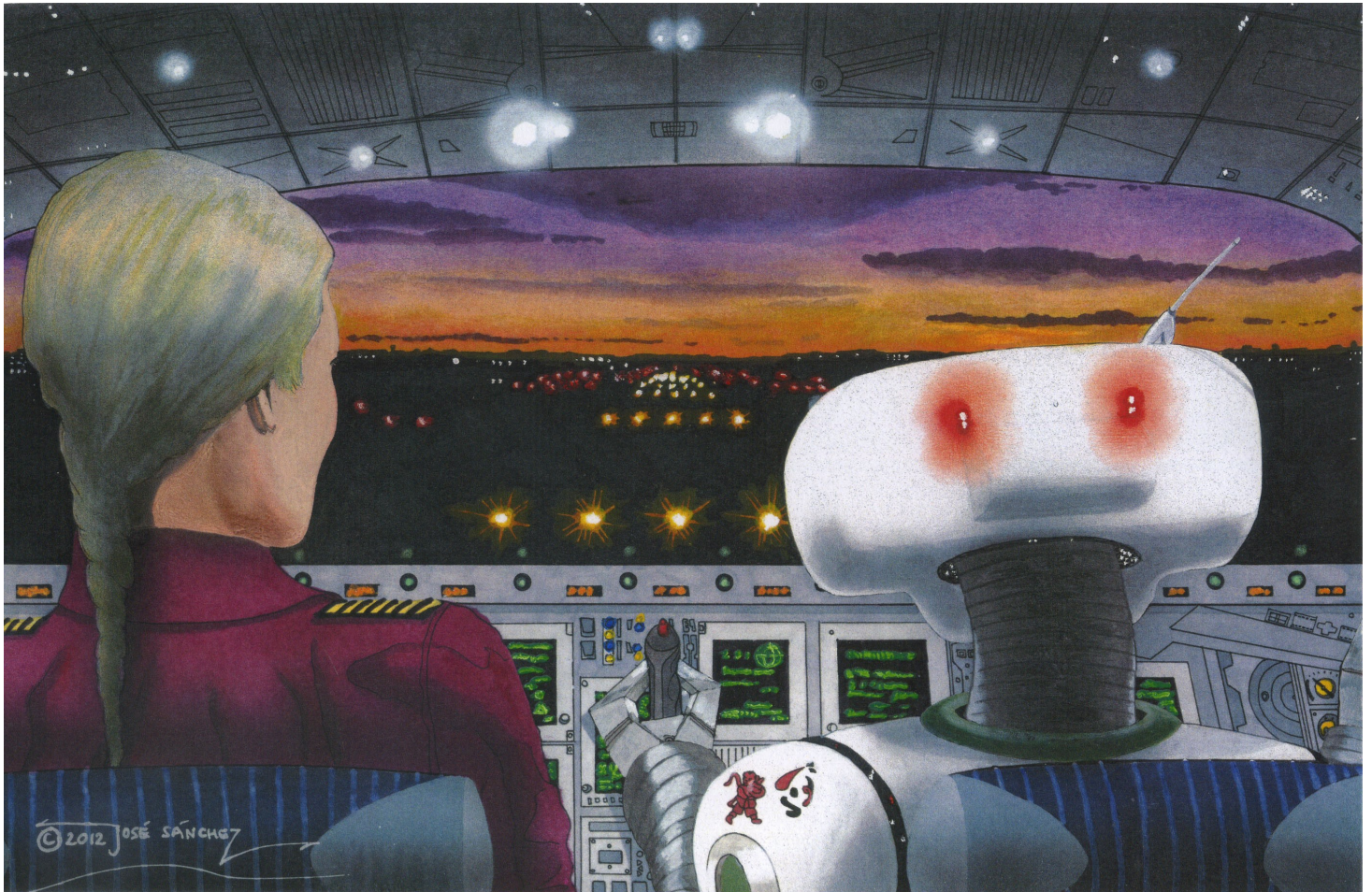


Eldritch Science

November 2018



On Final Approach

José Sánchez

Editorial

First, a significant error in the last issue. In setting up the bylines, we scrambled author names.

Alla is by Fiona Jones.

Big Bad Bob is by Ray Nelson

Humble apologies.

Second, we have a new content item: First Chapters! Yes, if you are a Neffer and have published novels, send us the first chapter (and, if you wish, the cover image), and we'll publish it as an introduction to your tale

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Thrill Ride

By Shami Stovall

Weddings were generally dull, but after fifty-six times through with the exact same couple, on the exact same day, dull wasn't a strong enough word to describe the mind-numbing festivities. But weddings involved a lot of people, which meant plenty of opportunities to make my own fun.

"Attention, everyone," the best man shouted into his microphone, silencing the music. "I won't take much of your time. I just want to congratulate Charlie and Lissa. We all knew this day was coming, but seriously, what took you guys so long to tie the knot?"

Laughter spread throughout the vapid crowd. The guests lifted their glasses and cheered. Even the first time I heard his short speech, I hadn't been impressed, and now it grated at my limited patience.

How banal.

I needed to find something to enliven my evening. It took all of my willpower not to set the place on fire, but I knew that wouldn't result in the kind of raw emotion I wanted. Living life like an average person--going through the motions--it lacked all spark and exhilaration.

Eldritch Science

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I kept returning to the wedding, hoping to find a situation or person that piqued my interest since so many were here. There had to be something I never tried before. Something exciting and not on the schedule.

With stiff motions I slipped through the crowd, never making eye contact, my attention focused on the trite slice of cake I had on my plate. I side-stepped the drunken windbag doing his karaoke--I knew his every wobbly movement by heart--and avoided the urchins playing tag in the dining room despite their mother's constant ineffective reprimands.

Where to sit?

Where hadn't I sat before?

I looked up from my cake to take in the surroundings.

My chest filled with a flutter of anticipation the moment I spotted my favorite person. He wouldn't be predictable. Things always got interesting when I involved him. Always.

I sauntered over and took a seat at the rickety foldout table. The corner of the room offered protection from the cacophony of dullards all around us, and I appreciated the semi-private space.

Simon, the only other occupant, didn't move when I joined him. He kept himself bundled in a black puffy jacket, his eyes focused on the plate in front of him, drilling a hole into his food as though he couldn't see it at all.

I stabbed my cake and broke it apart, trying to act normal--trying to hide my excitement. The icing slid across the cheap paper plate.

"Hello," I said.

Simon looked up, his blue eyes momentarily flashing with some sort of intense emotion. Hate? Fear? I didn't know. But it disappeared as quickly as it came, his vacant gaze afterward a disappointment.

"How are you enjoying the wedding, Lukas?" Simon asked, quiet and without enthusiasm.

"It's hard to enjoy anything you've seen hundreds of times before."

Simon lifted an eyebrow. "Did the best man practice his speech with you?"

The struggle to hold in my laughter prevented me from answering straight away. "That's not what I'm saying," I whispered.



Art by Angela K. Scott...Goblin

"I don't know what you mean then."

No one knew. It always amused me to explain it all, even if it would be forgotten in an instant. After I finished mutilating my cake, I leaned forward and smiled. "The best man is about to spill his drink. Wait for it."

Right on cue, the best man fumbled and with his second glass of champagne. It slid from his hand and shattered across the floor, eliciting a grasp from the cows of the audience. He shrugged off the ordeal, grinning like a fool, and threw down a few napkins.

“Technical difficulties,” he said.

Everyone laughed.

Well, everyone but me and Simon.

“And now some fat buffoon will attempt to help,” I continued, keeping my voice low, “but he’ll only make the situation worse.”

As though my words were a script, and everyone in the room mere actors for my amusement, an older man, heavy set and breathing hard, got up from his chair. He carried over a fistful of napkins but tripped on a speaker cord underfoot. He stumbled forward, hit the edge of a table, and then slammed to the floor. Food and drinks went flying. More glass shattered across the concrete floor of the community center, creating a hazard that would eventually cut some idiotic cleaning woman later in the evening.

The other guests jumped up and rushed over.

Now it was my turn to get a chuckle.

“It isn’t a wedding without a few hiccups,” the best man said into the microphone, repairing the jovial atmosphere with his laidback attitude. The crowd lifted their glasses and cheered at his sentiment.

Simon returned his attention to me, his complexion wan under the fluorescent lighting.

“You’re drunk, Lukas,” he said. “Or do you really expect me to believe you can see the future?”

“I don’t see the future. I live through it. Over and over again.”

“Maybe you should go home,” he said after he took a bite of his cake. “You’re bringing down the mood.”

I chortled. Then I jabbed my fork into the last of my spongy dessert, puncturing the plate. “No one ever believes me when I tell them. I thought you would be different. I guess I was wrong.”

Simon finished his glass of champagne but didn’t offer further commentary. How disappointing. Then again, maybe I could still get a reaction

out of him. Something to entertain me while the charade of human life continued on around us.

“It happened one night,” I said, meeting his gaze with my own. “I was depressed. In too much debt. Bank foreclosing on my house. Divorce paperwork in the mail. Some circumstances eat at a person. You know what I mean.”

Simon ran his thumb over the ring on his finger. He hated whenever I alluded to his ex-wife.

I continued, “So I loaded a gun, brought it to my temple, and right before I pulled the trigger I heard this whispering.”

He stared without blinking, his muscles tense.

“The susurrations spoke to me, like the darkness itself dared me to say its name.”

“You must have been dreaming,” Simon said.

“Maybe. But then I said it. The name of the darkness.” I slammed my hand on the table, toppling over Simon’s glass and causing him to flinch.

“And?” he asked.

“And then I went back. To before everything went wrong. Years of time. All undone.”

The groom picked up the microphone and shouted, “I’m so grateful for our lovely community! I moved to Alcombry ten years ago, thinking I needed a change. Little did I know my life would change forever when I met soulmate, Lissa, at the grocery store.”

The crowd awed, followed by a hearty round of clapping. Then the lights dimmed, casting our corner in shadows, and the happy couple started their dance.

Simon moved to the edge of his seat, his gaze hard set. “You should just enjoy the celebration, Lukas.”

“I’ve done that already. A few times. Because every time I whisper the name of the darkness, I go back. I used it to relieve the best moments in my life. A hundred times over.”

And I kept going back. Again and again. Doing everything perfectly, whenever I made a mistake. Falling in love, experiencing the first date, the first kiss, the heated moments in bed—but slowly it lost all meaning, lost all luster. So then I made new friends. Had new first dates. Fell in love with others. Had those first moments all over again.

But the same thing happened.

It became boring.

Knowing the solution to every problem, knowing I could correct any sentence or mistake or failure, knowing I could eventually get whoever I wanted, given enough time, brought about a deep sense of ennui far worse than when I had contemplated suicide. But with the ability to unravel time, I didn't wish for death, I just wished for something more exciting. Something to sate my curious mind and appetite for pleasure.

"I lived a perfect life," I whispered to Simon. "A life you couldn't even imagine. Women. Money. But it wasn't enough."

His eyebrows knit together, but he remained silent.

"You know what I thought then?"

Simon clenched her jaw, almost like he wanted to ask, but couldn't.

I smiled. "I thought, what if I killed everyone instead?"

Although the music continued to play, a harsh silence came between me and Simon. He moved his unsteady hands off the table and played with the dog tags around his neck. But he said nothing. Didn't matter. I would get the reaction I wanted once I told him the best parts.

"At first I was little scared," I said.

More people shuffled onto the dance floor, creating a white noise that blanketed the area.

Simon waited, his attention on me and me alone.

I exhaled, the memories fresh in my mind, and I smiled wider. "I had never killed anyone before. There's a rush to it I can't explain. So much excitement and adrenaline."

Nothing topped that first kill. I snuck into the house of the old crone who lived across the street. She had once called the police on me because I left my mailbox full and the sight displeased her. Well, I remembered, even when she didn't, and I swore her nagging would be the end of her.

I went in at night, no alarm system or dogs, and I carried my paring knife all the way to her bedroom. Then I sliced her wrinkled throat clean

open. Really hard to nag about a mailbox after that.

"Who was it?" Simon asked.

I pointed to the old crone--alive right now--but I had killed her in more than a hundred timelines, each more imaginative than the last. "Old Ms. Windbag there. You wouldn't know it by looking at her, but she has a lot of blood, actually. Gets all over the place, which is why I tend to suffocate her now."

"That's a sick story," Simon said, curt. "I really hope, for your sake, you're just drunk and looking for attention."

"Is it really so bad? One whisper of the darkness's name and I reset everything anyway."

The music swelled, and more guests jumped to their feet, leaving me and Simon as the last two seated at a table. Despite the celebrating, neither of us moved.

"It wasn't hard killing everyone in town," I muttered.

I turned my head, surveying the partygoers. My attention flitted from child to child, from the postman with a missing finger to an older single mother, to the basement-dwelling thirty-something woman with asthma. I didn't stop until I spotted the sole police officer for our tiny town.

"Not even Officer Logan put up much of a fight," I said. "He kept trying to calm me down, ask what was wrong, refusing to believe I would ever hurt anyone. He doesn't want to admit it, but he's soft. He shot me a few times, but he always aimed for the arms or my legs. It cost him every time."

"I think you might be sick in the head," Simon said.

When I returned my attention to him, I couldn't stifle my chuckling. "Everyone is easy to kill. Everyone, that is, except for you."

Simon tensed. Still as a corpse, he stared, like I might lunge at her at any second.

I loved it. Nothing made the air taste as sweet as panic did.

"You always put up a fight," I whispered. "A real fight. I tried to kill your daughter at her little

elementary school, but there you were. Ready to do whatever it would take to stop me.”

He wasn’t like the others.

I ran a hand down my face, grasping at the memories and piecing them together. Every blow, trick, and plan I had to kill him and his daughter--he was ready and waiting, like he could sense me coming. Almost like he knew I was hunting them.

“Why is that?” I asked.

Simon said nothing.

“How do you know when I’ll come for you?”

He remained cold and unmoving.

I wanted him to tell me his secret, but maybe even he doesn’t know. Apparently there are shadows that unweave the very fabric of reality and time--what if he had some other power that helped him stay alive? But his icy demeanor revealed nothing.

“And one time you almost got me,” I said. “Fighting to the death has a certain appeal to it. Again, it’s almost too hard to explain. The pure rush of it all hit me like nothing before. I had to do it again. And each time I came for you, you fought back.” I leaned forward. “Tell me how you do it. I want this same sensation with others.”

The competition for life couldn’t be rivaled, not by sex or casual murder. The euphoria of coming out the victor after an intense struggle really couldn’t be understated. What if I could find others with the same determination to live? I could go through hundreds of fights before I was bored with the situation.

Life was so fucking dull and pointless. But not in those moments. Not in the afterglow of a vicious and brutal victory.

“You’re psychotic,” Simon whispered.

I almost attacked him right then and there. What if I forced him to answer? No. Simon had more willpower than most. He’d die just to spite me.

A few people glanced over, but the rhythm of the party called them back before they questioned anything. I took the time to inhale and exhale, calming myself, regaining my composure.

“You said something odd the last time I killed you,” I muttered. I shook my head and furrowed my brow. “What was it? You called me an abomi-

nation or something. It really sent shivers down my spine. Do me a favor. Say it again. Tell me how evil I am. No one does it like you.”

Simon took in a ragged breath. “You need help. You should call someone right now, that’s how serious this is.”

I huffed and leaned back in my chair, my gaze traveling up to the ceiling. Was he playing dumb? Or did he really not know? Either way, it was dull.

“Eh. How disappointing.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“I’ve told my secret to a few people before I rewound time, but never you. I don’t know what I was so afraid of. I figured you would attack me, or perhaps reveal your secret power. But instead you’re just as spineless as the rest of these puppets. Saying the same things they did.” I mimicked their panicked voices as I said, “Lukas, you’re unstable, or Lukas, what’s wrong? We want to help you. Or, my favorite, Lukas, please don’t hurt my family! Why are you doing this? You know. The same ol’ same ol’.”

“Maybe you should listen to them.”

I smiled again as I recalled the deaths of my neighbors. “You know, everyone else begged me to spare their life. But not you. You never beg. It really gets me going. No one is as fun as you are.”

The music slowed and couples formed to dance out their inner emotions. The groom and bride took the spotlight, their happiness infecting everyone around them. No eyes lingered on the corner of the room. No ears heard our mutterings. For all intents and purposes, Simon and I sat alone, stewing in the darkness.

“If this is all true,” Simon whispered. “Why would you do any of this? You’re wealthy. You have everything you want. Why would you hurt the people of Alcombry?”

“Why not? I need the excitement in my life. Something to stimulate my imagination.”

“Just because you can do something doesn’t mean you should.”

I waved away his comment with a twist of my wrist. “It doesn’t matter. I’m above consequence.”

“Is that really what you think?”

"Are you going to try to talk me out of my evil ways like all the others? You'll have to be creative. I've heard a lot of speeches in my time."

"You could just stop," Simon said. "And live out your life normally. No one is making you say the name of whatever demon gives you this power. None of what you did needs to happen. You understand that, right? You're in control."

With a forceful exhale, I stood.

Simon gripped the edge of the table, but otherwise didn't move.

"Whelp," I said, "you were a waste of an evening. Maybe I'll unravel time and go corner you in your house again. You're infinitely more entertaining when you have that wild look in your eye. All your fight seems gone now, like you barely care."

"Lukas. Let's talk about this."

"People are much more entertaining when they think they're about to die. And talking about it has made me nostalgic for the experience."

"What're you going to do?"

"Something I haven't done before. Something hilarious."

Simon didn't reply. He stared, his expression neutral, as I circled around the table and walked up behind him. Still, he remained seated. But even through the heavy coat and shadows, I could see the tension in his body, and the sweat dappling his skin.

"Aren't you going to tell me to stop?" I drawled. "Aren't you going to tell me not to hurt anyone?"

Simon said nothing.

"Is your daughter here?"

He ground his teeth so hard it could be heard over the music.

"There's my favorite person," I said with a smile. "Maybe I can make this night exciting for the both of us."

"Lukas. Don't."

"Sseersangilix."

The moment the syllables of the name were uttered, the shadows themselves tore away at reality, unraveling the threads that bound matter together. Light ceased to be, but in the next instant, everything coalesced into a moment of the past, bringing me back to the start of the toast--the very

moment I had thought of before speaking the word.

The next few seconds left me nauseous, but I shook off the illness and returned to my default state of barely feeling anything.

Standing at the edge of the room, cake in hand, I glanced over my "new" surroundings.

"Attention, everyone," the best man shouted into his microphone, silencing the music. "I won't take much of your time. I just want to congratulate Charlie and Lissa. We all knew this day was coming, but seriously, what took you guys so long to tie the knot?"

Laughter spread throughout the vapid crowd. The guests lifted their glasses and cheered.

So fucking predictable.

I slipped through the crowd, disgusted by their ignorance and pathetic, worm-like existence.

They had no idea a god walked among them.

I sidestepped the drunken fool singing to the karaoke, but when the kids ran by, I let my cake fall into their path. One little urchin boy slipped on the frosting and slammed his face into the cement floor. I restrained a smile as blood exploded from his nose. Too bad he wouldn't remember my little lesson.



Art by Angela K. Scott...Elven Enchantress

The mother ran over, but I stepped around her as well.

I had a target, and I spotted her at the back of the room. The pretty little preteen Simon cared for so much. What was her name? Marie. Her long blonde hair shimmered, even in the terrible lighting. What would it look like when clumped and knotted with blood? I'd soon find out.

With my excitement in check, I glanced to the corner of the room. There sat Simon. All by himself. Quiet and drinking, just like he had been before our now nonexistent conversation. He didn't even glance over as I crossed the room.

Did he have some sort of power gifted to him by the shadows? Did he know something I didn't? I wish he did. It would have made life so much more exciting.

Marie stood by the bathroom door, rubbing at a frosting stain on the sleeve of her pretty little blue dress. A vision of youth with a mix of curiosity. Sweet and innocent. A perfect combination for the best tasting dread. She was alone, no group of girls flocking around her. Her quiet nature reminded me of her father.

"Technical difficulties!" the best man said.

He must've just spilled his glass.

But I ignored all that as I made my way to the bathroom door. I slid a hand into my pocket and caressed the cold steel of my knife. I could've brought my gun, but that wasn't as satisfying. It was more personal with a knife. More visceral.

I approached Marie with a smile. "Occupied?"

Marie glanced up and then to the side, avoiding eye contact. For a moment she remained silent. Did she know? Maybe she too could sense my intentions, just like her father. My pulse quickened just thinking about it.

"It's Ms. Carver," Marie finally said. "She has her oxygen tank. It takes her awhile to move around sometimes."

"Oh, trust me, I know."

Marie turned back, her brow furrowed. "You can wait behind me."

That wouldn't do.

"I know of a bathroom in the back," I said, motioning to the kitchen door. "I'm going to use that. You know how Ms. Carver can be. I'd hate to rush

her." Then I turned and headed for the back. A smile crept across my face as I slowed my pace. Marie would follow. I didn't even need to look back.

Sure enough, my heart fluttered with anticipation the moment I heard the clock of Marie's heels.

"Can you show me where the bathroom is?" she asked.

"Of course. Follow me."

The bustle of the kitchen made it impossible for anyone to take special note of our trek. There were sideways glances, but no one approached or questioned. I had explored this area enough times to know who would cause problems and who wouldn't. So I led Marie through the modern steel kitchen, and through the back hallway covered in cracked paint. Marie shadowed my steps, keeping close and mumbling apologies to everyone she passed.

I barely took note of anyone's existence. What did it matter? They were beneath me. Their boring puppet lives had nothing interesting to offer.

I turned the corner and entered the large pantry, beyond the sight of the waiters and waitresses. Marie stepped inside with me, glancing around with her eyebrows knitted together. When I stopped, she wrung her hair with her hands, a portrait of nervousness.

I licked my lips, already enjoying the taste in the air.

"Are you sure it's here?" Marie asked.

"Actually, now that you mention it, we did take a wrong turn."

I stepped past her and grabbed the pantry door. Then I shut it, trapping her in the windowless room.

The silence between us thickened. Perhaps the hunted could smell the deadly intentions of the hunter--my victims always seemed to know right before their final moments that they would die in a struggle. Even though I hadn't said anything, Marie held her arms tight across her chest, her shoulders bunched at her neck.

She trembled as she stared, her eyes wide.

Then I withdrew my blade.

Marie knew. In that moment she had all the pieces put together. The dreaded realization on her

face made for an interesting expression--one few people ever got to experience. I could taste the thick stench of fear.

It tasted like blood.

"Scream," I commanded as I pulled my cell-phone from my pants pocket.

Marie remained quiet. She took a step back, her quavering form growing smaller as she hugged herself tighter and tighter.

Didn't she know that killing someone wasn't enough anymore? I needed more. I needed the intensity that came from a fight. The rush. The burn. I needed to not only taste her fear, but her mettle as well. The girl's will to live.

"If you don't scream, I won't have anything to show your father," I said as I took a step forward. I pressed record on my phone's microphone before I placed it on the pantry shelf. "And nothing gets your father angry like listening to you scream."

"Father," Marie gasped.

"Yes. Your father. I want--"

The blinding pain of cold metal in hot flesh cut my speech short. Everything went white and my senses dulled, but it didn't last long. I had felt the sting of a blade in my body before. I had felt everything before.

In that one moment of weakness, the knife twisted in my throat. My attacker carved upward, straight to my ear, silencing me forever in one fell stroke. And then an arm wrapped around my mangled neck, trapping me against the person as I thrashed about.

I knew it was Simon. I'd never forget the smell of my favorite person--the anger that laced his being whenever we met. He had come to protect his little girl, like he always did.

But how did he know we'd be here?

Simon slammed me into the wall, breaking open skin and cracking bone.

"Are you above consequence now?" he said between attacks.

Losing consciousness, I tightened my grip around my own blade and stabbed into determination to kill heightened the moment. He never disappointed.

Simon pressed me against the pantry wall and kept me pinned in place. My heart worked against

me, pumping my blood out my throat in disturbing amounts.

"You think you were the only one the shadows spoke to?" Simon asked, his voice practically a growl. "But I never gave in to their promises. Unlike you."

My body--was this agony?--no. It burned, but the pain lessened and lessened. I had no air. It was unlike anything I had experienced before. My vision blackened at the edges.

"You could've walked away," Simon continued through clenched teeth. "Now you'll suffer for what you've done."

I could feel it coming.

Death.

No. Not death. Something else.

My body went limp. Simon finally released his hold. I crumpled to the floor, my own blood a cold pool that broke my landing.

"Dad! Are you okay?"

"Marie. Everything will be fine. Are you hurt?"

"Y-your arm!"

"It's okay. It's okay. I love you, Marie. Come here. We're leaving. There's nothing left in here but demons."

Their footsteps rang a million miles away.

Perhaps I had unraveled reality so many times I no longer existed inside of it. Or perhaps I had hurt so many people that each time I lost a little more of myself in the process. Or maybe I didn't deserve the warmth the flames of hell would provide. All I knew was that as the waves of death washed over me, I could feel something more. Something permanent. Something shattering my soul and feasting on it one bit at a time.

But that was okay.

Oblivion was one hell of a thrill ride.

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S.A. Stovall relies on her BA in History and Juris Doctorate to make her living as an author and history professor in the central valley of California. She writes in a wide range of fiction, from crime thrills to fantasy to science-fiction. Stovall loves reading, playing video games, entertaining others with stories, and writing about herself in the third person.

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Art by Angela K. Scott...Rainbow Unicorn Kitty

## Beneath The Photosphere

I hear the ghost echo  
of first generation suns  
a mere 180-million years  
after the primal detonation,  
it sings at 78-gigahertz,  
I wear insulating boots  
with triple-layered soles  
to hot-foot this dead star  
strolling its luminous shell,  
and gasp with pleasant shock  
as whisperings of dust begin  
the slow flux of fused particles  
in low-density spin, solar flares ignite as  
boot-heels crunch fierce atomic cinders,

polarized lenses show no constellations  
in the iridescent photosphere but  
in the incandescent surface tumble  
I hear the ionized radio-song  
of fumbling unborn galaxies  
as close as sweat on skin,  
I walk on, engrossed in reverie  
with words that won't come,  
and my mind with all its angst  
and pinpricks of vanity  
and self-aggrandizement  
dissolves away in the  
superheated breeze  
...Andrew Darlington

## Trash Smashers, or, The Princess of the Flea Market

By  
Robert W. Jennings

Look, I've told it and told it and told it. How many damn times do you want me to tell it? Manny's dead, that's it. He's dead as a door knob and me telling it again isn't going to bring him back.

OK, officer, fine, you bet. But this is it, you get me, this is it. You get a tape machine running or jot it down in shorthand in your little red book or something, because this is absolutely it. Your police station here is nice and cozy but this is it, hear me? I am not going to tell it except this one last time, you got that?

Ralph Reynolds, that's the name. No, you dim bulb, that's my name. The stiff is Manny Driscoll. Sergeant, do we have to have this bozo sitting here? Every time I say even three words this guy has to interrupt me with something stupid.

Fine, fine. But I'm telling you, this is absolutely the last time round with this. So get it down real good boys, because I am not saying it again.

I'm Ralph Reynolds. I set up at the Worcester Indoor Flea Market. Yes! Of course I have a state sales tax number! Nathan, the owner, doesn't let anybody set up unless they've got a state sales tax number, or they're in the process of applying for

one. Sergeant, so help me, I don't care if this guy is from the D.A.'s office, if this creep cannot keep from interrupting me every two seconds then I am just going to shut the hell up and you boys can go back to the donut shop or wherever...

Fine. Thank you very much. I hope. Anyway, I'm set up down in the back left section. The flea market is inside an old factory building, with lots of odd configurations for dealer spaces. I'm down in the back left, where I've got most of the whole left wall in the section filled up with my tables.

I sell used VHS movies, some comic books, used paperbacks, old time radio shows on cassette tapes, movie star photos and like that. Yeah, I guess you could say a lot of my stuff is nostalgia. I call it popular entertainment. That's mostly what I specialize in; popular entertainment.

Gina, the orange haired lady with the four kids is set up across from me along the right wall. We both have lots of space, a lot more than we're officially supposed to have, but that's because Nathan wants the place to look full.

Even so, there's nobody on that back wall, and nobody at all in the center space between Gina and me. So, one day I come in Saturday morning and what do I see but a big display set up in the middle of our area. A brand new dealer is there, and he is there bright and early, a true eager beaver.

Well, as I start to take the tarps off my stuff I hear Gina saying something about how her feet are all swollen up, and how much her back hurts, and how she has a headache, and would I please keep the music I play real low today because she just feels ever so sick. I say something and keep working. I am now very glad there is a new guy set up between Gina and me, so I don't have to listen to her whine and complain all day. Honestly, I really believe one of the great pleasures in that woman's life is complaining about all her aches and ills, of which she seems to have an infinite number. I, for one, don't want to hear that crap this weekend, thank you very much.

So, after I get everything uncovered and neat, I glance over at the new guy to see what he is peddling. It looks like auto parts to me. I see a couple of new car radios and speakers. I am not an auto guy, but in honor of the occasion I dig thru

my pile of CDs and pull out the "Bitchin' Hard Rockin' Movin' Motor Music" disk and pop it into my player. In honor of Gina's perpetually renewable headache, I crank the sound up to Merely Loud. It's nice and loud, but not so loud you can't have a conversation consisting of, say, how much does that cost, or here's your change from that twenty, or thank you for your purchase you have a good day now. How much conversation do you need at eight thirty on a Saturday morning anyway?

Sometimes Gina and her whining just gets on my nerves and I do stuff like that.

Anyway, I am wondering what the guy is doing selling auto items in a flea market. So, I decide to ask him. We're neighbors, and I'm curious. In the flea market we are one big mixing bowl of personalities, and everybody wants to know about everybody else. It's not gossip; it's just getting to know what's happening in a very tight community.

I say Hi, the new guy says Hi, and introduces himself as Manny Driscoll. I give him my name and check out his tables. It turns out I was wrong, because although he does a few auto things, like the boxed car radio and speaker sets, he mostly seems to have decals. I guess they're car decals, altho I suppose they could go anywhere.

I'm mildly curious. I dunno, it seems to me that if somebody wanted to stick some decal on the side of their truck they would check the car shops first, as opposed to looking at a flea market, and I say so.

But, Manny says that's where I'm dead square wrong.

"Besides," he says, "auto stores don't have this kind of selection. Decals are mostly an impulse item. You see something that looks good, you decide to buy it on the spot." He holds up a couple of the decals, a grinning skull on wheels streaming fire in a long arc behind it, and a fire breathing werewolf with wicked dripping fangs

In addition, he explains that his decals are actually magnet decals. There is micro-filament magnetic wire in the back of the illustration, so you just position it on the side or rear of your vehicle, smooth it out, and there it is, solid like a decal,

but if you even want to maybe take your wheels to a Sunday church meeting or the like, you can peel the picture right off. If you get tired of the old illo, you can change it next week for a completely different one without ripping up the paint finish on your chariot.

Well, that certainly seems like a good idea to me, now that he explained it. Change the decals instead of having them permanently bonded to the side of your car. Makes a hell of a difference if you can peel off that silhouette of the well developed female figure holding a wine glass when you decide to trade your buggy in on a newer model.

So, I look and now I see that practically the whole near side of his display, two tables worth, is all different kinds of decals, some of them pretty cool, some of them pretty dumb and sophomoric. I like almost all of them. I begin thinking about which pictures I might want to add to the side of my cargo van, when a customer starts looking at the used VHS movies at my tables so I move back to see if he is going to buy something.

Well, it is not a busy Saturday, I'm sorry to say, so I drift around, check out some of the other dealers and see what they're displaying this week. I come back and Gina has decided to scream at her kids, which of course, cheers her right up and makes her forget all about the phony-baloney aches and pains she was whining about earlier.

I now have a chance to check out the other side of Manny's display. Despite there not being many people in the flea market this morning, he has managed to sell a few of his spiffy magnetic decals, which is good, because I don't think too many people are going to buy his install-it-yourself car radios and speakers.

On the other side of his display there are different things, things I don't recognize at all. There is a hand printed piece of cardboard that says "Super Trash Compressor" with a couple of bullet points of info about how this super trash compressor reduces both the size and the weight of the trash by nine tenths. There are a couple of clunky plastic units with one of them plugged into an extension cord from the back wall outlet. It looks sort of like a cheap picnic cooler that was made way too big. There are a few buttons on the front,

and a light that shows when the unit is on.

I'll admit I'm curious. So, I ask. Manny perks right up. I should also mention that altho Manny can be a very charming guy, with a smooth as silk radio announcer type voice and a smile that could light up a cavern when he turns it on, most of the time Manny looks not too much unlike one of those birds who hang around the bars on Green Street. He is not all that tall, but gives the impression of being tall, if you get what I mean. He has solid black hair, which he wears short and neatly combed. He has piercing dark eyes that sort of bore right into you when he focuses your way, and a muscular body that fills out his denim shirt very solid. He does not wear sunglasses, but he is one of those people who look like they should be wearing sunglasses and a dark Italian sports coat to go with the sunglasses.

Manny says he is some sort of engineering person involved in electrical applications of research in physics. He is in between jobs. Later the next day he admits that this is due to making a pass at his division manager's wife at a company party. My impression is that it was a completed pass.

Anyway, Manny says that he and his friend have developed a new energy system that allows plain electric energy and some sort of magnetic coil in this machine to penetrate the contents of the plastic box, and compress the material inside, except it is not compression. What he says is happening is subtraction. The machine is actually somehow or the other converting some of the mass in the bag full of garbage into energy, and then just whipping it away, so that what is left over is the same bag of garbage, only now it happens to be considerably smaller and considerably lighter. Nine tenths smaller and lighter are the figures he is using.

"Well," I say, "I find this hard to believe. You don't happen to have something to demonstrate do you?"

Of course he does. He has a couple of bags of trash already there behind his tables. By now it is just past noon time and there are several other people, close on to six or eight if I remember right, who are listening to the pitch Manny is making, and they are also very curious about this demon-

stration.

Manny takes a big thirty gallon bag of trash, opens the top of his plastic box, and stuffs the bag down inside. It doesn't fit so well because the bag is really full, but he manages to cram it in anyway. He is keeping up a cheerful line of patter the whole time, grinning and making little humorous quips. I remember thinking the guy sounds more like a carnival pitch man than some sort of physics engineer.

He pushes the button on the left, which clearly says ON. The light in the middle comes on. He pushes the button on the right which says COMPACT. There is a hum, and the machine begins to vibrate. People sort of step back. The vibrating keeps going for perhaps ten or fifteen seconds, then stops. The light goes out. Manny opens up the top, reaches down into the machine and pulls out the trash bag which is now the size of maybe a softball. Smaller even, except it still looks like a black garbage bag, with the plastic tie around it and everything, except now it is extremely small. Manny picks it up and tosses it from hand to hand like it was a beanbag. He offers it for me to feel. It's even lighter than a bean bag.

Despite everything, I'm impressed, and I don't impress easily.

"How much is it," asks one of the flea market patrons.

"Two hundred and fifty dollars, complete," says Manny. People begin to shift and prepare to move away. But some don't. Manny then gives his big closing punch line: about how many of these little compacted thirty gallon bags of trash will fit inside one Worcester City Official Yellow Trash Bag. Everybody stops and listens very closely.

Two and a half bills may seem like a lot of money for something like this, but it's not when you consider the situation in Worcester, Massachusetts. Our fine city, in a burst of environmental enthusiasm, decreed several years ago that they would not pick up any city trash unless it was inside an Official Yellow City Trash Bag. These bags cost four dollars. Each. One Official Yellow City Trash Bag will hold maybe eight or nine gallons of trash, total.

If your trash is not in an official yellow bag, it does not get picked up. The price goes to run the sanitation department, fund the city recycling program, and pay for the yellow bags to be sent to the state approved incineration furnaces where all the trash is burned to make electric power. The ashes are leached for lye, and then sold for compost fill. All very environmentally sound, and also very expensive for the average citizen.

So Manny's sales pitch finds several people avidly interested. I am not one of them. I had the sense to go in on a program with some other folks in my little back corner neighborhood. We pool all our trash every week into one big load and a private rubbish removal service comes and picks it all up as one stop. It's lots cheaper than buying the city trash bags, and we only pay for one bulk weekly pickup. It's a great solution for us, but obviously that won't fly so well with most city households.

Manny claims his machines are guaranteed one hundred percent for one full year against malfunction or failure, and he sells one, to an old skinflint who's reputation for frugality would make Ebenezer Scrooge look like a drunken prodigal. The units are not boxed, but they don't weight much either. Manny picks one right up and carries it out to the old skinflint's car for him. Later that afternoon, after giving the pitch six or eight more times, he sells another one.

By Sunday morning Nathan has made a deal with Manny to use all the trash from the flea market for Manny's demonstrations, in return for free rent on his space and tables. There is a lot of trash at the flea market. In addition to all the paper, food scraps and stuff from the snack bar, there are tons of cardboard boxes from dealers bringing in new merchandise, newspapers, coffee cups, paper towels from the rest rooms; you name it. Charlie Chang the college kid Nathan hires to help clean up around the place is bringing over trash bags five or six times a day, and Manny compresses all of them to softball sized wads with no effort at all.

By Sunday afternoon he has sold five more units, and people have promised to bring money in next week.

I'm almost as happy as he is because whenever

he pitches his product, he keeps getting small crowds of interested people into the area. This satisfies me because some of them look over my stuff as well, and even buy a few things, after they ooohh and ahhhh over his electric trash subcontractor.

Manny's feeling pretty good about the way things at the flea market are going so far. We've been chatting most of the weekend. Around Sunday noon he's browsing thru my selection of VHS movies and I ask him why in the world, with a potentially hot property like he's got, is he content to set up at the flea market instead of launching a big marketing blitz.

"Can't do a marketing blitz without money Ralph buddy," he says. "I need money to increase production, and this is the fastest way to get public exposure, and some cash inflow. Plus, word of mouth is the best advertising in the world. By the time I've been here five or six weeks, the product will be so well known around town that when I get a real manufacturing facility set up, the public will be primed and chomping at the bit for all the units I can turn out."

And he smiles that big happy smile again. I admire his logic, and I'm telling him so, when the big smile drops right off his face. I glance over to where he is looking, and I see one of the most beautiful young women I've laid eyes on in some months, and that's saying something, considering how many college students and young people visit the flea market. There are some very admirable specimens of the feminine gender roaming the premises every Saturday and Sunday, but this gal outshines them like a flood light would outshine a cheap key chain penlight.

She is tall, trim, formed very well, with clear skin, regular features, and brown hair shoulder length so light that it is almost into the blond range. The page boy style hair cut frames her face perfectly. She has gray eyes and would probably have a smile that matched everything else about her except she's not smiling at all. She has her mouth set in a thin anger line and her eyes are flashing sparks to match.

I'm about to step away when Manny says, "stick here with me Ralph buddy. I need a little moral support."

This is the first hint that maybe Manny has some personal issues in his life. Manny suddenly has that hard look I mentioned earlier. He doesn't look like an engineer developing interesting new inventions, he has that sort of ruthless, cruel look that a lot of women seem to find fascinating in men.

The brown haired goddess steps up to the table and doesn't waste a second being pleasant.

"So, this is where you've been peddling the machines, eh Manny. I thought we were supposed to meet Friday and talk about merchandising plans."

"Look Linda, I've been pretty busy. Production problems have..."

"Don't give me that runaround! Production problems my left hind foot! All the production problems are on our end. After my dad practically broke his neck changing over those molds and getting a special plastic extruder so you could get your precious base unit established. He's the one doing all the work. All you had to do, you said, was to slap the electronics on the inside and the unit was set to sell. Set to sell, your words. Well I guess they are set to sell, and it looks like you're selling some too. So how about our share of the money Manny, or maybe you forgot about that part of the deal too."

The young woman, I now notice, is carrying some sort of midget dog in the crook of her left arm. It is not a poodle or something cute like that. It is a little Heinz mongrel with a long snout, big eyes and weird shaped furry ears that look way too big for its head. It has dark brown and black fur, like some of those gang dogs you see on the streets.

"I didn't forget anything, Linda," says Manny, his voice all smooth and sincere. "And I know your father has been doing a great job on his end getting the plastic molds set. I really appreciate it. But there are other problems. We have to have the electro-magnets set just right, you know that, and then there's the special insulating treatment. I've had some problems getting the lining to set properly without bubbling the plastic. These things take time, baby, you know..."

"Don't 'baby' me Manny! And don't give me

any more of that crap about production problems! We had a deal, and the deal was that as soon as these units were ready to sell we'd sit down and figure out how to turn Daddy's idea into money. We were going to talk with Mobile Electric Home Utilities, remember? What happened with that?

"As soon as things get rolling, we can try that. I know we've got a good product here. All we need is the right backing, and the right marketing plans. And of course, as soon as we get the production up and going..."

"Yeah, right. Well it looks to me like you're doing pretty well all by yourself. You're selling them here, aren't you Manny?"

"Linda, what I am doing is demonstrating them here. Demonstrating. Showing the public what the product can do. I am developing the market potential, so that when the production kinks are worked out, then we can sell units." His voice is like liquid sunshine, so sincere that I might have believed every word he said, if I hadn't already seen him pocketing money from selling the things.

"If you aren't selling units, why do you keep pressing Daddy to make up more plastic shells? He says he dropped off a hundred of the things early this week and you didn't even pay the trucking cost. I've had it Manny. You were supposed to go half on the costs of this thing, and so far all we've gotten from you is a lot of excuses, and no money at all."

"Look, as soon as I sell some units, you'll get your share. You know you will. I promised, didn't I?"

"Yeah, you promised a lot of things."

With this the midget mongrel suddenly takes its cue from the babe, and begin yelping at the top of its squeaky little voice.

Manny gives the dog a glare, then reaches over real fast and grabs it right around the muzzle. The dog can't open its mouth to bark, but that doesn't stop it from growling, or squirming either.

"Get your hands off Ginger, you creep!"

"I'll get my hands off this mutt when you can make it shut the hell up." Manny's voice is no longer sweet and sincere. "Now, I told you Linda, as soon as I get some units made up, and sold, you'll get your share of the money. So far as the

freight on the shells, I'm sorry. I was short that day. Tell Barry to get me a tally sheet on the total costs and we'll work it out. That's the way it's going to be, understand?"

"No, I don't understand." Her glare could melt an iceberg.

"Then make an effort!" Manny's voice is hard, threatening. "As soon as I turn product into money, you'll get your share. That's the way it was agreed, and that's still the way it'll be. So back off and quit crowding me."

With that he releases his hold on the dog's snout. Ginger begins barking for all she's worth. The woman, Linda, shoots eye daggers at Manny and says something which I don't hear, turns around and leaves. She is clearly not placated by Manny's line.

As the sound of the yelping dog gradually recedes into the distance Manny looks over and me and flips his hand in the air. "Women! Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em."

I shrug, and say nothing. This conversation was none of my business.

At the end of the day Manny has done very well. He has no more units left, but he has two people who want to buy from him. He tells them to wait a second, that he might be able to get something for them today.

He's over at my display and makes a pitch. He had to rent a cargo van to get the units over to the flea market last Wednesday afternoon, that's the dealer restock day, and he doesn't want to lose these two sales. So, he offers me some decals and a fill on gas if I will go with him to the leased warehouse space where he makes up the units, and pick up two trash subtractors that are already made, and help deliver them to these two customers.

A fill on gas and some decals seems OK to me. I've got nothing lined up for Sunday evening, since I am bereft of female companionship of late, and besides I'm somewhat curious about how these trash machines are put together, so I say sure, I'll do it.

Manny smiles, and goes over to the two potential customers and manages to extract fifty bucks deposit from each of them, gets their names, ad-

dresses, and phone numbers and promises to deliver to them before seven that evening.

I meanwhile pick out a couple of decals, then I think about it, and decide to pick out six decals all total. What the hell does Manny care; he's about to land five bills for selling two more trash subtractors.

The flea market closes at four, and by the time I cover up my tables of goodies, Manny is ready and impatient to go. We leave his car in the far lot, pile into my van, and I make sure we go directly to the discount gas station up at Kelly Square and fill the buggy to the very brim. It is not cheap, but Manny doesn't seem to care much.

He directs me. His loft, or space, or whatever, is in the old warehouse district down beyond Grove Street near the train yard. There are a lot of old warehouse and factory buildings there, some of them closed up. We pull in front the building where his space is. He unlocks the front door and we go into the freight elevator, and he confides that the building is at least half empty, so he got his space at a pretty reasonable price.

We ride up to floor three, where he is clearly the only business in residency, and he unlocks a big plywood barn-door sized entrance and flips on the lights. He seems to have plenty of room here, more than he needs.

I take a quick look around. There is a stack of what looks like trash subtractor units against the far wall; maybe sixty or seventy of them.

"Wow!" I say, "You're really planning on selling a lot of units."

"You bet, but those aren't ready yet." He explains that these are actually plastic shells. Linda's father, as I have already heard, is in the plastics biz, and he had cobbled together some extruders and molds and makes the basic unit shells. Various other guys make up the electro magnets and some of the other inside electronic stuff. Manny and another guy he hires part time do the final assembly, to keep the actual mechanics of the machine a secret.

"But the real secret Ralph," he says, as he checks a couple of units on the skid before him, "is the coating on the inside."

"Coating? Like paint?" I am looking at a

stack of big twenty-gallon tubs of liquid rubber compound mix.

"In a way, except it's a special preparation of liquid lead, powdered aluminum, silicate and a few other things to make it totally reflective. I mix it with the liquid rubber mix so the plastic unit doesn't melt down or anything, and that's what keeps the electricity inside and doing its stuff, if you get what I mean."

No, of course I don't. Manny just smiles. He knows if he explained everything to me in complete detail I still wouldn't get it. That's probably why he's not too worried about me seeing his operation, because he knows I sure can't spill any scientific secrets.

Anyway, he checks a unit, and says the paint is dry on this one. He clicks something mechanical looking into a recessed slot, uses an cordless electric screw driver to tighten it into place, then plugs the unit in and tosses in a thick support beam from a broken up railroad pallet. In fifteen seconds or less it has been subtracted to the size of maybe a match stick. He smiles, says it's definitely ready, so he picks it up. I grab another unit, and we carry them over to the freight elevator. I did mention that these things don't weight much didn't I? Well, they don't. I don't even break a sweat hauling the thing.

Manny turns out the lights, locks up and we delivery to the two buyers, one of whom lives up on the third floor of an old three-decker. Hauling that unit up three flights of outside stairs is a pain. It's not that the unit is heavy, but it's clunky, even with two of us carrying it. Good thing the unit is made of plastic instead of metal, otherwise the thing would be all scratched up before the customer even got it inside the kitchen door.

By the time I get Manny back to his car he has made a deal with me to help him load in a bunch of completed units to the flea market this coming Wednesday afternoon. I figure if I clean some of the junk out of the back of my van I can get eight, maybe even ten units out per load. I do some rapid calculating and set my price at just below what it would cost for Manny to rent a commercial van, plus gas. He agrees with no problem. Having two people loading and unloading those things is the

real advantage, as he obviously knows.

Now, come Wednesday, I meet Manny at his warehouse, we load out eight units, and we are unloading them into the flea market when the wild card in this account comes into play, in the form of Princess.

That's Princess Pussycat, as we who are regulars at the flea market know her. She's a white cat with gray stripes, or maybe it's the other way around. Anyway Princess resides in the flea market, and makes sure that no mice, rats, or interesting insects manage to make it across the floor of the building. She wandered into the building a couple of years ago as a small kitten, and was immediately adopted by Nathan and almost all the dealers in the building as well.

Princess is well named, because she sure is treated like one by everybody. In addition to the dealers, most of the customers love her. Whenever she makes an appearance on any Saturday or Sunday she is the center of attention, being petted and hugged and fawned over by young and old alike. She's her own traveling stage show, trailing adoring crowds of onlookers who want to touch and hold her.

Sometimes she decides to take a stroll around the building by way of the conduit and water pipes that cross the ceiling of the building. Then she creates major traffic jams as people point and children squeal, afraid that she'll slip and fall, but she never does, even on the most narrow pipes. I once saw her tip-toe across a taut span of electric cable, just like a tight-rope walker.

Occasionally she will pause, and lean way over the edge, just to terrify small children and the faint of heart. She's a born ham. For a real thrill she has a routine worked out where Nathan wraps a piece of cooked hamburger in a wad of packing tissue, and tosses it up to her. She can make a two-pawed catch, scaring the pants off every kid watching below, and have the paper shredded and raining down on the crowd below like confetti before you even know what's happening.

Well, that's Princess. She's used to being the center of attention, and like any female, she likes being the center of attention. She considers it her duty to check out new dealers at the flea market, so

this Wednesday as Manny and I are loading in the eight trash subtractors, Princess strolls up, leaps on top of one of the units and meows for attention.

But she doesn't get any attention from Manny.

"Get the hell off there!" he shouts, and makes a sweep with his hand. Princess ducks under the hand, and stands to one side, a little taken aback, you can see. This is not what she expected. She is the Princess Of The Flea Market, and obviously Manny has just misunderstood things.

I try to explain about Princess being the pet of the building, but Manny wants none of it.

"I don't like cats. And I especially don't like cats on my clean merchandise." And he shoots an evil look over at Princess, who is standing, with her thick tail sticking straight up in the air, uncertain as to what she should do to win a new devotee.

Manny is about to make another hostile move, when I figure I had better defuse the situation, so I pick Princess up, and give her some cuddling and cooing, and walk her over to the hole in the side partition, and push her thru. It is clean to me that Princess does not understand what is up with Manny, but she leaves willingly enough. There are plenty of other people restocking this Wednesday who appreciate her charm and personality.

But, you know how it is with some cats and dogs, especially if they are well beloved pets. They can't understand how somebody could not like them, especially when everybody else clearly adores them. So they are drawn back to the unreceptive individual, seeking answers and new ways to win over the human and bring him into the fold.

And that's the way it is with Princess. She makes another cautious visit as we are finishing loading out the last of twenty-four subtractor units later that afternoon, but only gets a glare and a sharp "Scat!" from Manny.

Princess leaves. We finish setting up the display of Manny's trash subtractors, and we also leave.

Come eight thirty next Saturday morning, and the first person into our area is the goddess, with her four legged fog horn scampering on a leash beside her. This time they don't even get over to Manny's tables before the mutt begins yapping at

the top of its voice.

The mutt is no less agitated than Linda herself. I'm over behind my tables but the words carry pretty well, even over the sound of the dog barking. Linda has discovered that Manny is not just demonstrating the trash subtractors, he is selling them, and she has learned he already sold a bunch of units last weekend, and she has decided that it's time for a showdown.

She wants money, and an accounting of expenses, and a fair distribution of funds, and some kind of plan to turn the product into real money. Her voice keeps getting louder and louder, as she tells Manny in no uncertain terms that if this does not get worked out, right away, she is going to the cops and file charges against him for fraud and swindling and theft and some other things I don't quite catch.

She finally shuts up. Ginger the canine racket repeater settles down to low growling so I hear Manny say, real clear and real nasty, that he'll have an accounting for her, and especially for her stupid dog.

"Don't you dare lay a finger on Ginger, or I'll have you arrested for cruelty to animals," she snaps.

"Yeah? How about cruelty to humans?" but this goes by without a reply from Linda.

Manny tells her to come around to his warehouse this very evening, after the flea market closes, at around four thirty, and he'll have a demonstration of how effective his machine is and a settling up that will satisfy her completely.

Linda says, "Fine by me", and stomps off.

For some reason I am uneasy. I don't like the way Manny has phrased his last comments.

Still, it's none of my business. The day progresses, and Manny gives some more demos and sells some more units. In fact he's selling units right and left, and raking in the dough. I begin to suspect he will want me to help him load out more units for tomorrow's business, but he says nothing to me either way.

Comes late afternoon and business picks up for me. I'm selling movies and paperbacks, restocking the displays, doing well, when some kids come in and try to sell me a collection of comic books. I

have a heck of a time explaining that I can't buy the comics from them; in fact, I can't even look over the collection because all of them are under the age of eighteen, and the state of Massachusetts has this very explicit law that says merchants may not purchase anything, as in absolutely nothing, from any person who is below the age of eighteen.

Getting this point across takes some time, inbetween waiting on people who are looking at and buying stuff from my tables, until the message finally sinks in and the leader of the group agrees to come back tomorrow with his father, who will act as his agent, and will also sign the book stating that the material is not stolen merchandise, if we can cut a deal.

Then, just as suddenly as that, there is a lull, with nobody back in the area at all. These things happen at the flea market, a big wave of people, then nothing. I check my watch, and it turns out that this is the lull before closing. It's like fifteen minutes till four. I glance over and see that Manny is already gone. His tables and his few remaining units are covered with tarps and he has left. That strikes me as a little odd, since both days last week Manny got last minute business right down to the very closing.

I'm turning this over in my mind when I hear some sort of high pitched squeaking noise. It sounds very strange, and very close. In fact, the little squeak sounds again, right underneath my front tables. I look down and there is some kind of tiny animal there.

I bend over to check closer and I freeze. There is indeed a tiny animal there. It is a cat, but it is not a kitten. It is Princess Pussycat, only Princess now stands perhaps three inches tall, in total. I can't believe it. Even when I pick her up, I find it hard to believe. It is indeed Princess, complete in every detail, an adult cat, but less than three inches tall.

In a flash it comes to me that this is Manny's doing. Princess must have come poking around again something during the afternoon, and Manny scooped her right up and dropped her into one of his trash subtractors, and turned a full grown cat into a living miniature toy. Princess is taking this a lot better than I am. She seems not to regard her

new situation as anything very unusual, but I am stunned.

Then another thought crosses my mind. Linda! Linda and her mutt Ginger! They were going to meet Manny at the warehouse at four-thirty, and I'm sure that Manny has sinister plans for them. Manny has absolutely no intention to sharing any of his scratch with Linda, and is undoubtedly planning to shrink Linda's dog Ginger down to a tabletop toy just like he did Princess, as a warning to her to leave him alone. A cold chill goes thru me. In fact, if that doesn't scare her off, he may have similar plans for Linda herself.

I briefly consider calling the cops and instantly decide that won't work. They would never believe me, not unless they saw Princess in person. I'm the only one who has a chance of stopping this ugly situation.

I'm not a physical guy. I'm sure not as physical as Manny, who looks like he spends at least a few of his off hours exercising at the local health club. But I know I have to do something, and right away.

I scoop up a small cardboard box and place Princess inside. The walls may be high enough so she can't jump out, but just to be sure I fold over the top flaps. Princess immediately starts complaining but I pay her no mind.

I go over to see Gina, who is in the process of tossing the tarps over her tables and ask her if she still has that Masher Blaster horn gadget she bought some months back on the incredible off chance that somebody would try to jump her and snatch her handbag or something. Gina is a large healthy woman. I would be more apt to place odds on Gina than on any punk would-be purse snatcher, but she bought one of those things anyway. The can looks exactly like a container of mace, which is why I want it.

She looks at me funny, but I guess the expression on my face keeps her from asking any questions, which is good, because I am certain that time is very short. She hands me the gadget, which works off compressed air or something, and asks what I've got in the box making that funny sound, but I don't take the time to answer. I almost run, out of the building, over to the parking area, and I

have my van cranked and rolling out of the lot in a flash.

I don't take the expressway or the main drag to the area behind Grove Street. I know a back way, a very bumpy, pot hole filled back way that bounces me and the box with Princess in it around like ping pong balls. But I make good time by saving distance and especially by avoiding almost all traffic. Princess' cries are most pitiful to hear, but I can't take the time to comfort her.

I brake hard into the parking lot in front of Manny's warehouse. His car and another one are the only other vehicles there. That other car must be Linda's. I grab the box with Princess along with the can and sprint for the door, which is fortunately not locked.

I don't have time for any slow freight elevator to come down and ride me back up. There are stairs to the right of the elevator, and I take them two at a time. The stairs take several turns before finally getting to the third floor. I have some slight worries that the stairway access door will be locked, but when I get there I see the door is so old and pitiful that it would have been useless to try and lock it anyway. I push thru and run down the hallway to Manny's space, which is showing the only lights on the whole floor.

I burst thru the doorway and see Manny standing near a skid with three trash subtractor units on it. Linda is standing on the other side. The mongrel is on a leash, and for a wonder, is not barking. He's sniffing around at an open tub of liquid rubber compound.

As I arrive everybody stops and looks at me, including Ginger the mutt.

All three of us start talking at the same time.

"Who are you?" asks Linda.

"Ralph, what the hell are you doing here?" growls Manny.

"Linda! Stay away from this guy. Keep your dog away from him too," I shout. "I'm here to keep Manny from using that machine on Ginger!"

"What in the world are you talking about?" Linda asks.

"I'm talking about this," and I open up the cardboard box. Carefully I pick Princess out of the box and set her on top of one of subtractor units.

Princess squeaks politely and glances over at Linda, who is staring at the cat with an unbelieving expression on her face.

“My God! That...it’s, a live cat! It’s so tiny! Manny, what did you do?”

Princess senses Linda is a friend and rubs her tiny head against Linda’s outstretched fingers.

“Yeah, that’s right, Manny did this,” I say, “and Manny’s going to do the same thing to your dog Ginger there.”

“But why would...” she can’t quite grasp the situation.

“Shut the hell up Ralph!” snaps Manny. “I’ll tell you why. Because I’m sick of you and your old man interfering in my business. This is my business, mine, you understand, and I’m running things my way, and you can keep your long nose out of my affairs, or else. Or else! You understand me Linda?”

“Oh I understand all right! You creep! You jerk! You turn that poor cat back into her regular size or else I’ll...”

“No, you won’t do anything baby. I’ve had it with you and your loud mouth and your threats. Nobody threatens Manny Driscoll. I was willing to give you a little warning, but I guess you need the full treatment, just like Princess here got. When I deliver you to your old man smaller than a Barbie doll I think he’ll get the message, even if you don’t.”

Manny grabs a big stick of wood and steps around the skid toward Linda. “Dead or alive babe, I don’t much care. The object lesson will be the same whether you’re dead or alive.”

“Keep away from her Manny. I’m warning you. I’ve got a can of mace here,” and I whip out the blaster can and hold it out in front of me.

“You? You, are warning me? Then I guess I’ll take you out first, snoop. And for your info, I’m one of those guys that mace doesn’t affect. Why don’t I rip that can right out of your hands and we’ll see how it works on you instead.”

I reach up and push down on the button and immediately an ear splitting schreeching noise comes out that sounds like the blast on Gabriel’s final trumpet. It’s so loud nobody can hear anything. Princess, itty bitty Princess, is so scared she



Art by Angela K. Scott...One’s Powers

jumps straight up and then leaps toward Manny. I think, now, that she was just trying to jump into his arms. Humans have always given her safety and comfort before, and she did it instinctively this time. But she must have forgotten that Manny hates cats.

But Manny doesn’t forget. He sees the cat jumping toward him and staggers back. Princess snags the front of his shirt with her claws as she slides down, and that makes Manny scream, although nobody can hear him, and he knocks against the front of the nearest trash subtractor unit on the skid.

He must have accidentally turned it on, that’s the only way I can figure it, because the next second there is a huge electric arc of white light flashing above his head, something like summer lightning, and then there is a rumbling sound, which we all hear, because I have instinctively taken my finger off the Masher Blaster horn button when the electric arc flashed. Then a rain of objects comes pouring down on top of Manny.

There’s not much more to say. Manny is buried under a rain of timber, trash bags, rocks, sticks, old toasters and the like. The pile comes down and

down and keeps coming down for at least two full minutes, maybe even longer. When it finally stops the whole far side of the room is a mountain of trash bags and wood and junk, going from floor right up to the ceiling twenty or so feet above us. I don't even have to check to know that Manny is dead.

So, after we get our pins under us again, Linda uses her cell phone to call the police. That's where you boys come into the picture. You picked us up and took us down here to Headquarters.

Yeah, sure, I'll give you my ideas on what happened. It seems pretty clear to me.

Manny's machine subtracted the bags of trash and everything else he put in those units. He thought the material turned to energy and vanished, but I think maybe what really happens is that the unit divides the material in the hopper of the unit, and sends the bulk of it, nine tenths or whatever proportion it actually turns out to be, somewhere else.

Now, I do not know where someplace else might be. It might be in the future, or it might be to other planet, or it might be some other reality, like a different dimension or something, existing parallel to our own world, like in the movies. The units send the trash over there, see.

Just put yourself in the position of whoever is living over in this other place. Suddenly bags of garbage and junk are falling down on them. I don't know about you, but I'd be pretty ticked off, myself. It's just like living in a nice neighborhood here in Worcester. Suppose some punks next door or down the block throw trash over your fence into your yard. You'd get ticked.

You'd spend a little time making sure you learned exactly who the jerks are, and then, just like people here in Worcester, you'd return the favor, by taking all the trash they dumped onto your yard, and dumping it back onto their property, and maybe you'd add fifty or a hundred percent interest to the loan. Maybe you'd drop it all over their car, or on their prize roses, just to make sure they get the message.

Every one of the machines Manny sold got tested here in his warehouse first, to make sure it worked properly. So when he tripped and hit the On switch on that machine after Princess leaped at

him, these other people must have gotten their co-ordinates targeted just right, and dumped the full load back onto him.

So if I were you, I'd get busy and pick up all those trash smasher units Manny sold, and I'd get 'em back quick, before these other people, from wherever they might be, manage to zero in on those units too.

I don't feel bad about Manny at all. I don't wish harm to anybody, but he got what he deserved. Manny was a jerk and a crook. Maybe he really had gone to college and became an electrical engineer, but I don't think so. I think he made all that up. Instead of being a punk stealing cars or selling illegal automatic weapons or setting up a boiler room operation swindling suckers with fake Wall Street stocks, he found Linda's old man and talked himself into the deal with the subtractors the old man had invented. Criminals can't play the game straight, and Manny couldn't either. If he hadn't been killed here, he would have gotten his ticket punched working some other scam some other place down the line.

No, what I worry about is Princess. That poor little kitty cat. How am I going to explain to Nathan and all the guys next weekend that the Princess Of The Flea Market is gone forever?

BLAM! The office door slams open and a young cop runs into the room all wild eyed. "Captain! The break room..."

Everybody is on their feet, including me. Then we're all coughing and making weird faces because of the sudden aroma in the air.

"My God!" cries the Assistant D.A. "What's that awful stench?"

The cop stammers and finally says words that make sense: "The break room! It's all filled up with rotting garbage!"

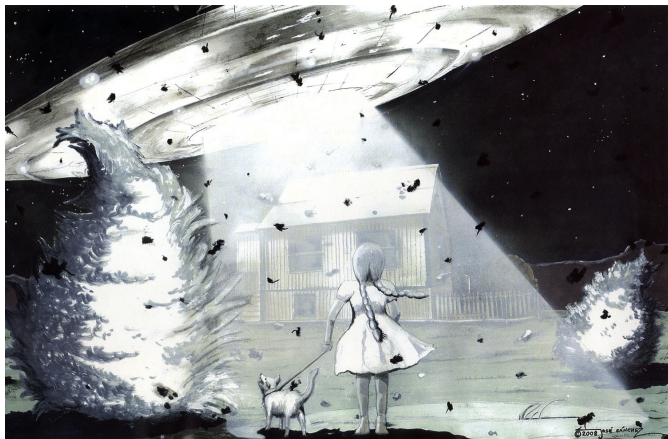
"You see!" I shout, "They got the co-ordinates right and now they're returning all that garbage Manny sent them, with a hundred percent interest!"

Nobody is listening to me because there is a crash from the main booking area and we can all see thru the open door as about a ton of trash and garbage comes raining down out of the air, right over the spot where the police station's other trash compactor used to be.

## Hello Moon

With your sea of storms.  
and your sea of tears.  
Your quiet solitude belies the violence  
of your past experience.

Gary Labowitz



Art by Angela K. Scott...  
Out for a Stroll When All of a Sudden

## The Sisterhood of the Iron Wing

W. Gregory Stewart  
and  
David C. Kopaska-Merkel

These  
(a klatsch of nonesuch hookers  
scattered across the planets and races and  
genders  
of the Known Forms)  
are enchartered/entrusted/condemned to bring  
certain comforts  
to certain peoples in certain ways - their name  
is the same in every language, but means some-  
thing different in each.

The Iron Wing is, variously,  
a shield  
a sword or a plowshare, depending on the decay  
of a single cesium atom

a flying wing  
a resolute society of disparate dream  
a small device of no certain function, a doo-dad  
a reason to hope  
and so.

Their primary pimp is a corporate collective  
of third party intelligence dedicated to explora-  
tion, contemplation,  
the walking of dunes and wastes, thrumming  
across millennia.

You can find their footprints, stride and pace,  
in as many places as they are found:  
ash-fall tuffs bleak to a hard sky on abandoned  
worlds  
shelly mountain tops overlooking cities ahum  
with electrons  
under glass where forgotten peoples are com-  
memorated  
(desert pavements bore them once  
glaciers scoured some away)  
shoreside kitchen middens and toxic landfills.

They will seek you, or you, them - it doesn't  
matter  
they will....  
find you when you need them  
drink endless stimulants in cafes you could  
have sworn  
stood firm between this purveyor of parasite  
harvesting devices  
and that adjacent empty shell of pre-colonial  
drab  
respond to personal ads in certain fora  
abandon dissipated clusters for millennia  
pop in for tea.

The Iron Wing  
will bring you something  
to distract you, to warm you,  
to wow you  
(e.g., oh wow oh golly gee now don't that  
beat all?)  
the Wing  
this Wing  
of Ferrous Feather  
will take you away from hear and know

to a place of mindblinded disregard  
and momentary... well, something between  
quiet joy  
and raging ecstasy  
with a voice to catch the attention  
of far far seas

the Wing is a kind of love.

It is amnesia, brief, when amnesia is needed,  
and it is omniscience, less than kind -  
it is the butterfly of chaos knowing  
that it has flattened some unseen forest on the  
other side of whatever  
and that it also started life  
as a sac full of caterpillar gut.

You may find whole worlds scattered in dust-  
bins  
monsters pickled in museums, the larvae of top-  
pled races  
hawking trinkets in transfer-station gathering  
spots

minerals that could only form at Pressure-  
Temperature conditions  
now restricted to neutron stars and, transiently,  
the halos around black holes;  
the Iron Wing will be there too.

YOU hide a jigsaw piece at family gatherings,  
so you can finish that puzzle;  
THEY watch the pre-bang polygalactic collapse  
from their convent distance, knowing  
THEY are the bit that would take it critical, won-  
dering  
did YOU really earn a second chance?

End of poem

## Memory Wipe!

By John Thiel

It seemed an unusual day, in that Murdock  
could not recall any other day quite like it. True, it  
was rather humdrum, with birds flying overhead,  
cars going by in the streets, people talking about

nothing in particular, yet had it been that way on  
other days in his recent memory? The cars were  
not the same ones, were they? Had not the birds  
changed their songs in the slightest? He looked for  
ways that would account for his feeling that there  
was something different about they day, and could  
find little that would exactly explain it.

Well, it was a different day in that it WAS a  
different day—but, now, no, that wasn't the feel-  
ing he had had. The day had seemed UNUSUAL  
to him, not just different.

What had been the source of the feeling?  
Was it just him? If so, if it was only him who was  
different, that would make it a different day, any-  
way, a difference that would concern only him.  
But it seemed to him that the feeling of unusual-  
ness had come from something he had sensed out-  
side himself. Whatever it was he had sensed  
would probably seem unusual to someone else, if  
Murdock were only able to identify it and find  
words for it.

He remained where he had been when the  
feeling had come upon him, scanning out minor  
details along the street as well as major ones. Per-  
haps this feeling had stolen over him from some-  
thing he'd already passed, but in that case he  
would have to back-track, not progress, in solving  
the mystery.

Many were the details that were probably  
unique, but none were so rare that they could make  
the day itself seem unusual. As he continued to  
watch, almost of a mind to give up his vigil and  
forget the matter, a Regules Vendura came around  
a corner and joined the stream of traffic.  
"Certainly not all the newest makes are SUVs," he  
thought, considering its byzantine lines—then he  
remembered that that was the second Vendura he  
had seen that day, and it came to his mind what  
he'd been thinking when he saw it first. He'd  
never even heard of the Regules, let alone their  
Vendura model. Now here was a second one.

The first had made it a potentially unusual  
day, and the appearance of a second made it a defi-  
nitely unusual one. That, then, was the source of  
his feeling. He smiled as he watched it pass, and  
walked on, relieved that he had discovered the  
source of his new perception. Then he remembered

that he had been considering whether he could pass along a comment to another about what he'd seen. Yes, he could imagine himself saying, "Seen any Venduras about lately?" and getting a response.

And so his day continued. He had walked eight more blocks and was waiting for a light when another Vendura came around the corner and headed back the way he had come; the driver gave him a little wave, recognizing him from the neighborhood.

He turned and looked back at the vanishing car, and then, because the light still had not changed, he crossed the street the car had taken and just made it across before the light did change. He stood at the curb awhile, lost in thought. He was considering much earlier days when pedestrian traffic was more common. Over the years, there had been quite a change. When had those days been? He thought back. It was difficult to evaluate a gradual change, to say just when things had definitely become any different.

When he recommenced his walk, the light had changed in the cross street, so he continued in the new direction he had taken. He was only out after a newspaper, and supposed it wouldn't matter if he varied his route a bit, considering that the stand was four blocks in this direction also. Usually he walked all the way to the cross-street where the stand was located before changing direction.

Was seeing three cars of the same make so unusual? Well, where had they come from? Had somebody sent some new automobiles into town and sold three of them on the same day to drivers who would use the same street? If no one else would consider it novel, he'd have to be a lone thinker, because it seemed to him to stand out from normal events. It was not like the way things usually were. The sighting had caused him to change his course, and that made a difference to at least one man, himself.

He found new matters to consider as he continued his sally. He suddenly recalled a dream he had had last night. About the only thing he usually remembered about his dreams was that he didn't usually remember them. Come to think of it, perhaps sometimes he did remember full dreams,

but just didn't remember remembering them as he thought about it now. What, exactly, was memory? When a person totally took in something, and it became a part of himself, he had no reason to remember what he'd taken in and so he forgot about it. Discrepant and unresolved thoughts were what persisted in the memory. But dreams were all that way, discrepancies in thought. Were they resolved during sleep?

"Not only are my dreams forgotten, but so are all discrepant thoughts," he said aloud. He continued to himself, If I have had any thoughts that were not ordinary ones, I don't remember them now. They're the very things I should be remembering, because they have not culminated as thoughts and been processed in. In fact, he had practically not been making use of his memory at all.

This realization put him into such a state of consternation that when he reached the street where he had to turn, he turned in the other direction instead. He told himself, "I'll make it an unusual day if it is not one," and proceeded on his walk back to his house, taking the same street he had already taken in returning. He had gone several blocks when he began to wonder where he was coming from. He knew where he was going, he was going to his house. But where had he started out from and what had he done while there?

He stopped for a moment and recollected his steps. It seemed to him he had been at the news stand. Oh, yes, it was clearer now—he had not been at the news stand. He had decided not to go there. Why he had changed his mind was not very clear to him. As he considered it, it seemed to him that some gross sin or transgression had been committed by his not going there. But what was it? Why, it was his job to be there, dispensing the daily prints. It was a shirking of his responsibility, not doing the thing for which he was paid.

But no, that was the news dealer. The consideration did not fit him at all—it was another man's concern. He himself would have bought a paper, and that would have been his part of the transaction. Had he shirked any responsibility by not playing his part in the transaction today, by not enabling the man to sell one of his newspapers the

way he always did? At any rate, it was not his job, and he didn't like thinking of something he didn't do as being his job, or suffering for not doing it.

Somebody came across the street toward him, a jaywalker. "You don't sell news!" the fellow shouted.

From down the street, another fellow said, "You'd better watch out you don't come out to be the news yourself!" He seemed to think he'd said something funny.

A policeman pulled in alongside of him. "You're not a newsman, just like they're saying. You better go back to being what you really are."

"I'm not pretending to be a newsman!" Murdock responded. "I'm on a walk, see, that's all!"

"Well, I can see we've bothered you without cause," the policeman said. "Only one thing, why aren't you down there getting your newspaper?"

"I don't want one today! The news is not interesting enough. Why should I bore myself with it each and every day?"

"How do you know it's not interesting if you haven't read it? You ought to want to better yourself by reading the news, to be a good citizen. But suit yourself, you don't have to read it every day. I'll go back and tell the news vendor you won't be by today."

"Would you do that? I feel like I've slighted him, but that would make it better."

"It's always a righteous work to make another man feel better," the policeman said, and continued up the street. Murdock looked at the men who were bothering him and then suddenly broke free of them, hurrying off down the street toward his home. He distanced them nicely, and soon had the sidewalks practically to himself. As he approached his house, another man stepped out of a doorway across the street, crossed the street and caught up with him.

"We're having a new car rally," the man told him. "Regules Venduras. It's just being introduced into this town. If you want to give your impression of our street demonstration, we'll sign you up as a possible owner of one. An endorsement gets you a cut rate and any amount of time to

pay. Be one of ours."

"No, thanks, I've got other matters to attend to," said Murdock. "And that's chiefly, being what I am. If it's one of theirs, that's okay by me."

"Suit yourself," said the man. "It's just like what that policeman said to you."

"You could be one of ours, if you're legitimate enough about this auto deal."

"I'll think that one over," the man said. "See that you remember it, for the next time we meet."

A Sample Chapter:

## Dead Man's Hand

by Jean Lamb



### Chapter 1

Tonio Vitor laughed and threw the dice. He'd been gambling at various clubs since early afternoon, mostly at cards and tiles. The slow, but steady wins that came his way from calculation filled his pouch, but not his spirit. He longed for

the joy that came from real gambling, though, and found it here. Tonight, no matter how improbable, the dots and pictures he needed turned up as the glittering cubes obeyed his every command. The smoky light of the Dancing Cat, his favorite gaming club, made everything shine. This was his last night here in Argnon. It was only right that he and his friends spend it here in the wharf area, close to where his beloved *Wing* was docked.

He gazed down at the felt-covered table. Nothing was like the lightning that ran down his arm with dice. Of course, if he played picwin, he knew how to make his own luck. With his memory for tile-patterns and numbers, he was assured of coming out ahead unless the tide truly turned against him or his mother was in the game. He would miss this place. Tonio shook off the shadow of foreboding that assailed him. Why should he let the future douse his present joy? He paused anyway. "We have to go," he said reluctantly to his cousin. "The tide turns in a few hours." The will of the Star-Lady waited for no man.

"Leaving the tables so soon? Everyone will think you're ill," Harin della Rovere said with a peculiar smile.

"But not you." Looking at his cousin was like gazing into a mirror. They had the same narrow face, dark eyes, and pale skin. "You're usually the first one to drag me away, since anyone who stays here long enough loses everything. Then I swear never to put my house at risk the way your father has yours. Have I remembered your lessons?"

Harin rolled his eyes. "It's still true. You don't have to tell me that my mother's sister keeps all her gaming inside the family, but my father doesn't. That's why I have to marry a rich merchant's daughter I don't even like to keep my line from going under."

"Yet tonight you're staying quiet, when you'd rather play the good spirit and keep me from temptation," Tonio said wryly, passing the dice to someone else, since he was delaying others by this talk. "Well, we don't have to stay here. For one thing, I haven't finished buying presents for my family. I wish one of them could have come to see us leave the University of Argnon covered in glory." He was proud of his accomplishments. Only

one student a year received the Cup for skill in mathematics from Professor Sirisac. It felt peculiar to be taught by a dragon, but everyone else was used to it—the old fellow had been there for most of a century.

"I know," Harin said. "None of mine did, either. Lessimo had his uncle show up. That's why he's not with us now, but the two of us have the same problem."

Tonio sighed. "Father prefers to oversee the barley planting instead of leaving it to clients, not to mention tending the minta trees. My brother certainly can't leave with his wife about to bear a child." *Luiva*.. He ached with guilty pleasure thinking of her.

"Old Vitor is proud of you. Mother wrote me how much he brags," Harin said.

"He promised me ownership of the *Wing* if I did well," Tonio said. "I suppose he is." Once he returned home, he would have to leave again. *Luiva* still lived there, wed to his beloved brother Anderay. His blood burned thinking about his luscious sister-in-law, remembering how her heavy-lidded eyes and red lips inflamed his heart. Her actual presence would drive him mad. It had before.

And yet—perhaps she had given birth to his brother's child by now, and had grown to love her husband. There was no way he could find out save by going home.

"Oh, blazes!" Harin intercepted the dice as they came around to their corner of the table again. He put the cubes back in Tonio's hand. "A few more throws won't hurt. What's the big rush?"

Tonio smiled, shook off his thoughts, and tossed the dice to the croupier behind the cloth-covered table. He added a bow, out of respect. "I must be gone," he said. "The tide waits for no one." It was time to stop running away and face his fears. He was glad that *Luiva* was so near her time, or he might have to face more than that. Surely she had been carrying Anderay's child when they had befouled his brother's trust in them.

Harin and their other friends gathered around, ready to follow him.

"Leaving so soon?" Avdan Delcoros, the son of a rival family, walked into the gaming chamber.

He had been sent north from Cuda to cool his heels, too, though he was rarely seen at his books. "How courageous of you to depart before anyone has a chance for revenge."

"You've had all night," Tonio said.

"Some of us have family duties even so far away from home," Avdan replied.

"Oh? Do they include hiring bravos to waylay me and my friends? One of them was too wounded to flee, and named a 'foreign lad, a great hulking brute' as his paymaster," Tonio said. It was odd how none of the bands had attacked him while he was alone, though.

Avdan flushed red, but stood his ground. "As I said, some of us have family duties. But it will be a pleasure to pull you off your dunghill and pluck your tail-feathers!"

"Go ahead, try all you want. A pity it won't do you any good."

"Perhaps I'll just hang them up on the wall as a trophy," his rival blustered. Avdan threw back his shoulders, looking more like a prize bullock than ever. There was peasant blood in that family, which showed in darker skin and cruder attitudes.

"Why not?" Tonio said. "You deserve one last chance to humiliate me. I should warn you that I've been lucky all night." He was certain he had at least one more throw in his tingling right hand, though he'd learned the hard way to stop when it did. One month here he'd been forced to live entirely on the food at card parties rather than admit to his father that he'd lost his allowance. *But I can't be beat tonight, especially by a Delcoros!*

He pulled out his winnings and set them on the table, though he could feel Harin's unspoken disapproval. "I won't even ask you to match my wager if you can't. Just empty your pockets." He counted on Avdan to stand there and choke before admitting he couldn't.

It was fun to watch the great lump sweat during the time it took for Avdan to borrow enough money from those around him to equal Tonio's pile.

The dice-master discreetly signaled for more gentlemen to keep order. *Wise fellow!* Tonio thought.

The croupier announced the rules. "This is a

private game. Side bets may be placed with the man in the gold baldric. This will be short. Each player will throw one pair of dice in turn for three throws. The best two out of three will win. The highest number wins each throw, and the dragon trumps all. A pair of dragons ends the game. Kiron, bring the tournament dice."

"No!" Avdan said. "No matter what is thrown, the other player ought to be able to try to match it."

"Do you agree?" The croupier turned towards Tonio.

"Of course." The picture side on any set of dice was called a dragon, no matter what the design actually looked like.

An older woman with lovely greenish eyes stepped forward. She was obviously a mage with an orange cap covering most of her soft brown hair. She held a tray bearing four small, six-sided dice. One pair was red, and the other blue. The mage lifted them to show that each one had the proper numbers and one picture on it. Tonio's set had two small ships marked in white, while Avdan's had dragons engraved yellow. Dragons were lucky for him, even in his enemy's hands, though he naturally preferred the ships.

"I assure you both that these dice have no spells and have the proper balance," she said, clearly speaking as the house mage.

Tonio threw first. His score was nine, with a five and four combination. It wasn't a great number, but possibly a winning one. His fingers still tingled.

Avdan looked disappointed when his dice bounced their way to a three. "Mage, I smell something rotten here. Can you make sure nothing in this room is working against me?"

"My dear sir, I renew the spells against any magic in here every morning," she said, clearly displeased. "If you were cursed outside of this room, I suppose you could be carrying it with you, though I doubt it. However, just to make sure that nothing can be said, I shall put one around this table so strong that my own magic won't work till I move away from here." She chanted a spell in some foreign language.

Tonio's heart fell as his right hand lost its fire.

He'd never thought of his gift as magic, really, since it had worked here before and in other clubs equally guarded against enchantment. Unfortunately, he couldn't possibly back out now. Sweat prickled at the back of his neck. He forced a smile when he picked up his blue dice again.

His friends crowded around to lend their support, but Harin backed away. Tonio shrugged. His cousin was a good companion in all things but gambling. Harin had never run off, for instance, when they'd faced real danger on the streets of Argnon.

So what if he lost? He was only risking what he'd won tonight. He picked up the dice and threw without thinking.

Delcoros crowed with delight as his dragon and five beat Tonio's pair of twos. "Redouble!"

"With what?"

"You have this pile. And you own the *Wing*, don't you? Or is it still your father's?"

"It passed to me upon graduation, especially since I did so with honors. I haven't wasted my time stalking someone I barely know, unlike some people!"

Avdan's eyes flashed. "You have no idea what you're talking about. If you paid attention to something past the bottom of a wine bottle, you might learn more than you think. Besides, it won't kill you or your friends to work your passage home or walk home south along the Neck. I've always fancied myself a bit of a sailor."

Fancied is the right word, Tonio thought. He'd seen Avdan at the tiller of someone else's boat, and it hadn't been a pretty sight. Delcoros had been so distracted by whatever he was watching, instead of where he was going, that he'd nearly run the little vessel aground.

"You still haven't offered anything of equal value," Tonio said. "This is a different bet."

The other man glanced at those around him. They shook their heads, after being bled for one loan already. "Isn't my word good enough?" Avdan said, his face full of panic.

"Perhaps your word is good with the Mintaran slave factors, but not with me!" The Vitors and their friends were opposed to involvement with the trade of that empire to the south of Cuda. Howev-

er, the Delcoros clan and their allies pressured the Congregation of the Houses to increase trade with Mintar, and to look the other way when their ships raided the shores of Allante and Grand Marq. One of the good things about Argnon is that most people here hated Mintar, too.

Thus far the influence of Sandro Vitor as First Speaker had steered the Houses away from such a dangerous ally. *Father is right about them*, Tonio thought. Besides, trade with Argnon and a free hand in Lemgol already meant wealth and plenty of markets for Cudan wine and minta oil. Why risk losing what they already had to gamble for more?

Then again, perhaps he ought to back off from the same course himself. "I am content to keep the bet as it was," he said. "Do remember that my friends are here as witnesses to whatever you'd like to say." *Oh, Avdan, please give me the chance to run you through without having to fear your family's revenge!*

"Damn you! It's a deal!" Delcoros rapidly scribbled on a piece of a paper. "You'll have to believe in this note, if my word's no good."

"I hope you realize how much the *Wing* is worth," Tonio said. His heart beat faster.

"Getting cold feet now? Maybe you don't know how much my share of this year's harvest is worth, even though I'm the youngest. I suspect it adds up to more than yours."

"I doubt it," Tonio said, though the wealth of Avdan's family was legendary.

"Well, if you don't trust my accounting of it, you can look at the steward's tally yourself." The other man wrote some more on the paper.

Tonio eagerly wrote his own note for the *Wing*. Winning the right to examine the Delcoros financial records was worth the risk. If he lost—but he couldn't lose. *I can look Father in the eye and say I did it for the family. Besides, knowing a rival's standing is wealth beyond counting to any Great House*. His heart sank, though, knowing he put his sweet little yacht at risk. After this game he'd take a vow not to game for at least a month. This was how Harin's father had lost so much.

The house mage frowned, but took custody of both pieces of paper. The croupier declared the first game null and void, replaced with this one, in

which one throw only would determine the winner—unless there was a tie, of course.

Sweat ran down Tonio's back. He stared at the table. This was too important a throw not to think about it first. How many factors could he influence? Then he studied the dice. Was it his imagination, or did Avdan's pair look subtly different than before? Then again, the light in the chamber changed as candles burned down and were replaced. He should ask for two new pairs to be brought, as was common in such games.

On impulse, he reached for the crimson pair. "As the challenged party here, I have the choice of dice," he said. Avdan could easily have changed them while everyone was writing notes, and... Tonio suddenly remembered what the mage had said. Her powers were gone as long as she stood by this table, because of the spell she'd cast at his opponent's request.

Delcoros turned pale, but said nothing.

*He's got courage*, Tonio thought, and balanced the little red cubes in his hand. They felt fine, though he wasn't sure if he would recognize any differences unless they were blatant. The one time he'd been certain the dice were loaded, he'd quit the game as soon as he could. *Surely there is something different...unless he wanted me to have these dice...* He smiled to himself. Even old Uri didn't have that twisty a mind. He hoped.

"One roll decides the bet," intoned the croupier. "Same rules as before. Blue dice throws first."

Avdan made his throw. His dice bounced off the inside corner of the hollowed-out table, flipped up, and then landed. Everyone gasped as two tiny ships faced the crowd. Delcoros's broad face lit up.

*Oh, Death-Lord, I've lost everything.* Tonio stared numbly at the small engravings that now blackened his hopes. "Wait," he said in a hoarse voice. "I have the right to equal it, if I can."

"Why, of course, Vitor. Never let it be said that a Delcoros isn't your match in courtesy."

Tonio wanted to wipe that smirk off Avdan's face. Sick terror overwhelmed him. It was too late to back out now. He breathed deeply. His opponent had wanted these dice for a reason. Now he would find out why.

"Never say that a Vitor gives up too easily," he said. "For Siranna!" he cried, dedicating this throw to his family's estate. He let the dice fly.

The glowing cubes bounced against the back of the table, leaped into the air, and rolled to a stop.

Two beautiful yellow dragons blazed face up, their eyes picked out in tiny rubies.

Avdan wiped his forehead, clearly aghast that his throw had been met. "We have to toss again!" he said. "Now it's my turn to use the red dice."

"No, Delcoros. Dragons trump all." No wonder the other man had wanted the red pair. Not only did they match the ones he'd started with, but the rules favored him in a tie. Now they favored him. He folded his arms and smiled.

The house mage sighed. "That's correct. You had the red dice for two throws, and the other gentleman has had them for only one."

"I don't plan to give them up." Tonio picked them up before anyone else could get too close a look. "If we toss again, I will use this pair."

Avdan's shoulders slumped. He pushed the pile of coins in front of him to the middle of the side-table. "It's all yours."

Tonio rejoiced in the blank despair he saw in his enemy's eyes, and gleefully pulled his winnings to him as Delcoros walked away. His pleasure became even greater as he collected the two notes from the mage, and tore up the one for the *Wing*.

It was time to go. "Gentlemen and ladies, I really must leave you now." His friends crowded around him, noisy with relief and pride. Harin had returned, too. *A good thing I won*, he thought, *or he'd still be gone. At least the others are loyal*. No, that wasn't fair. His cousin had good reason to abhor this kind of gambling. A pity that Father had turned Harin down as a husband for his sister Issola, who had also pleaded for the match. Tonio wouldn't mind having his companion as a brother-in-law as well as a cousin.

He wrenched himself back to the present as the manager of the club, a tall, thin man, walked over. "Ser Vitor, would you care to sit down in a quiet room for a short time? Winning can sometimes be exhausting."

"Is there some trouble?" he asked.

"No, of course not. Your friends may accompany you, if you wish. We often offer this courtesy to winners, and sometimes losers, at this time of night."

Tonio decided he could use a brief rest, despite the clamor from the others to go out and celebrate. He picked up a small handful of gold and gave it to the croupier, and then offered the same amount to the mage.

She declined. "I'm oath-bound never to touch money while I'm employed here," she said. "It helps remove temptation."

"That must make shopping difficult."

Then one of his friends called out, "We'll be having something to drink in the front room, Tonio! We know better than to get in your way." The small group left, which was reasonably tactful for them.

"It sounds like your friends are used to your flirting," the mage observed.

"Ah, yes," he said, trying to ignore the warmth in his face. "Before I was interrupted, I wanted to tell you that you should be surrounded by beautiful things, to best display your own gentle face." She appeared more attractive by the minute to him.

She smiled, revealing her dimples. "I shouldn't listen to a flatterer like you." Then she looked sober. "I have to discuss a few things with you. Come with me for a moment, though please don't assume that I've fallen for your charms."

Tonio blinked, but did as she said. The manager had reassured him that he wasn't in trouble. He hoped that was still true.

Once they were both inside a room lit by a couple of lamps, with two chairs and a table, she had him sit down while she remained standing. "First of all, I really wish you had asked for a fresh set of dice. The spells in this place not only affect anyone who brings in their own dice, but anyone who uses them knowingly. Clearly, your opponent found out who our supplier was, and had his dice altered to roll a Grand Dragon by weighting the opposite side. He was quite clever, really. Asking me to reinforce the spells against magic so thoroughly meant my powers could not detect the false dice soon enough to insist on a new set. However,

you may find your winnings rebound on you somehow. Who knows, it may have been better for you to lose this time."

"My ship!" he said.

"Some losses are easier to bear than others," the mage said. "I'm certain that idiotic boy will suffer for his. I simply wanted to warn you that you could run into problems as well. You're a generous lad, for all your foreign ways. You've been a good player, though if you had any control over that tingle in your arm you might end up with a cap like mine. Granted, it's not much since the normal spells don't stop it, or we would have told you to forget any dice-play a long time ago. I...I just wish you hadn't handled those altered dice."

Tonio wished he hadn't now as well. He sighed. "Is there some place where I can make an offering to turn away this bad luck?"

"Nothing that is open this late for the gods your people worship. Stop at the nearest shrine on your way home, though. That might help. And say a prayer for the poor lad you cleaned out. His fate isn't going to be good either."

*He's the son of Uri Delcoros,* he thought. *That's bad enough, I suppose.* "I'll consider it, my lady." Tonio didn't want to think about any problems Avdan could have, though.

"Oh...could you have a servant bring me some blackbean tea with honey? Someone in my group needs to stay sober, and I expect it's going to be me." He'd received the Philosopher's Cup from Dr. Sirisac at dawn today, or yesterday, and since then he'd been in the company of his friends.

"Also, I would like to know about secure storage. I don't want to carry this much coin on the way home."

"You would be better off sleeping and leaving on the noon tide," she said. The mage picked up a lamp, walked to the far end of the room, and opened a door. Tonio followed her into the narrow passageway, which led to another place in the building.

"We let anyone come here who wants to," she said, and waved at a stack of metal boxes piled high on tables against the walls. Some boxes had doors that hung open, while others had a red seal on them. "Each box is closed by a magical lock

and will open to one person only. You can leave instructions for me to open it for someone else, though. Go ahead and try your thumb on the seals. They won't open. In fact, we invite people to come in and try as many as they like. It's amusing and keeps idiots from breaking in."

Tonio gazed at the stacks. What riches must be stored in them? "No wonder you're bound not to touch money. Is there anything valuable that you are allowed to have?" He ran his thumb across several locked boxes, with no result.

She shook her head, and showed those lovely dimples again when she smiled. "Pick one of the empty boxes, load it up, and close the door. I'll turn my back, and will seal it for you when you're ready."

He bowed to her. Once she wasn't looking, he looked over his winnings. The pile of gold and silver glittered in the dim lamplight, but of course, the note from Delcoros was worth more. Avdan was probably right that his share of his family's harvest might come to more than his own portion in Siranna. If only old Uri wasn't so rich! Then nobody would listen to the horrible old man, and Father would have an easier time of it.

Tonio counted out enough gold and silver to get home on for his pouch. He needed a few last-minute supplies for the *Wing*, and to finish finding presents for his family. Oh, how glad he was that he'd done so well in his studies. Without that, he couldn't have dared so greatly and won so much. What would old Uri offer to keep the Vitors from looking at his books?

He chose one box, and put the coins and the note inside it. If anything happened at sea, or in this city, his family could still have their revenge. Tonio closed the box's lid and said, "I'm ready now."

She nodded gravely once she saw which box he'd picked. "Place your hand over the lid," she said, and then muttered something to herself.

A red seal now covered the door. It felt cool and slick to Tonio, more like glass than metal or wax.

"Remember, your box is number 39," she said. "One last thing. Never try to remove any of the boxes from this room. We keep the skeleton of the

last man who tried on display."

Tonio had wondered about that, since he could lift one of the empty boxes without much trouble. He wasn't about to doubt a lady's word, though, especially on such a matter.

Both of them went to the manager's office, and Tonio paid the fee that would cover storage for five years. He also let the man know that anyone with the Master-Ring of Siranna should have access to the box. Sandro Vitor, his father, might prefer the note kept safely away from any feuds until agreement on what it was worth could be reached. *Who knows, perhaps Father can trade the note for a favor worth more to the family than any gold before the old man can play merchants' tricks with the tally.*

He went back to the sitting room. Harin was there, along with the blackbean tea. "Here, drink this," his cousin said. "You look almost as bad as Delcoros did."

"I'm just glad I won," Tonio said. He didn't tell his friend about the curse the mage had mentioned, but took the cup and sat down.

Harin kept standing, and looked down at the floor. "I'm sorry I deserted you," he said. "The chance you took—it reminded me of my father."

"I know. I must have been mad." How could he explain that the greater the risk he ran, the greater the joy and relief when he won? The terror that ran down his spine made him feel alive the way few other things did. "Mother's warned me a dozen times. I've lost count of how often you've spoken to me about it." *No wonder Harin doesn't want to go home right away. Maytera Montegardo is attractive, but she's still a merchant's daughter.* He tried not to remember the way her eyes flashed, even though she'd been angry with him the one time he had met her.

Harin sat down in the other chair. "Perhaps you ought to concentrate on sailing, now that the *Wing* is yours. Trying to drown yourself, and the rest of us, ought to be enough excitement."

Tonio laughed. Then he let his head droop. The blackbean tea wasn't helping much. The exhilaration of winning faded all too quickly.

"I'll go find the others and we'll come back here. I still think we ought to have a good night's

sleep before going home,” his cousin said. “There will be other tides.”

“I’m beginning to agree with you,” Tonio said.

“And don’t be too proud. Hire a pilot. I know you received your license last month, but it’s busier than the Grand Avenue out there.”

“You’re no fun!” Tonio emptied his cup. “I worked so hard for it, too.” It was rare for a foreigner to be allowed to take the exam, even for just the commercial area of the port. Dr. Sirisac must have intervened for him. Well, Marlena might have, as well.

“I’ll look for the others now, but if I come back here and find you asleep, we’re not leaving till noon.” Harin stood and yawned. No doubt he was tired as well.

“All right,” he said. Once his cousin was gone, Tonio took an oilskin pouch from his belt, opened it, and admired several pieces of paper that he spread out on the table before him. The first was the deed to *Beloved’s Wing*. *That’s the most important one*, he thought. *Merciful Death-Lord, what was I thinking when I risked it?* He folded it and put it back. Then he beamed at his rather large certificate, signed by Dr. Sirisac himself with his right foreclaw dipped in red ink. Tonio still doubted that he had really mastered philosophy, which included mathematics, but he wasn’t going to quibble. He knew how privileged he was to be taught by a dragon. The marvelous were rare even in Talisgran.

The last item was a sealed letter from home, received by special messenger today—well, yesterday. He hadn’t opened it yet, since he knew all the reasons no one from the family could come and didn’t want to hear them again.

*I might as well read the latest news*, he thought with a sigh, and opened the packet. He recognized his great-grandmother’s crabbed handwriting. Tonio had never known anyone who could squeeze so much onto a single sheet of paper as she did.

*They tell me you did well with your studies. I’m glad you’re coming home, and so is everyone else.*

HowHow like his Nonna to begin so abruptly.

*I finally told your father why you left. Of course you wouldn’t say anything, but I guessed. I don’t think Sandro will tell your brother. I knew*

*you didn’t do anything that little minx didn’t ask for. Tell her ‘no’ the next time.*

*We should have sent someone to show those northerners that we were proud of you. Luiva can’t travel in her condition, though, and it is her first. She’ll settle down once the baby is born, or I’ll find out why. Your mother is much too lenient with the girl, as is your brother, but they don’t listen to me. I talked with her, though, and told her to keep her eyes to herself. I’m telling you the same thing!*

Tonio bristled. It wasn’t Luiva’s fault! She was a wonderful woman, and made Anderay happier than he’d ever been. He should have refused to walk with her in the garden last autumn. He should have sailed north from Cuda to Argnon the week before. He should have left immediately after his brother’s marriage, in fact—especially when he had realized she was looking at him the way she should have been looking at his brother.

He bent back to the letter. *I should find you a wife, but you have too much Gambrell blood to settle down for a few years. Your father thinks you can use that to the family’s advantage. Talk to him when you return—no more of those proud silences! I’m glad that fling between you and that daughter of Argnon came to nothing. You deserve better than to be that little madam’s plaything.*

Tonio felt his face go hot. He’d had no idea that Marlena was the one who had cleared the way for him to study for that pilot’s license—or that she was the Duke’s eldest child. Fortunately, some other nobleman had caught her interest. With any luck she’d forgotten about him. Even he wasn’t bold enough to sail in those waters. Given that Argnon had once been occupied and ruled by one of his fellow countrymen, his presence at Marlena’s side would undoubtedly cause riots, if not an actual uprising.

He continued reading. *It’s been several generations since someone brought a foreign bride to Siranna, but maybe it’s time again. Who can I train to take over after me? These Cudan girls all pretend to bow their heads, and then do what they want behind my back. Bring one home who’ll shout right back at me!*

He smiled at that. It was fun to tease his Nonna by imitating her harsh Allanten accent. She was truly his great-grandmother, but everyone called her just Nonna. Respectfully.

*Did I ever tell you about your ancestor, the pirate? Of course I did, I'm not senile yet. I could name a few ports that could use the same treatment Old Gambrell gave them, but you've heard plenty from me about that.*

Some of his favorite nursery stories had been the bloodcurdling tales of Ravin the Pirate storming the ports along the Inner Sea. Even death hadn't slowed the fellow down—after his death, his ghost had supposedly rallied his ships to strike and burn. It probably wasn't true that the old pirate had trained all the gambrells to spy for him; besides, it was bad luck to kill those birds of the sea.

Tonio had laughed when he'd discovered that 'ravin' was dockside cant for 'ghost' here in Argnon. *One of these days I'm going to use that riddle-rhyme Nonna taught me to find my way through the rocks of Collar Island, and find out if Gambrell's last stronghold is still there. And perhaps I might pay a call on the current ruler of Alante.*

The first Tyrant had murdered nearly all the Gambrell family, except for Nonna. She had already entered the Vitor family, as a bride of fourteen in the days when women's names were never mentioned below the second floor. The second Tyrant had hunted down the few remaining survivors at the beginning of his reign. Now the third boasted of destroying all the great families that had once tempered a ruler's power.

*Come home. Bad times are on their way. Uri Delcoros is growing stronger in the Congregation. We can't let Cuda be sold to the Mintarans! Your father and brother will need your eyes and ears, though they don't realize it yet. We were a sea power equal to Argnon once. Are we going to let that sorry bunch of northerners fight our battles for us? I remember when Kercherrian ruled there, and was an idiot to lose it. What fools we would look asking them for help!*

Tonio considered that. To this day, some people in Argnon spat on the ground if they realized he was from Cuda. After he learned why they

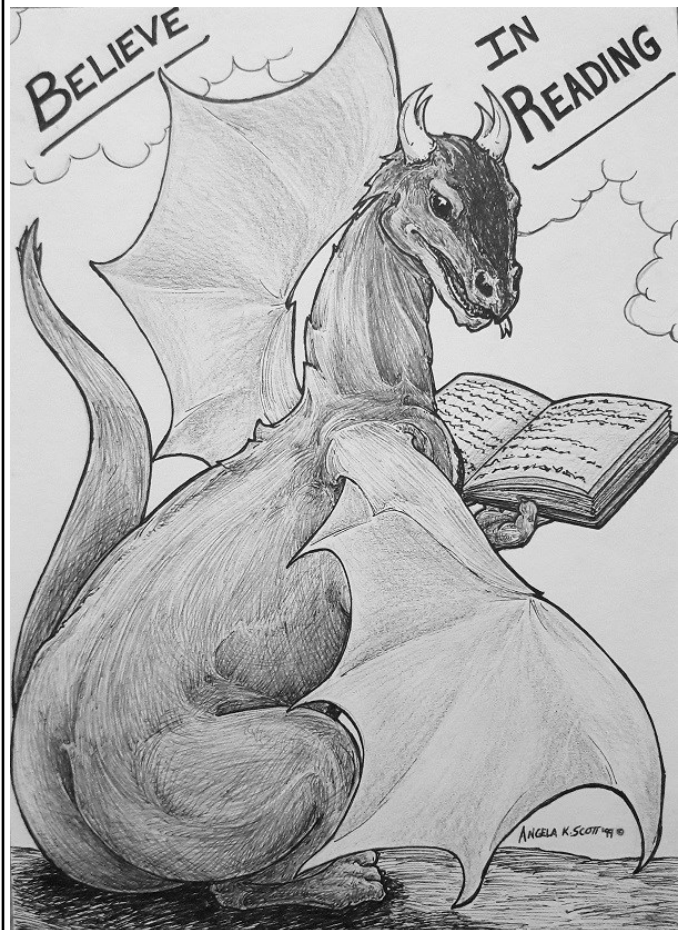
called Arion Kercherrian the Butcher, the way that hero had died looked less like hideous treachery and more like great good sense.

*Come home. We miss you. I threw an offering to the Sea-Lady to keep you in Siranna for as long as I live. Humor an old woman, will you?*

*Love, Nonna.*

He breathed a huge sigh of relief. He hadn't found a good way to explain his lack of honor to his father. The Maiden willing, only he and Luiva would ever know what the two of them had done. No doubt she'd already been pregnant by his brother when they'd met, since she was so close to her time now.

Tonio folded the letter and returned it to the pouch. What a weight his great-grandmother had taken from him. He always wanted to help the family, but had his own dreams too. Surely there



Art by Angela K. Scott....Dragon Reading

was a way to do both, and it sounded as if Nonna had thought of one.

The old woman was the strongest of the clan despite her many years. Sandro voted her way in the Congregation, and everyone in the Vitor family knew it. No one spoke of it to strangers, of course; a woman's influence, save for a surviving widow with a young son, was usually private.

That didn't stop the house from being flooded with gifts for Nonna every time the Congregation was in session. She laughed, accepted the booty, and claimed to be only a crazy old woman when a messenger pressed for an answer from her. Everyone thought it a huge joke, especially Tonio's father. Being able to pass off political pressures to each other amused both Sandro Vitor and Nonna—and drove the enemies of the house out of their minds.

Tonio thought he'd kept his own secret well. He was so glad he'd been wrong. Father had been so angry when he'd mentioned staying in Argnon permanently.

He bowed his head. It had been years since he'd made an offering to the Grove of Siranna with his father and brother. He gazed into the cup of blackbean tea, now stone cold, and sank into meditation. Yes. Deep down inside, he still felt the pull of those ancient trees. His birth-cord, along with those of all the sons of the Vitor family, was buried there. No wonder he'd never been truly lost at sea. In the center of his heart he always knew where he was.

Most men of the Congregation had that gift, even Avdan Delcoros. That was one reason a Cudan fleet was always feared, and why Allante hadn't attacked its main rival for over a century. It took more than that to make a good sailor, though, and Tonio was proud to have it.

He stood up and stretched. Harin and the others were waiting for him. He froze as he heard voices on the other side of the wall. Gentlemen didn't eavesdrop, but he listened anyway.

"If I knew someone reliable who could run the Chute more than once a month and could dodge the Emperor's pickets, I'd send the stuff myself," a man said.

"Surely it's not that bad?" That was a woman, an elderly one by the sound of her.

"That's what I'm told. Whoever goes has to avoid being inspected by the customs officials, or have a better hiding place than the last one. Your profits will be higher if he doesn't have to pay the fees, plus I won't have to pay a fine to see him come back."

"If they see what I want to send the old man, they'll keep the lot for themselves. Now, Artur, what's the point of the Shadow Guild if you can't do me a simple favor?"

"Yes, mother." The man sighed. "But I have to find someone who can get past the Hounds."

Tonio decided he'd better leave. A Shadow Guild member might not like being listened in on. A pity he couldn't tell them the Chute wasn't that bad if the ship had a centerboard. The tide didn't have to be full-moon high to sail without a keel. The *Wing's* draft with the board pulled up kept her from grounding, at least once the spring storms were over. He'd slipped into Lutan past the Emperor's picket ships on a dare just last fall.

He met Harin and the others in the front room. His friends were glad to see him, and only Harin seemed sober, compared to the others. The group noisily made its way through the port area, stopping only when Tonio bought gifts with some of his winnings, and paid his harbor and slip fees, which were required before departing.

Tonio nearly did all the work himself rather than trust drunken friends to raise sail and cast off, though they cheered his every move. Finally, he was tired of being distracted, and sent all but Harin below.

He glanced proudly at the gold-colored medalion nailed to the mainmast. It testified that he'd passed the harbor pilot's course and no longer had to pay anyone else to sail for him inside the bar. It hadn't been easy. The narrow eastern channel was handiest to the quickest route to the University, but he'd had to learn the traffic rules in the central commercial area, where the entrance to the Talis River began. However, it had taken Dr. Sirisac's influence to allow him a cursory run through the westernmost channel, where the ships of Argnon were docked when not out in the Inner Sea. That

was an unusual concession for a Cudan, to say the least.

*Marlena never told me how highly ranked her family was...* Tonio mused as he inhaled a rotting whiff of vegetation and dead fish. A pity he hadn't admired her as much as she apparently had him, but the odd system of marriage here would confuse anyone not raised to it. He refused to be one of three, if nothing else. It was bad enough to have a family arrange one marriage, let alone more.

He cursed as he nearly struck a marking buoy. He really should have slept and left on the noon tide, instead of raising sail at dawn. Tonio felt anxious to be home, though he told himself it was only because his brother's wife might be near her time.

Harin silently helped him, if only by his presence. It was annoying to be stuck right behind a Mintaran slaver, which easily maintained its position with oars. The Duke of Argnon could not forbid them the harbor entirely, though rumor said he wanted to. The southern empire spread poison that now oozed north. He'd met a few southerners last year, especially when he'd slipped into Lutan. They hadn't seemed like such bad fellows, but had taken slavery for granted in their daily lives. Of course, none of them were likely to give him any other opinion but the proper one.

Once past the bar, Harin went down below and Lessimo came up. This friend of his was almost too pretty to be a young man, but was competent enough with sword and dagger to avoid taunts. He had also studied sailing, and knew the way home to Cuda as much as they all did. He now looked pale and wan, as if he'd bent over a chamber pot recently.

A wave of sleepiness passed over him once they were out to sea. He turned the helm over to Lessimo, who was now reasonably sober.

As Tonio went below, he saw Harin with a sheaf of papers in his hand. "You have a nice design here. I didn't know you were interested in larger ships. One with three masts needs a much larger crew than you normally deal with."

"Yes, that's part of my final grade with the old dragon. And then he told me the real contest was last year!" Tonio had racked his brain to come up

with a compromise between something sturdy enough to haul cargo, but which could still endure storms and be faster than most other ships of its size and class. He'd really wanted to design something fit for racing, and had hated the other parameters. "I nearly screamed when I found out," he added. "Who knows, I might see it built one day, though I can already think of improvements. For one thing, I have to find a way to put a bigger bed in the captain's stateroom..." He yawned.

Harin laughed. "Speaking of bed, I'd better let you lie down." He stood up, put the papers back in a box, and waved his friend towards the berth.

Tonio took the empty place on the bunk and sat. He was lucky to have one—there were ten people on board, who either slept in hammocks or on deck. "I'm glad I stocked the ship and made it ready to sail between the end of tests and graduation," he said. "I can't believe it's only been a few hours since I threw those dice. It feels like a couple of days."



Art by Angela K. Scott...Sea Horse

"My memory's clear enough! You frightened me out of a year's growth."

"I know. I didn't mean to," Tonio said. "You've probably heard that from your father, too."

"No, he never apologizes any more. I'm just glad you won." His cousin looked sober. "Enough of that. I'm going up on deck to keep Lessimo awake, but you should sleep."

Tonio was exhausted, but he had one more thing to do once Harin had left. He opened the chest where he'd stowed the presents for his family, and pulled out a gossamer scarf. The filmy gauze rested in his hands like a breath of light blue air. *Oh, Luiva, if only I could stop loving you.*

A Sample Chapter

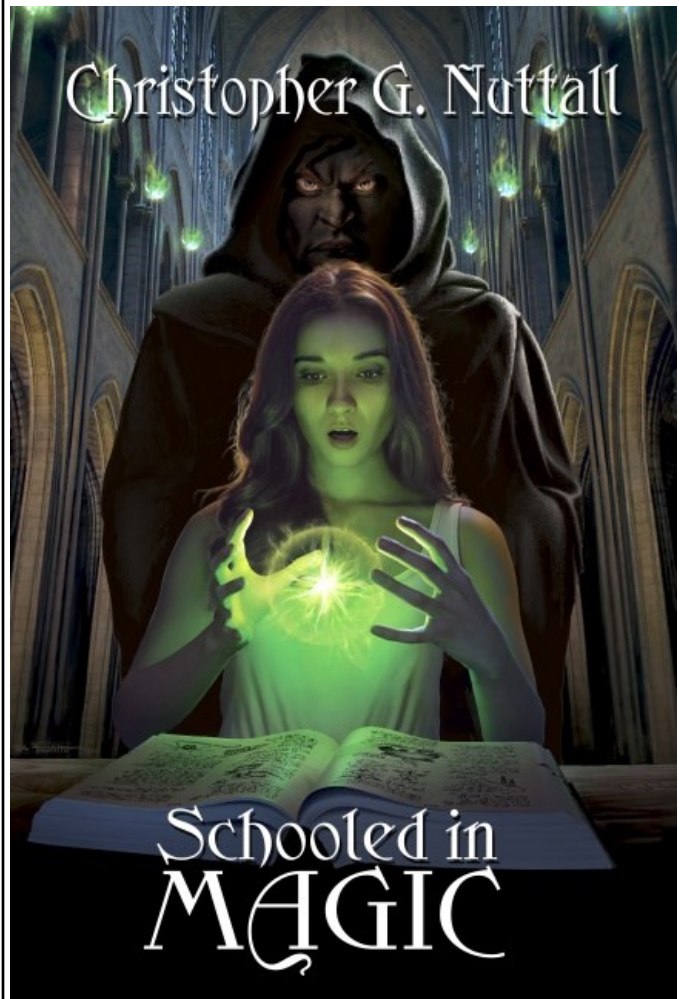
## Schooled in Magic

by Christopher G. Nuttall

"It's time to close, my dear."

Emily Sanderson nodded reluctantly as the librarian stepped past her seat and headed to the handful of other occupied chairs. This late at night, only a handful of people remained in the library, either intent on reading or simply because they had nowhere else to go. The library was small and rarely more than half-full even at the best of times. Emily loved it because it was her refuge. She too had nowhere else to go.

She stood and gathered her books, returning them to the trolley for re-shelving. The librarian was a kindly old man – he'd certainly not asked any questions when the younger Emily had started to read well above her grade level – but he got grumpy when visitors tried to return books to the shelves themselves. Not that she could really blame him. Readers had a habit of returning the books to the wrong places, causing mistakes that tended to snowball until the entire shelf was out of order. And Emily hated to see poor Rupert grumpy. He was one of the few people she felt she could rely on.



Most teenage girls her age would never crack open a history book, unless they were looking for the answers to some test. Emily had fallen in love with history from a very early age, taking refuge in it from the trials and tribulations of her life. Reading about the lives of famous people – their struggles to change the world – made her feel her universe had a past, even if it didn't have a future. Perhaps she would have made a good historian one day, if she'd known where to start working towards a history degree. But she already knew she would never find a proper life. She knew what happened to most graduates these days. They graduated from college, they celebrated, and then they couldn't find a job.

Her stepfather had certainly made it clear to her, after an endless series of arguments about

what she wanted to do with her life, that she would never do anything worthwhile with her life.

"You'll never amount to anything," he'd told Emily, one drunken night. "You won't even be able to flip burgers at McDonald's!"

Her mother should never have married again – but she'd been lonely after Emily's father had vanished from their lives, so long ago that Emily barely remembered him. Emily's stepfather – she refused to call him father – had never laid a finger on her, yet he hadn't hesitated to tear down her confidence every chance he could, or to verbally rip her to shreds. He resented Emily and Emily had no idea why. She didn't even know why he stayed with a woman he clearly didn't love.

Emily caught sight of her own reflection in one of the windows and winced inwardly. She didn't really recognize the girl looking back at her. Long brown hair framed a face too narrow to be classically pretty, with pale skin and dark eyes that looked somehow mournful against her skin. Her clothes were shapeless, hiding her figure; she rarely bothered with makeup, or indeed any other form of cosmetics, not when there was no point. They wouldn't improve her life.

Nothing would.

And they might attract unwanted attention too.

The librarian waved to her as she took one last look at the bookshelves and headed for the counter. "No books today?"

"No, sorry," Emily said. She had a library ticket – it said a great deal about her life that it was her most treasured possession – but she'd filled it over the week. There would be no more books until she returned some old ones. "I'll see you tomorrow."

The familiar sense of despondency and hopelessness fell back over her as she stepped out and walked down the street. There was no future for her, not even if she went to college; her life would

become consumed by a boring job, or an unsatisfactory relationship. No, the very thought was laughable. She was neither pretty nor outgoing; indeed, she spent most of her life isolated from her peers. Even when there were groups that might have attracted her – she did occasionally take part in role-playing games – part of her never wanted to stay with them for very long. She wanted friendship and companionship and yet she knew she wouldn't know what to do with them if she had either.

In fact, she'd been to a game earlier, before coming to the library. And she'd left early.

But now she didn't want to go home. Her stepfather might be there, or he might be out drinking with his buddies, swapping lies about their days. The former was preferable to the latter, she knew; when he was out drinking, he tended to come home drunk, demanding service from Emily's mother. And then he shouted at Emily, or threatened her.

Or looked at her. That was the worst of all.

She wished to go somewhere – anywhere – other than home. But there was nowhere else she could go.

Her stomach rumbled, unpleasantly. She would have to prepare a TV dinner for herself, or perhaps beans on toast. It was a given that her mother wouldn't cook. She'd barely bothered to cook for her daughter since Emily had mastered the microwave. If she hadn't been fed at school, Emily suspected that she would have starved to death by now.

As she trudged home, she realized something with a crystalline clarity that shocked her; she wanted out. She wanted out of her life, wanted out so badly that she would have left without a backward glance, if only someone made her an offer.

And then she shook herself into sense. No one had made her an offer and no one would. Her life

was over. No matter what it looked like on the outside, she knew her life was over. She was sixteen years old and her life was over. And yet it felt as if it would never end.

A fatal disease would have been preferable, she thought, morbidly.

The wave of dizziness struck without warning. Emily screwed her eyes tightly shut as the world spun around her, wondering if she'd drunk something she shouldn't have during the role-playing session with the nerds and geeks. She had thought that they were too shy to ever spike her drink, but perhaps one of them had brought in alcohol and she'd drunk it by mistake. The sound of giggling – faint, but unmistakable – echoed in the air as her senses swam. And then she fell ... or at least it felt like falling, but from where and to what?

And then the strange sensation simply faded away.

When she opened her eyes, she was standing in a very different place.

Emily recoiled in shock. She was standing in the middle of a stone-walled cell, staring at a door that seemed to be made of solid iron. Half-convinced she was hallucinating – perhaps it had been something worse than alcohol that she'd drunk, after all – she stumbled forward until her fingers were pressed against the door. It felt cold and alarmingly real to her senses. There was no handle in the door, no place for her to try to force the door open and escape. The room felt depressingly like a prison cell.

Swallowing hard, Emily ran her fingers over the stonework, feeling faint tingles as her fingertips touched the mortar binding the wall together. It felt like the castles she'd read about, the buildings that had been constructed long before concrete or other modern building materials had enabled the artists to use their imagination properly. There was a faint sense of age pervading through

the stone, as if it was hundreds of years old. It certainly felt hundreds of years old.

Where was she?

Desperately, Emily looked from wall to wall, seeking a way out of the cell. But there was nothing, not even a window; the only source of light was a tiny lantern hanging from the ceiling. There was no bed, no place for her to lay her head; not even a pallet of straw like she'd seen in the historical recreations she'd attended with her drama group. And how had she come to be here? Had she been arrested? Impatiently, she dismissed the thought as silly. The police wouldn't have put her in a stone cell and they wouldn't have had to spike her drink to arrest her.

A hundred scenarios her mother had warned her about ran through her mind; her captor could be a rapist, a serial killer, or a kidnapper intent on using her to extort money from her parents. Emily would have laughed at the thought a day ago – her stepfather wouldn't have paid anything to recover her from a kidnapper – but it wasn't so funny now. What would a kidnapper do when he discovered that he'd kidnapped a worthless girl?

A clatter that came from outside the iron door rang through the cell and Emily looked up sharply. She would have sworn that the iron door was solid, but all of a sudden a tiny hatch appeared in the metal and a pair of bright red eyes peered in at her. There was something so utterly inhuman about them that Emily recoiled, convinced that they belonged to a monster. Or a devil. There was a second rattle at the door, which then blurred into a set of iron bars, revealing a hooded figure standing outside the cell. His eyes, half-hidden under his hood, weren't just red; they were glowing. The rest of his face was obscured in darkness.

Behind him, there were more stone walls. A pair of skeletons stood against the wall as if they'd been left there to rot. Something about them caught Emily's attention before she saw the first skeleton begin to move, walking forward as if it

were still flesh and blood. The second skeleton turned its head until it was looking directly at Emily, the sightless eye-sockets seeming to peer deeply into her soul. Emily felt her blood running cold, suddenly convinced, right to the very core of her being, that this was no ordinary kidnapping. She must be a very long way from home.

"Welcome," the hooded figure said. There was something cracked and broken about his voice, almost as if he hadn't spoken for a very long time and had lost the knack. "You may call me Shadye."

He spoke his name as if Emily should know it, but it meant nothing to her. She tried to speak, but discovered that her mouth was so dry that speaking was impossible.

Shadye stepped forward, up against the bars, and studied her thoughtfully. His red eyes flickered over her body, before meeting her eyes and holding them for a long chilling moment.

Emily forced herself to speak. All the novels she'd read about kidnapped heroines suggested that she should try to get the kidnapper to see her as a human being – although she was far from convinced that Shadye himself was a human being. The fantasy books she'd devoured in an attempt to ignore her father's departure and her mother's desperate search for a second husband seemed to be mocking her inside her skull. All of this could be a trick, perhaps a reality TV show, but something in her mind was convinced that what she saw and sensed was real. But what? She couldn't have put it into words.

Besides, she couldn't see any TV cameras anywhere.

"How...?" She broke into coughs and had to swallow, again. "How did you bring me here?"

Shadye seemed oddly pleased by the question. "They said that there would be a Child of Destiny who would lead the forces of light against the Har-

rowing," he said. Emily realized suddenly that he wanted to gloat, to show off his own cleverness. "But I knew that every prophecy has a loophole. I knew that if I could catch that Child of Destiny before it was her time, I could use her against the cursed Alliance and defeat them utterly."

Emily felt a sinking sensation in her stomach. "But I am not that person..."

"No Child of Destiny knows who she is until her time has come," Shadye informed her. "But the Faerie know, oh yes they know. And I called for them to bring me the Child of Destiny and they have brought me you." He rubbed his hands together in glee. "And now I have you in my hands. The Harrowing will be pleased."

"Right," Emily said. Her, a Child of Destiny? Only in the literal sense...and she doubted that Shadye would believe her if she tried to explain it. What did her mother's name have to do with anything? She fought desperately for something to say that might distract him. "And I guess I'm not in Kansas any longer?"

"You are in the Blighted Lands of the Dead, on the southern face of the Craggy Mountains," Shadye said. Her words seemed to mean nothing to him, which was more disconcerting than anything else. "Wherever this Kansas place is, I assure you that it is far away."

Emily started to answer, and then stopped herself. "If you don't know where Kansas is," she said, trying to keep her growing fear under control, "I really am no longer in Kansas."

Shadye shrugged, the motion stirring his robe. Emily frowned as she saw the way the cloth moved over his body, disturbed in a manner she found almost impossible to describe. She couldn't see what lay beneath his robe, but there was something about the way he moved that suggested he was no longer entirely human. A very faint shimmer of light seemed to surround him, half-seen forms flickering in and out of existence ...

Somehow, that was all the more disturbing to her imagination.

This is real, Emily told herself. It was no longer possible to believe that she was standing in the middle of a TV studio, with hidden cameras recording everything she said and did. There was something so real about the scene that it terrified her. Shadye believed that she was the person he'd been searching for and nothing she could say, or do, could convince him otherwise. She thought of all the fictional heroes she'd known and loved, asking herself what they would do. But they had the writer on their side. She had nothing but her own wits.

Shadye snapped his fingers. The iron bars melted away into dust.

Fresh shock ran through Emily's body at the impossible sight, but before she could do anything, the skeletons stepped forward and marched into the cell, their eyeless sockets firmly locked on Emily's face. She cringed back as the bony hands, so eerie without flesh and blood, caught her shoulders. The skeletons propelled her forward, no matter how she struggled. The sorcerer's servants didn't seem to notice, or care. Oddly, their bones were held together without touching, as if their flesh was invisible. Like magic.

"You don't have to do this," she said, as she was marched out of the cell. Was she even on Earth any longer? "I..."

Shadye cackled, a high-pitched sound that chilled her to the bone. "Your death will bring me all the power I could desire," he said. Emily redoubled her struggles, but the skeletons never loosened their grip. "Why should I let you live when I would remain like this?"

He pulled his hood away from his face in one convulsive motion. Emily stared, horrified. Shadye's skin was pulled so tightly around his skull that she could see the bones underneath, his

nose cut away, replaced by a melted mass of burned flesh. His eyes were burning coals of red light, shining in the darkened chamber, utterly inhuman. She saw his hand as he lifted it to stroke his hairless chin and winced at the cuts that crisscrossed his flesh.

Emily had seen all sorts of movies, ones where the directors strived to outdo themselves in creating new horrors, but this was different. This was real. She took a deep breath and smelled dead flesh in the atmosphere surrounding him. It was suddenly easy to believe that his body was dying, animated only by his will – and magic.

"There is always a price for power," Shadye said. His voice darkened, unpleasantly. "But there are always ways to escape the price. And when I offer you to the Harrowing...oh, they will rebuild my burned frame and grant me power eternal."

He turned and strode off down the corridor, pulling his hood back up to cover his head. Emily stared at his retreating back, just before the skeletons started to push her down the corridor after him. Resistance seemed utterly futile, but she struggled anyway, panic giving her extra strength. Just for a moment, she broke free of their grip and turned to run, but then there was a flash of blue light and her muscles locked, sending her falling to the floor. No matter how she struggled, she couldn't move anything below the neck. She watched helplessly as the skeletons picked her up and carried her after Shadye.

The sorcerer started to laugh. "I told you where you are," he said, mockingly. "Even if you escaped my dungeons, where would you go?"

He was right, Emily realized. She'd never heard of the Craggy Mountains, let alone the Blighted Land of the Dead. And he had never heard of Kansas. No matter how she wanted to avoid it, she had to accept the fact that she had somehow been transported from her own world to one where magic worked, where skeletons could be used as servants and an evil sorcerer could sac-

rifice her for power. She was utterly alone, ignorant of even something as basic as local geography.

Shadye was right; even if she did escape, where would she go?

They reached a stairwell leading up into the darkness. Shadye seemed unbothered by the lack of illumination, as did the skeletons, but Emily found it hard to restrain her panic as they climbed onward and upward, while she was unable to see anything. Her legs bumped against the walls from time to time, the spell binding her holding her body as firmly as ever, just before they finally walked out into the open air. The ground below their feet was mud...no, she realized suddenly, it was ash. She sniffed and then shuddered at the stench of burned flesh in the air. In the distance, she caught sight of what had once been a forest. Now, it looked as if something had killed the trees, leaving their dead remains standing in the midst of the darkness.

"The Necromancer Kings faced the assembled might of the Empire not too far from here," Shadye said with heavy satisfaction. He seemed to like the sound of his own voice. "They say that the skies were black with dragons and terrible lizards as they fought for forty days and forty nights. In the end, so much magic was released that the land was permanently warped by chaos. Those who stray into these lands without protection find themselves twisted and transformed into horrors. Few dare to visit my fortress, even though they believe that they have powers that can match my own."

Emily found her voice. "Why did they fight?"

"The Necromancer Kings wished to enjoy their powers without restraint, to create a world where their whims and wishes would be the whole of the law," Shadye said. "But the Empire and their wizards believed the necromancers to be an abomination. The wizards believed that they had won, yet the Harrowing can never be stopped. All they could do was delay it, for a time."

He stopped and muttered a series of words under his breath. There was a brilliant flash of light, bright enough to make Emily squeeze her eyes closed against the glare. When she reopened her eyes, she saw a large building made out of dark stone right in front of them, as if it had been there all along. Perhaps it had been invisible, she told herself, taking some measure of comfort from the thought. If Shadye had needed to hide his dark temple, or whatever it was, it suggested that someone was watching for him. Maybe he'd been lying when he'd claimed that no one came into the Blighted Lands of the Dead.

The skeletons carried her into an opening that appeared out of nowhere, an instant before her head would have slammed into the stone. Inside, there was a sense of overpowering vastness, as if the building was much larger than she could comprehend. The smell of blood assailed her nostrils; a moment later, as she looked around, she saw great waves of red blood washing down the walls and pooling on the ground. Shadye seemed unbothered by walking through the blood, bowing from time to time towards statues that appeared out of nowhere, only to vanish again when Shadye walked past. They were disturbing. Oddly, the ones that looked most human were the most disquieting. One of them, a stone carving of a handsome man with sharp pointy ears, was impossible to look at directly. Another, an eldritch horror out of nightmares, seemed almost friendly by contrast.

And yet she couldn't understand why one scared her more than the other.

"There," Shadye said. He reached into his robe and produced a sharp black knife, carved from stone, before addressing the skeletons for the first time. "Place her on the altar."

The altar was a simple stone block, easily large enough to accommodate her – or any other sacrificial victim. Emily opened her mouth to protest, but it was futile; the skeletons picked her up and carried her forward with implacable strength. Some-

how, the simple lack of carvings on the altar was even more terrifying than the horrors she could see in the distance. It struck her, suddenly, that there was no doubt to whom the altar was dedicated. This place belonged to Satan. It was a place beyond the sight of God.

She tried to recall the prayers she'd learned as a child, but nothing came to mind. Instead, she kept trying to struggle, but the force holding her refused to surrender. The skeletons placed her on the stone and stepped backwards, almost as if they were admiring their work.

"We begin," Shadye said. He started to chant as he waved the knife in the air. Emily couldn't understand a single word, but she felt the gathering power in the chamber, as if someone – or something – was slowly pressing itself into existence. Brilliant tingles of light danced over her head, slowly fading into a darkness so complete that it sucked up the light. In the last moments of gloom, she saw new statues – savage-faced angels – appear at the edge of the chamber.

Shadye stopped chanting. Absolute silence fell, as if unseen watchers were waiting for a final command. The summoned presence hung on the air, its mere existence twisting reality around it.

Emily saw something within the darkness, a hidden movement that seemed to be only present within the corner of her eye. A strange lassitude fell over her, as if there was no longer any point in fighting and it was time to accept her fate. Shadye stepped forward, one hand holding the knife as he raised it up and over Emily's heart...

...And then, suddenly, there was a brilliant flash of light. The summoned presence simply vanished.

Shadye bit out a word that was probably a curse and ducked as a bolt of lightning sliced through the air over his head, before smashing into the far wall. She twisted her neck as another flash of light lit up the chamber, revealing another dark-

clad form standing at the far end of the room. Darkness fell for a second before the third flash of light showed the figure much closer, followed by the monstrous angel statues, which had moved when Emily wasn't looking. Her savior? It was obvious that he didn't want Shadye to have her.

"No," Shadye snapped. He lifted his hand, somehow plucked a fireball out of empty air and threw it at the newcomer, who lifted a staff and deflected it into the darkened reaches of the chamber. There was a deafening explosion as it struck one of the angel statues, which appeared undamaged. "You will not cheat me!"

A second later, the newcomer tossed a spell of his own. Shadye vanished in a flash of light.

The spell holding Emily to the altar snapped at the same instant, allowing her to move again. She sat up, only to see the newcomer race toward her. Another flash of light revealed that his face was hidden behind a wooden mask. He reached for her and she drew back, suddenly unsure of what this new man wanted. Shadye had wanted to sacrifice her. What would this man want?

"Take my hand if you want to live," the newcomer said, when Emily balked. The darkness was flooding in from all sides, pushing in around them as if it were a living thing. "Come with me or die!"

Emily didn't hesitate any longer. She took his hand.

And then the dark chamber vanished in a final blinding flash of white light.

*The Schooled in Magic* fantasy series

By Chris Nuttall

Schooled in Magic book 1

Lessons in Etiquette book 2

Study in Slaughter book 3

Work Experience book 4

The School of Hard Knocks book 5

Love's Labor's Won book 6

Trial By Fire book 7

Wedding Hells book 8  
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 The Princess in the Tower book 15  
 The Broken Throne book 16

## The One World

By George Phillies

### Prologue

Temple of the Falling Cloud  
 Aya-Apulchta, South-Shore  
 Leaf-fall 13, 2432

"Evaine?" the Instructor asked. "Recall for us the Proof from Life that Womankind, uniquely, partakes of the Divine Nature of The Goddess."

Evaine stood. She was not yet into her full height, but was still taller than her teacher.

"Instructor," she answered. "Among the beasts of the field as many boys as girls are born, because they are balanced between She Who Is and the Divine Boy of the Sea. Among Womankind alone, for every boy eight or a dozen girls are born, because Womankind uniquely is filled with her Divine Essence."

### Chapter 1

Caer Adurel  
 Springhint 9, 2446

Whap! Whap! A weighted wooden sword wrapped in cotton padding beat against an entirely real shield. Evaine-sa-Orowan sprang back from her attack, her right arm drooping, leaving her opponent an opening. Opponent thrust fast ahead, the sword's move a classic Strike of the Cobra. Evaine's sword, mongoose-swift, was suddenly left of the attack, pushing away her opponent's blade. She sprang forward, left leg back and braced. Her hip snapped into contact with her opponent's. Her extended right leg swung back, sweeping her opponent's feet forward. A hard push dropped her opponent onto her back. "That was really good,

Gloria," she announced. "Those were good counters. Your last roll was excellent." She helped her student to her feet. "What's the count?"

"Three hands of demonstrations," referee Katrina Katrinasdotr called, her voice a girlish high soprano. "That's four and twenty for you, Michael," she added, repeating the count in neutral numbers for the one boy in the practice cycle. "And two of us even touched you."

"You all did better," Evaine announced. "A lot better than two months ago." That was true, she told herself. They showed what rigorous practice and rational training did. "Catch your breath, have some water. We'll do more stair running." Students groaned. "Then back to rational training." Students groaned louder at the mention of weights, again, the same day. Evaine had been fighting continuously, one of them after the next, critiquing as she went. She was less winded than most of them. Still, sweat stung her eyes, the padding under her chain mail was soaked, and she was not gasping for breath only because she forced herself to breathe slowly.

A whistle shrilled from on high. Evaine's younger sister was the watchdaughter, keeping solitary lookout from the High Tower. "Gail! What is it?" Evaine's voice rang up the walls. It was wonderful that Gail was moving into adult responsibilities. Evaine slipped off her helmet to hear more clearly. The sun lay warm on her black hair.

"Two great-mules," Gail shouted. "Galloping up Longbeachport Road. A man riding one. Bareback."

"Gail!" Evaine called. "Who is chasing him?" The man, Goddess-in-Her-Five-Aspects have mercy on him, had no sidesaddle. He might become a soprano. Perhaps he was running away from the Republic. A Republic girl who wanted an expensive apprenticeship would have her Circle, her mother and aunts, support her. A Republic boy wanting the same would need to indenture himself. Every so often, a Republic boy with initiative ran away to Torinsdale. That was Torinsdale's gain, wasn't it? If the Republic treated boys like people, the apprentices would stop fleeing to Caer Adurel.

"Nothing!" Gail shouted back.

Evaine turned to her students. "Daphne, fetch the Swordmistress." Evaine's real weapon came off the benches and looped across her back. "The rest of you, draw steel. Return here. Fast!" There were groans. Drawing real weapons meant satisfying formalities. "Remember. Bureaucraties make you stronger." Evaine strode across the courtyard, trying to hide a smirk.

By and by, the Swordmistress appeared. "Steel?" she asked.

"Practice drawing from stores," Evaine answered. "An important task. They're slow. They must be tired. Perhaps they need more, more..." The younger women weren't slow, Evaine told herself, just not hastened by fear.

"Push-ups?" the Swordmistress suggested enthusiastically.

"I'm happy to honor your recommendation, ma'am. And then--stairs." Evaine formally outranked the Swordmistress, but listened carefully to the older woman's advice. Besides, they were the best of friends. They had common interests, little money, and no Circle. "The man. He could be chased by bandits. Better safe than sorry." The greatmule, blowing heavily, slowed when they saw Evaine and the Swordmistress blocking the gate.

"I know him," the Swordmistress said. "Dealer in spices and books. Never drunk."

The man's dry voice came faintly over the wheeze of the mules' breathing. "Demons!" the man babbled, rolling off his mule into Daphne's arms. Swordmistress helped Daphne lower him to the ground. "Demons! Longbeachport. All gone. Sliced to pieces. Demons. They killed them all. They can't be seen. Demons! They killed them all," Daphne opened her canteen, letting him swallow from the diluted vinegar. "Demons," he coughed. "All dead and ruined and sliced to pieces. Dead. Dead."

Bells chimed Lesser Recension. Noon. The Daytime Daughter, Her Second Shield, had reached the peak of her travels. Now her blinding disk would sink toward the Western Waters. The upper soprano voices of little girls rang out from the Library, climbing vigorously about the Heir-Second's golden baritone as he led them in song. Evaine peered thoughtfully down the road. The

Heir-Second was teaching. That left her completely in charge. She saw nothing like giant invisible demons, nor their hopefully visible giant footprints.

"Signe," she called. "Close and bar the gates! Set a watch at each."

"Against what do you guard?" Swordmistress asked over the man's babble. Gates rolled shut, the rumble not quite drowning out the choir.

"Darned if I know," Evaine answered. "But it's a lot less work to open gates again,"--a glance over her shoulder confirmed that the Caer's other gates were being closed--"than to push them shut, while someone's trying to enter unappreciated." She listened again to the man's ravings. "Floris, go to the classroom. Say to the Heir-Second: Your Cornet most humbly begs the fortune of the presence of The Goddess's Eye, The Shire Interlocutor."

"I should talk like I'm a fourteenth century romance novel?" Floris asked. "I can't just say 'Interlocutor Tomas, Evaine says please come downstairs' like normal people?"

"The language is the same millennium old as your Nimue novels. I'm Tomas's Cornet. He expects me to say it right." Evaine explained.

"Unappreciated?" The Swordmistress continued her careful survey of the Caer's walls.

"He was galloping bareback," Evaine answered. "He has a scabbard. Where is his sword?" Even men rarely lost their weapon. The Swordmistress looked thoughtful. Further thuds were other gates closing. Evaine waited patiently.

"You commanded my presence, Evaine-sa?" The speaker was a middle-aged man, round-faced, hairline not quite receding though silver threads wove through the brown, dressed in the traditional gray robes of a scholar. His collar, cuffs, and hem were embroidered with the violet tracery that marked an Initiate of the Archimagate. He came with the odor of lilacs: his morning perfume. Tomas Cherylsson-sa-Torinsdale-sur-Maserin would probably inherit the Domain if elder sister Joseline died. The Swordmistress curtsied. Evaine touched hand to brow.

"Tomas-sur, I humbly asked you," Evaine said. To her taste, Tomas was excessively fond of the

baroque stylistic phrasings of an Interlocutor's court.

"I believe the words were 'humbly beseech your presence'." His eyes twinkled. On another man, the trace of laughter might have sent jowls ashivering. Tomas was trimly thin. He regularly went for long walks through the fields. Gossip said his taste in women was equally odd, though none would say he had abandoned his duties to the Goddess's Aspects. "For an Interlocutor, the faintest shadows of duty are chains of blackest iron."

"Here is no shadow. This poor man says he saw people killed." The bookseller's head lay in the Swordmistress's lap.

"Demons," the man croaked. "Demons! Demons killed them dead." For all that the witness was only a man, a chill crept up Evaine's back. She knew how to kill women, horses, camels, even war-mammoths. But demons? 'Killed them all' sounded that more than two, perhaps even four, people had died, and a demon had done it.

"Gloria," Evaine said, "Join Gail in the High Tower. Keep watch toward Longbeachport." She raised her voice. "The rest of you, we will keep double watch in the High Tower." The Swordmistress raised an eyebrow. "For all that he's a man, he's terrified. He lost his sword. Perhaps his wits, too."

"The gates appear closed," Tomas remarked casually.

"Indeed," Evaine said. Their legal relationships were complicated. She was the Daughter-Heir's Banneret, with authority over the Caer in the Daughter-Heir's absence. However, he was Heir-Second. He might do something so unmannish as take charge. That was his hereditary privilege. If he did, the Caer might be in some modest danger, though far less than with most other men. "The man might be a Republic runaway," Evaine continued. "As well as a known bookmonger. Sometimes the Republic gets a bit vigorous about snatching back their men. Without precise regard for marked borders. The Daughter-Heir would rightly wax wroth with me if I permit him being snatched out of the Caer."

"Wax wroth?" the Swordmistress repeated painedly. Evaine grinned. It was an antique

phrasing. 'Char the whitewash off the gates' would be closer.

"He is that bookmonger. Timothy Lottason is his name," Tomas agreed. "His words are weird. You were right to be cautious. You cannot just go and look, can you, Longbeachport being across the border?"

Evaine bit her tongue. Tomas was not being contrary. He was waiting for her to explain something she was supposed to know. He was testing to see that she knew it. "Your Grace," she answered, "as Banneret-First, I cannot be seen in the Republic under arms. I might start a war. But wandering around unarmed is a really bad move if Longbeachport is infested by demons. However, as Cornet-Sole to the Shire Interlocutor, that's you, I can ride into Longbeachport, fully armed and armored. If I wear your kon and go about your business, I might even be treated politely." She pondered North-shore legal structures. Tomas was Shire Interlocutor, the investigating prosecutor of serious crimes across a legal structure that included Torinsdale Domain, the adjoining Republic, and modest interspersed bits of Archimagate and Temple Lands. Domain, Republic, and Archimagate were totally independent legal jurisdictions, all with different laws but the same Interlocutor. When Tomas donned his Interlocutor's stole, she was his Cornet, his avenging sword.

"Precisely," Tomas answered, smiling.

"Actually, after the sheep rustlers I expect the Sisterhood would greet you warmly."

"One would hope. So I called you. So you could send me," she answered. She hadn't quite led him by the nose. "Whatever happened is near the border. I wear a kon the Republic respects, so I can cross the border. If need be, I will kill their demons." She hoped she was not actually called upon to honor her closing remark. The classic 361 Poses of the Perfect Sworddaughter neglected forms for demon-slaying, likely because its authors, agreeing with her and all other sane people, neglected to believe in demons.

"How will I defend the Caer without you?"

Tomas asked querulously. She looked skyward. He knew that answer.

"You have two greathands of women, most reasonably skilled with sword and bow. A dozen men are passable archers. Gated walls. A moat. Towers. A keep. And someplace around here the Domain has a Master of the Dark Arts, too. Doesn't it?" Evaine asked, the last not quite seriously. Tomas was also a Mage. His quarters lay under the paw of the Lion of Arhad, and lawfully were part of the Archimagate, not part of the Domain. In those rooms, she was Tomas's Apprentice-Mage.

"Would you take escorts, say a Hand?" he asked innocently.

"Did you mean a Hand and five?" Evaine answered, equally innocently. There went another of Tomas's trick questions. The Swordmistress counted under her breath and nodded. Other women looked baffled. It was not so difficult to convert, Evaine thought, but most women reckoned in girl numbers, not in boy numbers. For a woman, four fingers marked four. A thumb was worth as much as its fingers, so a Hand of four fingers and thumb naturally meant eight women. A Great-hand, a Hand of Hands, was sixty-four women. Temple Instructors said girl numbers were octal, base eight. In all Torinsdale, only she knew what base meant. Others knew there were different counts. Men, of course, thought themselves sensible to use scores and men's dozens, dozens being thirteen here and eleven on South-Shore. The Republic Senate used base ten. A male Interlocutor used men's count for his escort, so a Hand and five would be a dozen—thirteen--escorts. "A dozen is way too many. I'll take Daphne and Avis," she answered.

"On horse," he decreed. "Armed and armored. I want you there and back soon. This man sold books to horse barbarians. He would not frighten lightly. Who will counsel me if his fear comes here?"

"The Swordmistress. Her knowledge of matters martial is a pearl beyond price. She knows far more than I," Evaine answered. Only a few people in the Care knew the truth of her final claim.

"I am absolutely confident that I can mouth 'what she said' faster than Swordmistress can shout commands, ummh, whisper suggestions," Tomas



Art by Angela K. Scott....Her Thoughts

answered. The Swordmistress sighed. "Get on with it. You have hours to Longbeachport, more hours back. You may need some moments to kill the, ahh, 'invisible demons'."

"The day is clear," Evaine noted, "The Longbeachport sunspeaker reaches the West Sea Tower. A sunspeaker there reaches here. We don't know whether my immediate return is wise. Sending people to the Sea Tower, I'm not sure that's within my authority."

"Do it!" Tomas ordered. "If Joseline or Mother wish to quarrel, it's with me, a family matter."

\* \* \* \* \*

Evaine, Avis, and Daphne, their horses pacing briskly, clattered up Longbeachport Road to the crest of Weathertop Hill. Just beyond lay the border between Domain and Republic. The rise gave them their first view of the father of the waters. The colors were a fantastic weave of sapphire and diamond. Evaine stopped, telling herself that she was resting the horses and checking their shoes.

"So far, naught out of the ordinary," Daphne said. "It's a fine day for a ride."

"Longbeachport is beyond the woods," Evaine drew her farseer from her saddlebags. The copper tube extended. Evaine twisted it slightly to peak the focus. "I see tall buildings. Some smoke, less

than I expected. You two take a look. There's something not quite right, isn't there? Something." She passed the farseer tube to the other women.

"Looks good to me," Daphne finally said, her naturally suspicious mind finding nothing awry.

"There are a lot of boats at anchor," Evaine noted. "Are their fisherfolk and lobsterdaughters not working?"

"They have a lot of fisherfolk," Avis said, pushing her curly brown hair back from her brow to tuck it more carefully under her helmet.

"Is this a Republic holiday?" Daphne asked.

"I didn't think of that," Evaine answered. "I don't know. Their holidays are not ours, save Summertide. Tomas and I went to their Summertide market. They had traders from the south with silks and spices and books. The locals sell seashell dyes, perfumes, and fruit cordials--our Domain's are better. Tomas bought books." She mounted her horse. "We stayed at the Inn. Even by Domain standards, it was well built, with an excellent chef. It had a fanciful name: The House That Floats. Its signboard was a rich mansion, bedecked with a truly absurd number of sails, bounding across the waves."

"Tomas likes vacations?" Daphne asked. Evaine decided to ignore implications 'with you?' It had been no vacation. Nor had she had Tomas's company at night, as she might have expected with another man. She would not have complained, but Tomas never took advantage of his opportunities.

"Tomas had business there," Evaine answered. "Tomas's mother sent him to discuss taxes. The Domains were having another tiff with the Senate about Abundance and Surplusage, taxes so arcane Tomas says they defy human comprehension. Except one bit: We don't pay them. He went to talk. The Sisterhood of the Sword has a Longbeachport garrison, left over from when Sea Eagles attacked in their great canoes. The Sorority Chapterhouse was happy to have an extra fencing partner. But, Daphne, you are better at gossip than me, not to mention visiting Longbeachport more often. Did you ever hear demons mentioned?"

"Gossip? Me?" Daphne said. "No demons. Not even mages. The High Priestess of Xerinth took yet another mirror, this being less surprising

than news that the Shield rose in the East. There was buzz about strange boats far out on the water, almost at the horizon. I was polite. But a boat? Out at the horizon? What if there were a fog?"

"Once upon a time," Avis said, "I was out in a boat. A fog came up. There was no land in sight and nothing we could do. It still makes my skin crawl." She shivered. "If I'm on water, a river ferry securely tied to both shores is adventure enough."

"In the Western Reach," Evaine said, "sailors do go out of sight of shore. For a few hours, when the season wind is rock-steady, and every which way ahead lies land. Crew-bonuses for those trips are hefty. Vair Reach sailors are bolder." The other women flinched at the mention of the Vair Reach..

"Hello, what's that ahead?" Evaine gestured for the trio to slow. Something large and colorful lay behind bushes in the distance. "Doesn't seem to move."

They rode closer. The shape was a wagon, gone into the ditch, looking in good condition except where traces had been cut. A discarded sword lay on the ground. Evaine stared at the handle. "T L," she read. "Timothy Lottasson," she announced. "That's him. This is his. 'Tim's Treasures', that's his Factoring title. Why'd he run? Avis, do you see anything?"

"Demons have feet like giant turkeys," Daphne said, "I read that. If you believe in demons." They all giggled. "With two mules, that wagon is stuck. It's small, but full with books."

"Ground churned where the mules tried to pull free. Lottason's boot marks. No one else." Avis peered under the wagon. "You know, that's odd. This road is empty. We haven't met anyone coming towards us."

"Time to string bows," Evaine said. "I'll lead. You stay two greathands of paces back. If we meet something really strange, run! We absolutely have to get word back to the Caer." She slid her bow from its case, braced herself, and drew the string over the bow's pulleys.

"And if you are ambushed by pirates, outnumbered, and outmatched?" Daphne asked.

"Run for it," Evaine answered. "Word first, me second." To herself, she added 'what do you bet pirates don't know I'm temple-trained?' That was her secret. "Mind you, a sheep rustler seeing three of us, Interlocutor's kons and all, will run faster than Goodman Lottason did."

\* \* \* \* \*

Approaching Longbeachport, the smell of wood smoke filled the air. The lowing of cattle caught Daphne's attention. "Those cows," she said. "They want milking. Badly. They go on much longer, they'll go dry."

"Republic," Avis muttered. "It's a disgrace, the way they misuse the Lady's animals. Even in the Republic, dairy farmers should know better." They stared at farmhouses. A door had been left open. It swung back and forth in the breeze, banging whenever it hit its frame. No one came to close it. There were no people. No movement. No smoke from the chimneys.

Evaine pulled to the side of the road, waving for the two of them to come up with her. "This is the last stand of trees before town. Then it's open field, grazed grass, up to the walls. There's a path to the Shrine. We'll leave horses at the Fountain; go through the woods on foot. I want to see the town before I stick my head in. This close to town, there should be people in their gardens...there's not a sign of anyone." They turned from the road, horses' hooves sinking to muffled quiet when pavement was replaced by deep pine needles on sand. A splash and tinkle of water was the Fountain, fed by a pipe from the reservoir. Daphne stared into the pond, its fish swimming slowly in the depths. She tossed the last bits of her lunch onto the surface. Fish snapped hungrily at the crumbs. The horses slurped at a trough, raising no complaint when they were tied to hitching rings.

Beyond the trees, a cluster of houses stood close together. Their Circle, Evaine recalled, supplied haulers, selling water and fodder for draft animals. House after house stood empty, doors ajar, not a fire in any fireplace. A nearby pair of homes had burned to the ground. Recently, too; they still smoked.

"Stay here!" Evaine ordered. She slipped along the wood line, staying out of sight, then dashed for a low wall, dropping flat when she reached it. A long crawl brought her to its end. In the service yard of one home were three wagons. Their animals were gone. The merchants themselves? In the house garden lay three bodies. Evaine listened as hard as she could. There were birdcalls. Crows, a lot of them, someplace. The distant rumble of the surf. No dog barked. No sounds of tools, no hammers or saws. Perhaps she was too far from shore to hear shipwrights at work, but there was nothing to be heard, just three dead women lying silently in the mud of a yet-unplanted spring garden. The one she knew was Gabriela Michaellassdotr, whose hobby was sleight of hand. At the Caer she would always spend hours entertaining children, pulling things from nowhere, from children's ears, and from her flowing red hair. Now her sleight of hand was gone, spilled on the cold, cruel ground, her silver laugh never again to be heard at Caer Adurel.

Evaine waved. She hoped Daphne and Avis wouldn't spend too long being sick. To Evaine's surprise, the other two women did no more than turn pale. "Take a wagon tarp, open it, keep it in the air above the ground while you cover the bodies. Tomas studied forensic sorcery. He might interpret footprints."

"This must be what Lottasson saw, don't you think?" Daphne asked.

"This is the oxenyard," Avis answered. "He had mules, would have stayed on the road until the turnabout near the gate. Besides, he said 'cut to pieces'. Those two argued with stabbing swords, and this one...that must have been an axe, taking off the back of her head. What happened to her face? Spearpoint? And lots of boot marks."

"I'll advance to the gate," Evaine announced. "And call if it's safe. We'll go to the Sunspeaker tower. I get to ask the Sorority detachment why they left buildings to burn."

Evaine left the Avis and Daphne spreading the tarp. She purposefully strode down the hill. A reach to her shoulders felt for her Interlocutor's kons, stiff white banners bearing the black-outlined outspread hand of She Who Is Five and

the lidless eye of She Who Judges. The kons were her shield. Few people picked quarrels with Interlocutors.

What had happened here? Homes burned to the ground, animals cried in distress, bodies lay in the open air, and no one seemed to be fixing anything. Some footprints were very sharp. Someone's boots were the same left and right. Surely even Republic shoemakers knew better?

Ahead was the town. The North gate tower was simply gone. All that remained was a blackened square-cut foundation the height of Evaine's shoulder. The tower, which Evaine remembered as six stories of wood, had vanished. Part seemed to have burned. Pieces, boards and tiles and furniture, lay scattered on the ground. The place smelled of burned sulfur. Its ashes were cold. The fire must have burned a day previous. Evaine felt her heart beating, harder and harder. She stretched and released, walking around the tower onto the main road.

The town gate had been smashed flat. Beams were strewn hither and thither. Up to the third floor of neighboring buildings, windows were broken. There, fallen well behind the gate, was the broken body of a gateguard. The woman lay on her side, clearly dead. She wore ceremonial plate armor, well enameled and polished. Now something had punched a large hole in her chest plate, her chest, and her back. Her sword remained in its scabbard. Here was someone dead as yesterday's dinner, lying in the sunlight with flies buzzing around her wounds, and no one was doing anything about it.

Something had happened to the road, too. A gaping pit, several paces across and a pace deep, had been torn in the gravel. Evaine stepped gingerly into the blackened hole.

Her perspective switched. Everything had moved directly away from her. The gate had fallen into town. The tower had fallen sideways, away from her, hit the town's stone wall, and shattered. Window panes down the street were blown in, as if a hurricane had struck. Roof tiles had gone upward. Even the poor gate-guard had likely been stationed someplace above the gate here, and had fallen to earth over there. She looked more closely

at the upper porch of a nearby building. Assuredly that fancy mass of bronze was a dragon--to be precise, one of the highly polished dragon hinges that had until recently held Longbeachport's main gates. Very briefly, the dragon had remembered how to fly.

She walked to the nearest building. The window was smashed. The floor was clean. Glass had not fallen in a spray on the floor, as it might if someone had smashed the window with a chair. She stepped through the doorway, skipped over the collapsed door, and peered at the further wall. Large pieces of glass had planted themselves like spikes in the plaster. Exploration with her dagger showed they were deep-buried. Someone standing in front of the window would have been flayed alive by her own casement. Standing next to the glass, looking back out the window, she could see the pothole, centered in the window.

Evaine walked back to the main gate, all the time listening. Listening for voices. Listening for work. Listening. She heard the sea, the wind, birds. She had found four bodies and a silent town. Where was everyone? She whispered the Chant of Imminent Readiness.

Avis and Daphne had walked down to the gate. "Is aught wrong?" Evaine asked. "You were going to stay..."

"We were afraid," Avis said. "We looked in the houses. There were dead people. Women. Babies. All killed."

"Tomas must be notified as swiftly as possible," Evaine said. "Let's go to the Sunspeak tower."

"I'll need help," Daphne said. "Tower mirrors are too heavy for me to shift by myself."

"Tell me what to do," Avis said. "It can't be worse than helping Tomas with his spellcasting mill."

"Let's go," Evaine said. "Stay alert. Someone killed these people. She may still be here."

"Some one?" Avis asked doubtfully.

"All right. Some two. If you meet them both, first arrest the first, then arrest the second." Evaine said. "And please keep a dozen paces behind me. I'm jumpy enough without being nudged."

Fifty yards down the street, they found the next body, a woman of sixty years or so. She was still in her nightgown and slippers. She had been stabbed to death, great cutting slices coming up from stomach into chest. Another twenty yards brought them to three more women, equally dead, wearing chain mail under black tabards.

"Sisterhood of the Raven," Avis said. "They'd drawn their swords, were running--look how the swords fell--toward the gate." She rolled one of the women on her side. "What killed them? Greatbow? You see how the mail punched into the wound here, how it tore away in back?"

"That's a big hole," Evaine said. "You'd need a siege engine to drive that bolt. A spoolbow bolt, even a spoolbow lighter than mine, goes through like that, but a bolt is narrow. I could put my thumb through that wound."

The Sunspeaker tower rose eighty feet above Longbeachport, its thick stone walls reinforced to ignore any storm. Evaine knocked politely at the door, realized that an answer was most unlikely, raised the latch, and swung the door open. The first floor office had been vandalized, shelves swept clean onto the floor, drawers flung open and dropped on the ground.

"Interesting," Avis said.

"What?" Evaine asked.

"Someone pried open the cash drawer. They left the money. They took the pocket change," Avis answered.

Daphne led them up to the roof. Sunspeaker mirrors were intact in their cases. Evaine continued to scan the town. Boats lay at anchor. More bodies dotted the next road. On the fields to the south, there had been a very large fire. West of the square, toward the water, would be the Temple. There were a lot of birds above the temple. Truly a lot of birds. Crows. Gulls. Suddenly she became extremely grim-faced. "You two barricade the doors behind me. Get the sunspeaker talking to the Sea Tower. I see something I must investigate."

\* \* \* \* \*

Evaine walked swiftly along empty streets. She could name a certain number of reasons why so many birds would gather. Most were unpleas-

ant. The western avenue, The Moon-Touched, bore a name so ancient that it must have been brought to Longbeachport by the first settlers, three millennia ago. If she remembered correctly, when first built the road was aligned on a setting of one of the Bracers. No longer. Its paving was brick, with mortared sand swept into the gaps. Coarse-rock dry-well gutters kept trees well-watered.

She found herself with back against a warehouse wall, sword in one hand. There had been motion, close overhead. Her training took over. The offending crow lay in the street, no longer moving. That hadn't been all that set her off. The wind had shifted momentarily. She had caught a smell. A very characteristic smell. One she had smelled far too often before she came to Northshore.

The temple gate was a square of walls rising twenty feet from the pavement to an open top. Arches framed its sides. A colorful mosaic of the Wheel of The Living covered the floor. The square's roof was a lattice of wooden beams spanned by budding grape vines. Moon-Gates were all flung open. That was odd; today was not the Quartersday. Evaine sprang through the second arch, looking one way and then the other, sword weaving a complicated defense against foes who might be waiting. Tradition said one did not bring weapons beyond the Gate. Indeed, townspeople overborn by raiders would flee to their Temple, leaving their weapons stacked outside, trusting the Grace of the Goddess and the pious faith of the raiders to protect them. From the stacks of swords, the people of Longbeachport had adhered to custom.

Something had smashed the front of the Sanctuary, splintering its stained-glass windows. Part of the roof had collapsed. The whitewash was stained with soot. A South-Shore war-mammoth, properly armored, could knock in a wall. But how could a mammoth enter the court yard?

Inside the Temple? Now she understood what Timothy Lottasson had meant, 'all smashed and killed and cut to pieces'. She sank into her training, looking for wounded whom she might succor. Failing that, she made a count. It was easier to count those who were still in one piece. On the

altar? At first she couldn't decide what she was looking at. All the parts were still there, but no longer assembled in their proper order. That hadn't happened in a very long time, a time Tomas could date precisely. She made herself look more closely at the dead. Close to the wall, they lay on their faces. Further in were the younger women, then the older, then the town's men, perhaps two hands of them. They all faced the rear wall.

\* \* \* \* \*

Daphne and Avis waited at the Sunspeaker Tower. The suncatcher was correctly aimed, needing only the adjustment of a screw every few minutes as the Lesser Daughter sank toward the sea's loving arms. The West Sea Tower could be seen clearly in a large farseer. The Union sunspeaker crew apparently worked a few hours on alternate days, and logs said today was not the day. Until tomorrow, no messages could be sent up into the Republic.

"Ahoy, Daphne," Evaine called from below. "Are you there?" Daphne dashed down the stairs while Avis engaged Evaine in shouted conversation. Daphne flung open the door. A wan Evaine stepped though, carefully barring the door behind her. She drew from her kit a length of black silk and tied it around her right arm. "Never thought I'd do this," she announced, "but I am Tomas's Cornet. Let's go upstairs."

"There's no 'Receive' flag on the West Sea Tower," Daphne said. "They must not be ready."

Evaine looked doubtful. "They forgot to bring a banner," she guessed. "Floris and Dorothea left before we did and had less far to ride. They must be ready. Did you try a transmit flash?"

"We were waiting until you got back," Daphne said.

"I have a message for Tomas," Evaine said quietly. "And for Union, if you found their schedule."

"Union? Not today," Daphne asked. "Where is everyone?" Her voice rose in fear.

"Try the flash?" Evaine asked. "When I'm done, my message needs riding to Caer Adurel. Just as a backup. Could you do that? I'd ask you, Avis, but there's tracking."

"Flash answered," Daphne said. "You were right about the flag."

"There's a formula," Evaine said tonelessly, "For what I have to send. For what I found." Evaine sat down, pulled a pencil and paper from her kit, and began to write, speaking each line sotto voce after she had written it.

She finally began to dictate, her stops punctuated by the rattle of Daphne at the sunspeaker mirrors. "Speaking, Evaine. I Speak for She Who Judges." That phrase would get Tomas's most careful attention, because only an Interlocutor could invoke it. The conditions under which she was allowed to invoke it were incredibly narrow. "A Hideous Crime was committed." Hideous Crime, Evaine recalled, was a term of art for the most serious misdeeds. "Please confirm current North-Shore applicability, Council of Altairis, Decree on Summary Execution of Necromancers. Town gate was smashed by sorcery, repeat, sorcery. Her Priestess lies dead upon Her Altar."

Daphne stopped signaling, her hand covering her mouth. "Those wounds. They're the demon's claw. When it sucks out a woman's soul." She bolted down the stairs, shrieking in terror.

"Oh, dear," Evaine said. "I could have warned her. I'm sorry. I'm a bit distracted."

"What do I do?" Avis asked. "Go after her?"

"Why? They all died yesterday. Whoever did this is gone. She'll be safe. I think." Eight stories down, a door slammed shut. Evaine looked at the harbor. The Temple interior floated in her mind's eye. "Can you run the mirror?" Avis nodded in agreement.

"She got to 'Altar'," Avis said. "Continue."

"It gets worse," Evaine said, holding up a hand.

"Worse? It can?" Avis asked.

"Sorry. Resuming message: Evaine-sa to Interlocutor. In Her Longbeachport Temple and Sanctuary I found dead two greathands, repeat, greathands of people," Evaine said.

"Goddess preserve us! Sorry, I interrupted."

"They were murdered. Longbeachport is deserted." A long pause. "No one on walls. No people. No smoke from chimneys. All boats ride at anchor. Evaine-sa-Orowan, in the Interlocutor's absence, the Goddess's Eye." Evaine waited while Avis caught up with her. The Council of Altairis had been more than two millennia ago; she wasn't

sure North-Shore even remembered it. "Tomas-sur, I found no enemy dead. I strongly recommend raising the Domain Levy, High and Low, as soon as possible. Evaine-sa-Orowan, who is not utterly ignorant of battle tactics."

The last phrase should penetrate. She knew what her recommendation would cost. The High Levies were the Constables of each hamlet, three or four women from as many or more greathands of people. The Low Levy was every woman who could bear arms, and a few men with bows. Raising the High Levy would cost the Domain part of the Land-Rent. Raising the Low Levy would cause chaos.

Avis stared through the farseer. From the West Sea Tower, Evaine's words came back on wings of light. "They're transmitting to Caer Adurel. And I've been sent a private message from Dorothea." She made a response, and another. "I'm telling them we'll be reconnoitering for a piece."

"That first answer couldn't've been more than a half hand of letters," Evaine said. "Two," Avis answered. " 'No' comes that way. But your message is not a jest. Now what?"

Evaine slumped into a chair. "Let's recover our horses. There might be someone hiding in town. There might be tracks--looking for tracks is for you, house-by-house is me. A bit before twilight...you fort up in this tower, every door and stair locked. Me? The inn has good windows facing the tower door. If someone goes after the tower, I hit them from behind. Neither of us shows a light: let them hunt for us in the dark."

"I'll get the horses," Avis said. "They'll want a walk. You start your search."

\* \* \* \* \*

Evaine, shield at the ready, unlatched another door, kicked, and stepped back quickly. "Friend!" she called. For better or worse, her main danger was someone who had hidden, survived, and confused her with whoever attacked Longbeachport. This was the twentieth home she had searched. Every home had been looted. The looters were boringly consistent. Articles of Faith, Shrines to an Aspect, icons, anything with representational art, were trampled or gone. Books were all missing. So were wheelbarrows. Lockboxes were

smashed. Money was scattered on the floor.

Coins and jewelry were gone--her intuition said that homes should have more small, decorative pieces of art than she saw. She found a few bodies. Grannies who might have slept through an alarm. A couple whose honoring of Her Aspect As Voluptuary had continued until, to judge from how the bodies lay, an unwelcome and fatal interruption had taken place. Whenever she found cradle or baby's clothes, she made a careful search for an infant who might have been hidden. She never found one. She blinked back tears.

Against the back wall of the counting house lay an old man, his robe the blue and gold of the Vaultholder's Guild, his sword resting a pace from him. He was in stockings, not wearing small-clothes; he must have dropped his clothing in place without dressing properly. A shattered box lay at his feet, a few vault notes still in it. Others had blown against the wall. His body had been pierced, once and again, by something. What? She should know, and didn't. Her best guess was a gear-cranked superheavy crossbow, a weapon with great carry but incredibly low rate of fire. The stucco of the wall behind him was fresh-painted.

Something glinted feebly in a hole in the stucco. Her probing dagger released...what was it? A slinger's ball? Slings required considerable skill, but outranged the feeble bows of four millennia past. Where had someone trained with a sling?

Shadows were lengthening. She would cut over to The Moon-Touched, and look into shops until she got back to the town square. She would indeed sleep in The House That Floats. Even their most luxurious bed would not compensate for sleeping under arms. More pounds of chain mail than she cared to contemplate would burden her dreams.

Across the street, awnings on grocers' stalls had been torn down. Pointless, she thought, pointless, it was damage that didn't do anything. Goods had been systematically taken. Two alleyways over lay more awnings, torn from their hangings, and another body, almost out of sight.

A half-house further along, she stopped. What had the dead woman been wearing on her feet? Temple training brought her curiosity to the fore.

She crossed the street and looked over a tall fence. The alley was depressed from street level. The dead woman was thoroughly out of sight except from the porches across the street. What was on her feet? Black? Polished like a beetle's carapace?

Evaine felt her hair stand on end. Demons, some of them, had the bodies of insects, shiny and odd colored. Some demons only looked dead until they struck. Or so, finishing her thought, some demons did if you believed in demons. She did not.

She kicked the alley's gate open, and stepped away. Surprise was one thing, but she wanted some hint about her opponent first. She did not really believe in demons, but matters in town were unreasonable. The gate slowly swung closed. Whatever the body was, it didn't move.

Evaine pushed the gate open and advanced, shield first, sword on guard. There were no noises, no movement. She used her sword point to tug at the awning. It lay atop the unknown like a bed's counterpane, ready to be dislodged. Thrust to snag awning. Pull rapidly sideways. The awning dropped onto the bare ground. A dead person lay there, the crossbow bolt through her head suggesting the cause.

She was wearing the oddest clothing...no, make that he, Evaine thought. The well-trimmed walrus mustache was unmistakable. He was wearing the oddest clothing. Dark green. Heavy, almost felted, fabric. Lavish white trim. A huge, unstylish hat. His boots were stained glossy black. The soles? They were the same. His shoemaker did not distinguish left from right. He was armed, too. A spear. Short shaft, not more than four feet. Spearhead fastened well off to one side. The spear shaft? Metal-wound? The shaft was hollow, more like a chunk of pipe than a pole, with grips at the far end. The spearhead was very long. She prodded with her foot, then picked up the spear. The weapon was grossly overweight relative to her training swords, which was saying a lot. Even two-handed, it would be clumsy.

The man was quite dead. From his hair, he did not bathe very often. Was he the local eccentric? Tomas would want to examine this one carefully. Perhaps forensic sorcery would reveal his confederates. She covered the body.

\* \* \* \* \*

Back at the tower, Avis awaited Evaine. "Did you find anyone?" Avis asked.

"Dead," Elaine answered. "You?"

"I circled the town," Avis answered. "I found a huge trail. I back tracked. The trail starts at Blackwater Cove. People landed from the sea. They came here. Three or five greathands of people. They camped there, a day I'd say. They walk strangely, all in a dozen lines, one following another, like nuns on South-Shore. They spread out, tracks around the town. They all had the strange shoes. The way they stumbled, I think they walked at night."

"Boots," Evaine corrected.

"Look like shoes. Why do you say 'boots'?" Avis countered.

"I found a suspect. He's been dead a day," Evaine said. "A block down the street." Evaine and Avis strolled down The Moon-Touched.

"One other thing," Avis said. "Those trails come in to town. They don't come out again."

Evaine stopped, stock-still. She deeply wished that Avis had mentioned that first. "You tracked all the way around?" We're close-surrounded, she thought, perhaps in the next building, by several greathands of murderers?

"Yes," Avis said. "The town is rebuilding their roads. There's a good two hands of paces of sand with no cobblestones, no place to march out unnoticed. They came in and did not leave."

Evaine looked around warily. "Did you check the docks?"

"Why?" Avis asked.

"They came by water, they left by water," Evaine said. "Perhaps. Though this one is no Sea Eagle. Blonde, he is not. Also, clean, he is not."

Avis professionally examined the corpse. "He is filthy," she announced, cursing under her breath. "He has Creator-forefend fleas. And hair lice. I've never seen clothing like his." She hefted the man's spear. "Too heavy. Too short. His sword has I don't believe it a metal scabbard. Where did he come from? The far side of The Shield? You know, I've only seen books, but I think those face-marks are smallpox scars. Wasn't he vaccinated?"