his eyes from Sayuri's eyes. Finally he said quietly, "Yes, I see them," and he did not say whether he meant wolves or bears, or Daisuke Ikeda, Minister Shiro Nakamura or Minister Mitsuo Kondo. He said, "The *kami* did this to you before you were born. It is your fate, but it is not your fault."

"But what I did is my fault!" she cried. "Death is death, killing is killing!" She paused to catch her breath and compose herself, and then went on in a lower tone. "My husband thinks that I killed those men to remove them from his path to power in the court. I say *no, no, it was the animals, not me* --but what if it is true? What if that is exactly what happened? What should I do then, Turtle, please tell me? Turtle, please!"

The old man took her hands between his own. "Even if every word is true, you are still blameless. Listen to me now. I have studied the way of the *kami* all my life, and I am no longer sure that there is even such a thing as blame, such a thing as sin. You did what you did, and you are being punished for it now, as we two stand here. The *kami* are never punished. This is the one thing I know, daughter, with all my years and all my learning. The *kami* are never punished, and we always are."

Then he kissed Sayuri on the forehead, and made her lie down, and recited to her from the *Kojiki* until she fell asleep, and he went away.

Passing the courtyard where the *daimyo's* soldiers trained, he noticed Junko watching an exercise, but plainly not seeing it. The old priest paused beside him for a time, observing Junko's silent discomfort in his presence without enjoying it. When Junko finally bowed and started away -- still without speaking, discourteous as that was -- Yukiya addressed him, saying, "I will give you my advice, though you do not want it. Whether for a good reason or a bad one, it would be a terrible mistake for you ever again to order your wife, in words or in your thoughts, to become so much as a squirrel or a sparrow. A good reason or a bad one. Do you understand me?"

Then Junko turned and strode back to him, his face white, but his eyes wide with anger, and his voice a low hiss. "I do *not* understand you. I do not know what you are talking about. My wife is no shapeshifter, but if she were, I would never make such a request of her. Never, I have *sworn* to her that I would never --"

He halted, realizing what he had said. Yukiya looked at him for a long moment before he repeated, "In words or in thoughts," and walked slowly on to the shrine where he lived. Junko stared after him, but did not follow.

But by this time he was too far lost in envy of Masanori Morioka to give more than the briefest consideration to the Shinto priest's warning. True to his promise to her, he held himself back from urging Sayuri to remember, in so many words, that there was no future for them in a court commanded by Morioka. Even so, he found one way or another to put it into her mind every day; and every night he awoke well before dawn, hoping to find her gone, as had happened so many times in their life together. But she continued to slumber the night through, though often enough she wakened him with her twitching and moaning, which once would have moved him instantly to soothe and comfort her. Now he only turned over with a disappointed grunt and drowsed off again. He had always had the gift of sleep.

Finally, on a night of early autumn, his desire was granted. The moon was high and small, leaves were stirring softly in a warm breeze, and the space beside him was empty. Junko smiled in the darkness and rose quickly to follow. Then he hesitated, partly from fear of just what he might overtake; partly because it would clearly be better to be aroused by running feet in the corridors and the dreadful news about Minister Morioka. But it was impossible for even him to close his eyes now, so he donned a kimono and paced their quarters from one end to the other, impatiently pushing fragile screens aside, cursing when he tripped over pairs of Sayuri's *geta*, and listening for screams.

But there was no sound beyond the soft creaking of the night, and finally the silence became more than he could endure. Telling himself that Sayuri, in whatever form, would surely know him, he drew a long breath and stepped out into the corridor.

Standing motionless as his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, he saw and heard nothing, but he smelled . . . or almost smelled . . . no, he had no words for what he smelled. The wild odor of the bloody-mouthed black bear was lodged in his throat yet, as was the scent of the wolf fur clutched in the dead fingers of Minister Nakamura. But this was a cold smell, like that of a great serpent, and there was another underneath, even colder -- *burned bone*, Junko thought, though that made no sense at all; and then, even more absurdly, *bone flames*. He turned to look back at the entrance to his quarters, but it seemed already far away, receding as he watched, like a sail on the sea.

There was no choice but to go on. He wished that he had brought a sword or a *tanto* dagger, but only samurai were permitted to carry such weapons; and for all his kindly respect and affection, the Lord Kuroda had never made any exception for Junko. When he was in Morioka's place, he would change *that*. He moved ahead, step by step, cautiously feeling his way between splashes of moonlight.

Masanori Morioka's quarters were located a floor above his own -- closer to the *daimyo's*, which was something else to brood about, and tend to later. He started up the stair, anxious neither to alert nor alarm anyone, and beginning to wonder -- all was still so quiet -- whether he had misread Sayuri's absence. What if she had merely gone scurrying in mouse-shape, as she had once been fond of doing, skittering in the castle rafters as a bat, or even roving outside as any sort of small night thing? How would it look if he were surprised wandering himself where he had no reason to be at such an hour? He paused, very nearly of a mind to turn back . . . and yet the serpent-smell had grown stronger with each step, and so near now that he felt as though he were the creature exuding it: as though the coldly burning bones were, in some way, his own.

Another step, and another after, moving sideways now without realizing that he was doing so, the serpent-smell pressing on him like a smothering blanket, making his breath come shorter and shallower. Once he lurched to one

knee, twice into the wall, unsure now of whether he was stumbling upstairs or down . . . then he did hear the scream.

It was a woman's scream, not a man's. And it came, not from Minister Morioka's quarters, but from those of the Lord Kuroda and the Lady Hara.

For an instant, Junko was too stupefied to be afraid; it was as though the strings of his mind had been cut, as well as those of his petrified body. Then he uttered a wordless cry that he himself never heard, and sprang toward the *daimyo's* rooms, kicking off his slippers when they skidded on the polished floors.

Lady Hara screamed again, as Junko burst through the rice-paper door, stumbling over the wreckage of shattered *tansu* chests and *shoji* screens. He could not see her or Lord Kuroda at first: the vast figure in his path seemed to draw all light and shape and color into itself, so that nothing was real except the towering horns, the cloven hooves, the sullen gleam of the reptilian scales from the waist down, the unbearable stench of simmering bone . . .

"*Ushi-oni!*" He heard it in his mind as an insect whisper. Lord Kuroda was standing between his wife and the demon, legs braced in a fighting stance, *wakizashi* sword trembling in his old hand. The *ushi-oni* roared like a landslide and knocked the sword across the room. Lord Kuroda drew his one remaining weapon, the *tanto* he carried always in his belt. The *ushi-oni* made a different sound that might have been laughter. The dagger fell to the floor.

Junko said, "Sayuri."

The great thing turned at his voice, as the black bear had done, and he saw the night mare cow-face, and the rows of filthy fangs crowding the slack, drooling lips. And -- as he had seen it in the red eyes of the bear -- the unmistakable recognition.

"My wife," Junko said. "Come away."

The *ushi-oni* roared again, but did not move, neither toward him, nor toward Lord Kuroda and Lady Hara. Junko said, "Come. I never meant this. I never meant this."

Out of the corner of his eye, Junko saw the *daimyo* moving to recover his fallen dagger. But the *ushi-oni's* attention was all on Junko, the mad yellow-white eyes had darkened to a dirty amber, and the claws on its many-fingered hands had all withdrawn slightly. Junko faced it boldly, all unarmed as he was, saying again, "Come away, Sayuri. We do not belong here, you and I."

He knew that if he turned his head he would see a blinking, quaking Minister Morioka behind him in the ruined doorway, but for that he cared nothing now. He took a few steps toward the *ushi-oni*, halting when it growled stinking fire and backed away. Junko did not speak further, but only reached out with his eyes. *We know each other.*

He was never to learn whether the monster that had been -- that *was* -- his wife would have come to him, nor what would have been the result if it had. Lady Hara, suddenly reaching the limit of her body's courage, uttered a tiny sigh, like a child falling asleep, and collapsed to the floor. The *ushi-oni* began to turn toward her, and at that moment the Lord Kuroda lunged forward and struck with all the strength in his old arm. The *tanto* buried itself to the coral-ornamented hilt in the right side of the demon.

The *ushi-oni's* howl shook the room and seemed to split Junko's head, bringing blood even from his eyes, as well as from his ears and nose. A great scaled paw smashed him down as the creature roared and reeled in its death agony, trampling everything it had not already smashed to splinters, dragging ancient scrolls and brush paintings down from the walls, crushing the Lord Kuroda family shrine underfoot. The *ushi-oni* bellowed unceasingly, the sound slamming from wall back to broken wall, and everyone hearing it bellowed with the same pain, bleeding like Junko and like him holding, not their heads and faces, but their hearts. When the demon fell, and was silent, the sound continued on forever.

But even forever ends, and there came a time when Junko pulled himself to his feet, and found himself face to face with Minister Morioka, pale as a grubworm, gabbling like an infant, walking as though he had just learned how. Others were in the room now, all shouting, all brandishing weapons, all keeping their distance from the great, still

thing on the floor. He saw the Lord Kuroda, far away across the ruins, bending over Lady Hara, carefully and tenderly lifting her to her feet while staring strangely at Junko. Whatever his face, as bloody as Junko's own, revealed, it was neither anger nor outrage, but Junko looked away anyway.

The *ushi-oni* had not moved since its fall, but its eyes were open, unblinking, darkening. Junko kneeled beside it without speaking. The fanged cow-lips twitched slightly, and a stone whisper reached his ear and no other, shaping two words. "*My nature . . .*" There were no more words, and no sound in the room.

Junko said, "She was my wife."

No one answered him, not until the Lord Kuroda said, "No." Junko realized then that the expression in his master's eyes was one of deepest pity. Lord Kuroda said, "It is not possible. An *ushi-oni* may take on another shape if it wishes, being a demon, but in death it returns to its true being, always. You see that this has not occurred here."

"No," Junko answered him, "because this *was* Sayuri's natural form. This is what she was, but she did not know it, no more than I. I swear that she did not know." He rose, biting his lower lip hard enough to bring more blood to his mouth, and faced the *daimyo* directly. He said, "This was my doing. All of it. The weasel, the wolf, the bear -- she meant only to help me, and I . . . I did not want to know." He looked around at the shattered room filled with solemn people in nightrobes and armor. "Do you understand? Any of you?"

The Lord Kuroda's compassionate manner had taken on a shade of puzzlement; but the Lady Hara was nodding her elegant old head. Behind Junko, Minister Morioka had at last found language, though his stammering voice retained none of its normal arrogance. He asked timidly, "How could an *ushi-oni* not know what it was? How could such a monster ever marry a human being?"

"Perhaps because she fell in love," the Lady Hara said quietly. "Love makes one forget many things."

"I cannot speak for my wife," Junko replied. "For myself, there are certain things I will remember while I live, which I beg will not be long." He turned his eyes to Minister Morioka. "I wanted her to kill you. I never said it in those words -- *never* -- but I made very sure she knew that I wanted you out of my way, as she had removed three others. I ask your pardon, and offer my head. There can be no other atonement."

Then the Minister shrank back without replying, for while he had no objection to the death penalty, he greatly preferred to see it administered by someone else. But the Lord Kuroda asked in wonder, "Yet the *ushi-oni* came here, to these rooms, not to Minister Morioka's quarters. Why should she -- *it* -- have done so?"

Junko shook his head. "That I cannot say. I know only that I am done with everything." He walked slowly to retrieve the *daimyo's* sword, brought it to him, and knelt again, baring his neck without another word.

Lord Kuroda did not move or speak for a long time. The Lady Hara put her hand on his arm, but he did not look at her. At last he set the *wakizashi* back in its lacquered sheath, the soft click the only sound in the ravaged room, which seemed to have turned very cold since the fall of the *ushi-oni*. He touched Junko's shoulder, beckoning him to rise.

"Go in peace," he said without expression, "if there is any for you. No harm will come to you, since it will be known that you are still under the protection of the Lord Kuroda. Farewell . . . Junko-san."

A moment longer they stared into one another's eyes; then Junko bowed to his master and his master's lady, turned like a soldier, and walked away, past smashed and shivered *tengu* furniture, past Minister Morioka -- who would not look at him -- through the crowd of gaping, muttering retainers, and so out of the Lord Kuroda's castle. He did not return to his quarters for any belongings, but went away barefoot, clad only in his kimono, and he looked back only once, when he smelled the smoke and knew that the servants were already burning the body of the *ushi-oni* that was also his wife Sayuri. Then he went on.

And no one ever would have known what became of him, if the old priest Yukiya had not been the patient, inquisitive man that he was. Some years after the disappearance of Minister Junko, the commoner who had ridden at the right hand of a *daimyo* for a little while, Yukiya left his Shinto shrine in the care of a disciple, picked up his staff and his begging bowl, and set off on a trail long since grown cold. But it was not the first such trail that he had followed in his life, and he possessed the curious patience of the very old, that is perhaps the closest mortal approach to immortality. The journey was a trying one, but many peasant families were happy to please the gods

by offering him lodging, and peasants have long memories. It took the priest less time than one might have expected to track Junko to a village that barely merited the title, on a brook that was called a river by the people living there. For that matter, Junko himself was not known in the village by his rightful name, but as Toru, which is *wayfarer*. Yukiya found him at the brook in the late afternoon, lying flat on his belly, fishing for salmon by the oldest method there is, which is tickling them slowly and gently, until they fall asleep, and then scooping them into a net. There were already six fish on the grass beside him.

Junko was coaxing a seventh salmon to the bank, and did not look up or speak when the old priest's shadow fell over him. Not until he had landed the last fish did he say, "I knew it was you, Turtle. I could always smell you as far as the summer island."

Yukiya took no offense at this, but only chuckled as he sat down. "The incense does cling. Others have mentioned it."

Neither spoke for some time, but each sat considering the other. To the priest's eye, Junko looked brown and healthy enough, but notably older than he should have. His face was thinner, his hair had turned completely white, and there was an air about him, not so much of loneliness as of solitude, as though what lived inside him had left no room for another living being, or even a living thought. *He chose a good name*, Yukiya thought. "You do well here, my son?"

"As well as I may." Junko shrugged. "I hunt and fish for the folk here, and mend their poor flimsy dams and weirs, as I was raised to do. And they in turn shelter me, and call me *Wayfarer*, and ask no questions. I am where I belong."

To this Yukiya knew not what to say, and the two were silent again, until Junko asked finally, "Akira Yamagata, the horsemaster -- he is well?"

"Gone these two years and more," the priest replied gently, for he knew of the friendship. Junko inquired after a few other members of Lord Kuroda's household, but not once about the *daimyo* himself, or about Lady Hara. Wondering on this, and thinking to provoke Junko beyond prudence, Yukiya began to speak of the successes of Masanori Morioka. "Since you . . . since you left, the ascent in his fortunes has been astonishing. He is very nearly a Council of Ministers in himself now -- and the lord being old, and without children . . ." He shrugged, leaving the sentence deliberately unfinished.

"Well, well," Junko said mildly, almost to himself. "Well, well." He smiled then, for the first time at the puzzled priest, and it was a smile of such piercing amusement as even Yukiya had never seen in all his long life. "I am pleased for him, and wish him all success. Let him know of it."

"This after you sent an *ushi-oni* to destroy him?" It was not Yukiya's custom ever to raise his voice, but perplexity was bringing him close to it. "You said yourself that you wished Minister Morioka dead and out of your way. Sayuri died of that envy." Startled and frightened by the anger in his words, he repeated them nevertheless, realizing that he had loved the woman who was no woman. "She died because you were insanely, cruelly jealous of that man you praise now."

Junko's smile vanished, replaced, not by anger of his own, but by the same weary knowledge that had aged his face. "Not so, though I wish it were. You have no idea how I wish that were true." He was silent for a time, looking away as he began to gather the seven salmon into a rush-lined basket. Then he said, still not meeting the priest's eyes, "No. My wife died because she understood me."

"What nonsense is this?" Yukiya cried out. He was deeply ashamed of his loss of control, yet for once refused to restrain himself. "I warned you, I *warned* you, in so many words, never again to coax her to change form -- never to let her do it, for your sake and her own -- and see what came of your disregard! She yielded once more to your desire, set forth to murder Minister Morioka, as she had slain others, and thereby rediscovered the terrible truth she had forgotten for love of you. For love of you!" The old priest was on his feet now, trembling and sweating, jabbing his finger at Junko's expressionless face. "Understand you? How could she understand such a man? She only loved, and she died of it, and it need not have happened so. It need not have happened!"

The sky was going around in great, slow circles, and Yukiya thought that it would be sensible to sit down, but he could not find his feet. Someone was saying somewhere, a long way off, "She loved me when she was an otter." Then Junko had him by the shoulders, and was guiding him carefully through the long journey back to the grass

and the ground. In time the sky stopped spinning, and Yukiya drank cold brook water from Junko's cupped hands and said, "Thank you. I am sorry."

"No need," Junko replied. "You have the right of it as much as anyone ever will. But Sayuri knew something that no one else knew, not even I myself." He paused, waiting until the priest's color had returned and his heartbeat had ceased to shake his body so violently. Then he said, "Sayuri knew that in my soul, in the darkest corner of my soul, I wished her to go exactly where she did go. And it was not to Minister Morioka's quarters."

It took the priest Yuriyasa no time at all, dazed as he still was, to comprehend what he had been told, but a very long while indeed to find a response. At last he said, almost whispering, "The Lord Kuroda loved you. Like a son."

Junko nodded without answering. Yukiya asked him hesitantly, "Did you imagine that if Sayuri . . . if Lord Kuroda were gone, you might somehow become *daimyo* yourself?"

"'Like a son' is not like being a son," Junko replied. "No, I had no such expectations. My master, in his generosity, had raised me higher than I could possibly have conceived or deserved, being who I am -- *what* I am. In a hundred lifetimes, how should I ever hold any grievance against the Lord Kuroda?"

Twilight had arrived as they spoke together, and fires were being lighted in the nearest huts. Junko stood up, slinging the fish basket over his shoulder. Looking down at Yukiya, his face appearing younger with the eyes in shadow, he said, "But Sayuri knew the *ushi-oni* in me, the thing that hated having been shown all that I could not have or be, and that wished, in the midst of luxury, to have been left where I belonged -- in a place just like this one, where not one person knows how to write the words *daimyo* or *shogun*, and *samurai* is a word that comes raiding and killing, trampling our crops, burning our homes. Do you hear what I am telling you, priest of the *kami*? Do you hear?"

He pulled Yukiya to his feet, briefly holding the old man close as a lover, though he did not seem to notice it. He said, very quietly, "I loved Lord Kuroda for the man he was. But from the day I entered his castle -- a ragged, ignorant boy from a ragged village of which *he* was ignorant -- I hated him for *what* he was. I spent days and years forgetting that I hated him and all his kind, every moment denying it in my heart, in my mind, in my bones." For a moment he put his hand hard over his mouth, as though to stop the words from coming out, but they came anyway. "Sayuri . . . Sayuri knew my soul."

A child's voice called from the village, the sound sweetly shrill on the evening air. Junko smiled. "I promised her family fish tonight. We must go."

He took Yukiya's elbow respectfully, and they walked slowly away from the river in the fading light. Junko asked, "You will rest here for a few days? It is a long road home. I know."

The priest nodded agreement. "You will not return with me." It was not a question, but he added, "Lord Kuroda has not long, and he has missed you."

"And I him. Tell him I will forget my own name before I forget his kindness." A sudden whisper of a laugh. "Though I am Toru now, and no one will ever call me Junko again, I think."

"Junko-*san*," Yukiya corrected him. "Even now, he always asks after Junko-*san*."

Neither spoke again until they had entered the village, and muddy children were clinging to Junko's legs, dragging him toward a hut further on. Then the priest said quietly, "She really believed she was human. She might never have known." Junko bowed his head. "Did you believe it yourself, truly? I have wondered."

The answer was almost drowned out by the children's yelps of happiness and hunger. "As much as I ever believed I was Junko-*san*."

The Frankenstein Diaries

by [Matthew S. Rotundo](#)



[Artwork by Kevin Wasden](#)

Part Two

[\(Part one is in issue 8.\)](#)

The guidance counselor introduced himself as "just Mike" -- a young man, barely older than the students, clean shaven, short hair, small gold triple-hoop earring for the lightest touch of cool. He stood a head taller than John. His handshake was firm, his welcoming smile easy and natural. He invited John to sit.

Across his walls ran inspirational holos of mountain climbers scaling impossibly steep pitches, runners dashing for finish lines, and the like. Interspersed among these were college and financial aid fliers, and a single army recruiting poster, tucked away in a corner.

Instead of taking a seat behind the desk, Mike sat in the chair next to John's. "I don't like putting obstacles between me and my visitors," he said.

John nodded, tapping one foot.

"Nervous?"

"A little. I've never had a meeting like this before. Paul's mother used to take care of these things."

"I understand." Mike pulled a PDA from his breast pocket and tapped a few keys. He scanned the readout for a few seconds. "How's Paul adjusting to his mother's death?"

"Yesterday he got a snake tattooed to his face."

Mike raised an eyebrow, tapped a few more keys, then stowed his PDA. "I see. Well, he has a lot to work through. The grief, the anger, the transition from living with his mother to living with you -- it'll take a while. The best thing you can do is stay alert for warning signs, and let him know you're available if he wants to talk."

"Is the tattoo a warning sign?"

Mike shrugged. "Hard to tell. He's not the first student I've seen with one. What did you say to him about it?"

"Nothing."

"He may have been trying to provoke you."

"The thought occurred to me."

"It's natural, given his situation, for him to test his limits. He needs to know how far he can go. But once you show him where the line is, he'll respect it."

"You know, I doubt that."

"Hmm. Well. Mr. Griffin, the reason I called you here today is to give you an overview of what we've been trying to do to help Paul. I worked with him all last year, and I thought that by spring he had come to trust me a little. Since his mother's death, however, he's regressed. His teachers tell me that he never participates in class, even when called upon. And he skipped his last appointment with me."

"That sounds like Paul."

A frown creased Mike the guidance counselor's forehead. "Behavioral problems are not uncommon for kids with his disorder. I'm used to that. But --"

"Is that what they call cloning these days? A *disorder*?"

Mike's frown deepened. "Of course not. I was referring to his dyslexia."

"His --" John shook his head. "His what?"

Mike produced his PDA again and brought up more data. "According to my files, Paul was diagnosed with developmental reading disorder when he was seven years old. Isn't that correct?"

"Seven . . ." John thought back. That would have been about a year after the divorce.

"You didn't know?"

He could only sit there dumbly, feeling the weight of Mike the guidance counselor's stare. John glanced at him, and he looked away.

"I'm sorry," Mike said. "I guess I assumed you knew. But then, as the non-custodial parent --" He waved it off. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I was only trying to say that Paul's behavioral problems are nothing I haven't seen before. With a great deal of patience and persistence, I was able to get him to open up a little. His mother's death has changed that. Time for grief notwithstanding, it's cause for --"

He was talking rapidly. His words faded into babble. Instead, John heard Marie's voice, weak but still accusatory, even on the brink of death: *You never had time for him*. In that moment, he realized just how contemptuous she must have been of him, how serious she had been about Jackie taking Paul.

And then he remembered the long-ago letter from the clinic. He stood. "I'm sorry. I have to go. Please excuse me."

"Mr. Griffin --"

That was as much as John heard. He was already out the door.

He made it to the visitors' parking lot before anger overtook him. Hands shaking, he pulled his phone from his pocket. He could not remember the number; he hadn't dialed it in years. He accessed an online directory, found a listing for the clinic, and selected it.

A receptionist answered.

John said, "I need to speak with Dr. Aiken."

"He's in a consultation, sir. May I have him --"

"Tell him it's John Griffin. Tell him it's an emergency."

"Sir, if this is an emergency, perhaps another doctor at the clinic can --"

"No." He worked to keep from becoming strident. It would not do to be disconnected. "No, it has to be Dr. Aiken. Tell him it's me. He'll understand. Please hurry."

"I'll try, sir."

A moment's silence, then strains of classical music came on the line. While he waited, he tempered his anger, working on what he would say.

The music cut off. "Mr. Griffin?" said a familiar voice.

"Hello, Dr. Aiken."

"What's wrong? Is something the matter with Paul?"

"Yes. He's dyslexic."

"He's -- I'm sorry; I don't think I heard --"

"Yes, you heard me correctly. He's dyslexic. Diagnosed seven years ago. I just found out."

Aiken was silent for a beat. "I was told this was an emergency."

"You never told me. You said Paul's DNA matched Steven's exactly. You said there was no difference. I still have your letter, you know. Were you hoping I'd forget?"

"Mr. Griffin, you're obviously upset about something. Perhaps you should calm down and --"

"Dyslexia is genetic, isn't it?"

"I beg your --"

"*Isn't it?*"

Another beat. "There's evidence to suggest that, yes. Dyslexia tends to run in families. But the specific gene has never been identified."

"And you told me that Steven and Paul were genetic duplicates."

"They are. Paul was cloned from Steven's --"

"*Steven was not dyslexic!* But Paul is. Do you hear me, you son of a bitch? Do you understand what I'm saying?" The more he thought about it, the more enraged he became. "You botched the cloning. And then you tried to cover it up. But it wasn't just your ass on the line, you know. Three lives have been ruined by your negligence. If you had owned up to it --"

"Mr. Griffin." His voice became stern, authoritative. "You've just gotten some distressing news. You're not thinking clearly. Perhaps that's understandable. But you need to listen to me very carefully, before you say or do anything else."

John smiled, though he knew Aiken couldn't see it. "Go ahead. This ought to be good."

Dr. Aiken cleared his throat. "Even if it were proved that dyslexia is caused by a genetic defect -- and I stress the *if* -- even so, that's not proof Paul's DNA was somehow damaged or altered during the cloning process. For all we know, Steven was dyslexic, too."

"That's ridiculous."

"Not at all. What you need to understand is that the signs of developmental reading disability aren't always immediately apparent. Some dyslexic patients can learn early reading and spelling skills. And the clever ones can conceal the symptoms even longer."

"*Conceal* them? Steven was just a child."

"Did you never help him with his reading? Did you never complete a word for him when he hesitated on it?"

John opened his mouth to retort, then hesitated, frowning. Of *course* he had done that; every parent did.

"Children can sometimes manipulate teachers and parents into doing the work for them. There are other tricks, too. And don't underestimate the power of brute-force memorization, when all else fails. If my guess is right, Steven likely wouldn't have been able to conceal it much longer. But children can do amazing things when they're strongly motivated. Given that Steven had a writer for a father --"

"That's enough."

"Mr. Griffin, I should never have allowed you to talk me into doing that DNA comparison. I had hoped it would put your mind at rest. Clearly, the opposite has happened. I'll say this to you one last time: the results of the comparison will stand up to the highest scrutiny. Steven and Paul are genetically identical. You'll be much better off if you accept that fact, rather than making unsupported accusations of negligence."

"I may do more than make accusations. I may do a great deal more than that. You can expect a call from my attorney."

"You --"

John disconnected. He resisted the urge to hurl the phone across the parking lot.

—*ignus*—

September 30, 2039

Too agitated to think straight, so I've pulled out my handheld and tried to make some sense of all this. I've passed the last several hours looking through old entries in this diary. God, the signs of Paul's disorder were apparent long ago. His screaming fit in the car when he was four years old stands out in my memory, as clearly as the day it happened.

All this time, all these years. Finally, the façade begins to crack. Finally, some glimmer of hope that I will be vindicated.

I've set up a meeting next week with my attorney. Between now and then, I'll have to assemble as much supporting documentation as I can. I'm sure all those DNA comparisons I've had done will work against me. But Paul's dyslexia can't be refuted, and neither can his history of antisocial behavior. And Dr. Aiken's preposterous allegation that Steven may also have been dyslexic -- clearly, he panicked. I take that as a sign he may be scared enough to offer a settlement.

Steven dyslexic? Can that possibly be true?

Nonsense. And the notion that Steven had been so desperate to please his novelist father that he would conceal a reading disability -- nothing more than a cheap shot.

I *had* pushed Steven to read, though -- as I had with Paul.

Damn Aiken. Damn him to hell for sowing this doubt.

As I write this, it occurs to me that getting Paul to agree to testify would greatly bolster our chances. Somehow, I've got to get him to trust me.

Yes, it all makes sense to me now. The silence between us has gone on too long. We need to talk.

I just don't know what I'll say.

— *igms* —

Five days later, he finally worked up the courage.

He asked Paul if he'd like dinner. To John's surprise, Paul said yes. John made spaghetti, with both marinara and alfredo sauces -- the former for Paul, the latter for him. Paul was uncharacteristically helpful, tossing salads, toasting garlic bread, setting the table. Twice, John noticed him looking in his direction. Each time, Paul quickly shifted his gaze elsewhere.

Half an hour later, they sat to eat at opposite ends of the little dining room table.

John took a deep breath. "I saw your guidance counselor the other day."

Paul paused with a forkful of spaghetti. "Yeah?"

"He tells me you skipped your last appointment."

"I guess I did." He resumed eating.

"You want to tell me why you did that?"

"He would have wanted to talk about Mom. I didn't feel like it."

The snake tattoo across Paul's face kept distracting John. "I know you miss her," he said. "You might have a hard time believing this, but I miss her, too. I wish she were here."

On another day, Paul might have made a sarcastic rejoinder. Today, he only sipped from his glass of cola.

"She knew you so much better than I do. But she's gone, and it's just the two of us now. We hardly know each other."

Paul wiped his mouth with his napkin. "Yeah. I've been thinking about that a lot lately."

John smiled, slightly amazed. "I'm glad to hear you say that. Do you have any ideas?"

"Keith says I could come live with him."

John set his fork on his plate with a clank. "Pardon me?"

"He says he's going to talk to his parents. He's sure they won't mind. And I can get a job to pay for --"

"You want to move out?"

"Well . . . yeah."

"Paul --"

"Like you said, we don't know each other. Neither one of us wanted this. You spend all day in your office. And I'm always over at Keith's."

"Your moving out isn't exactly the solution I had in mind."

He pushed his plate of food aside and sat back in his chair, arms crossed. "What, then?"

"Ah . . ." John's hopes of getting Paul to testify dissipated like smoke. "I don't know, exactly. I thought we could maybe spend more time together. Talk more often. Maybe go to a movie now and --"

"You're kidding, right?"

"Let's not get into an argument."

"Fine." He stood and picked up his plate.

John rose, too. "Where are you going?"

Wordlessly, he took his plate to the kitchen.

John followed. "Hey, we're not done talking here, are we?"

"I am." He dumped the plate, still half full of pasta, into the sink, then shouldered past John and returned to the dining room for his glass.

John stood in the entryway. "I really think we need to --"

Paul glared, and the words died in John's mouth. Paul retrieved his glass and headed back toward the kitchen. John stood his ground, blocking Paul's path.

"Get out of my way," Paul said.

John took a breath. "You're not going to bait me into a fight. This is too important."

Paul hurled the glass at him. John ducked; the glass hit the kitchen floor and shattered. Cola and ice cubes splattered across the tile. Slowly, John straightened. He looked from the mess in the kitchen to Paul, standing at the dining room table, flushed and panting.

"I don't want to be here! Don't you get that? I don't like you, and you don't like me! So why the hell would you want me to stay? Huh? Why?"

John went cold. He realized that he feared Paul -- feared his own son, and in his own home, no less. "I may not have asked for this, true. But that doesn't mean I don't like you, or that I want you to live somewhere else."

"You're lying, and I know it."

"You don't know any such thing."

"I know it. I can even prove it. You think I'm just a defective clone of your little angel boy, don't you?"

Muscles in John's chest tightened. "Did . . . did your mother say that to you? Did she tell you that?"

"She didn't have to. I know it."

"That is simply not --"

"Hey, if he was so great, how come he's dead now? Did you ever ask yourself that? Maybe he was just too stupid to know when he should have ducked."

John closed the distance between them, jabbing a finger at him. "You don't talk to me like that. Not about your dead brother. Not ever."

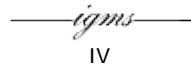
A smile played at the corners of Paul's mouth. "He was stupid. He deserved to die."

John couldn't stop himself; he swung.

But unlike that awful night eight years past, Paul ducked the blow easily and countered with a fist to the belly. John doubled over and fell backward, his wind gone.

Paul stood over him, sneering. "See what I mean?" He pursed his lips and spat in John's face.

He could only watch, gasping for breath, as Paul walked out, slamming the front door behind him.



The phone call from St. Joseph's came twenty-six hours later, some fifteen hours after John had notified the police that his son was missing. Bleary-eyed and befuddled from the sedative he had taken to help him sleep, he listened as an anonymous woman on the other end informed him that Paul had been brought into the ER by a friend. She couldn't give him any specifics on his condition, but she advised John to come as quickly as possible, in case he needed to authorize treatment.

He arrived at the St. Joseph's emergency room twenty-five minutes after getting the call. When he entered through the automatic doors, a uniformed policeman approached him and said, "Mr. Griffin?"

John hesitated. His heart jogged in his chest. He nodded.

"Sir, I'm Officer McPherson. The hospital called the police about your son -- standard procedure in cases like this."

"A case like what? Where's Paul? I have to see him."

Officer McPherson put up a hand. "He's been badly beaten. He was unconscious when his friend brought him in. He's being treated now. That's all anyone knows at this point."

John waited, expecting him to continue. The cop regarded him blandly.

"Beaten," John said through numb lips. "Badly beaten. How badly?"

"The report indicated contusions and stab wounds. Beyond that, I don't know."

"Somebody stabbed him? Who? Why?"

"Again, I really don't know. I'm sorry."

John glanced around, hoping to get a glimpse of a doctor or nurse. At the registration desk, a clerk took information from a middle-aged woman with disheveled hair and a sleepy little girl in her arms. Beyond the desk, a set of double doors stood shut, bearing a sign that read, *Authorized Personnel ONLY*. A couple walking past gave John and the policeman a wide berth, stealing surreptitious glances. Neither of them appeared to work for the hospital. He hated them for that.

"What about this friend who brought him in?" John said. "Big kid, seventeen, lizard tattoo on his face?"

McPherson nodded. "That's him. He's injured, too, though not as badly. I'll question him when the doctors allow it."

"Where are his parents?"

"No one's been able to reach them yet." He produced a notepad and pen. "Mr. Griffin, you had called the police regarding your son, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"You said he had run away. What were the circumstances?"

Speaking in a low voice, John told him about the night Paul disappeared. McPherson listened impassively, taking notes. When John finished, McPherson clapped him on the shoulder and promised him he'd find out what happened as soon as he could. He retreated to the ER entrance and stood to one side with his arms behind his back.

John took a seat and waited. First Marie, and now Paul. He had seen too much of hospitals lately.

Half an hour passed before a nurse emerged from the double doors to tell him that Paul was bleeding internally, and had been taken into surgery.

"Can you tell me how he is? Is his life in danger?"

"We're doing everything we can for him. We'll update you as soon as we know more."

She walked away, back through the double doors.

An hour later, a different nurse emerged and took Officer McPherson back to talk to Keith. McPherson came out after twenty-two minutes. John timed it.

He stood and intercepted McPherson before he could leave. "What did he tell you? What did he say?"

McPherson kept moving toward the exit as he talked. "He said they were attacked outside a warren on West Fifty-Seventh."

"A warren?"

McPherson sighed and stopped. "It's a kind of secret den, usually hidden in a basement, for crackers and phreakers. Lots of black market hardware and software is traded there. And there are plenty of secure and untraceable Net connections available, in case you want to crack a system, launch an attack on a corporate web site, or introduce a virus. All set to loud music and flashing lights, with plenty of Euphoria tabs to go around, if that's your thing."

"What were they doing there?"

"He wouldn't say. But when they left, they ran into a group of Jesus Phreaks." Before John could ask, McPherson said, "A local gang whose members carry Bibles, knives, and saps. Dedicated to ridding the world of unbelievers and other undesirables. They like to break into Jewish and Muslim sites and shut them down." McPherson paused. "They, ah, don't think highly of clones."

"Son of a bitch."

"The boys were afraid to go to the hospital, so they went to a friend's apartment. Tried to patch themselves up. When your son lost consciousness, Keith finally brought him in."

John ran a hand through his hair. "So what's next?"

"I have to go check out his story and round up some witnesses. And I'll need to talk to your son if he comes around." He handed John a business card. "If you'll excuse me, please." He edged past John and left.

John sagged against the nearest wall. The business card slipped from his hand. *If he comes around*, McPherson had said. *If*.

The handheld clipped to his belt started beeping.

He pulled it out and opened it. The display indicated an urgent text from Eric. John frowned, wondering why in the world Eric would be awake at such an ungodly hour. It had to be after one in the morning.

He opened the message. It read, *John, have you heard anything about this? Call me as soon as you can. Eric.*

Beneath the message was a link labeled *Frankenstein Diaries*.

—*igms*—

Maybe you've heard of big-shot, best-selling author John Griffin. Maybe you've even read some of his books. Maybe you think he's terrific. But none of you know him. None of you know what a bastard he really is. Well, that ends today. Now you can read from the diary he's kept for the last fourteen years. Check it out. Click on any of the entries below. Take a look at the way he treated his own wife (April 19, 2026). Find out how he *really* feels about his cloned son (December 3, 2029). See what he thinks of his agent and his editor (February 8, 2039). And there's lots more.

See for yourself. Then pass on this link to anyone who might be interested. Have fun!

—*igms*—

John had once thought that Steven's death would be forever marked in his mind as the single worst day in his life. As he sat in the emergency room, living every parent's worst nightmare for the second time in his life, scrolling through screen after screen full of dated entries, he concluded that he may have been premature in that judgment.

The entries were all genuine, copied verbatim from his diary.

His journal had been password-protected since the day he had bought it. He changed the password every sixty days, and always made sure to use random letters and numbers, not recognizable words. He didn't write the password anywhere; he used mnemonics to memorize it.

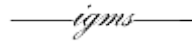
None of which had posed much of an obstacle to Paul, it seemed.

The latest entry was from September thirtieth, only a week previous. Paul must have copied the files sometime before their argument -- a little ace in the hole for him, in case John didn't agree to let him move out.

I can even prove it, Paul had said that night.

The emergency room, tomb-quiet at that hour, faded to insignificance. John looked through the entries -- and at the hate-filled diatribe that introduced them -- with a kind of detached fascination. He would have to call Eric soon, to find out what kind of damage had been done. Just as soon as he worked up the energy to explain all that had happened.

As if from a great distance, John heard the opening of the double doors and looked up. A doctor in scrubs had emerged. She called his name and asked him to follow her.



The surgeon's name was Dr. Stramm. She showed him to an office -- wood-grain desk, two chairs, and a small couch upholstered in leather. Stramm ushered him in and shut the door behind him. She closed the window blinds as he sat. He wondered vaguely how many times he had sat in various offices through the years, listening as some functionary or another told him what was wrong with his son.

He became aware that he was holding his breath. His mouth had gone dry.

The surgeon -- stocky, middle-aged, dark hair shot with gray -- sat on the arm of the leather couch. She inhaled deeply and said, "Mr. Griffin, Paul has suffered very serious injuries, but I believe he will recover."

He exhaled in a long, shuddery breath. A fit of trembling seized him. All thought of his pirated diaries fled his mind. He could only think of Marie. At that moment, he realized how terrified he had been of letting her down, of betraying her trust . . . of validating her doubt of him.

"However, I need to make clear that we're not out of the woods yet," Dr. Stramm said. "The surgery to repair his internal injuries was as successful as I could hope, but he's lost a great deal of blood. He's still unconscious, and in critical condition. We've moved him to intensive care, and we'll keep a close watch on him, but we've done everything we can. Now it's up to Paul. In twenty-four hours, we'll know more."

She cleared her throat. "Paul's gravest injury was to his kidneys. He took stab wounds in both of them. He has suffered a complete loss of kidney function -- acute renal failure, to put it in medical terms. In Paul's case, I'm afraid, the damage cannot be repaired."

John stopped nodding. "Cannot be . . . but . . . how --"

"He's on dialysis. That will hold him for as long as necessary."

"Dialysis." He stared past her.

"Ideally, that will only be a temporary solution. He needs a kidney transplant."

"Do you have a donor?"

"Not yet, no. To minimize the chances of tissue rejection, a close relative would be best." She stopped, fixing her gaze on him.

His shell-shocked mind took several moments to catch her meaning. "I'm the closest relative he has."

"Mr. Griffin, the risk to you would be minimal. You can lead a normal life with --"

"I only have one kidney. I was born that way."

Her mouth tightened. "I see."

He slumped, shaking his head. "God, I can remember being so worried when Steven was born, that he might be the same way. My wife and I were so relieved that he was normal."

"You have another son?"

"He died many years ago. Paul was cloned from his cells."

"Ah. I noticed the tattoo."

They sat in silence for long moments.

Dr. Stramm said, "We can put Paul on a waiting list, if we must. Those lists tend to be long, though. He could be waiting for years."

"What about stem cells? Can't you grow him a new kidney?"

"That's an option, yes, but you would need donor eggs. Those are harder to come by than kidneys. Many people have a moral objection to them. The waiting list for stem cells is even longer than for organs. Paul will have to remain on dialysis until a donation becomes available. We have kits -- expensive ones, mind you -- that would enable him to do it at home. Three times a week. The process usually takes three to four hours."

"My God."

"It can be hard. But there are many good support groups available for dialysis patients."

John wondered how long Paul would last in a support group. About five minutes, maybe.

"But we're getting ahead of ourselves," Dr. Stramm said. "First, we have to get through the next twenty-four hours. We can worry about finding a donor later." She leaned over to place one hand over his. "When was the last time you slept?"

"I don't remember."

"You should go home, get some rest."

"I want to stay here. Just in case. Is that all right?"

"Hospital policy is --" She waved off the demurrals. "Sure," she said, and stood. "I'll show you to the ICU waiting room. And I'll have an orderly get you a pillow and blanket."

"May I . . . see Paul?"

"He's still out from the anesthesia. He'll probably sleep through the night. But you can stop by for a few minutes, if you like."

She took him to ICU. Paul's bed stood in the center of an imposing hodgepodge of EEG and EKG monitors, IV stands, a tangle of equipment he didn't recognize -- the hemodialysis machine, he guessed. He had to turn sideways to edge up to the bed.

The sheets covered most of the damage, but Paul's face was horribly visible. The skin around both eyes was purplish-black and swollen. Multiple contusions marred his cheeks. Tubes ran from his nose and mouth.

John preferred the tattoo.

He stared at Paul's unconscious form for several minutes. He thought he should probably be crying, but it seemed the place inside him that housed his sorrow had gone empty, drained. After a while, he left the ICU and went to the waiting room. The promised pillow and blanket lay on a couch.

A wall clock displayed the time -- just after four a.m. The after-hours hospital quiet unnerved him. Most of the overhead lights had been darkened. A passing nurse stopped in and asked him if he wouldn't rather go home. He would have, actually, but he couldn't. Marie wouldn't have.

He managed about four hours of fitful sleep on the waiting room couch, and awoke sore and scratchy-eyed. Activity on the floor had picked up, many comings and goings in the ICU. A nurse at the station desk told him that Paul's condition had not changed.

He was heading back to the waiting room when he saw Keith, wheelchair bound, guiding himself down the corridor. Keith stopped when he saw John and glanced to either side, as if debating whether he should turn around or not. He held his ground as John approached.

Bandaged from the eyebrows up, Keith bore bruises and contusions similar to Paul's, though less severe. A long red slash, stitched shut, marked his jaw line and cut through the tail of his lizard tattoo. He wore a gray hospital gown.

He said, "I, ah, was coming to see Paul."

"He's doing all right for now, they tell me. But he hasn't woken up yet."

"Oh."

They faced each other in the middle of the corridor. Passersby flowed around them.

"That's a nasty scar," John said.

"One of them got me with a switchblade. And my head hurts. Concussion." He tapped the arms of his wheelchair. "They want me to use this, in case I get dizzy or something."

"Did the doctors say when you can go home?"

"Around noon. I wanted to check on Paul before I left."

"You can wait for him, if you like." John extended a hand in the direction of the waiting room.

"Ah . . ." Keith's brow wrinkled. "I can maybe check back in a few hours."

"All right." John stepped past him.

Keith reached out to touch his arm. "Mr. Griffin, it wasn't my idea to go there. It was Paul's. And like I told that cop, I don't know what he uploaded. He wouldn't say."

Still bleary, John had forgotten all about Paul's little stunt. Eric was no doubt waiting for a phone call. "All right, Keith. I understand."

"Listen, if you talk to him . . . tell him I said thanks."

"For what?"

"When those Jesus Phreaks jumped us, it was mostly me they were after. I've tangled with some of them before. They tried to shove Paul away, but he kept coming at them. He just went nuts, like he had a death wish or something."

John grimaced.

Keith went on, heedless: "If it hadn't been for him, they might have killed me. I think he saved my life." His voice cracked as he spoke; he looked away.

John settled a hand on his shoulder, squeezed. "I'll tell him."

Keith muttered his thanks and wheeled himself back the way he came. Halfway down the hall, he stopped and turned to John. "Did you know he designed that tattoo himself?"

"The snake, you mean?"

"Yeah. He drew it and brought it with him to the tattoo parlor. He draws a lot."

"No, I didn't know that."

Keith gave a strained smile and wheeled away.

John returned to the waiting room, powered up his handheld for video, and dialed Eric's number. He guessed that he looked a fright -- unwashed, unshaven, short of sleep -- but he needed the face-to-face contact.

The connection took only seconds. Eric must have been waiting for the call. The image coalesced; his ever-youthful face looked haggard and drained of color.

"John," he said. "Where are you? At home?"

"I'm at the hospital." He spent the next few minutes giving Eric a précis of the last forty-eight hours. Eric listened without interrupting, impassive, nodding slowly.

When John finished, Eric said, "Paul. I should have figured. Kelso was worried it had been someone who worked for him. He's had the police in his office, conducting interrogations of his entire editorial staff."

"Not taking it well, is he?"

"Given the circumstances, who would?"

"How bad is it?"

Eric cocked his head. "Oh. I guess you've been out of touch."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"We should probably talk about this later. Your son's in the hospital."

"Eric, what's going on? Talk to me."

"I don't know how. It seems you have a new best seller on your hands."

John glanced around the waiting room to make sure he was still alone. "Would you care to repeat that, please?"

"'Best seller' is actually the wrong way to put it, since nobody's selling anything. But *The Frankenstein Diaries* have hit every major server, search engine, and ISP on the Net. It's causing congestion and network overloads in New York, L.A., London, Tokyo -- everywhere. Now the news services are involved. This thing has become a phenomenon."

"What can be done about it?"

"The lawyers at Fidelis advise --"

"The *lawyers* are involved? Already?"

"They tell us we can get an injunction. But that'll take another day or so. By then --" Eric shrugged.

"By then, there'll be no stopping it, injunction or not."

"Basically. I've tried getting Kelso to look at the bright side. I told him there's no such thing as bad publicity. But you know Fidelis. It's a very conservative house. They have a lot of pride in their reputation as a literary publisher."

A family of four -- a young couple and two small, fussy children -- came into the waiting room, the first visitors of the day. The parents held hands as they tried to quiet their bickering kids.

John pulled the earpiece from the handheld's casing, plugged it in, and set the receiver in his ear as he removed himself to a far corner. "What are you telling me?"

"Kelso's in an emergency board meeting right now. My guess is that they're deciding whether or not to continue our contract negotiations."

"They want to drop me?"

"They're considering it."

"Can you stop them?"

"They won't talk to me. That doesn't bode well. It didn't help matters that I couldn't reach you until now."

"Eric, Paul's in the damned ICU, waiting for a new kidney! What the hell --" He caught a glimpse of the young couple staring at him and lowered his voice. "I can't fly to New York right now. You have to take care of this for me."

"I've done all I can."

Never before in their relationship had Eric sounded so final, so negative -- cold, even. John peered at the monitor, and thought he saw anger in the furrow of his brow and the hard set of his jaw. And he thought he knew why. "Have you . . . have you read the diaries?"

"I looked through some of the entries, yes. I had to know what we were dealing with."

John flushed, feeling violated and ashamed, as if he'd been caught masturbating. "Whatever you've read, you have to know that I think you're a damned fine agent. I owe a great deal of my success to you. If I haven't said that often enough, I'm sorry. I just --"

"John, you may be overly envious of the fact that I'm younger than you, but that's not really the problem."

"Then what is?"

He glanced away. "Have you ever read *Frankenstein*? The original novel, I mean?"

"Once, when I was a kid."

"Do you remember the story?"

"Victor Frankenstein made a monster. Of course I remember it. I think I even referenced it in my diary."

"Yes, you did. But I think your recall of the plot is a little faulty."

"Maybe. What's your point?"

Eric looked into the monitor again. "It always seemed to me that Victor Frankenstein didn't create a monster. Frankenstein *was* the monster."

"I don't understand."

"The thing he made -- it wasn't what he'd hoped it would be. So he abandoned it. He refused to live up to his responsibility for the life he had created. I've always thought he got what he had coming to him."

He stopped, but kept his gaze steady.

John stared back, nonplussed.

"You look terrible, John. You should go home. Try to get some sleep. I'll notify you if I hear anything."

He disconnected. The screen went dark.

—*igms*—

October 10, 2039

Dear Paul,

Dr. Stramm says you refuse to see me, so I'm writing you this letter. I'll have a nurse pass the handheld to you. I've disabled the password feature, so you'll have no trouble opening the file. After all that's happened, the security of my diary is no longer an issue, anyway. It seems rather fitting that this should be the last entry.

I beg you to read all of this. I know you won't want to. But please hear me out -- if not for my sake, then out of respect for your mother's memory.

I can't begin to express how glad I am that you have regained consciousness and are recovering. When Dr. Stramm told me the news, a surge of joy, stronger than anything I'd ever experienced, swept me. My relief could not have been greater if it had been my life that had been spared. For the first time in years, I prayed, thanking God for bringing you through.

And then I came here.

I'm at the cemetery now, writing this while seated on a bench across from your brother's grave. It's the first time I've been here since his funeral. I didn't think I'd ever see this place again. The grave site is prettier than I remembered. An old maple tree shades the area. The leaves have turned crimson and yellow, and are just starting to fall. But even this late in the year, the grass is still thick and green. A neat gravel path winds through the graves.

The stone is square and simply engraved:

Steven Timothy Griffin
Beloved Son
January 4, 2016 - April 19, 2023

So simple. So final. So immutable. I didn't think I'd ever have the courage to face it again.

I've spent the past hour weeping -- for Steven, for your mother, and for you. But mostly, I've wept for all the time I've wasted, the damage I've done.

All this time, I've been deluding myself into thinking that I was over Steven's death. I've congratulated myself on the way I rebuilt my life after such a shattering catastrophe. I've prided myself on having the strength to heal. The grief I feel today tells me what a fool I've been.

You and your mother were right, Paul. I wanted you to be Steven reborn. I never accepted you for being different, for being yourself. I spent years casting about for an explanation, certain there had to be something wrong with you. As it turned out, the problem was with me all along.

I'm not telling you any news, I'm sure. I understand now why you hate me so much, why you stole my diary in the first place. I'm sorry I took so long to figure it out. I offer no rationalizations for my stupidity, no excuses but this: living with constant heartache does strange things to your mind.

Since I mentioned the diary, I might as well tell you that Fidelis has decided against a new contract. I'm out. Yes, there will be other publishers down the line, but I'll be starting over. Again. I expect you think I hate you for what you've done. Maybe that's what you wanted.

But I don't hate you. I love you now more than I ever did, if for no other reason than for helping to realize a truth I've been dodging for nearly fifteen years.

Worst of all is the knowledge that nothing I can do will bring back that time. Every parent wishes he or she had done things differently, but I have a hell of a lot more to answer for than most. And nothing I do now can make it right.

But maybe --

I picture you lying in that hospital bed, and my eyes tear up again. The thought of you having to spend so much of your future hooked to that damned dialysis machine, hoping for a donor, is more than I can bear. You've had enough pain. If I can do anything to stop it, by God, I will. So I've come to a decision.

I have only one kidney, Paul. But it's yours, if you want it.

Dr. Stramm will object strenuously. I don't care. If anyone has to go on dialysis, if anyone has to spend years on a waiting list, if anyone has to make adjustments and learn to cope, let it be me. I can take it.

Maybe you think I want something in return. Not so. It's a gift, completely free of obligation -- the best gift I can think to give.

Or maybe you think I'm doing this to save my reputation. But I won't have this publicized. The only people who need to know are you, me, and the surgical team that does the work.

Or maybe you think I'm trying to atone for what I've done. You and I both know better: there is no atoning. One kidney can't make up for fourteen years.

If anything, Paul, it's a new beginning.

I'm not asking your forgiveness. I don't have the right. But I am hoping for another chance. I offer you my kidney as a token of goodwill. Please take it, no matter what you decide about me.

And then what?

I honestly don't know. If nothing else, I'll get to see you become a man. I look forward to that, even if you never speak to me again. But first, you have to get well and get home from the hospital. Let me help you with that. Please, Paul. It's the best I can do.

I'm heading back to the hospital now. I'll find a nurse to give you this journal. By the time you read this, I'll be in the waiting room just outside ICU. I'll be there for however long it takes, waiting -- and hoping, and praying -- for your answer.

I love you, son.

Always,

Dad

Cassie's Story

by David B. Coe



Artwork by Anselmo Alliegro

By the time Cassie was shot, I'd been covering the story of the vigilante killer, Hell's Fury, for a couple of months. I'd gotten the assignment as the Metro beat writer, but the story had become front-page news and they'd kept me on it. Biggest story of my life.

I had interviewed the cop who fired the shots the night of the shooting for an article that ran the next morning. As he told it, he and his partner had been patrolling their usual beat when they heard a girl screaming in the alley. The cop's partner reached the girl first and saw that the guy who had attacked her was already dead. But the guy's killer -- a woman -- was still in the alley. She ran from the partner and straight at the first cop. He shouted for her to stop and when she didn't, the cop fired. He only got off one round before feeling himself flung against the alley wall, but he'd been certain that he hit her. That's what he said at the time, and even when I interviewed him again, giving him every opportunity to change his story, he stuck to it.

Turns out this cop had been talking about Cassie Sloan. Cassie, whom I had worked with and then dated after her husband died. Well, not really dated, so much as slept with one night and then avoided for weeks afterward. Not my finest moment.

Now Cassie was in jail, a convicted killer. And I was here to interview her.

She didn't look the part. If you could have found a person in this country who didn't know who Cassie Sloan was, or what she was said to have done, and you had shown that person a picture of her, he might have guessed she was an actress, or a sports star, or a news anchor. He might even have guessed she was a newspaper reporter, which she was. Anything but a killer. That was part of the fascination. The crimes themselves were enough to feed the headlines for months. Add in her angelic face and the long dark hair and the pale blue eyes, and you had a spectacle.

Staring at her now, through the small glass window in the door, her features framed in one of those diamonds of wire embedded in the glass, I could see lines around her eyes and mouth that hadn't been there before. The last few months had taken their toll on her. People who didn't know her wouldn't have seen it. But I did.

She sat on a metal chair, her hands resting on the wooden table before her, which was bare save for a pack of cigarettes and a book of matches. She looked small, solemn. Back when we'd worked together at the paper, before everything happened, she'd always seemed to be smiling. Not friendly, necessarily. More like she was amused by something that the rest of us hadn't heard or wouldn't have understood. Now she looked so serious, though I saw no sign that she was scared, or that she dreaded this conversation as much as I did.

"You ready?" the guard asked me.

I took a breath, nodded.

He unlocked the door and stood back, allowing me to step past him into the room.

Cassie looked up, her eyes widening at the sight of me. "You've got to be kidding me! They sent you?"

"I've been covering it from the start. You know that."

I heard the door close behind me, and for just a minute I started to panic, my heart trip-hammering, my breath catching in my throat. My hands began to tremble and I thrust them into my pockets so she wouldn't see.

Cassie shook her head, her lips pursed. "Fine then," she said at last. "Let's get this over with."

I just stood there, watching her. Her hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail and her lips were dry, cracked. She'd always been pale, and she would have been the first to point out that she hadn't spent much time in the sun recently. But in the flickering glare of the fluorescent lights she looked positively ghostlike.

"Well?" she said, impatient, seeming to read my thoughts.

I forced myself into motion, crossing to the chair opposite hers, willing myself to inhale, exhale. As I sat, I pulled a digital recorder from my jacket pocket.

"You mind?" I asked. "I've always been terrible with notes."

At first Cassie just shrugged, but then a subtle change came over her, as if she had decided something. "Sure," she said. "Go ahead."

I switched the recorder on and placed it on the table.

"Thursday, September fourteenth." I glanced at my watch. "Nine forty a.m. I'm with Cassidy Sloan at the Fuller Correctional Facility. Cassie, why don't you --"

"I don't think it's working." She stared at the recorder. "Shouldn't there be a light or something?"

I leaned closer, checked the LED. She was right. Nothing was happening.

"Damn it." I picked it up, moved the switch to "off", then back to "record." Nothing. I took out the batteries and put them back, though they were already loaded correctly.

"Looks like you're stuck taking notes. Just as well. They say writing things down helps you remember them better."

Our eyes met for an instant. There was something in her expression . . . a hint of amusement.

"All right." I put the recorder back in my pocket and pulled out a pad and pencil. I jotted down the date, time, and location before looking up at her again. "Why don't you start with your husband?"

A reflexive grin touched her face and then vanished as quickly as it had come. "I did."

I shuddered, and she grinned again.

"Why do you think everyone's so fascinated by this, Eric? Is it me? Is it the way I look?" She paused. "Is it the way I did it?"

"How did you do it?"

She eyed me briefly. After a moment she reached for the cigarettes. "I'd ask if this was going to bother you, but I don't really care. It's pretty much the only vice I'm allowed." She lit up and took a long, deep pull, closing her eyes. After what seemed a long time, she exhaled through her nose, a billowing cloud of blue-grey smoke enveloping us both like a mist.

"My husband." She opened her eyes. "You met him, didn't you?"

I nodded. "At one of the office parties, I think."

"That sounds right. It would have been several years ago. He stopped coming after my promotion." She took another pull, rested her elbow on the table so that the hand holding her cigarette hovered just beside her head. "Kenny was . . ." She shrugged. "I think I was drawn to him because we were so different. I wasn't looking for cerebral; I got enough of that at work. I liked him because he was physical -- muscular, broad, like an action movie hero."

I jotted down notes, avoiding eye contact, feeling weak and small.

"The first time he hit me, I was . . . shocked, you know? But I figured it must have been my fault."

"When was that?" I asked.

"April 22, five years ago."

I frowned and looked up.

"It was our anniversary." She smiled faintly. "A girl remembers. We'd just finished dinner and were . . . well, the evening was moving along as you'd expect. And then I said something. I don't even remember what it was, but it made him angry and before I knew it we were arguing. Finally, he got so mad that he hit me. His hand was open. It didn't even hurt that much. But it was . . . We crossed a line, you know? I knew it immediately, though I didn't admit it to myself."

"Kenny said he was sorry about twenty times. He got real tender. We went to bed a little while later and he was so gentle -- more than he'd ever been. I tried to put it out of my mind, but the whole time we were making love, I kept thinking to myself, 'He hit me. Kenny hit me.'"

"How long was it before he hit you again?"

Cassie took another drag. "Not long. A couple of months maybe. Another argument. We were at home again. We were always at home when it happened. This time he hit me hard, with his fist." She pointed to a spot high on her cheek. "Right here. Really rattled me. For a couple of minutes I could barely see, like I'd been staring into the sun too long. You might remember the bruise. I said I'd gotten it rollerblading; that Kenny and I had been trying some silly trick and we bumped heads."

I did remember. Hearing this now, I was ashamed that I'd believed her.

"When was that again?" I asked to mask my discomfort.

"I don't know exactly. Early summer. After that . . ." She shrugged again and smiled, though it looked more like a grimace. "The hits just kept on coming. A black eye that I blamed on an inadvertent elbow during a basketball game; a swollen jaw that I blamed on my dentist; another bruise on my cheek that I couldn't explain, so I just stayed home for a week until it faded enough that I could cover it over with makeup. I think I pleaded flu on that one."

"I once did a piece on battered women," she said, looking at me. She took one last pull from the cigarette, dropped it on the linoleum floor, and ground it out with her foot. "Were you at the paper yet?"

"I don't think so," I said.

"Maybe not. I remember thinking that their stories were sad, but also a little pitiful, you know? I mean, he's hitting you, so leave him. I might have even said as much to some of them. 'Why don't you just leave?' As if it were that easy. And a few years later, there I was, just like them, trapped in love with a guy who knocked me around every now and then."

"Women like me -- professionals; strong, bright, educated women -- we're not supposed to be victims of abuse. Turns out that's horse shit."

I wanted to ask her why she didn't leave him, just as she had asked those women. Because I didn't understand. I couldn't get past what I knew about her. Cassie was beautiful and smart and strong. She should have been able to

walk away and make a new life for herself. But I didn't ask her about it. Instead, I kept to the story. "When did you decide to kill him?"

She cast a hard look my way. "You know that's not how it happened."

"I know what you said. But I'm still trying to understand. All of us are."

Cassie reached for the cigarettes and lit up again. She'd once been such a health nut; it was hard to believe this was the same person. But I kept that to myself, too.

"It got really bad," she finally said, each word emerging from her mouth as a puff of smoke. "He'd gotten his contractor's license not long after we were married, and for a while business was pretty good. Not great, but he was getting by. But then he had a problem with a client -- some rich guy up in the Crescent area. The guy sued and suddenly the rest of Kenny's clientele began to shy away. Pretty soon, he had nothing. No clients, no prospects, no way of paying his crew. I was making enough for both of us, but that just made things worse, you know?"

"He was angry all the time, and he started drinking." She closed her eyes and winced. "God. Listen to me. Somewhere along the way my life turned into a damn soap opera cliché."

I didn't say anything. I simply watched her, my pencil poised over the paper.

"One night he came home drunk and was yelling at me before he'd even closed the door. It wasn't just the beatings I was afraid of at this point. For a couple of months I'd been thinking that it was just a matter of time before he killed me. And this was the night. I was sure of it. If I hadn't --" Cassie looked away and lifted the cigarette to her lips. "I would have died that night," she said softly.

"Instead he did."

She nodded. "I'm still not sure how I did it. One minute he was coming at me, his fist raised. The next he was on the floor by the table, a gash on his forehead. You wouldn't have believed the blood."

Actually, I'd seen pictures and I'd been appalled. You always hear that head wounds bleed like mad, but good God. There was blood everywhere. The police investigated it as an accidental death and concluded that Cassie had called 9-1-1 as quickly as anyone could have expected. But Kenny never had a chance. And as to her killing him -- a man that big? The lead detective said it was impossible. The coroner agreed. Case closed, at least for a time.

"How did you do it, Cassie?"

"I just told you, I don't know."

I stared back at her, silent, waiting.

"It felt . . ." She stopped, shook her head, took another smoke. "You'll think I'm nuts."

"That would make me stand out in a crowd."

She looked startled for just an instant. Then she burst out laughing. "Yeah," she said. "Yeah, you have a point."

"You started to tell me what it felt like."

Cassie nodded. "Right. It felt like I . . . like I pushed him. But with my mind, you know? I knew what I wanted to do to him. I was scared and angry and sick to death of feeling that way. Of being afraid of the man I was supposed to love. Just once I wanted him to feel what it was like to be weak and helpless. I wanted to hurt *him* for a change."

She puffed fiercely on her cigarette. "So it was like I took hold of him somehow. I grabbed him and threw him at the table. Not with my hands, but with my mind." She shook her head. "I know how it sounds, but it's the truth. I was trying to make him hit his head. He . . . he did just what I wanted him to."

"You mean the way he fell?" I asked.

"I mean the way he died."

I wasn't sure what to say. I cleared my throat and Cassie grinned, seeming to enjoy my discomfort.

I forced myself to meet her gaze. "Then what happened?"

"Very good, Eric. For a second there I thought you were going to leave."

I looked down at my pad and realized that I'd stopped taking notes several minutes ago. Not that I was likely to forget any of this.

"What then?" I asked a second time.

Cassie shrugged. "I convinced myself that it hadn't happened. I'd never done anything like that before, and I couldn't explain how I'd managed it this time. The cops all said it was an accident, so that's what I told myself. I went back to living my life. I wrote. I slept around."

I felt my face turn red.

"Our night together came, what? Two months after Kenny died? Didn't that strike you as odd?"

"I didn't really think about it," I said.

She gave a short, harsh laugh. "Right. And afterwards you avoided me like I had the plague. Or was it the clap?" She grinned. "What was the matter, Eric? Wasn't I any good?"

I felt the panic rising in me again. "That had nothing --"

"Don't," she said. "It was a joke. That's all."

I wasn't sure if she was referring to what she had said, or to sleeping with me. She was right, of course. I had avoided her, but only because it had been an incredible night for me and, I was quite certain, far less than that for her.

"How long after that until you killed the second guy?"

"All business, huh?" she asked, a crooked smile on her face. She puffed on her cigarette for a few moments. "It was probably six months after I killed Kenny. It was a late night at work and I wasn't ready to go home yet. I went to the Oasis, instead. You know the place? Over on Sixth, near Woodbine."

I nodded. "Yeah, I know it."

"I was drinking white wine at the bar. Nothing very good. But I was chatting up the bartender, this pretty college girl, and wondering if I was ready to try taking a woman home for a change. And then I heard them." She shook her head. "It was like being pulled back in time to a part of my life I thought I'd escaped forever. I heard them arguing, I heard the way he was talking to her, and I knew. I just *knew* that he was beating her. Not there, of course. But at home. He was Kenny. She was me. I knew it."

"I listened to them, and when they left I followed. I was lucky, I guess. They lived nearby and they covered the distance on foot. They went in and I watched them through a window. And sure enough, as soon as they were inside the house, he started screaming at her and slapping her around. I don't know what he thought she'd done,

but he was pretty pissed. She was crying, and she was bleeding from her nose. I could see it all. I could tell that she hated him, that she wanted to be rid of him, just like I'd wanted to be rid of Kenny."

She'd sucked her cigarette down to the filter and she mashed it out on the table. Immediately she reached for the pack again, but then seemed to reconsider. Eventually she just looked at me.

"I did it pretty much the same way. He'd smacked her, and she'd flown across the room. She was this tiny thing -- that asshole must have had a hundred pounds on her. He was stalking her now and she was cowering against the wall next to the television. Before he reached her I pushed, hard this time. I knew what I was doing and I did it good and hard.

"He hit his head on the set and landed next to her. And then for good measure I made the TV fall on him. For a while she didn't move. She just sat there crying, staring at his body, saying, 'Oh no, oh no,' over and over again. I thought maybe she was upset that he was dead, you know? But pretty soon she pulled herself together and called 9-1-1. Then she got herself a glass of water. I figured she was okay, so I left. I didn't want to be there when the cops showed up."

"That was when you started going to the bars?"

Cassie nodded. "At first I wasn't sure why I did it. I mean, I knew what I was listening for, and I guess I knew what I was going to do when I heard it. But it wasn't like I decided, you know, 'Okay, now I'm going to start killing guys who beat their wives and girlfriends.' A part of me just wanted to hear those conversations. In a way it made me feel better. I wasn't the only one, you know? There were all these women out there who were just like me, who were afraid of their Kennys. They just didn't know how to do this . . . this thing that I did."

She stared at the cigarettes for several seconds before finally giving in and lighting up another.

"Pretty soon I was noticing other stuff, too," she said, breathing out a haze of smoke. "I could tell when guys were cheating. It didn't matter if they were with their wives or their mistresses, I always knew. After a while I could tell with the women, too. But I left those folks alone -- the men and the women. That was . . ." She shook her head. "I didn't want any part of that; it's just normal relationship stuff, you know? But then there was a night when I saw this guy slip something into his date's drink. Then I followed. And when he tried to rape her, I killed him. I don't even think she noticed that he was dead -- that's how out of it she was."

"How long was it before the papers started writing about you?"

"It was the next morning. I had to take a cab to keep up with them, and the cabbie remembered me. His description was way off, but that's when the headlines started. Pretty soon they started putting other things together. People remembered seeing me at several of the bars where I found the guys I killed. Without meaning to, I'd been wearing my hair differently from night to night, so the police sketches weren't very good. But they were looking for me."

I nodded again. The headlines had been sensational right from the start. "The Avenging Angel," they called her at first. But when that didn't prove lurid enough, they went the other way: "Hell's Fury." From that famous quote: "Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned." That was Cassie.

"You didn't stop, even after the stories started," I said. "Why?"

"I wasn't scared. I didn't think anyone could stop me." She took a long pull on the cigarette, her eyes locked on mine. "Do you have any idea what it's like to have the power I have? I can make people do whatever I want. I can kill with a thought. I can . . ." She trailed off. "You don't believe me, do you? You don't believe any of this."

I wasn't sure what I believed, but in that moment I was terrified, of her, of the anger I saw in her eyes.

"I just . . . I'm just wondering why, if you can do all these things, you're still here in this jail."

"Is that all you're wondering, Eric? Aren't you wondering if I ever considered killing you? You bought me drinks, you drove me back to my place, and you screwed me -- twice as I remember it, though that first time didn't amount to much. And then you ignored me. You didn't call, or speak to me, or acknowledge what had happened in

any way. After I was arrested -- after you read and heard everything they were saying about me -- you must have wondered."

She was right about this, too. I did wonder. I was wondering at that very moment. If she really was all she claimed to be, all she appeared to be, then she held my life in her hands. Or in her mind.

"Yeah," I admitted. "I thought about it. I'm out of my depth here, Cassie. I've never dealt with anything like this before. The things they're saying about you -- the things you're saying about yourself . . . I don't know what's real."

"Yeah, well, welcome to my world."

She stared at me for a moment. And then without warning, my chair flipped backwards. My pad and pencil went flying. I crashed onto the floor, the back of my head smacking the linoleum, the air leaving my body in a rush. I lay there for several seconds, trying to breathe and clear my vision.

"You all right?" Cassie asked, her voice calm and even.

Before I could answer, the door swung open and one of the guards stepped in. "Everything all right in here?"

I rolled off of the upended chair and climbed to my feet. "Everything's fine," I said.

The guard looked at me and then at Cassie, as if trying to decide if we were both crazy. After a few seconds he shook his head and left, pulling the door closed behind him.

"You didn't have to do that," I said. I rubbed the rising bump on my head.

"Didn't I? You believe me now, don't you?"

I nodded, righted the chair, and retrieved my notes and the pencil. Sitting down, I touched the bump again, half-expecting my hand to come away bloody. It didn't.

"You should put ice on that," she said.

"Yeah, thanks."

"Don't be pissed. I needed you to know that I'm not making this up. Now you do."

I nodded, sullen, embarrassed. My whole body hurt.

"One of the cops swears that he shot you, says he couldn't have missed. The others say he's nuts. But . . ."

I stopped, my mouth falling open. Cassie had taken hold of the collar of her shirt and pulled it down so that I could see the top of her left breast. There was a small white crater there, about the size of a penny. It was perfectly round and slightly puckered in the center. I got up and walked around the table so I could take a closer look, all fear of her forgotten for the moment.

"He did hit you," I whispered.

Cassie nodded. "It hurt like a sonofabitch, but only for a second."

"Tell me how it happened."

"I was at some diner, listening as this older guy tried to pick up my waitress. I stayed to closing time. So did he. He hung around the diner and I pretended to leave. When the waitress came out a while later, he offered to walk her home. One thing led to another, and eventually he forced her into an alley and tried to rape her. I killed him before he could hurt her, but I was still in the alley when the cops showed up. I guess there were two of them --

cops, I mean -- and they entered the alley from opposite ends. I ran from one of them and ended up face to face with the other. I tried to shove him aside . . ."

I looked at her and she shook her head.

"Not literally. I used my . . . I did it the same way I knocked you over, the same way I killed Kenny and the others. Anyway, I wasn't quick enough and he managed to get a shot off."

That was pretty much the story I'd gotten from the cop.

For months before that episode the press -- mostly the tabloids -- had been writing about the supposed supernatural powers of this "vigilantess" known as Hell's Fury. Not only could she kill with her eyes, but she could make herself invisible. She could fly, and summon the dead to her aid. The police, of course, dismissed all of this as nonsense. She was just another wack-job serial killer who happened to be taking out creeps instead of more respectable folk. Then patrolman Peter Silofsky told his story about shooting her through the heart. After that no one was certain of anything anymore. Not the cops, not the press.

Even as I stared at that tiny crater on Cassie's chest, I didn't know what to think. I didn't say anything. I just stood there, not believing it, yet not having any choice but to believe it.

"There's a mark on my back, too," she said, "where the bullet left my body."

I straightened, then hesitated. "May I?"

She nodded.

I stepped around to the back of her chair and as she leaned forward I lowered the back of her collar so I could see. Sure enough, there it was: larger than the entry wound, less perfect, but still vaguely round. Spidery lines radiated from the scar in every direction so that it resembled a child's drawing of the sun. Given where the bullet had gone in and the path it had taken through her body, I didn't see how it could have missed her heart. I let go of her shirt and backed away from her. After a moment I returned to my chair, happy to have that table between us. I felt queasy, though whether from the smoke or the sight of that wound I couldn't say.

"You should be dead."

"I know," she said. "But they can't kill me. No one can. You want to know why I'm in jail? Why I let myself get caught? Why I haven't escaped? Because I'm tired of killing. And I'm tired of being hunted. It was either kill myself, keep going, or get caught."

"You could have left," I said. "Gone somewhere else and started over again."

"I don't think so." She smiled, though sadly. "I'm Hell's Fury, remember? Those sketches would have followed me anywhere I went."

"They didn't look that much like you. Cut your hair, maybe dye it; no one would have recognized you."

"It's not that easy. Given the chance to kill those bastards again, I'd do it in a heartbeat. Even Kenny. Especially Kenny. I don't feel guilty at all. But that's no way to live. And I would have kept on doing it. I'm sure of that. Once I started hearing those conversations, the violence hidden in those words, I couldn't get away from it. It's everywhere, Eric. What I said about you before . . ." She shook her head. "I didn't mean that. I never for a moment thought about doing anything to you. You're a putz. But you were sweet that night and I don't think you're capable of hurting anyone."

I kept my mouth shut, sifting through my past, fearing that I'd find something -- anything -- that might prove her wrong.

"But the violent ones," she went on. "There's lots of them. More than you'd believe. And if I was out there, I'd still be killing them. I wouldn't be able to help myself. How long do you think a person can do what I've done before it starts to eat away at their soul?" She lifted the cigarette to her lips, only to find that it had burned to the end.

I made myself look her in the eye. "I don't know."

For a while neither of us spoke. She lit up again, her eyes wandering the empty room, one of her legs bouncing impatiently. I could tell that she wouldn't give me much more.

"So what will you do?" I asked. "If they can't kill you . . ."

"I'll do it myself," she said. "But first I wanted to get my story told. I wasn't happy when I first saw they had sent you."

"Yeah," I said. "I noticed that."

Cassie smiled faintly. "Well, maybe I was wrong. There's hope for you, yet." She toyed with the matches. "Anyway, once the story's out . . ." She shrugged.

Probably I should have said something, tried to talk her out of killing herself. But had I been in her position I would have been thinking along the same lines. She deserved more from me than empty words about not throwing her life away.

"You'll write it, won't you?" she asked.

"Of course I will. That's why I came."

"But you don't think they'll print it."

I exhaled, a frown on my face. "I don't know, Cassie. It's . . . it's quite a story."

"You believe it, though, right?"

For one last time, I forced myself to meet her gaze. "Yes, I do. Every word. I've got the bump to prove it." I smiled. She didn't. More seriously, I added, "And I've seen your scars."

"You think the scars would convince other people? You could take pictures." For just a moment she looked so hopeful. Then she shook her head. "Pictures wouldn't convince anyone, would they?"

"Probably not. Pictures can be doctored." I closed the pad and put it back in my pocket. "I'll write it," I said. "And I'll do what I can."

A faint smile touched her face and for a fleeting moment I saw the old Cassie, the smart-mouthed beauty with the wry sense of humor. "You haven't asked me the obvious question," she said.

I pulled the pad and pencil out once more. "Why you?" I asked. "Why do you think you wound up with these powers? Or whatever you want to call them? You're certainly not the only woman who's been abused."

"The short answer is that I don't know."

"And the longer answer?" I asked, knowing she wouldn't have brought it up if she didn't want to talk about it.

Cassie eyed me for a moment and then gazed toward the door, looking so wistful, so sad, that I thought she might just get up and walk out. And after all, who could have stopped her had she chosen to?

"I don't think I'm special at all," she finally said, her voice so low I had to lean in to hear her. "I think the power resides in all of us."

"But Cassie --"

She lifted a hand, stopping me. "It's in every one of us, Eric. But I found it. I was scared and I was pissed and I'd had enough. And somehow I found it."

"You can't have been the only woman to have felt those things," I said, expecting her to cut me off again. "And lots of them die at the hands of their boyfriends or husbands. How do you explain that, if they have this power, too?"

"I can't explain it. You're right: lots of women don't manage to save themselves. For some reason they can't find the power that I did. But I believe many of them do. More than you'd think."

I tried to keep from looking skeptical, but clearly I failed.

"How many guys die each year in ways the cops can't explain or only think they understand?" she asked, sounding so reasonable, so sure of herself. "That was Kenny for a long time, until they reopened the investigation. How many times have women protected themselves the way I did, but without actually killing the guy who was hitting them? We don't know, do we? Because it never draws the attention of the police or the press. It happens, then it slides by, unnoticed."

"If I could describe how I did it, if I knew some secret to finding the power, I'd write the damn article myself and make sure all of those women knew." A sad smile settled on her face. "Maybe what made me different wasn't the power itself, but my willingness to use it. I mean really *use* it. If I'd stopped with Kenny, we wouldn't be having this conversation. I'd still be working at the paper, getting laid now and then, leading a normal life. Maybe I wouldn't even believe it myself. But I couldn't leave it alone." She let out a small laugh. "Turns out I was different because I liked the way it felt. It felt good, you know? I wanted to do it again."

I wasn't sure what to say. As explanations went, hers didn't amount to much. But I could tell she believed it and I wasn't sure I wanted to challenge her.

"Go," she said. "I'm talked out. And you need to write this thing if it's going to run tomorrow."

I stood, reluctant to leave her like this. "I can come back --"

"No. Like I said, I'm talked out."

"How soon . . . ?" I trailed off, not certain how to ask the question.

She wouldn't look at me. "Take care of yourself, Eric. Be good."

I stood there for several seconds, then nodded, crossed to the door, and knocked once for the guard. "If you change your mind," I said, my back to her. "If you decide you want to talk again, call me."

Cassie didn't answer. In the next moment the door opened.

As I started to walk out, she said, "Sorry about your head. And also about your recorder."

The recorder? I hesitated, my hand straying to my pocket. All I could do was laugh and shake my head.

A guard waited for me in the corridor, a tall, rail thin white kid who couldn't have been more than twenty years old.

"Is that girl crazy or what?" he asked, grinning like a ghoul.

I grunted a response.

He led me through the twists and turns of the hallways and buzzed me through a series of locked, steel doors. I'd noticed the doors coming in and had meant to count them going back out, but I didn't remember until after I'd signed out and was outside, beyond the fences and the razor wire. The air felt cool and clean, and I realized that I must have reeked of cigarette smoke. It had rained while I was in the jail, but now the sun was shining, and faint wisps of steam rose from the damp blacktop.

I started toward my car. As I walked I pulled out my cell and dialed Beth's work number. We'd only been seeing each other for a couple of months, but already it felt substantial, like something that might last.

She picked up after the second ring. "Beth Danbridge."

"Hi," I said. "It's me."

"Hey, you." She sounded happy to hear my voice.

I smiled in spite of myself.

"I didn't expect to hear from you 'til later," she said.

"Yeah. I just wanted to say hi."

"You all right?"

"I'm fine."

"How'd the interview go?"

"All right. It was hard."

"I'd imagine."

I didn't say anything, and for a moment we were both silent.

"You sure you're all right?" she asked.

"I haven't hurt you, have I?"

"What?" She sounded confused. I could almost see the frown on her face, the crease in her forehead above those dark brown eyes.

"Never mind." I took a long breath, rubbed the bump on my head. "I'm sorry I bothered you. Why don't we eat out tonight? My treat."

"Yeah, all right. That sounds nice."

"I'll come by and get you around seven-thirty."

"Okay. See you then."

"Right. Bye."

Before I could close the phone she said, "Eric?"

"Yeah?"

"You haven't. We're doing okay."

I smiled. "Thanks." For a heartbeat or two I said nothing. I just enjoyed the silence, the feeling that she was enjoying it to. "Bye."

"Bye."

I closed the cell and returned it to my jacket pocket. Reaching my car, I glanced back at the prison, taking in the institutional brick, the small barred windows and the floodlights, off for now, but gleaming in the sun. I couldn't help thinking that it looked like a terrible place to die: sterile and cruel and lonely.

Not that there was much I could do about it. Her death, her choice. She'd made it clear that she didn't want my help, at least not with that. There was only one thing Cassie expected of me.

I climbed into the car and began the long drive back to the office. In my head, I had already started to write her story.

No Viviremos Como Presos

by [Bradley P. Beaulieu](#)



[Artwork by Jin Han](#)

Miguel jogged up the last flight of stairs to his grandfather's fourth-floor apartment, but stopped short when he realized a bald guy in a gray herringbone suit had just closed his grandfather's door and was now walking toward him. The guy had the look of a lawyer all over him. He paced down the hallway and tried to sidle past Miguel, but was forced to stop when Miguel placed his linebacker's frame into his path.

Miguel glanced at the briefcase. "Were you here to see Sandro Rivera?"

"That's confidential." The man at least had the decency to look a little nervous.

"Not when my grandfather's the one you're talking to."

"Do we have a problem here?" He asked while touching his ear. He'd no doubt primed his net phone and could have the Vero Beach P.D. here in minutes.

"Look --" Miguel softened his expression and jutted his chin down the hallway. "He's my grandfather. I'm just trying to protect him."

"Be that as it may, any business I have with Mr. Rivera must remain between me and him."

Miguel wanted to wipe the I'm-the-one-in-control expression off the guy's face, but instead he tongued the control that activated the camera embedded in his artificial eye. Miguel's vision blinked almost imperceptibly as the shutter release captured the image. Over the next few milliseconds, the microprocessor at the base of his brainstem intercepted the picture, sent a copy to

permanent store and embedded another inside a message addressed to Rich Carlsen, asking him to track the suit down with the *Post's* facial recognition software.

He'd find out who he was one way or another.

Miguel stepped aside. "Got a card?"

"Sorry. Fresh out." And with that the suit was past him and headed down the stairs.

Miguel continued down to his grandfather's apartment. When he stepped inside and saw Sandro, he shifted up three f-stops and immediately tongued the shutter release.

Sandro's gaze is lax and unfocused. The beaten armchair cradles him, as if he might shatter if released. His weathered cane sits forgotten between his knees, and though the shade behind him is pulled low, the sun is bright, casting ochre shadows over the geography of Sandro's face.

He labeled it: *Sandro, just before I tell him I'm moving back to D.C.* He wasn't all that surprised that Sandro looked so morose -- he'd been like this for the last several months -- but he expected something different with the lawyer having just left. He scanned the room, trying to find any papers or memchips or anything else that might give him a clue as to why the lawyer was here, but there was nothing.

The newsfeed was playing on the holovision in the corner. It showed a portion of the U.S.-Mexican border wall in Nogales, Arizona, one of five cities receiving strong opposition against the newly announced Customs and Border Patrol project to control immigration, but the sound was muted, and Sandro might as well have been watching a children's show for all the attention he seemed to be giving it.

Five minutes ago, Miguel would have said that the drama unfolding in Nogales was the cause of Sandro's depression -- Sandro had entered the U.S. through Nogales when he was only thirteen, and Miguel had simply assumed it was the yearning for his childhood that had started his latest bout with depression. But now? Now he wasn't so sure.

"You alright, Grandpa?"

Sandro's gaze shifted to Miguel as if it pained him to make that one small effort.

Miguel took a seat on the bright orange couch, sending dust motes to dance in the air between them.

Sandro lifted a finger and motioned toward the HV, which was playing a clip of armored border patrolmen routing three Mexican men into a van. The Border Patrol had just activated the one-week test of their new immigration control system. In a single day, seventeen migrants had been tagged by the new RFID launchers and ferried back across the border. A press release from the Directorate of Border and Transportation Security deemed it an "unmitigated success."

"I haven't been following it much," Miguel said.

He pointed again. The camera view, apparently captured from one of the new border patrol bots, showed an elevated view of the American side of Nogales' thirty-foot wall in night-bright green. Ropes hung down from the top and four men wearing tattered jeans and wife-beaters were slipping down the ropes. The footage slowed. Even so, the RFID devices were barely visible as they slid across the distance and struck each of the men in turn.

"They're shooting them like dogs," Sandro said, "dragging them back across the border."

The view switched to 3D. A diagram of a human skeleton, skin highlighted in transparent blue, floated out from the plasma and twirled a few times. A blue graphic of the RFID spyder landed on the shoulder. The view tightened on the spyder, which was burrowing beneath the skin, using local anesthetics and anticoagulants. Once subcutaneous, it made its way down the ribcage before settling posterior of the sternum. It was meant to make the devices nearly impossible to remove without great expense.

"They're hardly getting shot like *dogs*."

"What do you call being tagged and tracked and thrown back across the fence? Told to stay where you are?"

"I'm not climbing over my neighbor's fence after the sun's gone down." Miguel showed Sandro the back of his right hand, and tapped the location of his RFID chip. "I cross them legally."

The comments seemed to drain Sandro even further. "You'd think you didn't have Mexican blood running through your veins."

Miguel leaned back into the couch, wondering where the hell Sandro was going with this.

"They could use a man like me there," Sandro said.

A shiver ran down Miguel's back as Sandro continued to stare at the HV. Miguel actually believed, right at that moment, that Sandro meant those words.

"What did that lawyer want?" Miguel asked, trying to break the spell.

"Who?"

"The lawyer, the one that was here five minutes ago."

Sandro glanced up at the door. His eyes regained a bit of their usual intent, and his back straightened. "What? Him? Nothing. Something to do with my IRA."

"You didn't sign anything, did you?"

Sandro frowned and opened up the battered wooden chess box on the table next to him. "I'm not stupid, Miguel."

Sandro continued preparations for their weekly match, so Miguel moved to the chair across from Sandro and helped place the pieces.

"Then what did he want?" Miguel asked, moving the final piece, the black king, into its starting square.

"Nothing." Sandro slid his King's pawn to D4.

"Grandpa . . ." Miguel countered with his Queen's pawn.

Sandro looked up, annoyed. "Aren't you always telling me I need to take better care of myself? That I need to be more responsible?" He made another move, slapping the piece down noisily. "Well maybe you're right. Maybe it's long overdue. This is *my* business, Miguel. I'll handle it."

It was true. Miguel was always saying that -- from Sandro's gambling on Vero Beach's "riverboat" to buying too much World War II memorabilia to his penchant for giving downtown bums wads of cash. One time he'd even paid for three of his Vnet friends to fly in and visit, this from a man who lived on the joke social security had become and his vet benefits and the not-insignificant amount Miguel contributed to his bank account every paycheck. So why would a lawyer suddenly make him shape up?

It wouldn't, Miguel told himself. Something had clearly shaken Sandro up, but it would wear off in a few hours or a few days, and he'd be back to his same old self.

The chess match progressed to middle game, and Miguel's mind shifted to the reason he'd come here in the first place. His mind kept trying to formulate the right words to tell Sandro his news. Nothing sounded quite right, especially in light of Sandro's odd mood. But then he realized he was only stalling. Sandro was going to act wounded no matter how carefully he formulated the message.

Miguel suddenly realized Sandro was leaning back and smiling broadly. He inspected the chess board. Sandro had won, something he accomplished only once or twice per year.

"Grandpa," Miguel said, "I got the call from D.C."

Sandro's smile withered. "Oh."

Miguel had been bucking for a promotion for years now, and he'd been given the chance to head the *Post's* photo studio. Twice. But both times Sandro had developed debilitating migraines that went away after Miguel had turned down the promotion.

"I'm going to take it," Miguel said. "They want me to fly up tomorrow to start working out the details, then I go straight to the G10 gig in Tokyo, and then I'll be back here for a week or so to get things settled before I move."

Sandro leaned back in his chair, frowning at the chess board. "Oh." He glanced across the room at the HV, which showed a CGI image of a man running down a street lined by transparent trees and buildings, the spyder in his chest pinging his location like a sonar beacon every few seconds. Sandro raked his fingers over his stubble a few times, then nodded. "That's good, Miguel. That's good."

Miguel could only stare. He was speechless. Both of the last two times he'd told Sandro about the promotion offer, he'd immediately listed a dozen reasons why it was a bad idea to accept. He'd practically begged Miguel to stay, though he'd never come right out and said so. He was too proud for that.

Using his cane, Sandro levered himself out of the chair and shuffled toward his armchair. "Mind if we cut it short today?" He pointed toward the holovision on top of the bureau. "I have a meeting with the boys."

Miguel stood, feeling completely out of sorts. He thought he'd be here all night reassuring Sandro that everything would be all right. "I thought you met on Thursdays."

"Emergency meeting."

"About what?" Miguel quickly surveyed the landscape of Sandro's apartment again, hoping to find some clue about the lawyer.

"Members only, Miguel." He led Miguel to the door. "Members only."

—*igms*—

Jet lag was usually not a problem for Miguel, but it was killing him three days later on the morning of the G10 commencement in Tokyo. He had just managed to fall asleep when a high-priority call came in -- the only type besides Sandro's that he allowed at 3 a.m.

It was his new boss, Marianne.

He levered himself up in his hotel bed and took three deep breaths before tonguing the accept.

"Rich said you wanted to know right away," Marianne said.

Miguel stood and walked to the window, his brain refusing for several long moments to remember the picture of the lawyer he'd sent to Rich Carlsen the other day. Marianne's tone made her words sound like an apology, but the truth was she'd somehow intercepted Miguel's request and wanted to show him she was the one in control. She was like that.

"It's for Sandro," Miguel said in a hoarse croak.

"I gathered, which is why I allowed it. But I won't do it again, Miguel, even for my new head of photos."

"It's *one* search, Marianne."

"It's *one* more reason for legal to crawl up my ass, *Miguel*. And that ID subscription doesn't pay for itself. It comes out of *my* budget."

"Okay, okay. I get the idea." Miguel softened his tone. He was tired and cranky, but he didn't need his new life at corporate getting off on the wrong foot. "What did Rich find?"

"The guy was a lawyer, one Hilden Gramercy."

"*Hilden*?"

"Yeah, go figure. Works for an outfit called Ernst, Grobel, and Spitz out of Dallas."

"Profile?"

"They've got over two dozen lawyers on staff. Apparently Gramercy's a junior member, only been with them for couple of years."

"Okay, now comes the million dollar question: what was he doing at my grandfather's?"

"You requested an ID, amigo. You'll have to take over from there." There was a brief pause. "Now get some sleep. You have a G10 to cover for me in the morning."

Miguel hung up and checked for Sandro's online presence. It was evening back in Vero Beach, but Sandro's avatar was grayed out, which was odd since he usually left it active 24/7. He called Sandro's apartment. No luck. Miguel found himself annoyed that he hadn't pushed harder for Sandro to buy an embedded phone.

Miguel flopped on the bed, exhausted but beyond sleep. He felt miserable. He'd felt miserable for the last three days. That had been the wrong way to tell Sandro about his promotion, but he'd never been able to find a right way. Sandro always twisted it to look like Miguel was abandoning him.

The thing that bothered him most was Sandro's easy acceptance of the news. Why hadn't he done the same thing as before? What had that lawyer dropped off for Sandro?

Suddenly Miguel realized he might be looking at this the wrong way. *Sandro* might have contacted *the lawyer*. He and his online cadre of armchair politicians were always preaching that they needed to do something, to take a stand. Maybe he *had* taken a stand.

Miguel accessed Sandro's banking account. Why hadn't he thought of this before?

There was twelve-thousand in his checking, ninety-three in savings, and another forty-eight in his IRA. That would be about right. But when he went to the transaction history for Sandro's checking account, his feet went cold. He sat up in bed with his legs over the side of the mattress and stared at the display.

Seven-hundred-thousand dollars had been deposited two days ago. That same day, it had been transferred to an account held by the Bank of Ireland (I.O.M.) Ltd. Miguel tried accessing the account using Sandro's credentials, but was refused access.

He returned to Sandro's account. The last activity, posted only twelve minutes after the transfer to the Bank of Ireland, was the purchase of an airline ticket to Nogales, Arizona.

He tried Sandro's phone again.

Nothing.

He packed immediately, booking a scam to Nogales and then sending four messages to contacts that might have some clue about Ernst, Grobel, and Spitz. He sent another message to Sandro's bank, disputing the deposit. Hopefully he'd be able to find out where it had come from.

He sent one last message in the cab to a private photog forum, offering a subcontract for the G10 meeting, enabling a trigger so that when someone accepted, another message would be sent to Marianne with the relevant details.

She was going to be pissed, but there was nothing he could do about it. He had to find out what was going on with Sandro.

—*igms*—

When Miguel stepped out of Nogales International some six hours later, a news crew was filming outside baggage claim. Traffic through passenger pickup was much higher than he thought it was going to be -- an artifact of the latest goings-on, he supposed -- and he was surprised to find a line of white, unmanned cabs standing alongside the noticeably shorter line of yellows manned by greasy-looking Latinos.

He snapped a photo, the white line noticeably longer than the yellow, and labeled it, *The Cabby -- still holding strong in rural America*.

Most people chose the real cabbies, especially in smaller cities like Nogales, but Miguel was in a hurry, and the annoying *Norteño* music coming out of several of the yellows made him walk that much faster and duck into the front seat of one of the whites.

The video screen built into the windshield lit up, flashing the Advantage International Shuttle logo. Then an attractive Latino woman with an attractive Latino voice appeared in the display and said, "Where can Advantage take you today?"

A call came in while Sandro was rubbing his eyes. Crap. It was Marianne again. She'd called twice while he was in transit. He routed the call to voicemail and glanced at his watch. Nearly 7 p.m. local time. He'd have enough time to head back to the hotel and take a look around Nogales before crashing.

"Sir?" the cab said.

He leaned back into the comfortable leather seat and said, "The Montezuma Hotel, on Escalada."

"Ah, very good. Then please buckle up. We'll be there shortly."

The cab turned south on I-19 and headed for the city. The sounds of the road fell away as Miguel pulled up the latest newsfeeds.

Tempers along the border had flared while he'd been in Japan. Human rights groups in both Mexico and the U.S. had converged on Nogales. Most held marches, organized and unorganized, near the border walls and the downtown area and at the crossing from the U.S. into Mexico.

But one group took a bolder stand and had been helping dozens of Mexicans cross the border. They'd found a weakness in the RFID firing software: they wouldn't fire at a target when someone with a valid U.S. RFID was standing nearby, and so they'd set up ferrying points along the border. Five or six simultaneous crossings were organized each night. Most were foiled, with many arrests made for each, but one or two of these "Big Brother" crossings, as they'd come to be known, would succeed, and it was beginning to fuel the opposition to the Border Patrol's new system.

For the last two nights, resistance to the BP officers' arrests had escalated beyond the boiling point. Firearms were involved, and the police, rightly so, had protected themselves. The results: five dead, eighteen wounded.

Miguel had called the police and all the hospitals he could readily find the numbers to after boarding the scam in Tokyo. Something in his gut twisted every time he forwarded Sandro's picture and asked if Sandro had been found among the dead or wounded. Miguel had let out a long, thankful breath when all of them replied no. He thought of making contact with Sandro's online chat group, but was embarrassed to realize he'd never kept track of where Sandro surfed, or the identities of his online fraternity.

The cab dropped Miguel off at the New Montezuma Hotel, a few blocks north of the wall. He checked in and headed south, but slowed when he saw a crowd.

Along International Street, the street that hugged the U.S. side of the wall through most of Nogales, two lines of protesters were marching, one on either side of the street. Something must have happened only minutes ago, because there was a crowd of people in the center of the street, the two halves being dismantled by a dozen police. Miguel snapped a couple of shots, though he could already see three news teams on the scene. Doubtless there were ten more photogs like Miguel sprinkled throughout the crowd.

Miguel pressed forward just as the police were zipping people's wrists and packing them into the waiting vans. The next few moments passed by in slow motion, Miguel snapping frames the whole time.

An Anglo woman -- five-six maybe, weighing a buck and a quarter, tops -- was browbeating this hulk of a man. The woman's face was beet red, and she was choking back tears as she shook a papaya-sized hunk of asphalt at the man. "My son died because those animals snuck across in the middle of the night and needed a car!"

The guy, Mexican by the look of him, went two-fifty and ninety-five percent lean. He was wearing broken-in jeans, a black tee, and a cowboy hat. He looked calm, like he wanted the woman to do something with the asphalt.

"When he stopped at a light," she shouted, "they shattered his window with this!" Her knuckles were bone white as she shook the asphalt at him again. "They dragged him out of his car, beat him to death, and took off, all before the light turned green!"

The man smiled. "I'm Mexican," the man said without a trace of an accent. "Does that mean I'm going to kill children?"

"Maybe not --" she shook the asphalt at the wall "-- but your Godless *indios* over there will if they're given the chance!"

"Yeah, and maybe I'll tell them how to get to your house."

That's when Miguel saw him.

Sandro.

He was standing at the back of the crowd on the far side of the street, watching. Miguel snapped a shot immediately, but the woman got in his way. She'd lifted the asphalt high over her head while the man glanced nervously at two cops who were zip-tying a nearby protester's wrists. The woman heaved the asphalt as hard as she could. It caught the man just above his left eye socket and sent his head sharply backward. He went limp and fell over like a giant redwood. His cowboy hat tumbled between legs as his head thumped against the street.

Miguel backed up and scanned the crowd for Sandro. He kept the shutter release clicking -- no telling what the camera might see that he would miss. The crowd noise intensified. A handful of people fought their way forward in defense of the woman, a few more for the man. And then the lines on either side of the street stormed forward like warring packs of wolves.

The police didn't stand a chance.

As it turned out, neither did Miguel, because by the time the violence had eased, Sandro was nowhere to be found.

— *ignus* —

The buff Mexican, Miguel found out that night, had been taken to intensive care with intracranial hemorrhaging. Three had died, one from a severe reaction to the tear gas, two by trampling. Forty-seven more had been wounded. The woman ended up in jail on charges of assault, but hadn't received so much as a scratch.

The chaos of the riot, the shouting, the screams of pain, and the tantalizing closeness with which he'd missed finding Sandro all spelled sleeplessness for Miguel. He stayed up until four drinking single village *mezcal* and *horchata* and scanning the riot pictures for Sandro. He found only two pictures that had something resembling a clear shot of Sandro. One was obscured by the woman and her damn asphalt, and the other caught only the back of Sandro's head, but in both there was the telltale sign of a cane among a veritable sea of legs.

It *had* to be Sandro, which led Miguel to the uncomfortable conclusion that Sandro had had something to do with the conflict. Just how, he didn't know, and before he could figure out where his grandfather fit into this increasingly complex puzzle, sleep finally took him.

The next morning, while wolfing down greasy eggs and bacon from the buffet, Miguel realized he had three new messages from Marianne. He tagged the messages for follow-up and left the hotel.

He attended two marches near old town that morning and asked around while weaving among the crowd and the old adobe buildings, showing a recent picture of his grandfather, but no one admitted to knowing him. After absorbing six hours of shouting and sign-waving and staring at an endless sea of faces, Miguel was ready to give up. He was never going to get anywhere this way.

Just as he was heading toward one last crowd, an incoming message popped up -- it was from Sandro's bank. He opened it immediately and scanned the contents. He hadn't expected anything from them, certainly not this quickly, but it verified that the monies had been transferred from the estate of one Dr. Anthony Bayless.

He sat down on an ancient wooden park bench and searched the net. There were several references to Bayless. Some were recent, reporting his death five months earlier. He'd lived in Nogales for eighty years and -- Miguel whistled -- had died at the age of 153. The age was not completely unheard of, but it was still impressive.

Bayless had moved to Nogales after being crowned a hero when he'd helped to combat the outbreak of tuberculosis in 2041. It was a scary episode in Nogales' history, a time where nearly ten thousand died from the development of the tuberculosis superbug. It was yet another super-resistant pathogen, the fourth to achieve that status since the first in 2025, but it was the first that claimed airborne transmission. The outbreak wasn't given much press in the States at first because it was localized to the Sonora portion of Nogales. But when the outbreak crossed over, and was attributed to an illegal immigrant crossing, it had fueled a mass political hysteria that had given the President the firepower he needed to upgrade the entire Mexican border wall to a thirty-foot monstrosity.

Late that night, after a fruitless seven-hour search for anything that might connect Sandro to Bayless, Miguel's hunger finally got the best of him. He ordered up a chicken Caesar and lay on his hotel bed, watching the local news, which did nothing to ease his nerves.

"Officer Adam Giaterra of the Border Patrol," the female anchor was saying, "was shot through the neck at 10:18 p.m. local time in what the authorities are calling a ruthless sniper attack. No others have been reported wounded, and no group has stepped forward to take responsibility. The President earlier called it a clear retaliation over the violence that erupted two days ago . . ."

Miguel threw down his fork, no longer hungry. "What the hell are you doing, Grandpa?"

An incoming call trilled into his earpiece: unknown number, no handle.

He tongued the pickup. "Hello?"

"Hello, Miguel."

"Grandpa, thank goodness, where are you?"

"Never mind that. I need you to do something for me."

"Come to the hotel. I'm staying at --"

"Miguel, listen to me. I don't have much time. They've frozen my assets, and I need money. Bad. I need you to send it to this account number. As much as you can spare." A bank account and routing number popped up via Miguel's overlay system. He recognized it as the same Bank of Ireland account Sandro had used to transfer the Bayless money to.

Miguel brought up Sandro's bank and attempted to log in. A message appeared, asking that the owner of the account call Bank Security in Tallahassee.

"Grandpa, this is getting out of hand."

"Miguel --"

"Did you have anything to do with this border patrolman?"

"Miguel! I can't talk. Not now."

"Then *when*, because I'm not giving you anything unless we talk."

The line was silent for a long time, but Miguel could hear a hushed conversation going on in the background. "You know the downtown fountain in Sonora?"

Miguel paused. "I'll find it."

"There's a *panadería* due east of it. Meet me there tomorrow. Eleven o'clock."

"Why did they freeze --"

But the line was already dead.

He tried calling the number back. No one answered.

Miguel poured himself two fingers of *mezcal* and stared out his window at the amber lights of Nogales. In the distance, the blinking red lights of the wall trailed off to the horizon like some celestial device set to take his grandfather farther and farther away.

He downed the *mezcal* in one gulp.

He stared at the wall for hours, drinking, wondering what he might have done differently, wondering how he could deliver Sandro from this gathering storm when Sandro himself seemed to be at the center of it.

Ninety-three more immigrants were caught that night. An unknown number snuck through. One attempted crossing ended in gunfire: three Mexican men dead, twelve wounded. The only opinion from the CBP was that the strong success the program had already achieved would most likely accelerate the schedule for a full rollout.



Miguel woke with a screaming headache. It'd been quite a while since he'd last woken up still drunk from the night before, but not so long ago that he didn't remember how miserable it felt. Only after scrubbing his face for five minutes did it strike him that the sun was awfully bright outside. It was after nine already.

The rental he had arranged for was waiting for him in the hotel parking structure. He hopped in and rushed south to the wall, and though he tried to use his Press ID to grease the skids, it still took over an hour to make it through.

It was amazing how third-world Mexico seemed, even this close to the border -- maybe *especially* this close to the border. There were so many migrants using Nogales as a launching point for crossings that huge portions of the shanty towns were little more than temporary housing.

In some ways Mexico's predicament was understandable. NAFTA had been disbanded thirty years ago as an almost complete failure. Global warming had plodded on at a steady pace despite the ever-tightening global controls over greenhouse gases. Mexico's farming industry had been crushed, and its Gulf-side tourism had been pummeled to the point of collapse by the incessant arrival of hurricanes storming in from the Atlantic.

It was a shame, too, because the United States, ever since the wall had been upgraded in the mid part of the century, had become progressively wealthier, both technologically and monetarily. Various administrations paid lip service to helping their southern neighbors, but those initiatives, no matter how heartfelt, would often be dismantled within a decade of their conception, leaving Mexico in the same place it had been a century earlier.

It was well after eleven by the time Miguel found the old square which held the bakery. Miguel knew in his gut that Sandro had already come and gone, and sure enough, no one was in the cramped bakery when he arrived except a hunched old Mexican woman who eyed him suspiciously from the far side of the counter. Over her shoulder, a squeaky air conditioner fought vainly against the oppressive heat. It was hot, but Miguel liked the ancient and fragrant smell of the bakery.

Miguel took out a hundred-peso note and laid it on the counter. "*Café y dos churros, por favor.*"

Miguel took his coffee and *churros* and sat down to regroup. A few minutes later, while Miguel was nursing his hangover with the scent of the coffee, Sandro entered the bakery. He used his cane -- more heavily than usual -- to make his way between the tables and sit across from Miguel.

Miguel snapped a photo immediately.

Sandro's cane leans against a nearby chair as he wipes the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his faded denim jacket. His disheveled gray hair, his baggy eyes, his listless face -- all telltale signs of a man who hadn't slept in days.

"You look like hell," Miguel said.

"Back atcha," Sandro replied.

They both managed a weak smile.

An uncomfortable silence passed between them before Sandro reached into his jacket, pulled out a beaten manila envelope, and set it on the table next to the plate of *churro* crumbs. His hand rested a moment over it. Then he tapped it once and folded his hands in his lap. "The way I figure, you have a right to see that."

Miguel left it there. "I don't care what happened anymore. I just want to take you home."

After a moment's pause, Sandro nodded seriously to the envelope.

Miguel removed the contents. The top page was crisp and white. It was a letter, handwritten by Anthony Bayless. Miguel read it, and looked up at Sandro.

"An apology?"

Sandro nodded. "Keep going."

Miguel flipped the letter over and found a yellowed x-ray. It was a sagittal x-ray of the head. It seemed normal except for the bright white outline of a device near the base of the brain, where the spinal cord entered the cranial cavity. It was eerily similar to Miguel's own CT scan taken only hours after his camera interface had been installed.

The next photograph was of a boy lying in a hospital bed. Miguel had seen a number of pictures of Sandro as an older teen, and though the top of this boy's head was wrapped tight in white bandages and his face was slack as he stared upward, Miguel knew it was Sandro. Miguel assumed it was taken after the surgery for the implant he'd seen in the x-ray.

Miguel couldn't help but judge the photograph with an artist's eye. It seemed bad at first -- the balance was all wrong, and the lighting seemed to suck the life right out of the subject -- but then again, there was clear synchronicity between the lighting and Sandro's blank expression. What had the person behind the camera been thinking as he took this photo of Sandro? Probably nothing. Probably it had been the doctor who'd performed the surgery, or a member of the medical team who'd taken it. Doctor or photographer, he'd probably become numb to his patient's feelings long ago, much like Miguel had become numb to the suffering around him.

Miguel flipped through the rest of the documentation: doctor's notes, medical tests, psychological workups. He saw the phrases "tuberculosis in check" and "poor reception of implant" and "response times *decreased*" in the monthly summary pages from March and April of 2041. By the Lord above, Sandro had only been thirteen. Were they even *allowed* to do something like that to a boy so young? He flipped a few more pages and found a note from August of the same year that said "implant removed successfully" and "recovery slow but consistent."

The year, 2041, was notable in that it was the same year of the tuberculosis epidemic in Nogales, the same year Congress approved the expansion and strengthening of the border wall. Sandro's parents had emigrated at that time, but they'd died in the outbreak. Sandro nearly had, too, but he recovered when the bacteriophage for the superbug had been developed.

But what did the implants have to do with it?

"Do you remember any of this?" Miguel asked.

Sandro shook his head. "Nothing."

"I don't understand. A doctor was using the tuberculosis patients?"

"Several of them, yes. To test their company's prototype HMI implant." Sandro touched his right eye with one finger. "The grandfather of *your* interface."

"But tuberculosis patients?"

"That's how they got access to me and over forty other people. They thought we were all going to die, and they weren't far wrong. Twelve of the patients *did* die, and probably not from the tuberculosis."

"*Who* got access, Grandpa? How *who* got access?"

"The company Bayless was working for. InterGenome Sciences."

Miguel reeled. IGS was the same company that had developed dozens of different brain-enhancement implants. It had started with the military in 2047 -- human-machine interfaces to enhance reaction time and replacement eyes that could display messages and provide overlay information like the head-up display in a fighter pilot's visor. But military spending had become anemic, forcing IGS to leverage their technology into the private sector. They added memory banks to store simple data like phone numbers, addresses, account locations and passwords and PINs. Cameras and photo storage came quickly after, and Miguel had been one of the early adopters of the technology.

It had all been a chain of cause and effect that had started with IGS's experiments on Sandro and the others, and suddenly Miguel felt like he had *profited* from his grandfather's pain. He blew air through his pursed lips. "I know this must be a shock, Grandpa --"

"You have no idea what it must be."

Miguel realized that Sandro's depression these last few months must have started with some initial contact from Bayless's lawyers, perhaps a letter telling him about the experiments and the inheritance Bayless had left him. Why hadn't he told Miguel about it?

But as Miguel sat there, looking at Sandro, he realized why. Miguel had been trying to cut Sandro out of his life for years. Yes, he went to visit Sandro -- they played chess and talked a few times per month -- but Miguel had always been looking for a way to get out of Vero Beach for good. And Sandro knew it. He'd been trying to spare Miguel the pain he was bearing.

"Tell me about it," Miguel said softly. "I want to understand it."

Sandro stared at Miguel, his face expressionless, but then he softened and leaned back in his chair, scraping it noisily against the white tiles. He jutted his chin toward the far wall, northward. "When I decided to come here I thought I was like this city, that I was split in two, one piece damaged and rotten, the other healthy but not whole." Sandro paused, frowned. "I felt . . . incomplete. Broken."

"I couldn't stop thinking about what was gone." He glanced out the window to the littered street outside of the bakery. "Maybe the parts that were damaged didn't mean anything. Maybe I turned out exactly the way I would have without the surgery. But maybe not. Maybe I only achieved half of what I might have, understood a tenth of what I could have. I felt like a ghost of a man, like seventy years of my life had been going in the wrong direction. You can't know what that's like as young as you are."

Sandro picked up the picture -- a boy on a table, a broken implant destroying something vital. He'd never seen his grandfather look so sad.

Miguel took the picture from him and laid it face-down on the pile. "You don't have to throw your life away just because something was taken from you so many years ago."

Sandro nodded seriously. "No, you're right. That's why I came -- to prove that my life wasn't worthless -- but when I got here, I realized it was all bullshit. Good part . . . Bad part . . . It doesn't matter. What matters is doing something in your life that you can be proud of."

"You've done a lot," Miguel said. "You served your country."

"That was sixty years ago," Sandro said. "I've done nothing but stew and live off my bum knee and my family since, and it's high time I did something about it. I want you to come back with me, Miguel. Take the stories of the others: *El Movimiento para las Fronteras Abiertas*. I want you to spread their stories, just as you hear them, just as you see them."

"There are reporters all over both sides of the wall."

"Come on," Sandro said. "When's the last time you saw anything about a Mexican *family*, one that doesn't show them as illiterate beggars? I need *you* to tell their stories, Miguel. That's the only way I'll know it'll be told fairly."

The door of the bakery tinkled opened. A middle-aged woman came in and stepped up to the counter as the air conditioner continued to squeal. As she chatted with the owner, Miguel tried to sort his feelings. Part of him felt proud to be Sandro's grandson -- he was taking a stand; he was trying to do something he felt was right -- but another part of him saw a wizened old man with a bad knee and a guilty conscience.

"You don't owe anyone anything."

"I *do!*" Sandro gave Miguel such an intense gaze then, a gaze filled with more purpose than he'd ever seen in the eyes of his grandfather. "I owe *me*. I owe *you*. I owe those that came before me. I owe those that come after. Don't you believe that, Miguel? Don't you want to leave the world a better place than when you came into it?"

"Yes, but --"

"There are no buts! My time has come, simple as that."

Miguel realized that this had become just another chess match, though the stakes were unbelievably high. Sandro had convinced himself there was no other way than the one he'd chosen, and he wasn't going to back down.

Miguel had to accede. He would hear their stories, take their pictures. He'd even see about publishing them. And once Sandro had some time to calm down . . . then he would see reason. Then he would come home.



As soon as they left the *panadería*, Miguel was blindfolded and shoved into a car. He'd been blindfolded twice before, once in Riyadh and another in Pyongyang -- they had been the two times he'd most feared for his life -- but in that car, on the mercilessly rough ride to the MFA hideout, he feared not only for his life but Sandro's as well.

They took him to what Miguel assumed was a butcher shop -- even through the musty blindfold, the smell of meat and blood was strong. Everything seemed oppressive in that dark, dank basement. But the woman Miguel met with first -- a thick woman, a skilled cheese maker -- began to ease Miguel's mood. There was an earthiness to her that Miguel had never felt in his life. He'd been so wrapped up in school and travel and technology and his career that he rarely noticed such things. But while he was talking with her so intimately, asking about her dreams and reasons for joining the movement, he couldn't help but notice it. She was a decent and honest woman. She wanted a fair shake in life, as simple as that.

And so it went. He interviewed eighteen more members, and took a dozen pictures of each. He tried not to draw any conclusions while interviewing them. He tried to follow Sandro's wishes and merely let them tell their story. The important thing was to get to the human side of the conflict, the one that was getting lost beneath the politics of walls and spyders.

When it was done, Miguel was driven back to the *panadería* with Sandro. Sandro walked Miguel over from the ancient Ford Torino to his pristine blue rental car and held the door open for him.

"Come back with me, Grandpa. Let *them* fight this war."

Sandro shook his head sadly. "I'm in it for good, Miguel." He smiled, like he used to when Miguel had won a tight chess match, the smile that said he was proud of his grandson.

"We still need to talk about the money," Sandro said softly.

"I know," Miguel replied. He'd been thinking about it on the ride back, unsure how he was going to break it to Sandro. "I can't give it to you."

Sandro straightened his back, and his aged face looked more hurt than Miguel could ever remember. "It's not for me. It's for them. There are dozens coming back every night with spyders buried in their chests. The doctors work for free, but the equipment and supplies are expensive."

Miguel shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I can't support this. There are better ways, *legal* ways, to solve this crisis."

Sandro spit into the street. "Where were your legal ways when they were cutting a hole in my skull? Where were they eight years ago when the drought struck Baja and Sonora, when *seventy thousand* people died? Where are they now, while innocent Sonorans are getting killed because they stepped over some imaginary line?"

"I'm only one man, Grandpa."

"You still don't get it, do you? You can be greater than one man."

"How much time would my money buy them? A week? Two weeks? I agreed to tell their story, and I will, but that's as far as I'll go. It'll have to be enough."

They stared at one another for a long time, the hot desert wind blowing through the square and kicking up dust. Then Sandro coughed, and the spell was broken. "You want to tell stories? Fine. Then tell one more. The MFA is going to issue a statement the day after tomorrow, seven miles west of the crossing. Go there and take pictures. Tell everyone what you see. Tell it honestly."

"What are you going to do?"

Sandro stepped in and hugged Miguel. "You'd better go," he said.

"Grandpa, what are you going to do?"

Sandro turned and walked away. As the Torino carried him off into the Sonora streets, Miguel's gut twisted. It felt like the last time he'd ever see Sandro.

In the years to come, he would wish many times that it had been.

—*igms*—

Miguel made it back to the hotel late that evening, and found himself unable to sleep. He stayed up the entire night, worrying about what the MFA was going to do, and wondering if Sandro was going to be directly involved or not.

The MFA was going to "issue a statement." It made political sense; Miguel hadn't realized it at the time, but the decision to widen the system to three more cities had been made the morning he'd gone to see Sandro. Surely Sandro had known, and surely they'd chosen their timing to coincide with the dog and pony show at IGS's tracking facility. The governor of Arizona and over a dozen congressman were going to be there.

By the time lunch had come and passed, Miguel's stomach felt as twisted as a wrung-out wash rag. Why had Sandro refused to tell him what they were going to do? What would the message be? Even though Sandro claimed the MFA was for a peaceable resolution to the conflict, the fact remained: men had died on both sides. Just because Sandro wanted peace did not mean that all of them did, or that the Border Patrol or the National Guard did. Tempers flared all too easily at times like this.

That evening, Miguel couldn't take it anymore. He called the Border Patrol and told them of Sandro's plans. The captain running the anti-insurgent team asked Miguel to stay at the hotel. Miguel refused. They couldn't prevent him from being close since it was a section of the wall near a suburban neighborhood. But Miguel did promise to stay a few miles away when the captain authorized a tunnel into his embedded police transceiver. He would use it, he said, to update Miguel every half-hour, and Miguel could contact him should the need arise.

Miguel parked his rental car beneath a huge, curbside oak tree as the sun rose over a row of tan condos. It was 7:00 a.m.

He thought back to Sandro's face as he'd told him about the planned crossing, how he'd asked Miguel to take pictures of all of it. His face had been so serious, but Miguel hadn't been able to read anything beyond that. Just like when they played chess.

Miguel's veins went ice cold.

Just like when they played chess.

Dear God.

No, no, no.

This was all a feint.

"Captain!" Miguel called over his temp channel. "Captain!"

"Mr. de la Cueva, not now. It's already begun."

"No, that's not the real one."

"What are you talking about?"

"That's a decoy."

"No, Mr. de la Cueva. This is deadly serious. I'll update you when I can."

"Captain!"

He didn't answer.

Miguel started the car and punched the accelerator. The car surged forward, and he screeched onto the street ahead, narrowly missing a white sedan. He wove through traffic, heading for downtown, seven miles away.

Where would Sandro strike? What would he do?

He had no idea.

He blew through a red light. The traffic lamp blared a warning as he sped past, a signal that the police had been alerted, a request to pull over and wait.

He drove faster.

As he reached the edge of old town, it hit him. The tower of the tracking facility. The politicians. It was the only thing with enough heft to it, the only thing that would draw enough attention.

Why hadn't he seen it before?

He knew from the newsfeeds the facilities were just north of the downtown area, only a few miles away.

Halfway there, a black-and-white pulled onto the street a quarter mile behind him. It gained quickly on his sickly little rental.

He was so close . . .

He screeched into the parking lot a few minutes later, the cop nipping at his heels. The fifteen-story glass-and-steel building lay just ahead. Seven or eight news trucks surrounded a huge water fountain. He drove past the fountain and onto the lawn, braking too late to avoid slamming into one of the squat cement vehicle barriers lined up in front of the building.

Seven men in black suits and three guards were lined up on the far side of the lawn, near the street. Their pistols were drawn, and they were pointing them at the twenty Mexican men and women dressed in orange prison uniforms. Sandro was standing near the center. Each of them held a butane lighter in one hand, unlit, held near the center of their chest.

Closer to the building, three cameramen were snapping pictures with traditional cameras.

"Lie down!" one of the men in suits was screaming.

"No viviremos como presos!" they shouted as one. *We will not live as prisoners!*

Miguel sprinted as the police car ground to a halt behind him. Miguel was confused by the lighters, but then he smelled the gasoline, and realized their orange uniforms were damp. "Grandfather, no!"

"No viviremos como presos!"

"Acuestense en el piso!" One of the suited men was screaming. "Lie down! Lie down!" shouted another.

"Grandpa, no!" Miguel screamed, still sprinting toward him. One of the men in black suits broke away and pointed his gun at Miguel.

Sandro glanced at Miguel, his eyes watering, and just as quickly returned his gaze forward.

And, God forgive him, Miguel snapped a picture. He didn't think about it anymore. If he did, he would stop. So he just kept snapping pictures as, one by one, Sandro and the others held the lighters away from their bodies and struck the flint.

"No viviremos como presos!"

Their arms pulled inward toward their chests, toward the location the RFID chips were programmed to bury themselves.

"Please, Sandro," Miguel whispered, "don't."

Just then the sound of a great gust of air cut through all the shouting, silencing everyone.

As twenty orange flames painted the blue sky black.

The sound faded away until everything was inhumanly, horrifically quiet. And all the while Miguel took his pictures - tears streaming from his one real eye.

— *igms* —

Miguel parted the red curtains and took in the crowd of hundreds filling the stadium-seating auditorium. All of them had come to honor the International Photographer of the Year. To Miguel's left, the emcee was setting the stage for Sandro's suicide, telling the story as the pictures from Miguel's book played on the huge screen at the back of the stage.

Then the emcee called Miguel's name. The crowd began applauding immediately, but Miguel had to take a few deep breaths to control himself before stepping onto the stage. The applause and embarrassment and shame washed over him as he walked up and accepted the award. He gave a speech, as he had for the four other awards he'd won for various pictures and the book, which hit the stands some six months ago. It had been over a year since Sandro had killed himself, and the memory hadn't faded. It had, in fact, grown stronger, because Miguel had been forced to relive the moments over and over again in speeches, interviews, and during the book's long and intense editing process.

It was due penance, Miguel told himself. It was only right. Sandro had made the ultimate sacrifice. The least he could do was pass Sandro's message on as he'd promised.

The speech was finally over, and after trading pleasantries with dozens of other photographers, the crowd thankfully began to thin. But then he caught sight of a mousy woman calmly sitting, watching him. Recognition came, and he tried hard to hide his disappointment. He'd completely forgotten he'd granted this interview.

When the last of the crowd had left, the woman stood and made her way over.

"Mr. de la Cueva, I'm Beth Harrison."

"Of course. So glad to finally meet in person."

A wry smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "You look like you'd rather be eating worms than standing here talking with me."

"Is it that obvious?"

"Just a bit. Look, I know this must be emotional for you. We could reschedule if you'd prefer."

"No." He motioned to a nearby auditorium chair. "Please. If I don't do this now I might never do it."

She sat, placing his book on her lap. On the cover was a 3D picture of his frail grandfather, standing upon a lush green lawn with nineteen other Mexican men and women, all of them wearing orange prison uniforms, lighters held to their chests, mouths open in a perpetual scream.

The title read *No Viviremos Como Presos: We Will Not Live As Prisoners*.

After Miguel had sat down next to her and settled himself, Beth touched the frame of her no-nonsense glasses, activating the microphone hidden there, and leaned back. "All right. You mind if we start at the beginning?"

Miguel shrugged. "Not at all."

"OK. Tell me about your grandfather. What was he like?"

As the interview moved from the preliminaries and into the meat of Sandro's story, Miguel kept staring at the cover of the book. Part of him wished he'd never taken those pictures -- he knew, even now, they were going to haunt him for the rest of his life -- but another part of him realized that it was a small price to pay. This wasn't about him. It wasn't about Sandro. It wasn't even about the nineteen other people who'd taken their lives that day. It was about the heart of the people in Mexico, about the discourse that had long ago been dropped by the wayside. It was about tearing down walls, not building them up.

Before Miguel knew it, the interview was nearly over. Beth was staring at him. Her eyes had been noncommittal nearly the entire interview, but now there was a clear note of seriousness, of regret.

"I think I only have one more question, Mr. de la Cueva."

"Please."

"What do you want your readers to take away from this book?"

He had thought about that for some time before, knowing he would inevitably be asked by the media. The Spyder Project had ceased the day after the mass suicide, pending a congressional investigation. Talks had resumed between the U.S. administration and Mexico -- serious talks, it seemed to Miguel. But there was always the chance this would slip away, become yesterday's news. The U.S. was famous for it, and Sandro had known it. He felt, rightly or wrongly, like he'd had to make a statement so large that it couldn't be ignored. Miguel only hoped it would be enough.

"That's just it," Miguel said to Beth. "I don't want to say anything. I just want people to open their eyes. I want them to listen. That's all."

Red Road

by [David Barr Kirtley](#)



[Artwork by Nick Greenwood](#)

Benjamin had always thought of himself as a strong-willed young mouse, but he had to admit that he was starting to lose heart. Not that he ever regretted penning that pamphlet calling for the abolition of the monarchy, but now he did sometimes wish he'd used a pseudonym.

He'd been imprisoned in the dungeons beneath Kingsburrow for six months, which meant he still had fifty-four months to go on his sentence. His cell was tiny and dim. Its walls were angular and dirty, and the ceiling dipped so low that Benjamin couldn't even stand up straight. His tunic was in tatters, his fur was matted with grime, and his claws had grown long and jagged. He'd heard no news of his family, his friends, or the outside world. Twice a day, a gruff old mouse with gray whiskers would pass by and deposit a food tray on the floor outside the cell, and then Benjamin would reach between the iron bars to fumble for a tin cup of water and a hunk of moldy cheese.

One evening, two royal guards -- tall mice who wore red livery and carried gilded poleaxes -- appeared outside the cell. One of them said to Benjamin, "You there, the king wants to see you."

The guards opened the cell door, then led Benjamin down the passageway and up a steep spiral stair. Warm light seeped from above, and Benjamin was grateful for it, though when he finally reached the top step and emerged into a torchlit antechamber, the brightness made him squint.

The guards hustled him along. In one hallway, Benjamin passed a dignified and well-groomed mouse who stopped and instructed the guards, "He can't go before the king looking like that. Clean him up." So Benjamin was taken to a parlor where the first female mice he'd seen in far too long doused him with cold water, brushed the tangles from his fur, and dressed him in a fresh tunic.

Finally he was led to an elaborately decorated sitting room. In one corner stood the king's son, Prince Francis, who wore a red doublet, a black cloak, and a sword and scabbard. Benjamin had never seen Francis up close before. It was true what mice said -- Francis, with his thick, tawny fur and large, imposing ears, was the tallest and most handsome mouse in all of Kingsburrow.

Benjamin felt a touch of apprehension, for mice also said that

Francis was a master swordfighter, methodical and relentless.

Francis asked Benjamin, "Do you know why you're here?"

Something -- maybe just being clean for the first time in ages -- made Benjamin feel bold. He said, "To write a pamphlet?"

Francis actually smiled at that, but one of the guards swung the butt end of a poleaxe into the back of Benjamin's leg, and Benjamin fell to one knee. The guard said, "Kneel, you. And show respect."

Francis waved the guard back. "It's all right. Leave him."

Benjamin stood up again. His leg throbbed, but he refused to show any pain. He looked around. "So where's the king?"

Francis said sadly, "I am the king. My father is dead."

Benjamin was stunned. He found it almost impossible to imagine that King Michael, the grim and cruel old mouse who'd reigned for as long as Benjamin could remember, was king no longer.

Francis fixed an intense gaze on Benjamin and said, "Does that please you?"

Benjamin stared right back and said nothing, though what he thought was: Yes. Your father was a tyrant.

Francis turned away and began to pace. "What happened was this. My father had always had a passion for exploration. With the realm at peace and prosperous --"

Benjamin snorted loudly. Prosperous? This royal brat obviously knew nothing of the struggles of the common mouse.

The guards bristled and looked to Francis, who hesitated a moment, then ignored the interruption and continued. "My father decided to journey far away to the west, farther than any mouse had ever been. He took with him a band of brave knights." Francis halted then, and stared at nothing. "My father was slain, along with all his knights save one. That one, Sir Timothy, made it back here. He was mad with fever and badly wounded -- he'd been ambushed by Westburrow rats as he returned, and had barely escaped. Before he died, he whispered to me of the beast that killed my father. It was some foreign monster, unlike any we've ever seen." Francis turned back to Benjamin and said, "I will not risk the lives of any more good mice on this matter. We are too few as it is, and winter will be upon us soon. But neither can I sit here while my father's killer remains alive and free. I intend to seek out this beast myself, and slay it."

Benjamin suddenly knew why he'd been summoned here.

And indeed, Francis explained, "I shall need a squire to assist me on my journey, and if I should fall I'll need a messenger to bear the news of my fate back to Kingsburrow. You, Benjamin, are a traitor and a seditionist. Your life I am willing to risk. But you should know that I also feel, from everything I've heard of you, that you are not truly wicked, and that you even possess a certain misguided nobility. I believe you might deserve, and might welcome, a chance to redeem yourself. If you agree to accompany me, I will pardon you, and you will be a free mouse again. If you refuse me, you may return to your cell to serve out the remainder of your sentence."

Benjamin considered this. He'd be damned if he'd let the guards drag him back to that cell, and he *had* always wanted to see the wider world. But he didn't want to die at the hands of Westburrow rats -- or worse. The wilderness was crawling with all manner of grotesque monstrosities that Benjamin knew only from tales: Snakes. Spiders. Even the terrible owls, said to be the largest of all creatures. Benjamin especially didn't want to die for the sake of a royal fool like Francis. Still, Benjamin quickly made up his mind to accept. Being thrown back in the dungeon would accomplish nothing. But beyond the walls of Kingsburrow he might find opportunities for escape or subterfuge.

He remarked, "A generous offer." Then he mustered all the sincerity he could and said, "Very well, I accept. Thank you, your majesty."

Francis gave a wry grin, as though not totally convinced by this newfound graciousness, but he seemed satisfied. He said, "All right, then. I am pleased to hear it. We will depart on the morrow."



That night Benjamin slept in a modest bed. The next morning two guards escorted him to the throne room -- a massive chamber where large rectangular mirrors hung on red walls, crystal chandeliers dangled from the ceiling, and two golden thrones sat on a carpeted dais. The room was crowded with mice, and their babble filled the air. Every noble mouse in Kingsburrow had come, and Benjamin regarded with bemused disdain their haughty demeanors, their perfumed ringlets of fur, their tight, uncomfortable velvet coats and absurdly long silk gowns.

A side door opened, and Francis emerged and walked to the dais. He wore his crown, and his sword swung at his hip. The crowd fell silent. Francis stood before the thrones and said loudly, "Thank you all for coming. I have an announcement." He surveyed the assembled mice. "You know that my father, our king, perished in a far off land. Now I go to find the beast that slew him and destroy it. I ask that while I am away you heed the wise command of my sister, who shall rule in my place." Francis removed his crown and handed it to a page, who carried it to the front of the crowd and presented it to the princess, a plain-faced female mouse who wore a simple red dress.

Francis drew his sword. He held it aloft and said, "I swear I shall not rest until I have avenged my father's death. I swear it on my sword. I swear it by Sherry, goddess of childbirth and cheese. I am Francis, son of Michael, and I have sworn."

Benjamin found this whole oath business a bit absurd, though for the sake of appearance he applauded along with the crowd.

Francis sheathed the sword, nodded once, said, "Goodbye," and withdrew through the side door. The guards urged Benjamin forward, and he followed after Francis through the door and down a series of corridors. Finally Benjamin arrived in the large earthen cavern that housed Kingsburrow's main gates -- two tall oak doors studded with iron.

A group of guards, knights, and servants clustered around Francis. Two large rucksacks were brought forward. Francis shouldered one, and passed the other to Benjamin. Benjamin had expected to be burdened with the majority of their supplies, and was pleased to note that the two packs seemed equally laden.

A servant handed Benjamin a sheathed dagger. Benjamin couldn't believe they were making the mistake of arming him. His heart raced, and he tried not to show any surprise or excitement as he took the weapon and strapped it to his belt.

Several guards stepped forward and dragged open the giant doors. Behind the doors stood a portcullis, and the light of morning shone through it and cast a gridwork shadow on the floor. Then the guards turned a winch, and the portcullis creaked as it rose into the ceiling. Francis said some parting words to a few of his knights, then strode out through the gates, and Benjamin followed.

Outside, the sky was clear and blue. A gentle breeze played over Benjamin's fur. He was standing on a hilltop that looked out over a rolling landscape of rich autumn colors. He and Francis followed a wide dirt road that wound down the hill and into the farm country. In the fields, mice toiled with hoes and scythes while in the distance gray smoke plumed from the chimneys of the peasant burrows.

Francis and Benjamin hiked in silence. The farms disappeared behind them, and then there were only the great bushes and stones looming overhead, and the trees like giant towers. That afternoon, Francis and Benjamin came to a place where the road divided, and they chose the branch that turned west. That way would lead them to the border of the realm -- a two week journey -- and beyond that lay the lands of the Westburrow rats, one enormous inbred family famous for their cruelty. Francis was obviously hoping to cross those lands without attracting the attention of the rats. Benjamin would rather not take the chance at all.

When night fell, Francis chose a camp spot and built a small fire. He said, "I'll take the first watch. You get some sleep."

Benjamin was sore and exhausted, and compared to the dungeon floor the soft ground looked almost as inviting as a bed. He collapsed into the grass, wrapped himself in a blanket, and slept.

Hours later, he was shaken awake by Francis. Benjamin groggily crawled over to a tree and sat with his back against it. Francis spread a blanket on the ground, lay down, and closed his eyes. Soon his breathing became soft and regular.

Benjamin sat there for over an hour, fingering the hilt of the dagger and trying to work up the resolve to do what must be done. One thrust tonight would do more to bring down the monarchy than a million of his silly pamphlets, and he could make up any story he wanted about how Francis had died.

Benjamin eased the dagger from its sheath, then stood and crept across the grass. He paused and tried to steady his nerves. He had never wielded a knife before against anything besides cheese. His heart pounded. He felt dizzy. He wondered how much force it would take to puncture a mouse's flesh, and how much blood there would be.

He told himself: Just a little closer. Just take one more step. You can do that.

He took another step.

Francis lashed out with one foot. Benjamin gasped. His legs were swept out from under him, and his chest hit the ground. Strong hands grabbed his right arm -- which held his dagger -- and twisted the arm painfully behind his

back, and the dagger was wrenched from his fingers. Then he was rolled over, and he felt the dagger pressed against his neck. He stared up at Francis, who knelt over him.

Francis said, "I understand why, because of what you believe, you felt you had to try. Don't try again." Francis pulled the dagger away from Benjamin's throat, then tossed the dagger up, caught it by its blade, and offered it back to Benjamin hilt-first. Francis said, "You should hardly expect me to be off guard at your very first opportunity."

Benjamin stared at the dagger. "You're letting me keep it?"

Francis said, "I would not leave you defenseless in the wild."

Benjamin felt foolish. He snatched the dagger and slammed it into its sheath. Then he massaged his sore arm.

Francis stood. He returned to his blanket and lay down again, with his back to Benjamin.

Benjamin said, "So that's it? You're not afraid of me?"

Francis yawned. "No." After a moment, he added, "You would never have gone through with it."



Benjamin awoke before dawn to find that Francis was already packed and waiting. They continued on their way. Neither of them spoke.

Soon the sun peeked up over the hills and warmed the earth. At mid-morning, Francis called a halt, and settled down to rest on a bed of browning pine needles. Benjamin sat a good distance away. Francis chewed on a piece of cheese and said, "So tell me, why do you wish me dead? Wasn't it I who freed you from the dungeons?"

Benjamin scowled and said nothing.

Francis persisted, "Truly. I want to know."

Finally Benjamin burst out, "Forgive me if I'm insufficiently grateful that you ended my unjust confinement after a mere six months. And you only released me so that I could risk my life helping you."

Francis cocked his head thoughtfully. "Even granting, as you say, that you've been used poorly, is that really reason to kill me? Am I so bad?"

Benjamin glared. "Shall I list for you the abuses of your royal house?"

Francis looked away. He said, "My father was a strong ruler. Perhaps too strong. He was a hard mouse to love. No one knows that better than I. But I am not my father."

"It's not about you," Benjamin said. "It's the principle."

Francis turned back to him. "And what principle is that?"

"No more kings. Freedom and equality for all mice."

Francis frowned. "There will always be kings. Whether or not they're called kings. Whether chosen by blood or wealth or fame. Mice need kings."

Benjamin said, "You're wrong."

Francis sighed. "So what should I have done? When I found myself born a prince? What would you do? If offered a title?"

Benjamin answered at once. "Renounce it. Abolish the office, and let a more just order replace it."

Francis studied him carefully and said, "Truly? That's what you'd do?"

"Yes."

Francis said, "Your father is a merchant. A prosperous one."

"He is," Benjamin admitted.

Francis concluded, "So you're not exactly a common mouse yourself. You've enjoyed means and education far beyond the dreams of most mice. Is that just?"

Benjamin was defensive. "No. But I can't help that. I could have used my position to increase my own wealth and gratify my own desires, as my peers have. Instead I've used the gifts I've received to try to do some good, to try to change things so that more mice get the opportunities I've had. What else could I do? Forswear my family's wealth to live amidst the destitute? What would that accomplish?"

Benjamin suddenly felt uncertain. A hint of a smile played over Francis's lips. Benjamin said angrily, "It's not the same thing at all! You can't even compare the two. You, with your palaces and crowns and servants, and all your kneeling and silly oaths."

Francis looked puzzled. "What do you have against oaths?"

"It's pompous," Benjamin said. He knew he should guard his tongue, but he couldn't stop himself. "If you're going to do something, just do it. You don't have to put on a show for the whole world. Swearing to Sherry about this and that."

Francis narrowed his eyes and observed, "You don't believe in Sherry."

Benjamin sneered. "Of course not. Goddess of childbirth and cheese? The very notion is imbecilic. It's peasant superstition."

Francis grinned. "Says the great champion of the common mouse."

Benjamin stopped. He had no retort.

Francis suddenly looked very serious. "Listen to me. When I swear an oath, I invite the court as a courtesy, and I invoke Sherry because what can it hurt? But I doubt that either the court or Sherry would raise much fuss if I chose to break my vow. But *I* would know. An oath is a promise to yourself, and I would swear my oaths whether or not I was the only mouse around for a hundred miles."

Benjamin said nothing. He saw that Francis meant it.

Francis stood. "Enough. Let's get moving."

That night Benjamin took the first watch while Francis slumbered. As Benjamin sat there staring into the campfire, he understood that he would not try to harm Francis again. For two weeks they hiked west through the wilderness, and each night Benjamin kept watch as best he could and guarded over Francis. It wasn't just that Benjamin felt cowed by how easily he'd been overcome, and abashed at how lightly his actions had been excused. The damning fact was that he sort of liked Francis. Benjamin would never have expected this to be possible, but there it was. Francis was charming and clever, brave and sincere. If Francis had not been born into royalty, Benjamin imagined that the two of them might even have been friends. And Francis treated Benjamin as though they *were* friends -- friends and equals -- though Benjamin was nobody and Francis was king of all the realm. Benjamin hated himself

for feeling awed by that title. He had thought himself above such petty sentimentality. But he supposed that he was only a mouse, and that all mice were subject to such feelings to some extent.

One night at dusk, as Francis and Benjamin crossed a field of long grass, Francis suddenly stopped and said, "What's that?"

Benjamin halted and looked around, but saw nothing. "Where?"

Francis cocked his head. "Listen." Then a look of alarm crossed his face, and he said, "Get down." He crouched and grabbed Benjamin by the shirtfront and pulled him down too. Francis scanned the sky. Then he slid his sword from its scabbard with one smooth motion, and the sword made barely a whisper as it came free.

Benjamin was suddenly afraid. He looked into the sky, which was blue and tan in the fading light. "What? What is it?"

Francis said sternly, "Shhh!" He cocked his head again.

Benjamin waited. A breeze rustled the grass overhead.

Then Francis said, "Damn!," and leapt to his feet. He grabbed Benjamin by the shoulder, pulled him up, shoved him, and said, "Run! Now!"

Benjamin ran. Everywhere blades of grass stood before him, and he pushed between them. The grass whipped at his face. Then a winged shadow fell over him.

A huge scaly foot plucked him from the earth. Talons bit into his sides. Above him beat great dark wings that sent cold air gusting down over him. He twisted to stare up at his captor. It was the dread predator, bane of all mice, the death that comes from above. Benjamin knew its name from a hundred childhood tales. Owl.

Benjamin was borne up into the trees. Then the owl dropped him. Benjamin fell, and slammed onto a bed of withered grass -- a nest. He was too stunned and hurt to move. His tunic grew damp as blood oozed from his sides where the talons had gashed him.

The owl landed, and stood over him. Its massive head was crowned with a set of demonic horns. Below them a pair of huge round eyes gazed out with cold malice. The owl spoke in a high, rasping voice, "I will catch your friend tooo." Then it stepped back, spread its wings, and swooped away.

Benjamin managed to crawl as far as the edge of the nest, then he collapsed. He tugged his dagger from its sheath, but he was so weak he could barely lift the dagger, let alone fight. And what good would a dagger be? What good would any weapon be against that monster?

Benjamin stared upward. In the dim light, the branches overhead reminded him of the iron bars of his cell back in Kingsburrrow, and he felt an ache of longing. Why hadn't he stayed there, safe? He was no knight, to brave the wilds. And now it was hopeless. Soon he'd be dead.

Some time later, he heard an awful rustle of feathers. He turned to see the owl settle on the branch beside the nest. The owl said, "Your friend was tooo quick. I cannot find him."

Benjamin held up the dagger. "Stay back."

The owl laughed. "Fool. You cannot defeat me. I have consumed a hundred mice, and will consume a hundred more. Surrender your weapon and I will grant you the mercy of being swallowed whole. Else I will devour you in pieces."

Benjamin's hand trembled violently. The owl stepped toward him.

Then, from behind the owl, came Francis's voice: "Enough! Release him. I command you."

Benjamin couldn't believe it. Francis had climbed the tree, and now stood on the branch with them. For a moment Benjamin dared to hope that Francis could somehow bargain with the owl.

The owl's head rotated all the way around to face Francis. The owl said, "And whoo are you?"

Francis stepped forward. "I am Francis, son of Michael and king of this realm." He raised his sword so that its edge was aimed at the owl's throat. "I am your death, if you defy me."

Benjamin felt a fresh rush of panic. Was Francis crazy?

The owl said, "I have dined on the bones of a hundred mice. But never a king. You will be a true delicacy, Francis, son of Michael."

The owl fluttered toward Francis. Its claws reached for him. Francis leaped at it, his sword poised to strike. The owl panicked and tried to reverse course. Francis thrust his sword straight into the owl's looming right eye. The owl screeched and flopped backward, and Francis yanked the sword free and landed lightly on the branch and kept advancing.

The owl shambled to its feet. Blood streamed from its ruined eye. Francis circled to the owl's right, so that it couldn't see him. It turned to try to keep him in view. It used its wing to wipe blood from its face, then hunched forward to seek Francis with its good eye, and Francis stabbed that eye too, and the beast was blinded. Then Francis hacked at the owl -- at its thigh, its belly, its wings. The owl moaned and staggered away.

Then, as it teetered at the edge of the branch, Francis leapt onto its chest. He grabbed its feathers with his left hand and with his right he rammed his sword up through the owl's throat, deep into its head. The owl toppled backward -- with Francis still clutching it -- and together they plunged over the side.

Benjamin's pain gradually subsided. Then he climbed from the nest, walked along the branch, and scrambled down the tree's trunk.

When he reached the ground, he found Francis waiting there, unharmed and resting against the great mass of the owl's corpse.

Benjamin stared amazed at the beast. An owl was a thing out of nightmare, the most feared of monsters, and Francis had just slain one quickly and with pitiless efficiency. Benjamin had heard that Francis was a master swordfighter, but this was beyond anything that Benjamin had imagined. Benjamin was even more abashed now to have ever thought of raising a weapon against Francis. When Francis had a sword in his hand, he was terrifying, unstoppable.

Benjamin said, "I can't believe you did that -- climbed up there, fought that thing -- to save me."

Francis said simply, "You're one of my subjects. It's my duty to protect you."

Normally Benjamin would have bristled at being called anyone's subject, but now he was too tired, sore, and grateful to be alive to care. So all he said was, "Thank you."

A few days later they crossed the border of the realm, and entered the lands of the Westburrow rats.

— *igms* —

One night, by the light of the campfire, Benjamin asked Francis, "Tell me of this beast that we go to slay. The one that . . . killed your father. What did Sir Timothy say of it?"

Francis looked grim, and for a moment Benjamin was afraid that Francis wouldn't answer, but then Francis said softly, "When I met with Sir Timothy, he was delirious and near death, and much of what he told me was without sense. He spoke of a black and barren land where nothing would grow -- as if some demonic agency had leached all life from the soil. The very night my father's party entered that land they were set upon by a strange creature.

Sir Timothy whispered that it was giant, with burning eyes and a voice like thunder. Clearly, these were the fancies of madness. Still, I do not doubt that it is some formidable foe, to defeat a band of knights."

Benjamin said, "What if it defeats you?" Benjamin was surprised to feel so unhappy at the prospect.

Francis said, "Then my wise sister will rule, and the realm will likely be better for it."

These were brave, wry words, but beneath them Benjamin sensed something colder. Francis had no intention of being defeated. He meant to crush this beast, as he'd crushed every enemy he'd ever faced.

A few days passed. One afternoon, as Francis was making camp for the night, Benjamin set off into the brush to gather firewood.

As he returned, he heard Francis cry out. Then cruel, guttural laughter echoed through the forest. Benjamin dropped the twigs he'd collected and drew his dagger.

From the direction of the camp came an unfamiliar voice: "There are two rucksacks here. You three, search the area, find his friend."

Benjamin ducked into a bush. He peered between the leaves and saw three tall black rats pass by. Their fur was greasy and patchy, and they wore odd bits of scavenged armor and carried rusty scimitars. Westburrat rats. Benjamin was terrified.

He crept to the edge of the camp, and saw with horror that Francis had been captured. Two rats held Francis between them so that he dangled with his toes barely scraping the ground. Another four rats were rifling through Francis and Benjamin's rucksacks.

The rats must have taken Francis by surprise. But if Francis could just get his hands on his sword, he'd no doubt make short work of the rats. Where was the sword?

There. It was being held by a rat who seemed to be the leader. He was huge, and his fur was brindled and shaggy. He paced by the spot where Francis hung, and Francis glanced at the sword. The leader noticed and said, "Oh, you want this?" He held the sword up. "What do you think you're going to do with this toy, little mouse?"

Francis said dangerously, "Let me show you."

The leader laughed. He inspected the sword and concluded, "Too small. Useless." He went to break it over his knee. He was burly and strong, but the sword was the finest mouse steel, and refused to snap.

The rats were all distracted. Benjamin thought he might be able to disrupt them and give Francis a chance to break loose.

But why should Benjamin take the risk? All he had to do was slip away, and then he'd be free, and there'd be one fewer monarch in the world. Benjamin hesitated. He thought of all the months he'd spent rotting in the dungeon merely for speaking out, and the memory made him feel vengeful.

Then he stared at Francis, hanging there. Benjamin couldn't just leave him. Francis would be killed, or maybe taken prisoner, which was worse. There were horrid rumors of what was done to mice who were dragged down into the depths of Westburrat, and none of those mice were ever seen again. And Francis had saved Benjamin from the owl . . .

Enough. Benjamin's mind was made up.

He leapt from the brush, dashed up behind the rat leader, and plunged the dagger deep into the rat's lower back. The leader bellowed and dropped Francis's sword. Benjamin pulled the dagger loose.

The rats stood shocked. Then Francis slammed the heel of his foot into the groin of the rat to his right. The rat shrieked and released Francis's right hand, which Francis then raked across the eyes of the rat to his left. That rat

stumbled back, clutching its face. Francis dropped to the ground in a crouch, then sprang forward and sprinted for his sword.

The leader spun around. He gripped his wounded back with one hand while with the other he drew forth a heavy scimitar. His pointed brown teeth were clenched in a grotesque grimace. He said to Benjamin, "You are going to regret that, little mouse. When we bring you back to Westburrow, I'll see that you get special attention." Benjamin backed away, and waved the dagger warningly. The leader advanced on him.

Francis ducked a scimitar cut. He leapt for his sword. Another rat jumped on him, and they went down together. Francis kicked. He stretched out his hand to feel for his sword. His fingers brushed itsommel.

Come on! Benjamin thought desperately. The leader loomed over Benjamin, and backed him against a tree.

Francis wrapped his fingers around the hilt of the sword.



When the rats were dead, Francis said to Benjamin, "That was a courageous thing you did. I owe you my life. From the first time I heard of your case, I sensed that there was great potential in you. When I met you, I knew my guess had been correct. I am proud to see that I was not mistaken." Francis raised his sword. "Kneel, Benjamin."

Benjamin was full of awe. He couldn't believe this was happening. He knelt.

Francis touched the flat of the blade lightly to each of Benjamin's shoulders, then said, "Arise, Sir Benjamin."

Benjamin rose, euphoric. He had never dreamed of anything like this . . . well, maybe as a child, but that had been so long ago. He had given up on such dreams.

Francis now spoke of secret gestures and mottoes that would allow Benjamin to prove his rank to the knights of Kingsburrow. Benjamin listened as best he could. But all he could think of was the throne room, and how upon his return all those rich and noble snobs would have to bow to him -- to him, who had been a condemned prisoner -- and call him "sir."

He said, "Thank you, your majesty," and he meant it.

Francis smiled. "You've earned it."

Two weeks later, as evening fell, Francis and Benjamin came to the edge of a wasteland. Just as Sir Timothy had said, the ground seemed unnatural and accursed -- black, smooth, and hard as stone. Nothing grew there. Nothing lived there.

Francis stepped onto the black earth. Then he turned to Benjamin and said, "From here I must go on alone. This is *my* battle. I ask that you wait for me here. If I have not returned by morning, you must make the long journey back to Kingsburrow and tell my sister that I am dead."

Benjamin was startled to find himself blurt out, "I want to come with you. I want to help."

Francis looked melancholy. "My friend, you've already saved my life once. You've done more than I ever could have asked. I cannot allow you to take any more risks on my account. Sherry willing, I will see you at dawn. If not, it has been my honor to know you. Remain here, and do as I have bid. Your king commands it."

Before Benjamin could object again, Francis strode off into the wastes. Benjamin stared after him, then sat down in the grass.

Night came on quickly. Thick pale mist rose up to shroud that gloomy, barren land. Benjamin felt anxious and uncertain. He wondered if he should go after Francis.

Benjamin had been ordered to stay here. But normally he would never bow to the will of a king. Then again, normally he would never risk his life to help a king either. Benjamin felt adrift. The ideologies that had guided him all his life now seemed as vague and insubstantial as the fog. The only thing he was certain of now was that Francis was in danger.

Benjamin stood. He took a deep breath, then stepped onto the black ground.

He tried to follow in the direction that Francis had gone, but the mists were dense and swirling, and Benjamin soon lost his way. For a time he stumbled on aimlessly. Finally he halted, panting.

Then he heard something -- a rumble, a growl, an endless, breathless roar. A beast with a voice like thunder. Benjamin ran toward the sound, which grew closer and louder. Out in the fog there appeared two patches of light that Benjamin knew were the beast's burning eyes. Those eyes shone impossibly bright, and cast before them great white beams.

A breeze parted the fog. Away across the plain, Francis stood with his feet planted and his sword held ready.

Benjamin yelled, "Francis!"

If Francis heard, he gave no sign. His gaze was fixed on the rapid approach of the monster. Francis called to it, "Hear me, fiend. I am Francis -- son of Michael, whom you slew. I have come to exact vengeance for my father. Look upon my sword and tremble, for I have never been defeated by mouse or beast. Now, face my wrath!" He charged, his sword held high as he screamed, "For Michael! Michael and Kingsburrow!"

The beast drew nearer. It was gigantic, bigger than an owl, a hundred times bigger, bigger than anything Benjamin could have ever imagined. It bore down on Francis. Then the mists rolled in again and smothered Benjamin. For a time he saw nothing. Finally, he spotted two blurry red lights that faded in the distance as the beast sped away.

Benjamin dashed to where Francis had stood, but Francis was gone, vanished. Benjamin staggered in circles, seeking him.

It wasn't until much later, when the fog melted to nothing, and the clouds blew away from the moon, and the moon shone down on the earth, that Benjamin slowly realized, with an uncomprehending horror, that the ground beneath his feet was red.



Benjamin, desolate, dazed, wandered away, only vaguely aware of the soft squelching that his boots made each time he took a step, and of the bloody footprints he left behind him. He thought: Francis. Oh, Francis, why? You were a great mouse. You would have been a good king. I would have followed you.

Finally Benjamin halted. A familiar object lay just before his toes, though his confused mind took a moment to grasp what he was seeing.

A sword. Francis' sword, yet unbroken.

From somewhere behind Benjamin, there arose a low roar. Benjamin knelt quickly and snatched up the sword, then whirled, terrified, clutching the hilt to his chest. His breath came fast and shallow.

But he saw no blazing eyes, no beams of light. There was only the wind, picking up now, gusting across the plain.

The monster was gone. But the fear remained, and would remain, Benjamin knew, for so long as that beast was out there. That ghastly and unnatural thing that could crush a mouse flat.

Benjamin studied the sword -- the sword of Francis, that had vanquished the terrible owl, and had brought ruin upon the vile rats of Westburrow. Then Benjamin knew what he must do. He could not let Francis' death be for nothing.

Benjamin was the only mouse around for a hundred miles. He raised the sword above him and said, "Francis . . . I . . . I'll go back to Kingsburrow. I'll tell them what happened here, how heroic you were. I'll make them see. I will raise up such an army of mice as this world has never seen, and I will return here, and find some way to destroy that beast forever. I . . . I am Sir Benjamin, knight of Kingsburrow . . . and I have sworn."

Blood & Water

by [Alethea Kontis](#)



[Artwork by Nicole Cardiff](#)

Love.

Love is the reason for many a wonderful and horrible thing.

It was the reason I lived, there in the Deep, in the warm embrace of the ocean where Mother Earth's crust spread and gave molten birth to the world. Its soul was my soul.

Love is the reason she came to me in the darkness, that brave sea maiden. I remember the taste of her bravery, the euphoric sweetness of her fear. It came to me on wisps of current past the scattered glows of the predators.

The other predators.

Her chest contracted and I felt the sound waves cross the water, heard them with an organ so long unused I had thought it dead.

Help me, she said. I love him.

The white stalks of the bloodworms curled about her tail. We had a common purpose, the worms and I. We were both barnacles seeking the same fix, clinging desperately to the soul of the world. Their crimson tips brushed her stomach, her shoulders. They could feel it in her, feel her soul in the blood that coursed through her veins. I felt it too. I yearned for it. A quiet memory waved in the tide. I was a maiden, too. Once.

Patience.

My answer was slow, deliberate. How much do you love him, little anemone?

More than life itself, she answered.

She had said the words.

I had not asked her to bring the memories, the pain. There is no time in the Deep, only darkness. I could but guess at how much had passed since those words had been uttered this far down. Until that moment, I had never been sure if the magic would come to me. Those words were the catalyst, the spark that lit the flame.

Flame. Another ancient memory.

The hollow vessel that was my body emptied even further, pulling me to her. I held my hands out to her breast, and there was light.

I resisted the urge to shut my inner eyelids to it and reveled in the light's painful beauty. It shone beneath her flawless skin like a small sun, bringing me colors . . . perceptions I had never dared hope to experience again. Slivers of illumination escaped through her gills and glittered down the abalone-lustered scales of her fins. Her hair blossomed in a golden cloud around an innocent face, a face I remembered. And her eyes . . . her eyes were the blue of a sky I had not seen for a very, very long time.

She tilted her head back in surrender and the ball of light floated out of her and into my fingers, thin, white and red-tipped, much as the worms themselves. I cupped her brilliant soul in my palms and felt its power gush through me. So long. So long I had waited for this escape. I had stopped wondering what answer I would give if I should ever hear the words again, ever summon the magic. When the vessel was full, when my dead heart beat again,

would I remember? Would I feel remorse? Would I have the strength of will to save her, to turn her away? Would I choose the path of the good and brave or the path of desperation and escape?

She smiled at me over the pure flame of her soul.

I was a coward. *You will see him*, I told her.

I pressed her soul into my breast. The moment the light filled me I became her. I could see my body through her eyes - translucent white torso marred by jagged tears, blood red hair tossed up by the smoky vents and tangling about the worms, black eyes wide, lips parted in ecstasy.

I could see him in the back of her mind, the object of her affection. He was tall and angular, with sealskin hair. There had been a storm and a wreck, and she had saved him. She had dragged him onto a beach and fallen in love with him as she waited for him to open his eyes. She had run her fingers through his hair, touched his face, traced the lines of the crest upon his clothes. He was handsome and different and beautiful. When he awoke, he took her hand in his and smiled with all his heart. And when he kissed her, she knew she would never be able to live a life without him.

In that small moment, as the glow of her soul dimmed into me, her thoughts echoed inside me.

She told herself it was worth it.



Once the transformation began, the pain pushed all other thoughts out of her head. Water left her as suddenly as her soul had left her, her gills closing up after it. The pressure that filled her chest made her eyes want to pop out. She clamped her mouth shut, instinct telling her that she could no longer breathe her native water. She beat furiously with her tail, fleeing for the surface.

Halfway there, the other pain began. It started at the ends of her fin and spread upwards, like bathing in an oyster garden. The sharpness bit into her, skinning her, slicing her to her very core. Paralyzed, she let her momentum and the pressure in her chest pull her closer to the sky. Part of her hoped she could trust the magic enough to see her to the surface alive. Part of her didn't care. It wished to die, and knew it could not.

That price had already been paid.

Her head burst above the waves and she opened her mouth, letting the rest of the water inside her escape. Her first deep breath of insubstantial air was like a lungful of jellyfish. It was different from the shallow amphibious breathing she had done before, different when this was her only option. She coughed, her upper half now as much in agony as her lower half, not wanting to take that next breath and knowing that she had to.

She lay there on the undulating bed that was once her home and let it heal her. She stared up at the sky until it didn't hurt so much to breathe, until her eyes adjusted, until rough hands plucked her out of the sea.

She was dragged across the deck of a ship much like the one from which she had rescued her lover, right before it had been crushed between the rocks and the sea. The man who had pulled her up clasped her tightly to him. He was covered in hair, more hair than she had ever seen in her life, and in the strangest places. It did not reach the top of his head, but spread down his face and neck and onto his chest. Perhaps it liked this upper world as little as she did and sought a safer, darker haven beneath his clothes. She reached out a hand to touch it, and he spoke to her. The sounds were too high, too light, too short, too loud. She did not understand them. His breath smelled of sardines. She ran a finger through the hair on his face, and he dropped her.

She could not stand. Misery shot through her and she collapsed on the deck. Her hair spilled around her . . . and her legs. She stared at her new skin. It looked so calm and innocent, but every nerve screamed beneath it. Another man stood before her now, wearing more clothes than the hairy man, and he had shiny things on his ears and around his neck. His bellow was deeper than the first man's, but still as coarse and spiny, and still foreign to her. He crouched down before her and brushed her hair back from her face. He cooed at her. She touched the bright thing around his neck that twinkled the sun at her, and he grinned. His teeth were flat. She wasn't

threatened. Braver now, she pulled at the necklace. He let her slide it over his head and put it around her own neck.

He picked her up and carried her to a place that hid her from the sky and set her somewhere softer than the deck. He made light for her out of nothing, a red-orange glow that topped a lumpy white mass. He was doing magic to impress her. She liked this place and this man who worshipped her. He had given her a gift, and now he would take care of her. If only there was a way she could tell him why she was there. She was sure he would help her. Perhaps he could see into her heart and just know.

The man removed his shirt, and she relaxed even more. He wanted to put her at ease. By looking like her, he would make her feel like she belonged. He took off the rest of his clothes and came up beside her. He patted her head, ran his hands down her hair. He touched her new skin. Still sensitive, she brushed his hand away. He put it back. She tried to push it away again, but he was stronger. She frowned. He smiled all those flat teeth at her once more. She wondered if she might have been mistaken. He moved to cover her body with his.

The misery she had felt before was nothing in comparison. She inhaled the excruciating air and screamed a hoarse cry. She clawed at him, pushed at his weight on top of her, but she could not move him. Agony ripped her body apart again. A tingling sensation washed over her and the light in her eyes began to dim.

Somewhere in that darkness, through the pain, she could feel his heartbeat. The emptiness in her cried out. He had something she needed.

She reached up, pulled him to her, and sunk her pointed teeth deep into the skin of his neck. She drank him down, consuming his soul, filling the barren places inside her. He collapsed on top of her and still she drank, until there was nothing left.

The door burst open and the hairy man entered. He pulled the naked man off of her. She knew he would be able to tell what the man had done from the blood between her legs. And he would be able to tell what she had done from the blood she now licked from her lips.

"Siren," he whispered.

She gasped. In her brain there was an avalanche.

Words flooded her, images and thoughts, smells and sounds. Knowledge. She knew what it was like to love a woman and kill a man. She knew fire and rain. She knew how to sail a ship, this ship, and she knew the names of every man on the crew. She cried out again and slapped her palms to her head. She had taken the man's soul, and his life right along with it. She watched as the shafts of her golden hair turned deep red, filled with the captain's blood.

The first mate had named her. He knew what she was. She was death, the shark, the thing to be afraid of. She lured men to their graves with her beauty.

In one swift motion he pulled the knife from his belt. She did not flinch as he approached her. There was nothing left to fear.

The knife swept down and split the captain's throat open, hiding the teethmarks in the cut. He stared deep into her eyes as he pulled a large ruby ring off the dead man's finger and put it on his own. The knife, streaked with what little crimson was left in the captain's body, he brandished at the crowd of men gathered at the door.

"Eddie Lawless, what's goin' on?" the man in front asked. The men behind him whispered low, words like "magic" and "evil" and "witch" catching in her ears.

"It's Lawson, Cooky," the hairy man responded. "Captain Lawson. And don't you forget it."

"Yessir," the men mumbled. "Yessir, Cap'n."

"Leave me," Lawson ordered.

"But sir, what about Cap'n --"

"I am the captain," he told them. "You can collect the carcass later. Leave me now." He slammed the door in their faces.

The mattress shifted under his weight as he sat down across from her. She did not want to look at him, concentrating instead on the ends of her new hair and the line across the dead man's throat.

Lawson shoved the body onto the floor. "Siren."

She looked up.

"So. You can understand me then?"

She nodded once.

"Good." He pulled the sheet down and wiped his knife blade with it. "Understand this. I know what you are, what you need and what you do. If you do exactly as I tell you, I won't kill you."

If she had known how to laugh, she would have. It was unsettling. She knew what laughter was, what caused it and why someone did it, but she didn't have the slightest idea of how to make her body perform such a feat. It was the same with the words - she could understand them, but she couldn't get her tongue around them and speak back. She would have laughed at the thought of this man killing her, for she would have welcomed death. But there was one task she had to accomplish before that happened. She had to find her lover.

She nodded her head once more.

"Excellent." He left the bed and went to open a trunk on the other side of the room. He rummaged through it for a moment, and then tossed a bundle of burgundy material into her lap. She stared at it, marveling in the slight difference between it and the color of her hair. She reached out and stroked its softness, drawing patterns on it with her finger.

His chuckle brought her out of her state. "You have no idea what to do with it, do you?" He took her by the hand and gently eased her off the bed. "Come on, stand up."

She placed one foot flat on the floor, then the other. Then she pushed up with all her might, locking her knees and propelling herself forward into him.

He caught her before she hit the floor. "Whoa. Easy. You have to get your sea legs." He helped her balance enough to stay upright. Surprisingly, her feet held her without too much trouble.

"Now," he said, grabbing the bundle off the bed, "you're lucky I have a daughter and I'm used to doing this." He spun her around so that she faced the wall. "Six years ago I only knew how to *undress* a woman." He pulled her hands up above her head and eased the material down around her. He moved her hair to one side so he could button up the back.

"There." He turned her back around. "It's a bit large and it'll probably be a tad warm. But it'll keep the sun off you, and the . . . my . . . men away from temptation." He looked her up and down. "Not that they'll need much warning, mind. But you get enough rum into a man . . .well . . .stranger things have happened."

He looked down at the former captain's body. "You won't need to . . . eat . . . again for a while then?"

She shook her head.

"Right. Best if you only do it when I tell you." He shoved the knife back into his belt.

Her eyes widened.

"Oh, don't worry," he chuckled. "You're aboard a pirate ship, darlin'. If there's one thing we've always got more than our share of, it's blood."



They encountered a ship three days later. From her sanctuary she heard blasts from cannons spread amidst the cries of men. She lost her footing when the ship lurched sideways, hooks pulling the losing ship close enough so that men might cross over. She peeked through the windows at the smoke of the guns, swords clashing as the blood flew.

Lawson came back to her room when the battle had died down. He opened the door and threw a man at her feet. His clothes were ripped and his face was a bloody mess. Gray eyes looked up at her from the red-stained face and filled with terror.

"No . . . oh, God, no" were the last words he spoke.

His fear was intoxicating.

She closed her eyes when she was finished and let the magic wash over her. She felt the pain this man had in the pit of his stomach. She felt his broken arm and nose. She felt the love he had for his young wife and small child. She knew his favorite food was strawberries. It wasn't just the blood she craved; it was everything. She needed the senses and the psyche, the emotions and the pain, the good and the bad. She needed his life, his soul.

Rejuvenated, she tossed her hair back and peered up at Lawson. He cupped her cheek and wiped a spot of blood away from the corner of her mouth. "That's my girl." He threw open the door and kicked the man's body over the threshold. "There's your captain, men," he declared, eyeing each member of the newly vanquished crew. "Seems he got into a spot of trouble. Any of you want the same trouble, just cross me."

Crews were mixed and supplies were stolen, and then they were off in search of the next victim.

The second ship burned. It was spectacular. She ran to the railing and held her hand out to the beautiful, live thing that danced on the sea as it consumed sails and timbers and bodies alike. She had seen candles and lamps in life and in memory, but this was a beast, wild and hot and bright as the sun. Hands grabbed at her clothes to keep her from falling over the rail, and they pinned her down when the magazine finally exploded, taking the rest of that ship's crew with it.

On the third one, she found him.

The battle this time was a long one, and by the time Lawson brought her the captain of the other ship, he was half dead. She drank him anyway. And somewhere in the memories of this man was the someone she had been looking for.

She gasped when his face came to her. She drew back, her teeth disengaging from her meal, blood running down her chin and staining her dress. This man knew her lover. Not well, but he knew him. She tried to make sense of the jumble of images that flowed through her, but nothing connected. She searched his body for a sign, a hint, something. She found it on the smallest ring he wore, a gold band stamped with the crest she had traced over and over on the beach that day.

When Lawson returned, she pointed at herself and then held up the ring. He smiled and patted her on the head. "Of course you can keep it, darlin'. You can have all the trinkets your little heart desires."

He didn't understand. How would she make him understand? She slid the ring over her red-tipped thumb. She would save it until she thought of a way.

The fourth ship was a long time coming.

She spent most of that time at the bow. Lawson called her their figurehead. It was an apt description, based on what she had seen on the prows of other ships. She would lean against the rail, arms spread, red hair trailing behind her in the breeze. She liked letting the wind slip through her fingers. It reminded her of home. The currents

of air were not that different from the currents of water. Men did not have the freedom of movement that her kind enjoyed, but the principles were the same. They walked among it, breathed it in, let it give them life. It brought sounds and smells to them. They did not see it or think to taste it, but it was always there inside them, touching them, surrounding them.

She stood there, day after day, until the salt encrusted her lips and her hair was a faded orange. What little red appeared in the tips of her fingers had been burned there by the sun. The men avoided her and prayed hard for another ship. They tread lightly around the captain. No one wanted to be the Siren's next meal.

Lawson finally bade her return to the stateroom, and she was too weak to disobey. The table was covered in maps and charts. She walked past them on the way to the bed and glanced down at the area Lawson was plotting. A symbol caught her eye, and she jumped back. She waved at Lawson. She pointed to herself, and to the ring around her thumb. She pointed to herself, and to the same symbol down on the map.

"There?" he asked her. "You want to go there? Why?"

She could not answer, so she just kept pointing to herself and the map.

"That's home," Lawson told her. "Where Molly is. I promised never to go back until I had a ship full of riches. She deserves no less." He shook his head. "No, darlin', we can't go there. Not yet."

Frustrated, she closed her eyes. Disjointed thought-flashes skipped through her mind. She tried to remember the man with the ring, tried to bring his soul to the surface. But it had been so long, and she was so weary . . . and there was a port . . .

Her eyes snapped open. She moved her finger on the map to an island just off the coast of the country bearing her lover's symbol. She pointed at Lawson, and then stamped her finger back down on the map.

"Windy Port? What's there?"

She threw her hands up in exasperation and scanned the room. She held up the medallion of her necklace to him.

"Gold?"

She nodded and kept searching. She found his knife on the table, picked it up, and then shook her head.

"Swords?"

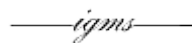
She shook her head again.

"This?" He removed the pistol from his belt and held it out to her. She nodded emphatically.

He cocked his head and grinned. "Siren, if you're right about this, I'll take you anywhere in the world." He strode out of the room and hollered to his first mate. "Hard to port, Matey!"

"Cap'n?" the first mate asked.

Lawson hooked his thumbs in his belt. "We're going home."



The moment Lawson set her down on the dock at Windy Port, she fell. The hollowness inside her throbbed. She could not believe anything could have been so still as land. There was no life in it. The air was not strong enough to keep it fluid. It was rock. Still, empty, dead rock. She was but a shell, a humble reconstruction of the world upon which man walked every single day. How did they survive without a connection? She hugged her stomach, doubled up and gagged, only emptiness escaping her dry heaves.

"You okay, honey? Take it easy. It'll pass soon."

The words spoken to her had a cadence she had never heard before, and it surprised her so much she didn't understand them at first. The hands that pulled her hair back away from her face were small and delicate. The woman had on a black dress. Her hair was pinned up on her head and decorated with shiny black beads. She smelled . . . soft and nice. And she was gentle when she accepted the Siren's embrace.

"It's all right," the woman said as she patted her back. "Everything's going to be all right." She barely screamed when pointed teeth pierced her flesh.

Everything was going to be just fine.

Suddenly conscious of her appearance, she pulled her dress over her head and began tearing at the woman's clothes. Lawson knelt beside her and motioned for his men to surround them so as not to draw attention to the scene. "Discovered vanity, have we?" he chuckled as he helped her undress the woman's corpse. Once she had changed, the men weighted the body and rolled it into the ocean.

Lawson helped her stand. He tossed a dark cloak about her and covered her hair with its hood.

The inn they went to almost pushed her sanity over the edge from sensory overload. The room was filled with people of all shapes and sizes. There were smells from the food, the ale, the dogs in front of the fire, the fire itself. Men and women talked and shouted and joked and laughed. A scrawny youth crawled up beside the dogs at one point and sang for his supper. She was mesmerized. These were so different from the songs of the water, the flash of fish in the currents, the mating of whales in the deep. Some were slow and soft; some were fast and loud. And when the rest of the room joined in, she clapped her hands in merriment.

Throughout the night the crew dropped in one by one to report and consult with Lawson. There were nods and low whispers. She watched as papers were signed and money changed hands. Thus Bloody Lawson conquered Windy Port, without ever leaving his seat. When the festivities ended he paid for his meal, tipped heavily, and left, dragging her behind him.



Molly's homecoming was a grand event. Lawson covered every flat surface in his new house with sweets and cakes and flowers. He hired a seamstress to take Molly's measurements for a whole new wardrobe, the only seamstress he could find that didn't seem overly preoccupied with the Prince's upcoming wedding. Paper-wrapped packages of all sizes littered the largest of the tables. A doll and a red rose waited on the chair for his princess.

The Siren sat on a stool in the corner, cut off from the sun and the earth, the water and wind. She waned as she watched the miniature cherub-faced human run through the door to embrace her father. Her mop of dark brown curls disappeared in her father's coat as she hugged him, right before he picked her up and twirled her around the room. There was something about this strange apparition, this child, and she could not decide what it was.

Molly giggled as she snuggled her doll. She reached out to the rose.

"Be careful," her father warned her.

"Yes, Papa," she said smartly. "I will watch for the pricklies and the thornies." She buried her nose in the crimson petals and took a deep breath. When she opened her eyes, Molly saw the Siren there in the shadows.

The child set her doll down carefully on the table. "Who is she, Papa?" Molly whispered.

"She's . . ." he started, twisting the ruby ring on his finger. "I saved her," he said finally.

"She's so pretty," Molly said. The child came around the table and held the flower out to her. "She's just like the flower."

"Yes," he said. "Just like a rose. She's got pricklies and thornies too, Molly. You have to be careful around her."

Molly took another step forward, still offering the flower. The Siren took it and grinned, being careful not to show any teeth. Before her father could stop her, Molly launched herself into the Siren's arms.

The child's skin was softer than the woman's at the pier. Her hair smelled of sweetness and . . . something . . . indescribable. Irresistible. She took another deep breath. There was life within this little bundle, so much life she vibrated with it.

Lawson wrenched his daughter away. He took her by the arms and held her tightly. He sank down to his knees, so that he could address Molly eye to eye.

"Don't you *ever* go near her again," he said sternly.

"But Papa, she's so sad," Molly cried.

"She's dangerous," he admonished. "Just be a good girl and do as your papa says."

Molly bowed her head. "Yes, Papa."

"We'll even call her Rose, okay? So you don't forget." Lawson chucked her under the chin. "Now, what are you going name your dolly?"

Molly's eyes brightened again and she rushed back to the table for her doll.

The Siren sunk her nose into the flower and inhaled, its fragrance mingled with leftover sweetness. She watched the child open the rest of her gifts.

That night as he escorted her to her room, he said to her, "You touch my daughter, I'll kill you." Then he shut the door and turned seven keys in seven locks.

Each day after that was much the same. He would not let her leave the house, for fear that she would be recognized, and he be discovered as the lawless man he used to be. The third time Lawson caught her staring out the windows, he forbade her that too. Each night he would take her to her room and give her the same warning about his daughter before turning the seven keys of her prison.

She would sit on her bed and stare into the darkness, wondering what she had done wrong. Had she not given him the riches he desired? Had she not paved the way for him to return home to be with his daughter? She had made him happy - why should she suffer as a result? How would she ever find her lover now?

She edged closer to the window and watched the moon move across the sky. Somewhere not far, the reflection of that same light was skipping across the waves. Somehow, she would escape from this prison. Someday, seven locks would not hold her.

Every few nights he would bring her someone, long after Molly was asleep. He would wake before the dawn and take the body away. She learned all she could from these poor souls, but it was never enough. They were whores or cheats or liars, people whose absence in some way benefited Lawson and whose minds were such a jumble of unreliable information she could never discern anything that could help her.

She waited. She waited while he scolded her every night. She waited as he shoved each of the seven bolts home. She waited as he fed her, sparingly, barely enough to survive. She waited for him to get comfortable, to slip, to let something get by him.

Like the snitch.

Lawson bent over and the unconscious man fell from over his shoulder and onto the bed before her. "Small, but he's all you'll get, understand?"

She opened her mouth, throat contracting. "Yeth," she managed to say.

"Good. 'Cause if you touch my daughter, I'll kill you." He shut the door. She counted slowly to seven before pulling the man into her lap and feasting.

Her heart pounded with a foreign pulse.

He was there.

Her lover.

He was everywhere inside this man's head. He sat at the head of a table, talking sternly to a group of older men dressed in black. He sat in a large chair at the end of a hallway. He rode a horse down the path through the garden and along the beach. He rode in a carriage beside a beautiful, golden-haired maiden and people threw flowers in the street before them. This was the golden-haired maiden who had saved him from a shipwreck, he told them. After months of searching, he had found her in a small fishing village on the coast. He owed her his life, and he loved her with all his heart.

He was the Prince.

And in a week, he was going to marry the wrong woman.

Lawson did not come the next day to let her out of her cell. Nor did he come the next. The third day, the snitch's body began to smell. The fourth day, she tried to feed off it again and gagged. There had not been much in him to begin with, and whatever was left in him now was gelled and rancid. The fifth day, she began to shake. She pounded on the door and the walls and the window until the skin of her fists shed. The sixth day, she began to scream. It came out of her as a long, keening wail. It echoed her hunger, her desperation, her emptiness. Her voice gave out as the sun rose on the seventh day, his wedding day.

She spent the hours curled up against the door, hoping to hear something. Any sign of movement at all would have been welcome. She played with the ends of her faded hair, teasing them in and out between her toes. The shadows moved, lengthened, and eventually, the sun's light died. Her hopes died right along with it. She placed her palm flat on the door beside her head.

It was warm.

She closed her eyes and could feel the energy radiating from the other side. She could hear small, shallow breaths. She could taste sweetness on the air.

Molly.

She knocked two times on the door.

"Rose?" the tiny voice called hesitantly.

She knocked two times again.

"Daddy's sick and he had to go away." Skirts rustled against the floorboards. "I'm lonely. Are you lonely?"

Two knocks.

"Do you want to play with my dolly?"

She spread her fingers against the door. "Yeth," she croaked.

The warmth faded, and there were sounds of a heavy chair being dragged across the floor. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven keys were all slowly turned in their locks. The chair was pushed aside, and the door opened.

The lonely child flew into her arms, the momentum pushing the Siren back onto the bed in her weakened state. She cradled the frightened child, felt the porcelain head of her dolly poking into her side. She soaked up the child's energy, willing it into her empty body. She bent her head and breathed in the sweetness of her. She nuzzled her nose in the softness.

She shouldn't. She knew she shouldn't, but he had caused her so much pain. She was so hungry. She had nothing left to lose.

Molly screamed and fought, but every bit of her gave the Siren the strength to hold the child down, to fill the abyss inside her with this soul of pure innocence. It was so beautiful. The sensations did not wait until she was finished. They exploded into her mind every second. There was fear, yes, absolute fear, but then came sadness and betrayal. There was happiness and laughter, anger and tears. Most importantly, she finally realized the *whys*. She knew why a person felt joy and why they felt pain. She learned the elation of seeing something for the very first time, and the despair in losing it.

Loss. She knew now what she had been dealing out all this time. There was no way she could have ever understanding the impact of ending a life without understanding what it was like to begin one. The weight of all the souls she had consumed pressed heavily upon her. She learned consequences. She realized that the things she did affected people other than the person she was killing. She understood that all the pain she had felt before was nothing to the pain those people would feel for the rest of their lives. She felt regret, and love.

Love.

It spread through her. Unconditional love tickled her down to the red tips of her fingers and toes. Love was trust. Love was faith. Love was believing in the impossible. The rainbow of Molly's soul filled her with love until the last drop. She held the child's limp body in her arms . . . and she laughed.

She laughed and laughed, her voice echoing through the dark, vacant house. She laughed until she cried, tears flowing unchecked down her cheeks for the first time. She cried for Molly, for all of them. She cried for all the things she had done. She cried for herself, for the love she had lost, for nothing.

Or was it nothing?

She had to hurry. She had to leave this place and never come back. She had to find her lover, find some way to tell him the truth. She gently laid Molly's body out on the bed and curled her arm around her dolly. She smoothed back the dark curls and kissed her forehead. She covered herself in the black cloak and fled into the night.

She was glad again to be in the air and running over the earth, despite what little support the strange elements gave her. She followed her heart and the dim memories of the snitch all the way to the castle gates.

She strode up to the guards there and threw her hood back. Those that knew of her let her pass. Those that didn't know of her learned. They died quickly.

The myriad halls and stairs and rooms made the castle a giant labyrinth, but she knew where she was going. Up and up and up . . . to the balcony suites of the Prince's bedchamber. She did not stop until she was at the foot of his bed, staring down at his sleeping body. She wanted to shake him awake, wanted to explain everything to him, wanted to scream her love for him to the rafters.

But she couldn't.

If he awoke now, he would know what she had become. He would see the evil inside of her, the stain of it in her hair and on her skin. She had saved his life, true, but how many others had she taken on her path back to him? With love came regret. She knew what she had to do. She knew that the only thing she had to offer him now was her absence.

If she could just touch him one more time . . . she reached out a hand to him. He would wake and see her. He would know that there was sky blue beneath the black of her eyes. He would know that there was gold beneath the red of her hair. He would know because he loved her. All she had to do was touch him.

No.

It would not stop at a touch. She could never be with him, truly be with him, because eventually she would devour him just as she had devoured Molly. His soul was not bright enough for her to survive alone outside it, nor was it strong enough to sustain him once she had consumed it. If she stayed beside him, it would mean his death.

She was a monster.

She forced her hand back to herself and placed it over her heart. She hoped that it spoke enough in the silence for him to hear it, to feel how much she loved him. If it had been water and not air between them, she knew he would have felt it.

A tear fell from her cheek to his.

He stirred and opened his eyes.

She gave herself one moment, one tiny, blessed moment of looking into his soul before she turned and ran.

She tripped down the stairs and cut her feet on the stones. The cloak caught on something and she unfastened it. She was sure that soon they would come for her. They would hunt her like the beast she was. She tasted the tears that streamed down her face and knew there was only one refuge. She ran to it.

The cold beach sand kissed her feet like a prayer. The salty spray mixed with her tears, chasing them away. The first tiny wave reached up and licked her toes. Waves rumbled in a cadence she had almost forgotten how to translate.

Come, they pulled.

Home, they crashed.

She took small steps forward. The sand slipped out from beneath her if she stayed too long. The force of the waves pushed her backwards in opposition to the call she felt.

Come, they pulled.

She stumbled, and the tide ripped her sideways along the beach. Gasping, she managed to regain her footing and continue walking out to sea. The current grabbed at her clothes, and she tore them off. The tips of her hair mingled with the foam. Flotsam swirled around her waist.

Home, they crashed.

She walked until a riptide took her and dragged her out to sea.

— *igms* —

My link to her was severed at that point. But I didn't have to live inside her anymore to know where she was headed.

She would grab the first sharp object she found - maybe a crab's claw or a clam's shell - and tear into herself so that the water could flow through her again. The first gash might have been straight, but the rest would be ragged and flawed. She would make her way to the Deep, her body drawn to the never-ending call of the soul of the world. She would make a home there among the bloodworms and the warm vents and the other predators.

She would take her love and regret with her. She would heal in the balm of the ocean, away from the complexities of mortal life. She would tell herself that if the day came, if the words were spoken and the magic came to her, she would turn them away. She would be brave and righteous. She would not let evil back into the world. The suffering would end with her. She would stew in the self-affliction until it became a dim memory, tucked away in the recesses of her mind like sight and sound, air and fire. Time would fade her lover's face, his name into nothing, and then time itself would melt into darkness. She would ebb and flow and never die.

But when that day did come, as it would, ages and ages from now, she would choose the light. She would choose the escape. She would let the evil out one last time just to feel it all again, to live, even if it meant stealing someone else's destiny.

As I had.

Strong arms wrapped around me, brushing my satin bedclothes against the small jagged scars on either side of my torso. I leaned back against him, feeling his heartbeat through his chest.

"I just had the strangest dream," he said. I felt his deep voice rumble through the skin of my back. "You came to me while I lay in bed, only your hair was red and your skin was different. You stared at me like you wanted to say something, and then you ran. You looked so . . . sad."

He turned me around to face him. "The day you saved me was the happiest day of my life. And this day should be the happiest day of yours. Don't be sad."

I smiled and shook my head.

"Good." He kissed me then, long and slow and deep. He hugged me tightly before pulling away. "Come back to bed?"

"Yeth," I whispered, the words still foreign to my tongue. He kissed me again and left me. I looked out over the moonlit water once more and said my goodbyes before following him, my prince, my soulmate, my stolen love.

Love.

It was the reason I lived.

The God-Voices of Settler's Rest

by Ken Scholes



Artwork by Emily Tolson

Mother Holton grieved when the god-voices returned because she remembered what it had cost Settler's Rest the last time, when she was a little girl. It made her weep.

But they were tears of sorrow, not fear. No, she was not afraid. She knew that the voices came around like Gussuf's Wheel and that after the god-voices quieted, they would have peace for a season. But this was the second visitation in a century. They would visit sooner and sooner until eventually they ushered in the next Age of Unknowing.

The Seventeenth age, if the Book spake true. "So many," she heard a dry reed-rattle voice whisper into the darkened bedroom. Her own voice, she realized.

The room bell chimed and she sat up from the blankets. With each year, they'd piled more of them onto her. "These winters are growing colder," she would say. "What do you think of that?" And they would heat the blankets near the fire that night and her bones wouldn't ache from the cold nearly as much.

The door opened and a wedge of light pushed into the room. A girl stepped into it.

"Mother, they have started," the girl said. Mother Holton couldn't tell who it was. Perhaps one of the younger, newer converts. Was that a hint of the Northern Coasts in her voice?

"I know they have," the old woman said. "Help me to prayer, girl."

The girl shook her head. "I am not permitted, Mother."

Mother Holton laughed. "Them that's told you not to answer the voices are already on their knees, I'll wager." She coughed and tasted copper in her mouth. "Whether or not we answer is irrelevant, regardless of what you've been taught."

The girl stepped forward, uncertainty in her voice. "Why do we want it so badly?"

For a moment, Mother Holton allowed herself to hear the whispering god-voices. *Comehomecomehomecomehome*, they whispered, *toaplacewhereyouwillbeloved*. Only the whispers, when they blended, were a choir that balanced perfectly between chant and song. Mother Holton forced the voices back down. "Because we cannot bear to be alone in the Universe," she finally said. "Now help me to my knees, girl."

The girl came to her side and helped her up. There was a time when Mother Holton would have pretended to accept the assistance without resting any weight on her helper. But now, she knew she needed all the help she could get. The girl gently lowered her to the floor. Mother Holton folded her hands and bowed her head.

"Now pray with me," she said.

The girl shook her head more vigorously. "I can not, Mother."

Mother Holton smiled. "This is your first time, child. You do not know it yet, but before they pass, you will bend your knee to them that's bidding. It's better to do it now. It makes what comes later more easy to swallow."

Trembling, the girl knelt beside her.

Then Mother Holton, Settler Priestess of the First Home Temple, answered the voices from her childhood so long ago.

"Oh," she said, feeling the lump grow in her throat, "I've missed you."



When she was thirteen, Abigail Holton loved Enoch Bentley and knew with a teenaged certainty that she would marry that farm boy and give herself to corn and babies. Her grandmother had raised her on the Book and she knew her part in the Settler's Promise. Grandmother was a seamstress with gnarled hands, doing the best she could by the baby that came into her care in the sunset of her life. Abigail's mother had died following a visitation. And though her grandmother did not speak of it, the other girls in town did.

But Abigail listened to the Book. She would not hate them for repeating the words their mothers whispered among themselves when they thought their children weren't listening. Her mother had taken her own life because the voices never stopped for her.

Abigail was walking in Farmer Bentley's fields, wondering what Enoch looked like with his shirt off, when she heard the voice that changed her life. *Come home*, it whispered and a choir joined in around it. All her life she'd felt empty and alone, until that afternoon as the day stars set hours ahead of the sun. But when the god-voices started up on the edge of her womanhood, Abigail Holton knew that regardless what she'd been taught, she was not alone in the universe.



The voices abated and Mother Holton opened her eyes. She could feel the girl beside her shaking, and she looked over at her. Head in hands, she sobbed into the edge of the bed. Mother Holton reached out put her hand on the girl's shoulder.

"What is your name, child?"

The girl sniffed. "Esther Hopewell," she said. "I am Sister Elizabeth Hopewell's daughter."

Mother Holton nodded. "I remember you." Sister Elizabeth was one of the seven Settler's Daughters who had disappeared exploring the ruins in the southern deserts fifteen years ago. At Mother Holton's insistence, the Temple had been the young orphan's caretaker. "Do not be alarmed at the voices, Daughter Hopewell. Their power is in perception alone. They will pass in time. Go, talk with Sister McDougall about it. She can teach you prayers and meditations that will help you."

The girl helped her back into bed and tucked the blankets around her. "I will speak to her, Mother Holton. Thank you."

She could see the shame on the girl's face. Shame for having wept, or for having prayed? It mattered little. Mother Holton reached a gnarled hand up and patted the girl's cheek.

"Remember what I told you," she said. "The voices will pass."

But she fell asleep hoping that they wouldn't, that somehow this time it would be different.

Maybe they will not change this time, she thought, *and the good voices will stay with us*. But she knew from the Book -- from a thousand of years of recorded Settlement history -- that they would follow the same pattern they always had. And the Settler's Daughters would write the words down, study them, and try as they had for centuries to understand the god-voices. They had given up on silencing them long ago.

Maybe they will not change this time.

But she knew they would.



The day after the voices changed, Abigail Holton snuck into the Temple and sought out Mother Cassel in her meditation vault.

Her grandmother was a childhood friend of the priestess and she'd grown up in the shadows of the Temple's massive laser-etched cornerstones. At one time, the First Home Temple had been the center of Settler's Rest. But at some point, trade and education had become equally important. Still, her grandmother's friend recognized the need for both and gave her friend regular mending business, paying the high end of fair wages for her skill.

The Book told them that the change would come, but she'd hoped it would be different. When they changed, she spent the day crying, lost and hopeless.

When the voices finally quieted enough for her grandmother to sleep, Abigail slipped into the night to find Mother Cassel.

"Abigail Holton," Mother Cassel said. "Does your grandmother know you're out in the middle of the night?"

Abigail swallowed. "She's asleep."

The old woman smiled. "The change was difficult this time, wasn't it?" she said. "Of course it was, this was your first."

She hung her head. "I was faithless, Mother. I didn't believe the Book. I didn't believe they would change." Her eyes came up slowly to meet the old woman's. "I *prayed*."

Mother Cassel clicked her tongue. "Of course you did. How could you not? The voices are beguiling at first, promising you something better. They gain your trust. But they always turn, Abigail, they *always* turn. They cajole, and then they loathe."

"But why?" she asked.

Mother Cassel shrugged. "We do not know. It's always been this way." She smiled. "But with each visitation, we learn more about the voices . . . and more about the world. We will write it down in the Book, and we will take what clues we can from the words between their promises, pleas, and threats. We will do what we can *while* we can. And someday," she continued, "the voices will win out for a spell and we will hide our work in the ground until reason comes back into focus again."

Abigail thought about the voices, both earlier and today. When they changed and became angry, she had not known what to do. She had felt betrayal, yet she had felt love, too. She'd known in that instant that she was made for more than Enoch Bentley's corn and babies.

"I want to help," Abigail Holton told her grandmother's friend. "I want to join the Settler's Daughters."

"I know, child," Mother Cassel said, and the next morning she came to Abigail's grandmother and extended her invitation.



Mother Holton took her tea into the Looking Glass room when the voices changed. Her cup rattled as she put it down and she was certain it was from being startled by the angry words that whispered at her.

She knew from the Book and from experience that when the voices changed, they said more in their anger. She had ordered her sisters to listen for this and to double the Scrivener's Watch. It was the only comfort she could take from the change.

The last visitation, during her girlhood, had pointed them to the ruins in the southern deserts. It had taken nearly seventy years to find them and they'd lost many Daughters to the searching. But for the last fourteen years, their excavation there taught them much about the home their foremothers had forged for them so long ago.

She listened to the voices until they passed. She had forgotten how bitter they were. *Time will do that*, she thought.

She looked up. "Sister Abernathy?"

Her plump, middle-aged day nurse bustled over. "Yes, Mother Holton?"

"Fetch Sister McDougall for me. I would speak with her in my sitting room."

Sister Abernathy nodded and waddled off to find the woman. Mother Holton finished her tea and tried not to feel sad at the loss. She knew it was an expected response. The voices affected most that way. The change usually disrupted commerce and sometimes even led to violence.

As they occur more and more frequently, she thought, *they will become more adept at handling them. Until the new Age of Unknowing comes to pass.* She said 'they' because she knew she would not live to see it. The frequency between visitations increased, but not in a way that could be measured and predicted. Hundreds of years of silence; then a smattering that became more regular until finally, the voices did not leave. Teachers would rise up, imparting divinity and destiny to any who would listen. And slowly, mysticism would consume reason. It was easier than resisting. And, according to the Book, it would eventually undo the work of the Settler's Daughters over decades -- even centuries -- until the voices finally faded again and the cycle began anew.

Of course, all of that would be years and years beyond her lifetime. By then, Esther Hopewell's granddaughter, if she were to have one, would be an old woman. And that granddaughter's great grandchildren would be old by time the world was put right again.

Sister McDougall was perhaps a dozen years younger than Mother Holton. Like the other Daughters, she'd given her life to studying the Book, learning the nuances of the god-voices. Now that they had changed, this would be her busiest time. But she sat across from Mother Holton now and didn't look distracted or annoyed by the interruption.

"Hello, Mother," she said, folding her hands in her lap.

"Hello, Sister. Is your Scrivener's Watch ready?"

Sister McDougall nodded. "It is. We'll get what we can. The change came faster than we expected."

"Yes," she said. Then she changed the subject. "I sent Sister Hopewell's daughter to you."

"I spoke with her," Sister McDougall said. "I've had talking-to's with several of the Daughters. The voices are harder on the younger girls."

Mother Holton remembered. "They were hard on me when I was young. But they brought me to the Daughters." She chuckled. "Before I heard the voices, my highest aim was to be a farm boy's nervous bride." For the first time in years she wondered what had become of Enoch Bentley. Dead by now most likely, but it wouldn't be hard to find out of a certainty . . . if she remembered to ask someone to look into it.

Enough lolligagging in yester-year, woman, she scolded herself.

Fixing her eye on Sister McDougall, she asked the question she dreaded. "How many of them do you think we will lose?"

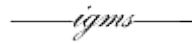
Sister McDougall shrugged. "None if I can help it. Our coping techniques get better each time."

Mother Holton felt a chill and shivered. "Thank you, Sister McDougall. Please tell Sister Abernathy that I will sit here a spell and then ring for her when I'm ready."

The woman inclined her head slightly. "Yes, Mother."

Mother Holton pulled at the quilt that covered her lap and Sister McDougall stooped to lift the heavy cotton patchwork up over her chest and then tuck it in behind her. She smiled her appreciation and the Sister returned it.

After the woman left her, Mother Holton sat alone in the sitting room and tried to remember what Enoch Bentley had looked like.



He had whispered beneath her window the night she was to leave her grandmother's home to take up studies in the Temple. The voices had quieted some time ago, but Enoch Bentley couldn't understand. He was a man -- or at least very nearly so -- and the god-voices passed over most of them. Less than understanding the voices, he couldn't understand her choice to join the Settler's Daughters.

She heard his voice and went to the window. "Enoch Bentley," she said in the angriest whisper she could manage, "you mustn't be here at this hour."

She was fifteen now; he was seventeen. The silver moon lit his blond hair and his eyes were red. "I don't want you to go," he said.

Her grandmother slept soundly in the bed across the room, but not for long if the fool farm boy didn't keep his voice down. "Wait there," she said.

She slipped into the calico she'd worn earlier at the small gathering of friends and family her grandmother had hosted. Barefoot, she tip-toed out of the room and let herself out into the night.

She found him crouched beneath the apple tree. Now she could let the anger into her voice. "What are you doing here?"

He blushed. "I . . . I wanted to tell you something."

She crossed her hands over her chest and wondered what she'd ever seen in this awkward boy. Before the voices spoke, she'd been convinced that he was her future. They'd grown up together on the edge of Settler's Rest. She'd helped him with his ciphers and letters; he'd shown her how to trap a rabbit. One year, after the Pioneer Days picnic and barn dance, she'd told him that she would marry him someday and she'd kissed him quickly on the cheek. He'd blushed and run away. A few years later, his mother, a dour farm matron, negotiated the dowry with her grandmother. But they had sent the cedar chest back to the farm just last week, because Settler's Daughters did not marry.

She looked at him, now, and realized he'd been crying. Her voice was softer. "What do you need to tell me, Enoch Bentley? You know I'm leaving tomorrow for the Temple."

He stammered and his foot dug in the ground. "I don't want you to go, Abigail." His red eyes came up to meet hers. "I want you to stay. I want to be your husband and father your children."

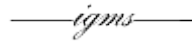
She shook her head. "I cannot marry you. I have to follow my calling," she started to say by way of explanation. "The voices --"

"Gods damn the voices," he said, looking away. The anger in his voice stung like a slap. When their eyes met again, he looked ashamed and tragic. "I -- I'm sorry."

When he turned and walked away, Abigail Holton stood and watched him go. *Let him go*, she told herself, *and let some other girl harvest his corn and babies.*

He could never understand, she told herself standing there beneath the apple tree, the grass and scrub around her washed in moonlight.

Enoch Bentley hadn't heard the god-voices; if he had, he would know that she was made for more than him.



Mother Holton stretched out beneath the heated quilts and sighed at another day gone past.

The god-voices had stayed angry until winter bled into spring and then suddenly they had stopped. Mother Holton met with the Sisters daily after that to hear what they'd learned listening for the scraps of truth amid the angry voices. It was long, slow work. Like the work of evolution or the work of the Book.

Between meetings she napped. Sometimes she napped *during* the meetings until someone coughed politely and startled her awake.

Mother Holton told her keepers that with the change in the weather, she no longer required the heated quilts. They didn't listen and she was glad for it -- though she kept that a secret. She felt cold all the time now.

The door opened and she heard Sister McDougall's quiet voice. "Mother Holton, are you awake?"

She sat up. "I am, Sister."

"I thought I should come to you first," Sister McDougall said, "because you've asked after her."

Daughter Hopewell. Mother Holton felt a stab of loss. She'd known there was something about the girl. "What has she done?"

"She and three of the other younger girls were caught teaching in the city."

It happened every time. Mother Holton sighed. "How long were they at it?"

Sister McDougall stepped further into the room, her face unreadable in the dim light. "A week maybe. We've gathered up everyone we could and we're working with them now."

Working with them. It sounded much nicer than the reality. "And the girls?"

"They are restricted to quarters. I think we're catching them soon enough that we will be able to reclaim them." She paused, looking away for a moment. "But I don't know that of a certainty. I only have word of them that's gone before."

Mother Holton nodded. "You must do your best," she said. "And I will want to speak with Daughter Hopewell in the morning."

Sister McDougall inclined her head. "As you wish, Mother." Then she turned to the door. "I will bid you good sleeping."

"Thank you, Sister." Mother Holton closed her eyes and listened to quiet footfalls and the sound of the hinges whispering. A question struck her and she called out. "Sister McDougall?"

"Yes, Mother?"

Mother Holton opened her eyes. "What were they teaching in the city?"

Sister McDougall didn't say anything for a moment and Mother Holton wondered if something different happened, some new variation of insanity that would eventually take them into a time where knowledge and reason meant

nothing. But when Sister McDougall answered, it was an old familiar tune. "They were teaching that the voices prove we are not alone in the universe."

Yes. That was how it started. Mother Holton nodded. "Thank you. Good sleeping to you, Sister."

"Good sleeping, Mother," she said as she closed the door.

Mother Holton took a long time finding sleep that night.



Daughter Abigail Holton put down her copy of the Book and stared out of the window at the moonless night. She sighed.

She'd seen him again that day, and once again he'd not realized that it was her beneath the cowl. It had been two years since they'd spoken and the newness of her calling had long worn off. The glamour she had imagined was mostly housework and cooking, though there were small projects with the Sisters and lots of classroom time. When she'd seen Enoch Bentley and his wagon in the merchant's square she was surprised at the feelings it evoked. He'd been selling corn to one of the produce booths and she had been running a message to the mayor's office for Mother Cassel.

She picked up the Book again, but once more she couldn't keep her mind upon the words. She tried meditating, but the only image she could conjure was straw-haired Enoch Bentley in his denim trousers and his loose-hanging, stained cotton shirt.

Finally, she gave up and went down to Daughter Henshaw's room. "I need the dress," she said when the freckled girl opened the door, still rubbing sleep from her eyes.

The dress was their best-kept secret. Mother Cassel and the others would have had it burned if they knew, Abigail was certain of that.

Phoenicia Henshaw disappeared for a moment, then came back with a bundle of cloth. She pushed it through the barely open door. "Now it's your turn to hide it," she whispered.

Abigail nodded.

She smuggled the dress back to her room and put it on beneath her cassock and cowl. Then she slipped out her window and climbed into the nearby tree. She'd snuck in and out of the Temple dozens of times to visit her grandmother over the last two years. She easily slipped the gate guard and hid her cowl and cassock in the Pioneer graveyard before turning west and making for Bentley Farm.

Damn fool girl, she told herself as she stood beneath an alder tree and watched his house. *What are you at?*

The windows were all dark. She moved beneath the one that she remembered was his and stretched up to tap at it gently.

Nothing.

She tapped again and then jumped when it groaned open. Enoch Bentley looked down, alarm on his face turning to surprise. "Abigail Holton? What are you doing here?"

What *was* she doing here? She looked away. "I . . . I came to see you."

"In the middle of the night?" Maybe he saw the look on her face. Maybe he just didn't want to talk in whispers from the window. He frowned. "Meet me at the barn," he said.

She met him at the large double doors. He wore the same trousers and shirt she'd seen him in earlier, his high leather boots scuffed and cracked. He pushed one of the doors open and went inside. Abigail followed.

After they got inside, he lit the stub of a candle and put it on a tin plate. He opened his mouth, a questioning look on his face, and Abigail swallowed and pushed herself at him. Her mouth found his mouth and she kissed him like the pictures she'd seen in Mercurio's *Notes on Human Behavior*. At first, he tried to talk, but eventually, he started kissing back.

She felt warmth in her belly, a tingling that spread into the rest of her body, out to her toes and fingers and hair.

Come harvest, she thought, *I'll give him his firstborn daughter and she will be strong and will not let the voices change her*. She would leave the Settler's Daughters proud of her shame and go to live a life of love in the midst of corn and babies and Enoch Bentley.

Afterwards, she lay in his arms and pretended it was their wedded bed.

"Have you left the Daughters then?" Enoch finally asked.

She turned so she could face him. "No," she said. "I'm going back after you're asleep and you'll not see me again."

He smiled. "Then I will never sleep again."

She said nothing. Instead, she pulled him closer and stroked his face and shoulders and side, pretending she would be there in the morning to cook breakfast while he tended to the farm.

But after he was asleep, she stood and wiped herself clean with an old towel she found near the goat stall. Silently, she pulled her dress back on and fought back tears.

She could imagine all she wanted. She could dream a house full of children and a legacy of love. But in the end, she would go back to the voices.

And if somehow Enoch Bentley's seed *did* take hold, Abigail would go to Mother Cassel, confess her transgressions and drink the Tander oil to end the pregnancy.

Tonight was a necessary detour, she told herself. A sacrifice was a sacrifice only when its worth was fully understood.



Mother Holton insisted that they take her to the girl's room. They sat her in a chair in the corner and waited outside. Esther Hopewell sat on the edge of her bed, her red-rimmed eyes dark from lack of sleep. "What will happen to me?" she asked.

Mother Holton smiled. "You'll be reclaimed from the voices."

The girl's eyes went wide and her voice trembled. "I don't want to be reclaimed."

They never did. But with time, the voices outside -- incessant and reasonable and calm -- would offset the internal ones and the girl would find the discipline to hold those ghosts at bay. The old woman nodded. "Nonetheless," she said. She leaned forward. "You've read the Book, child. You understand why."

The young girl's eyes filled with water. "And after that?"

"You'll be watched for a spell. And then you'll be sent home."

A tear spilled over. "This is the only home I've ever known."

Mother Holton reached over and patted her knee. "And so it shall continue to be. But it will be different for you now." She paused. "And your friends will be back at the farms." *Watched for a spell*, she thought, *and kept far apart to keep a resurgence from occurring*. The Seventeenth Age of Unknowing would come soon enough -- no point helping it come faster.

When the girl spoke next, Mother Holton heard the loneliness in her voice. "I don't know if I even want to be alive anymore," Esther Hopewell said.

"Of course you don't," Mother Holton said. "But you don't have to know anything right now except for this: Sister McDougall and the others will help you -- if you let them."

I could tell her, Mother Holton thought. *I could tell her that it is the easiest truth of all. That we are not alone in this universe as long as we have each other, as long as we have the Settlement.* But some truths could not be freely given -- they had to be slowly revealed because the process of revelation was the true engine of change. They would spend months with her, reclaiming her from the god-voices, and in the end she'd live out her days in quiet service to the Settler's Daughters or marry into the Farming Combine and live among someone's corn and babies.

She realized that Daughter Hopewell had spoken quietly and she started. "What did you say, child?"

"For a moment," she repeated, "I was certain I was not alone."

Mother Holton remembered that feeling. She'd felt it three times. Twice, it was the voices. Promises of home and love followed by threats and wrath and the ranting echoes of a people driven mad long ago. But she'd also felt it one other time, that night so long ago, when she'd pretended to be Enoch Bentley's bride.

"You are not alone," Mother Holton said.



The sacrifice gnawed at her for a month. Abigail Holton sobbed at night when no one could see or hear. She found herself oversleeping and unable to focus on her studies. When Enoch Bentley's letter found her, snuck in through an elaborate network of Daughters' errands, it reached her at her lowest point. She'd been scolded twice already that week and had just realized she was late with her bleeding. She opened his letter, read it, and discovered there were even darker basements beneath the lowest places of her heart. Like the voices, Enoch Bentley's letter started with promises of love and home, then became angry and cajoling.

The full weight of the sacrifice didn't strike her until later in the day. When she suddenly burst into tears in the middle of dinner, she found herself in front of Mother Cassel's desk as snowflakes fell outside the window behind, shining silver in the moonlight.

"I do not think you need the Tander oil just yet," Mother Cassel said after Abigail told her story. "You are under tremendous strain. Wait a few more days and then see me if you've not started."

Abigail Holton sniffed, wiping her eyes with the sleeve of her cassock. "Will I need to be reclaimed, Mother?"

Mother Cassel laughed. "Good lords, no, child." She clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. "If they made such a way as to reclaim the heart from love, we'd all be better off dead."

"I do not love Enoch Bentley," she said.

Mother Cassel chuckled again. "You do not know that you do today. But someday you will, and it will help you know that you've chosen well." She leaned forward in her chair. "You *were* making a sacrifice, weren't you?"

Stunned, she nodded slowly. "How did you know?"

"The Addenda speaks of it. It is a common theme among certain of the Settler's Daughters."

Abigail swallowed. "What does that mean?"

Mother Cassel smiled. "Nothing to worry on tonight, child." She sat back in her chair. "But it speaks highly of you, that you can be sure."

That night, Abigail carefully folded Enoch's letter and hid it away beneath her mattress. From then forward, she read it every night until it faded so badly that she could not read it, holding it in her hands until it finally fell apart.

But even long after that, she lay awake nights and recited it from memory until it simply became some small part of the other voices she remembered.



Mother Holton sipped her tea and looked out on autumn. She sat wrapped in the quilt, but near the window so she could see the ducks on the pond. There was a knock at the door and she turned toward it. "Yes?"

Esther Hopewell stepped into the room. "Hello, Mother," she said.

"Hello, Esther Hopewell." She hated that she could no longer call her daughter. "Sister McDougall tells me that you are leaving us."

Esther Hopewell nodded. "I am, Mother."

"What will you do, child?"

The girl shook her head. "I do not know. I will find work in the city. Maybe I will meet a nice boy and bear him a daughter."

Mother Holton nodded. "Maybe you will." Her reclamation had gone well, but Mother Holton had assumed it would. She'd finally understood what she'd known about this girl, but she was certain that the girl did not know it yet. She would know it later, when the irony of this sacrifice would make her laugh for years to come. But for now, Esther Hopewell was simply a strong young woman who had once been a Settler's Daughter before the voices changed her life.

I came by the voices and she leaves by them, Mother Holton thought. She raised her hand for the Patriarchal Blessing. "Go ye in grace and peace, Esther Hopewell. Be fruitful and Settle the land."

"Thank you, Mother," she said. She curtsied and then left.

Sister Abernathy came in shortly after, carrying a tray with a steaming bowl and a piece of bread. She helped Mother Holton into bed and then placed the tray on her lap. "I've done that looking into you asked of me, Mother," she said.

Mother Holton lifted the spoon to her mouth, tasting the sweet corn chowder. She couldn't remember any 'looking into' that she'd needed recently. But she'd learned not to show it, to simply nod and wait.

"He died six years ago," Sister Abernathy continued. "I talked with his daughter when I was in South Hold last week. He left many children and grandchildren behind." She laughed. "There were Bentley's all over the place."

Mother Holton nodded. She vaguely remembered hearing that he'd gone south with the earlier expeditions, more years ago than she could count. "He lived a full life then," she said in a quiet voice.

Sister Abernathy leaned forward. "Who was he, Mother?"

"Someone I wanted to have a happy life," she said. "And it sounds like he did."

She finished her corn chowder, soaking the bread in what little remained to soften it for the teeth she still had. When she was done, Sister Abernathy took the tray away just as the linen girl entered with her stack of heated quilts.

They tucked her in and left her to nap, but instead of sleeping, she laid awake and remembered that night long ago; the night she'd given herself to Enoch Bentley in order to understand what she was giving up to serve the Settler's Daughters, to give her life to the mystery of the voices in the quiet halls of the First Home Temple. Words came back to her, a voice that spoke promises of love and home, and for the first time in years, she found herself reciting Enoch Bentley's letter. She was surprised that she still remembered most of the words, and she spoke them now quietly as if they were a prayer of great power. She moved slowly through the first half, telling herself that it was to savor the beauty of them. *Lie to yourself, old woman, see what it will get you.* She recited the first half slowly so that she would be asleep before the voice changed. She did not want to hear the angry voices tonight -- not the voices that had driven her to Temple so long ago. And certainly not the voice of Enoch Bentley that had given her calling a value beyond a young girl's fervor. She closed her eyes and smelled the fresh-plowed earth.

In her dreams that night, Abigail Holton raised corn and babies. Beneath it all was a whispering she could just barely discern.

God-voices assuring her she would never be alone.

Jeepers, Creepers, Where'd You Get That Beeper?

by David Lubar



Artwork by Lance Card

To tell the truth, I really didn't know exactly what a beeper was or how they worked until the day I found one. I'd seen them in old movies. They're called *pagernow*, and they do all sorts of fancy stuff. But back then, they were just called beepers, and most of them didn't do much at all. If someone had asked me how they worked, I wouldn't really have been able to give a good answer. It wasn't something I paid much attention to.

I wouldn't even have found it if it hadn't beeped when I walked by. At the time, I believed it was a coincidence. I was on my way home from school. I was late. Mr. Atkins had made me stay after to work on an essay. I'd already written it once, but he told me I didn't put enough effort into it and he wanted me to try again. So I got out later than the rest of the kids. I'll bet a couple hundred kids walked right past the beeper before I did. It was lying on the ground next to the sidewalk, just a block away from the school. But it blended into the dirt pretty well, so it wasn't surprising that nobody noticed it. As I said, I would have walked right by if it hadn't beeped.

But it did beep. I stopped when I heard the sound. I really didn't know what I was hearing, but it seemed familiar. I searched around, then finally found the beeper. It was a small box, about half the size of a deck of cards, and there was one of those little windows on one side like they have on calculators.

It stopped beeping as soon as I picked it up. There wasn't any message in the window.

I stood there for a minute, holding the beeper and wondering what to do with it. The right thing would be to try to find the owner. I had no idea how to do that. I thought about just putting it back where I'd found it. I actually started to bend down and place it back on the ground.

As I reached toward the spot where it had been, it beeped again. Just one short beep. I stood up checked and the display window. There was still nothing showing.

I figured I'd bring it with me and ask my folks what to do after they came home from work. So I put the beeper in my shirt pocket and walked the rest of the way to our apartment.

My friend Max was waiting for me on the front steps. "I thought you'd never get here."

"Look what I found." I showed him the beeper.

"Cool," Max said.

It beeped again. This time there was a number in the window. "Let's call it," I said. "Maybe we can find out who this belongs to."

We went inside and I dialed the number. After four rings, I heard the click of an answering machine. "I can't come to the phone right now," the voice said. "Please leave a message when you hear the tone."

I hesitated, not knowing what to say. Finally, I hung up without saying anything.

"Well?" Max asked.

I told him about the message. The beeper beeped again. I dialed the new number. It was another answering machine. This time, the message said, "Need a new roof? You've called the right place. Leave your number and we'll get back to you."

I hung up again. "This is weird," I told Max. "I think the number is supposed to be someone who's just called the beeper. Right? But nobody is home at these places."

Max shrugged. The beeper beeped. I looked at the number. *Why not*, I thought. I dialed again. No surprise -- another recording. "To leave a message for John, press one. To leave a message for Karen, press two."

I hung up. The beeper beeped. The next call told us, "Be back soon -- leave a message if you want."

"I think it's broken," I said. "It's probably just putting up any number."

"Yeah," Max said. "Maybe it got wet."

The beeper beeped. I dialed almost before I realized what I was doing. Sure enough, another message, "Buried under a ton of work? We can help you with secretaries and other office personnel. Leave your number and we'll get back to you."

"Man, this doesn't make any sense," I said. "I've got better things to do than to make all these calls. Maybe I should just put it back where I found it."

"Yeah," Max said. "Or you can toss it in the trash."

I looked at the can. And I thought about the messages. I wrote them down.

I can't come to the phone right now.

Need a new roof?

To leave a message for John, press one.

Be back soon -- leave a message if you want.

Buried under a ton of work?

As I stared at them and saw the pattern, I felt my blood freeze in my body. My hand fell open and the beeper clattered to the floor.

"What's wrong?" Max asked.

"Look." I pointed to the messages with my pencil. "Read the first word of each one," I said.

Max took the sheet from me. "I need to be buried." He stood there for a moment. I guess it took that long for the meaning to sink in. Then he said, "Whoa," and dropped the paper.

I stepped back from the beeper.

"Too weird," Max said. "It has to be a coincidence."

"Has to," I said.

The beeper beeped.

I looked at the beeper. Then I looked at Max. Max looked at me. "Guess we have to find out," he said.

"We can't stop now." I picked up the beeper. The plastic felt oddly cold. I dialed, listened to the recording, and wrote down the first word.

There was no mistake. A message was forming. When it was done, the beeper stopped. I read the whole message aloud. "I need to be buried. Look under bridge on river. Thank you."

"Spooky," Max said.

"Yeah. Too spooky." This wasn't like a scary movie or a Halloween haunted house that you knew wasn't real. This was flat out creepy.

"Now what?" Max asked.

"I'm not looking for a body," I said.

"No way," Max agreed.

"We have to tell someone." If I called the police, they'd want to know how I knew. They'd never believe the truth. I realized I had to go to the bridge first. Max didn't want to go, but I talked him into it.

"I don't see anything," he said, when we reached the bridge.

I searched the rippling surface. There had to be something in the water. For the second time that day, I felt my blood freeze. I could barely make out the shape deep below me. I knew it wasn't a tree branch or anything like that.

"Come on," I told Max. We walked off the bridge and went to find a policeman.

That evening, the police recovered a skeleton from the river. I heard them say whoever it was must have been there for at least seventy years.

"Funny thing," the policeman told me when it was over. "You'd think the rescue workers would have spotted something when they pulled that car out last week.

"What car?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Some guy was more interested in talking on his cell phone than on watching the road. He went right into the water." He pointed over to the guardrail.

I could see that a spot looked newer, like it had just been replaced. "Was he hurt?"

The policeman shook his head. "Nope. Just wet. But even after we rescued him, all he could do was complain that he'd lost his phone. It's probably still sitting on the bottom. If you ask me, that's the best place for it. Those things will get you killed if you're not careful." He shrugged and walked back to his patrol car.

Max and I stood for a while and watched the water running beneath the bridge. When we were ready to leave, I reached into my pocket and took out the beeper. It beeped once. Then it was silent. It never beeped again. But I kept it. I'm not sure, but I think it brings me luck.

A Cart Full of Junk

by [David Lubar](#)



[Artwork by Lance Card](#)

Turk was in a mood to do some harm. He was hanging out at the corner of 4th Street, where the movies used to be. The place was boarded and shut, like almost everything else on the block. Gray was with him, along with Mackler, Johnny, and a couple of others. Across the street, an old guy came around the corner, pushing a shopping cart stuffed with junk. Bad timing.

Turk stepped away from the wall. "Let's go shopping."

He strolled across the street, angling to end up ahead of the old man. Gray and the others followed. There was no need to rush. The old guy couldn't run with the cart, and Turk knew there was no way he'd leave it behind.

The one flickering streetlight behind Turk jabbed his shadow like a spear at the old man. The rest of the lights had been shot out long ago.

"Hey man," Turk said as the old man got close. "Mind if I look?"

The old man stopped walking, but didn't speak. As Turk stepped toward the side of the cart, the old man reached under the blanket that draped the shapeless mound of possessions. Turk froze, ready to dodge if the guy pulled a knife. He'd seen street people could go crazy without warning, slashing out with a surprising fierceness. Turk knew how easy it was to end up sprawled across the curb in a puddle of blood and intestines.

The man removed something soft and small from beneath the blanket.

"A gift." As he rasped the words in a low voice, he flicked his arm. "From all of us."

"Hey!" Johnny shouted.

Turk turned and looked. Johnny was clutching whatever the man had thrown.

"Gloves?" Johnny held them up. "This is crap. There's a finger missing." He threw the gloves down.

Turk grabbed the edge of the cart. "You giving us junk?"

"Gifts," the man said. He barked out some sound between a laugh and a cough.

Turk shoved him with both hands. The guy had no more mass than a stack of paper bags. He tumbled, and stayed curled against the sidewalk. It was too easy to be much fun.

"Come on," Turk said. He led them away, in search of something more amusing. He found it soon enough.

Some fool had parked a new Taurus on 3rd Street. Turk hadn't expected to stumble across such a generous gift that night, so he wasn't prepared to make the most of it, but he figured there'd at least be time to snatch the stereo and a couple tires. Like a pit crew, they went to work at their usual tasks. Turk yanked the stereo while Gray popped the trunk and pulled out the jack.

It went fine until Johnny grabbed the right rear tire. The car slipped off the jack. The rim slammed down on Johnny's hand.

They left the tires, but Turk kept the stereo under his jacket when they dropped Johnny off at the emergency room. There was no point waiting for him. It would be hours. And the screams were getting on Turk's nerves.

Gray kept babbling about it the rest of the night.

"It wasn't my fault."

"I didn't make it slip."

"Johnny should have been more careful."

And on and on until Turk felt like hitting him in the face with a brick. It was as bad as the screaming.

The next night, Turk saw the old man again. As Turk crossed the street, the man was already reaching into his cart. He pulled something out and threw it towards the group.

Gray caught it. "One sneaker? This is useless." He threw it at the old man, nailing him in the shoulder.

"Yeah," Turk said. "What's wrong with you? You think we want junk?" He pushed the old man down. Then he grinned. It might not be any fun to push the guy once, but it could become an enjoyable part of his nightly routine. He gave the guy a kick in the ribs, but not too hard. He didn't want to break him just yet.

"Let's go get Johnny."

#

When Johnny came to the door, his hand was wrapped in a huge wad of bandages.

"Freakin' mummy," Turk said.

"I lost a finger," Johnny told them.

Turk's gut rippled. He didn't like the idea of losing body parts. "You coming?" he asked.

"Yeah." Johnny joined them.

They walked ten blocks to the closest subway stop. Turk hoped there'd be something interesting under ground. Something to play with. Or someone. But nothing exciting was happening.

Until Gray slipped on a piece of a meatball sandwich someone had dropped near the edge of the platform.

He fell at a bad time. There was an express train coming. He almost managed to scramble clear, but he got clipped. His left foot was mangled so badly, even Turk didn't have the stomach to look at it. At least Gray passed out, so they didn't have to listen to any screams as they carried him up the steps.

"One foot," Turk said aloud after they dropped Gray at the hospital. "One sneaker." He realized a person with one foot would only need one sneaker. And a person with a missing finger would need gloves with the same finger missing.

"Let's find that old man," he said. It was time to stop this. Whatever was happening, Turk knew how to end it.

They didn't find him that night. When Turk spotted him the next evening, two blocks from the subway, a chill ran through him. But he didn't back off. Fear was a sign of weakness. Weakness got you killed.

"Hey, you!" He jogged toward the old man. Turk expected him to keep walking, or to turn and run.

The old man did the unexpected. He shoved the cart toward Turk. Then he scurried for the corner. Turk didn't bother to chase him. He knew he could catch up with the guy after he checked out the cart.

"What's this crap?" Mackler asked, pulling aside the blanket.

The cart was filled with scraps of cloth. As far as Turk could tell, they were all the same. Turk reached in and lifted out a piece of knitted wool. The others all reached in and grabbed one. The shape seemed familiar, but incomplete. Turk noticed a label. *Size 7½*.

A hat? Turk thought.

"Half a hat," Mackler said, completing his thought.

Turk looked up. The old man was gone. He looked back in the cart just as Mackler pushed aside the mutilated hats, revealing an object underneath -- something made of wires, batteries, a mouse trap, and several dark sticks the size of road flares.

Snap.

Turk's brain screamed for him to turn away, but the bright flash erupted too quickly for his body to obey. The explosive force struck him and the others full in the face.

When the rain of flesh and bone was finished, any of the singed and smoking half hats scattered across the sidewalk would have fit nicely on what was left of Turk's head. Though Turk and his gang were beyond caring what they wore or how they looked.

Around the corner, the old man hadn't flinch at the sound of the explosion. He had other things on his mind. It was time to look for a new cart.

Interviews With The Fantastic

InterGalactic Interview With Esther Friesner

by Darrell Schweitzer

Esther Friesner is undeniably a very funny lady and the Queen of Comedy in contemporary fantasy. Her books include *Mustapha and His Wise Dog*, *Harpy High*, *Hooray for Hellywood*, *Gnome Man's Land*, *Majyk by Hook or Crook*, *The Sherwood Game*, and many others, including *The Sword of Mary* and *The Psalms of Herod* which are not funny, all of which remind us that Friesner is actually a writer of considerable range and versatility. She has won the Nebula Award twice, for serious stories, not comedies. Recently she has been writing a series of Young Adult fantasy novels on themes taken from Greek mythology. This interview was done on at Lunacon on Sunday, March 16, 2008. That weekend Esther also sponsored a decidedly mythological promotional event, in which several Greek deities and the Oracle of Delphi were present.

SCHWEITZER: The earliest things of yours I can remember are a couple stories in *Amazing* in the early '80s. One was called "A Game of Crola," and was eerie and serious -- was that your first sale?

FRIESNER: No.

Q: -- and then there was "Dragonet," which was more the work of the Esther Friesner we all know. So, where does it all begin?

FRIESNER: As far as selling stuff, the first thing I got published was in *Asimov's SF*, when George Scithers was the editor. He had this wonderful, wonderful, kind thing he did, which was to send you back checklists with "This is what you did wrong" for very common mistakes. Then you would start getting letters, which would say, "Okay, you have learned from the checklist and you are making *uncommon* mistakes," and then finally you would stop getting letters and you would get a check and a contract with no letter whatsoever, and that was great.

I believe my first sale through that route was called "The Stuff of Heroes." It was about a romance writer who had no talent for writing, but she was scientifically gifted, so she had created the first reading system where you got a palpable hologram of the hero. You started the book, the hero appeared, and you were cast in the role of the romance heroine. And of course he was extremely dishy, and well, hijinks ensued.

That was obvious "go for the comedy" gold. The second one was more ironic comedy. It was called "Write When You Get Work," also sold to *Asimov's*, about a solution to overcrowded prisons, and what happens when you are dealing with the results of that solution.

And from there, on we went. I've done funny stuff; I've done serious stuff; I've done horrifying stuff. It's always a lot of fun for me, because, well, if it isn't fun, why am I doing this? The glamour, the respect, the huge piles of rubies. . . . [Laughs.] Yeah, I would, but nobody has been offering me huge piles of rubies. What's the matter with this system?

But that is where my first sales of science fiction and fantasy started.

SCHWEITZER: You have to admit there are certain perks. There may not be piles of rubies, but I doubt that many mainstream literary writers were ever carried into a convention room on a palanquin borne by scantily-clad, muscular slave-boys.

FRIESNER: Well, you know, that's because they never *asked*. That's the problem. Usually I ask for something -- see rubies, above -- and I *get* it. Plus, we live in a frighteningly creative community and there is always someone who thinks, Gee, that would be fun. Let's see if we can get together and do that.

So I was in a discussion, and we were talking about what's your fantasy, and I mentioned being borne in triumph on a sedan chair by very nice looking young gentlemen. Some friends of mine said, "Okay, we can do that for you at Balticon," and they did, but you know what the problem is? More people found out about it and I couldn't turn around without someone saying, "Hi, we've got a sedan chair. We've got a bunch of scantily-clad young men. Would you like us to do that again?" I've had that done now three times. I think it's enough and it's time to move on to the rubies.

Are you paying attention? That's *rubies*.

SCHWEITZER: I saw it done at a Phrolicon.

FRIESNER: Yes, that was the second time.

SCHWEITZER: I have always appreciated your ability to move on before the gag goes stale. For example, we are beyond Cyberprep now. But it was great while it lasted, a response to Cyberpunk, and a way to promote good manners and niceness in science fiction in the 1980s.

FRIESNER: I am, I confess it, sometimes a curmudgeon. I now hear people laughing and going, "Sometimes? *Sometimes?* she says. The sun sometimes rises in the east."

But, long, long ago, when Cyberpunk first started, there were a number of its advocates who being very vehement about the fact this was *it*. This *was* what science fiction was going to be. This was the one, true science fiction. There could be no other. Anyone who thinks there can be any other kind of science fiction -- insert rant here.

And I was just listening to this, and my curmudgeonly nature took over, which is basically expressed in the mantra, "Well says *you*." I thought about it, and having observed the way the world works, I concluded that things get accomplished -- whether it's the exploration of space or whatever -- when there is money to be made for someone. So probably the conquest and exploration of space isn't going to be accomplished so much by the people with the chips in their heads as by the people who have the money to start with and want more of it. At the time, "Preppie" was a kind of icon. It was the days of *The Preppie Handbook*. So, instead of Cyberpunk, all this nitty-gritty, I thought we should start *Cyberprep*, because if space will be conquered, it will be conquered by the trust fundees who are terribly polite about it. But you don't want to get in their way. They can be ruthless.

So, it was a very nice joke. I was in this with Susan Schwartz and Judith Tarr as well. Once we had the core idea, we started riffing on it. I wrote the Cyberprep manifesto --

SCHWEITZER: It wasn't --

FRIESNER: It wasn't a manifesto. *Pronunciamento* because a manifesto is *ever* so Red and well, Communism is just *so* inconvenient to our interests. I went around a convention getting people to sign it. I got Isaac Asimov's signature. I still have that document, so it is probably now worth, oh, many rubies.

And we had a party to launch Cyberprep. From then on we started having other parties to continue it. Pink and green were the Cyberprep colors. The alligator was our symbol. We had very lovely tea parties. We had a butler at one. It was just a good joke, and then after a while, as with after a good joke, we decided it was funny enough and we stopped it. But it was *fun* while it lasted.

SCHWEITZER: I was one of the signers. My Cyberprep name was "DC." John Betancourt was "Biff."

FRIESNER: Yes.

SCHWEITZER: Do you remember the Cyberprep blazer? There was going to be a final Cyberprep blowout at, I think, the Atlanta Worldcon in 1986, or it might have been New Orleans two years later. There was a power failure and the party was not held.

FRIESNER: I wasn't even there.

SCHWEITZER: Then I can tell you a story. I had worked out the proper male Cyberpreppie attire for this. I was wearing a green blazer with a pink alligator on the pocket, which I had made by drawing it on an piece of pink cloth and cutting it out, because I couldn't find a pink Izod alligator. The party was cancelled but I decided to wear this getup anyway. I was wearing a pink shirt, green spaces, a green tie, and penny-loafers, along with my Cyberprep button, and I got into an elevator with Susan Schwartz, who just lost it . . . and missed her floor.

FRIESNER: [Laughs.] Oh . . . my . . . goodness. . . . Now I do remember that when we had a Cyberprep party at a World Fantasy Convention, Susan brought a bread in the shape of an alligator, and we gave Jane Yolen the first Lizzie Award. It's a big lizard like the one on all those preppie shirts. But just before we served the alligator-shaped bread, Susan raised a knife and yelled, "Think of the New Sun, Alligator!" and chopped its head right off. It was *grand*.

SCHWEITZER: We almost reach a serious point here. The essence of comedy is timing, and the essence of timing is knowing when to stop. This must be the essence of comedy writing too.

FRIESNER: It depends on the type of comedy. But sometimes people get tired of a joke. You can't tell the same joke over and over unless you're making that movie, *The Aristocrats*, I suppose. But there is always something new to write comedy about, because there is always something new that annoys me. Good comedy, as many people have said, makes you think about things. I always wind up citing Terry Pratchett, because he writes wonderful comedy, and it does make you think about certain things you've just kind of sailed through unconsciously in your day-to-day life. He actually makes you pay attention, and say, "Wait a minute. Is that right? Is that good? Why are we doing this again?"

But before Terry Pratchett, what my father used to read to me for bedtime stories was Walt Kelly's *Pogo*. And *Pogo*, some of it sailed right over my head, all of the stuff he wrote during the McCarthy Era. He had a character, a wildcat who was a caricature of Joseph McCarthy, known as Simple J. Malarkey who started a witch-hunt in the swamp. It was a blood-curdling thing if you knew what was going on in politics. But I was six years old or something, and I just thought it was funny. And then they had the Jack-Assed Society. I didn't know about the John Birch Society. I didn't know why my father was laughing hysterically reading about that. But there was enough for him to think about and appreciate, and for me to appreciate as a kid.

That's another thing about good comedy. Some things are "in" jokes. You can't do something solely based on an "in" joke unless you know that your entire audience is going to get the "in" joke. For instance, if you say "Red Shirts," from *Star Trek*, more and more people know the joke about the red shirts. Whoever wears the red shirt in classic *Star Trek* on an away mission, if he's not one of the main characters, that guy's not coming back. If you wear the red shirt, you're gonna die. Ensign Expendable.

This joke has gotten so accessible that on an episode of the cartoon show *Kim Possible* -- it's always fun, though it is a repetitive gimmick where the characters get sucked into a television and go through all the shows. She winds up in a *Star Trek* type universe. She contacts the kid who is her anchorman. He is a prodigy at the computer. His name is Wade. She says, "I'm in some kind of sci-fi show and I am stuck in this shirt," and he says, "What color is it?" "Red." "Oh my God! I've got to get you out of there in a hurry!" And, apparently enough people know the red shirt joke. Years ago, there wouldn't have been enough people who did for it to work.

So you have to have something to make everyone laugh, those who know the "in" jokes, and those who don't know the "in" jokes.

SCHWEITZER: As we edge into satire, it would seem that a lot of successful comedy is complaint. Comedy is in effect the use of laughter to prevent things from becoming too bitter. You're talking about your curmudgeonly side. So, have you written a lot of comedy as a form of complaint?

FRIESNER: Oh, you bet. I am not particularly meek, but I am small and slow, so my ability to effect any sort of change could result in my getting hurt by the people I am complaining about. So, if I can't do anything else, I can at least point out some of the things I find to be ridiculous and hurtful.

One of the stories I wrote was called "'White,' Said Fred." I was driving home, listening to public radio, and they had a story about how in England skinheads were now not merely targeting Pakistani immigrants; they were targeting the children. These full grown men were harassing Pakistani schoolchildren.

I was livid. Now, obviously, even if I were in England, what could I do about it? I am not exactly the sort to go over to a skinhead and say, "And you must stop that now." So I just had to get rid of all the anger I felt about this, and I wrote "'White,' Said Fred," in which three skinheads, who are definitely "We are the master race" supremacists, find a genie in a bottle who turns out to be a skinhead as well, and he gives them the requisite three wishes. Of course they try to change the world to fit their prejudices, and hijinks ensue. I got to do dreadful things to them and that is the closest I'll ever come, but gosh, it was fun.

SCHWEITZER: Lately you're been writing lots of fiction based on Greek mythology. Would you say something about that?

FRIESNER: I don't know why, but I have lately been on quite the Helen of Troy kick, and other Greek mythology aside from Helen too. I don't know why. I think it might be, "Oh, I've got a new toy," or it might be that there is so little told about her. In the stories of the Trojan War she is portrayed as not much more than "This is the woman who started it all. She is so beautiful." Even at the end of the war her husband doesn't kill her when he gets her

back, because she exposes her breasts to him, and he drops his sword. "Oh, ten years of war. You ran off with that guy. All these other guys are dead, but -- wow!" He takes her back.

I wondered, first of all, is that all there is to her, just a pretty face and a pretty . . . what she exposed? I wanted to explore the character in both historical directions. I wrote a story called "Helen Remembers the Stork Club." I took Helen of Troy because she's half divine. Well, she probably wouldn't have died so young. So I said, "What happens to a woman whose whole identity is that of the most beautiful woman in the world, but she continues to age?" She doesn't age at the normal rate, but she does age. Now here she is in New York City where, if you are a woman of a certain age, people tend to turn you invisible on the street. They bump into you. What if you are that woman of a certain age, and you have been so beautiful that no one would dare overlook you? How does she cope with this new identity? It's almost like Gloria Swanson's role [Norma Desmond] in *Sunset Boulevard*. She used to be this gorgeous movie-star, glamorous, and now all she's got are her memories and her delusions. I did not turn Helen of Troy into Norma Desmond, but I had fun exploring how the character would deal with being there and being who she was and who she had been.

I am also doing the backstory of Helen of Troy, which hasn't been told. What we have of Helen's story, Troy aside, is her conception -- Leda and the swan -- her birth, coming out of an egg, and her twin, Clytemnestra, who was the only half divine. There were four children born of the union of Leda, Zeus, and Tyndareos of Sparta. Two of the children were Tyndareos's children. Two were Zeus's. So two of the twins were mortal: Helen's sister Clytemnestra, and I forget whether Castor or Polydeuces was the mortal of those two. But the other boy was, like Helen, half-divine.

Helen in the myths is abducted at a very young age by Theseus. She is about twelve years old, and in studying this I learned some kind of creepy (to modern sensibilities) facts. In one of the stories, by the time Helen has been rescued by her brothers from Theseus, she has borne Theseus a child, and that child is Iphigenia, who was sacrificed on the altar by Agamemnon, because Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife, adopted Iphigenia and raised her as her own daughter.

So I am sitting there saying, "Twelve years old. May have been all right then. Creepy now."

SCHWEITZER: A little early even then. They could have waited a couple more years.

FRIESNER: Yeah, still pretty creepy. So I wrote a story about Helen of Troy as a girl being abducted to Athens. I thought, well, you know, she's not a classical Spartan. She's not of the era of the Three Hundred. She is pre-classical. She is a Minoan-Mycenaean era Spartan. But I thought that maybe the whole thing of educating the daughters in throwing the javelin, the whole physical fitness thing, training them almost as much as they trained the boys -- almost; the boys had it much harder. Maybe that didn't come out of nowhere. Maybe there was a tradition of giving the girls some kind of physical training. So I had Helen be beautiful, but why can you not be beautiful and smart? She's smart. She's got some idea of how to take care of herself physically. So instead of waiting for her brothers to rescue her from Theseus, she rescues herself.

This story was in the *Young Warriors* anthology from Random House, and I got a letter back saying, "We really liked the story. We'd love to see a novel." And now I have two novels about young Helen of Troy's backstory. One is called *Nobody's Princess* and the other is called *Nobody's Prize*. That's coming out this April. [2008 -- DS] And I've just had so much fun playing in the field of Greek mythology with Helen, giving her something more to do than just sitting around being beautiful and a pawn. She is an intelligent young girl and she has adventures.

SCHWEITZER: Are you going to take her into adulthood and retell the classical story?

FRIESNER: These are YA books, so nope, we stop it before she becomes an adult, before she gets married to Menelaus. But we did have Clytemnestra's first marriage, because I found, reading deeper into mythology, that Agamemnon was not Clytemnestra's first husband. She was first married . . . this gets into a very complicated thing. Let's just leave it at that before I tell the whole darn myth about the House of Atreus, which is definitely not YA material, a lot of that. It's bloody, scary stuff.

SCHWEITZER: There's the spike through the head --

FRIESNER: Not even that. There is the killing, cooking, and serving the sons of one of the two brothers [Thyestes and Atreus, who was the father of Menelaus and Agamemnon] to their father. Thyestes is fed his own children and he doesn't know it until his brother tells him, "Oh, guess what you just ate." Not exactly your functional family. I think even Jerry Springer would be hard-pressed to deal with the House of Atreus.

SCHWEITZER: You could do another series, unless you're becoming typecast. I could see it happening that, from another publisher, you did an adult, bloody account of the House of Atreus, but there might be concern that the readers of the YA books or the librarians of the YA books might find the adult version and put it on the same shelf. Is this an actual concern when you become a YA author? You are known as "the Queen of Silly," I'll have you know. [Friesner laughs.] So, if you made such a departure, would you have to use another byline?

FRIESNER: My reputation seems to still be very much about the comedy. And yet I have almost a shadow-reputation of being able to write very dark things, or certainly serious, if not dark things. Both of my Nebula Award stories were dark stories, especially "A Birthday." That was super-dark. It was also about dealing with a social issue. I think that the whole worry about librarians putting a dark, scary, inappropriate book next to the rest comes down to the individual librarian. If the librarian is paying attention -- I know they don't have time to read every single book that comes in -- but if they just take the time to look at the precis of the plot that comes with the material, they'll make the right decision. I know they can do that. I trust the librarians.

Also, I don't think I'm getting typecast because I am doing another YA series about Nefertiti. Helen of Troy, I have written a story for YA. I have written a story for the general populace. I have written two YA novels. Now I want to do something else. I am moving on. No one can typecast me but me.

SCHWEITZER: All writers should agonize over the terrible nightmare that begins when somebody says, "Here's a half a million bucks. I want another one just like the last one, and another, and another." [Friesner laughs.] And it keeps going on. It is possible to be trapped by success. Perhaps both Edgar Rice Burroughs and Frank Herbert were.

FRIESNER: True, but you mention the nightmare of being trapped in the millions of dollars . . . well, look at J.K. Rowling. She said, "I'm going to be done at number 7." Now, granted, we don't know what will happen within the next ten years, but, so far, she seems to be sticking to her guns.

SCHWEITZER: She can't be tempted by a mere half million the way many of us could be.

FRIESNER: It really comes down to the personality and also the financial necessity of the author. One of my favorite things about D.H. Lawrence, and perhaps my only favorite thing about D.H. Lawrence was a little poem he wrote:

He found the formula for drawing comic rabbits.

The formula for drawing comic rabbits paid.

So in the end he could not shake the tragic habits

the formula for drawing comic rabbits made.

I think I'd get bored if I had to do the same thing. Yes, I'd like to have a half a million dollars. I'd like to have a million dollars. I could have an awful lot of fun with that kind of money. But if I am not enjoying what I am doing, it will show in what I am writing. If I am not having a good time, the reader will not have a good time. The reader will not buy the book and the next time they come around they're not going to say, "Here's a half a million dollars, or a million dollars. Do it again." Readers should be given credit for being smart. They know what's good. They know what's bad. People do not really want junk food. Sometimes they want a little candy, just a totally relaxing thing to read, no need to put in any critical input, but they don't want to be talked down to. They can *tell* when the author is just phoning it in, like "Here's the slop, give me my check." I don't want that done to me and I don't want it done to the readers. I'm a reader too.

SCHWEITZER: I am sure you would never never allow your books to be franchised out. That's when the tired hacks show up.

FRIESNER: Oh my gosh, I never even *thought* of that.

SCHWEITZER: In the World of Esther Friesner . . .

FRIESNER: Or even worse, can you imagine I'm dead and I'm V.C. Andrews. I'm dead and still the books come out. When you said being franchised, I was sitting there thinking, "Oh I'd love to have McDonald's toys and happy

meals from one of my books," which probably wouldn't happen if I wrote the Dark House of Atreus. You wouldn't want to be eating any hamburger that came with the House of Atreus.

SCHWEITZER: I think a certain number of twelve or thirteen year old boys might go for that.

FRIESNER: And you're going to be wanting to watch those boys. Really watch them. But I think it would be great fun to see what they would do with a book of mine if they translated it to the screen. When *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* came out, I went to see it. I bought the book. The book was quite different from the movie, and the author said he was really pleased with how they changed it. It was a good movie, different from the book but still good. I like happy surprises. I realize I might sit there and see one of my books up on the screen and it's just "What did they do to that?" or it could be, "Wow, that's pretty cool. I didn't know Johnny Depp could do that."

SCHWEITZER: Have you ever had any Hollywood interest, with or without Johnny Depp?

FRIESNER: I have had a couple of books optioned, but so far nothing has happened. But that's how it works. You get someone who says, "Hey, let's put on a show. My uncle has a barn," and then the uncle doesn't let them have the barn. I don't know all about how it works, but it's nice to think somebody thinks one of my books might make a good movie sometime.

SCHWEITZER: If you were to radically change direction again, have you any guesses as to where you might go? I can just imagine you as a hard-science writer. It would be interesting. [Friesner laughs.] How do you think Esther Friesner the *Analog* writer would be?

FRIESNER: Pretty much impossible. I'm not saying this because I'm a girl and I'm a blonde and as blonde Barbie girl says, "Math is *hard*," but I have so many things in my background that I already know about, and I never did very well in school in the hard sciences. I could see myself writing an *Analog* story in one of the so-called "soft" sciences, and I have done books using biology. But chemistry and physics . . . I never took physics and in chemistry I managed to blow up the impossible-to-explode oxygen-making setup experiment.

SCHWEITZER: I saw somebody do that when I was in high school.

FRIESNER: Oh *really*? This was great . . .

SCHWEITZER: The guy I saw do it brought down the overhead lights with the force of the blast and hurt himself.

FRIESNER: Wow. I didn't do that, but we did have flames shooting out of the mouth of the test tube and the teacher came over and said, "It appears you've had an accident here." That was when I thought, you know, I don't think I'm going to like chemistry very much. And I never took physics. My husband has despaired of me. He is very much into the hard sciences. "But . . . physics is *fun!* *Physics is so cool!*" You know, he said the same thing about calculus. I don't believe him very much.

SCHWEITZER: Maybe the approach to writing about science, and the way into *Analog*, would be satire.

FRIESNER: Really.

SCHWEITZER: *Analog* has always run funny stories, particularly in the Probability Zero department.

FRIESNER: I have found funny stuff in science before. Some of it is pseudo-science. When I get my hands on it I can get that science to pseudo up so fast it would make your head spin, as in the first thing I ever sold. Well, there's a device here. That's the core of the story. Granted, someone will never be able to come up with this technology, but you can't say we *neverwill*, can you? And it was a funny story.

I never know where I am going to go next, so maybe I would do a science story, although right now my latest reading for pleasure project, which is usually where I wind up getting my ideas from, is alternating between reading Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* in English translation -- my French is good but not that good - - and finally reading through the entire Bible. I have decided to read a chapter a day and really pay attention to some of the things that are said. Since I've never done it. I've read spottily through the Old Testament and *very* spottily through the New Testament. Now I am going to read the whole thing, including all of those "And so-and-so begat so-and-so . . ."

So far I have actually come up with the idea that if they can calculate the date of creation, as Bishop Usher did, then they can certainly calculate the date on which the Ark finally landed. Why don't we celebrate Ark Landing Day? And somebody said, "Yes, that would be May 5th." So happy Ark Landing Day, everybody. It's just full of ideas. It's wonderful. So, I'm not reading anything in science that is inspiring me at the moment. Marcel Proust and the Bible.

SCHWEITZER: Which is funnier?

FRIESNER: I'm the girl who found a comedy moment in *Moby Dick*. And it was supposed to be a comedy moment too. I wasn't just pulling it out of thin air. The chowder scene. It's pretty funny. In *Moby Dick* it is all by itself and very sad and lonesome, but it is a comedy moment. So I really don't know. I am going through them both very, very slowly. But it's rich reading. I'm enjoying it. I think that's the key to what I do. I enjoy what I do. I like writing even when it's hard. It's like solving a puzzle. I don't consider it to be a chore. I don't consider it to be a stern duty. It's fun.

SCHWEITZER: What are your actual writing methods like. [Friesner laughs.] I collect them as a hobby . . .

FRIESNER: Not particularly anything fancy. I will sometimes get an idea out of a weird title. A title will pop into my head or present itself to me by the strangest means. The first time I won a Nebula Award it was for "Death and the Librarian." I got the idea for the title because Terry Pratchett gave me two little pewter figurines. They were about an inch and a half high, from *Diskworld*. One was of Death and one was of the orangutan who is the Librarian. And I go, "Ooh! Death and the Librarian! Thank you!" And then I sat there and the words just echoed. I thought, that's a good title, "Death and the Librarian."

The story that I wrote couldn't have anything to do with *Diskworld*; but it was not dark, but an emotional piece. It was the sort of story where when I stop reading it in public and look up, there are people weeping. So it does what it is intended to do. But my method is that sometimes I start with a title, and decide, "Well, what can I hang off this title?"

Sometimes I start with an idea and I flesh the idea out, and if it doesn't work, you can throw it out. I bless the day they made word-processors, because in the old days I would write something on a typewriter and being pretty lazy I'd say, "Yeah, that'll do," even though it could have stood a rewrite. I think I am writing much better now that I can rewrite easily.

SCHWEITZER: That may depend on how you do your rewrites. I actually had to learn to rewrite on a computer.

FRIESNER: Oh . . .

SCHWEITZER: My method involved typing one draft, and then marking it up and the retyping the entire thing, to gain a certain creative momentum. It is the difference between saying, "Remember that joke I told last night? The punchline should have been this ____" and telling the joke again, with all the timing and gestures in place. I went through a transitional stage where I would write the first draft on a typewriter, and then do this creative rewrite on the computer. So did you find that your actual methods changed when you switched to computer?

FRIESNER: I don't think so. I always was a child of the keyboard. I never wrote in longhand. My parents always let me near the family typewriter and didn't care what I did. So my handwriting stinks and it is slow, so I don't think writing has changed that much, except that it's so much easier to move the block of text here where it should be, or take things out. But sometimes I'll miss something when I am rereading on the screen. You can't do the riffle through the pages. But if that were really to adversely affect the writing, I will just have a printout and riffle through the pages and say, "Okay, this should have gone there." I've just gotten used to it. I haven't noticed a change. I haven't had a problem. The only change I have noticed is that it is so much easier.

SCHWEITZER: Always tell new writers that if you can't write a novel with a pencil, you can't write one with a computer, but if you can the computer's output will be a whole lot neater. What would be your sage advice for beginners.

FRIESNER: Okay . . . there is a lot of sage advice, but it is not the advice of absolutes. When you are a writer you have to be very sensitive and observant, because if you are not you won't be able to create characters except for walking yourself through things. You will not be able to think, how would someone who is not at all like me act? I have had some characters in my stories who are just monstrous beings doing things I would never do in my life, but I can imagine how they would do it. But you also have to have something of a tough skin, because writing,

especially if you want to have it published professionally, brings rejection. I have been writing since I was about three years old, telling stories, having my mom write them down. But when I started sending stories out, I'd get a rejection and I'd stop writing for months, because I thought "They hate me." No they didn't. They just didn't like the story. So you have to get over that. You have to be persistent, but you shouldn't be pig-headed. You can stand there and say, "Oh, they don't like me because they're stupid and horrible and evil," or you can sit there and reread what you have written and say, "You know, this could have been better. Let me try a different way."

So it's a balancing act. You have to know yourself, and you have to be willing to face truths about yourself. You also have to pay attention to the fact that writing is an art, but it's also a craft. You may have written the most beautiful thing, but if you are sending it out to an editor, well, do you know how many manuscripts most editors have to go through? You had better know how to make a professional-looking manuscript. You have to be able to know that your writing may be special and you may be a special human being, but there is no special treatment for you when it comes to submitting. If they say "No e-mail submissions," yes, they mean you. No e-mail submissions. They're not going to make an exception. They're very, very busy. Writing is an art, writing is a craft, and writing is a *business*. Sometimes very fine writing does not get published because the people who are in charge of publication don't consider it to be commercially viable. How are you going to get paid if they're not earning money selling stuff people want to buy?

I always used to love the idea of being just the writer as artist, but the reality is that you have to be artist, craftsman, and business person. You have to be able to hear no, and you have to be able to say, "No this time, but maybe next time yes. What can I do to get to that yes." I think you have to like what you are doing, because if you are only writing so you will be rich and famous, and you don't like writing, if you don't enjoy it, it's going to show. People have their own troubles. They are not going to want to be *not* entertained by what you have set in front of them.

SCHWEITZER: Thank you, Esther.