

ENCOUNTERS

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RUNNING REPAIRS

Mike Brooks

MARTIAN WATER

Greg M. Hall

THE LISTENER

Bentley Reese

MALL OF THE
ORANGE KING

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ALL THAT GLITTERS

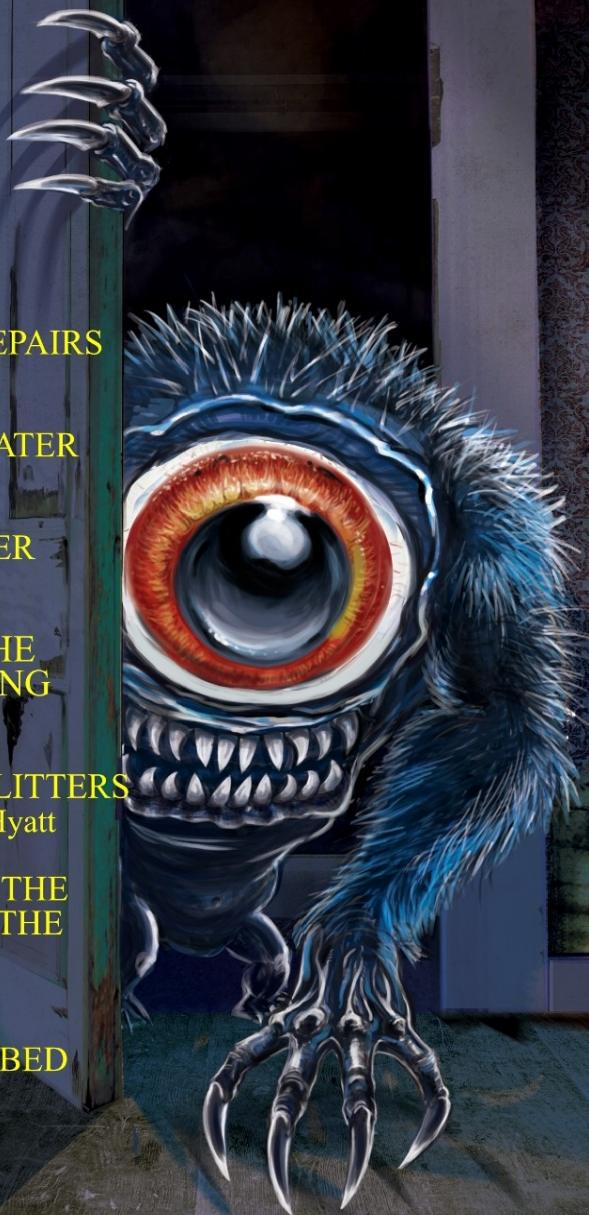
Kurt Heinrich Hyatt

THE WITCH, THE
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UNDER THE BED

Mike Phillips



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RUNNING REPAIRS

by Mike Brooks

It was January in Nottingham, and arse-clenchingly cold. Not the sort of dry cold that you get when it snows, where your breath steams in the air and the white power gives the city a brief, glittering cleanliness before it fades away into grey slush. That's the happy, muffling cold of silent wonder at the falling flakes, or the expansive cold of a clear blue sky a million miles wide and snow blindness from reflected sunlight. This was the grim, miserable cold of a sky the colour of dull iron pissing rain on you that, in defiance of mere physics, somehow felt colder than snow. It was the sort of cold that told you it didn't matter how well wrapped up you were, it would find a chink in your armour somewhere, and what's more was looking forward to the challenge. It was enough to make the statue of Robin Hood shiver as he stood his probably historically-inaccurate vigil outside the castle.

I love weather like this. I'm a taxi driver (most of the time). It's like someone's handed me the keys to the Royal Mint and said "here, this one's on us" every time I see a tailback of huddled pedestrians at the rank.

Unfortunately, one of the most important pieces of equipment for being a taxi driver is a taxi, and mine was playing up. The exhaust had been making throaty noises for a couple of days since I'd had a minor accident and was generally sounding like it was considering falling off, which wouldn't do at all. I reckoned I'd been ripped off by the last garage I'd gone to with a mechanical fault, so I'd been looking around for somewhere else to take the car. Thankfully, one of my fares yesterday had been waxing lyrical about the place who'd just serviced his car; not a common occurrence you might think, but the interesting point about this garage was that it was apparently an all-female venture, which had made it conversation-worthy for him. More pertinently for me this fare had been delighted with the quality and value of service he'd received, so at 4pm on this particular Thursday I headed off for Robinson's Auto Repairs.

The darker gloom of evening was already falling over Nottingham as I drove out of the city centre towards one of the industrial estates that lies down by the River Trent, and the streetlights were flickering on. I pulled up a little way down from a standard-issue small warehouse building with a large steel roller door on the front that was lowered against the elements,

and a smaller inset access door that was spilling warm yellow light out onto the dark, wet concrete. I hastened towards it, turning up the collar on my leather jacket as I did so.

I reached the rectangle of light and lurked as obtrusively as possible, not wanting to enter a work area without permission but wishing like hell that I could get out of the unpleasant rain. After a handful of seconds without seeing anyone I banged on the roller door loudly, and a few moments later a girl in overalls emerged from a doorway on the other side of the main work area and made her way over to me, picking her way between the two cars up on ramps. She was quite pretty and rather pale, with a black bob that was held back from her eyes with an Alice band, and looked to be about my age.

“Hi,” she said cheerily, beckoning me inside (which I was only too happy to go along with). “Simon, right? You phoned yesterday? I’m Jess.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said, watching her eyes travel up to the mohawk that was probably slanting to one side after a brief but concerted battering from the elements. “I’m not too late, am I?”

“Well, I’m just knocking off,” she replied, wiping her hands on a rag and throwing it carelessly away, “but the boss will be around for a while. She’s a little busy at the moment, though.”

“Paperwork?” I asked, following her gaze towards what looked like an office door.

“PR,” Jess grinned, then saw my confused expression and snorted in an only half-amused way. “Perils of the job. Sarah set this place up to catch the women drivers who didn’t want to take their cars to a regular mechanic because they thought they’d get ripped off, or were scared of men, or whatever. We’ve been doing pretty well, too. Trouble is, sometimes you get men coming here too, and sometimes they have wives or girlfriends...” She tailed off and shrugged. “The boss is dealing with a Mrs. Jealousy at the moment, who can’t wrap her head around the fact that maybe hubby came here not because we’re a bunch of bimbos in overalls but because we do good work at a decent price.”

“How very enlightened of her,” I said, nodding.

“Oh, it’s a beautiful moment for the sisterhood,” Jess commented, with an expression that would have made professional poker players break down and cry from envy. “Anyway, I’m clocked off and I need to catch my bus, so I’ll see you around. Boss’ll be out in a minute.” She fixed me with a stern gaze. “No stealing anything.”

“Heaven forbid,” I replied, raising my hands. She grinned at me again, grimaced at the weather and pulled on a heavy coat from a row of hooks by

the door, then disappeared outside into an environment that was doing a creditable impression of the North Sea. I was left in the workroom with nothing but a smell of oil for company and a large variety of tools, the uses of which I was only vaguely familiar with at best.

I'd just reached that state of boredom where one gets one's smart phone out and starts checking Facebook with it – so about thirty seconds – and realised that I'd left it in the car when I heard the office door open. I looked around and saw a woman who was perhaps on my side of fifty; dark grey shoes with low heels, similarly-coloured skirt to mid shin, blouse and jacket combination and greying brown hair that fell to round about her shoulders. She was being ushered out of the office by... well, by Harry Potter in overalls, if Harry Potter was about five foot four, ginger, and had breasts.

“-really not sure what offends me more,” Harry Potter was saying crossly, “the suggestion that I might sleep with a married customer, or that I might sleep with a man.” She saw me lurking in the doorway and her face instantly cracked into a wide, genuine smile. “Hi!”

It was probably simply because a) I wasn't some harridan haranguing her about her involvement in an imagined affair and b) money might change hands from me to her, but it was one of those instantly engaging beams that lights up the whole of someone's face. I couldn't help but smile back, which seemed to lead Mrs. Jealousy to believe that we already knew each other. I saw her eyes skim over me and take in the army boots, combat trousers, painted nails, Dangermouse T-shirt, studded leather jacket and red mohawk, and decide with a derisive sniff that this wasn't someone she wanted to spend time around. With nothing more than a stern backward glance at Harry Potter she turned and walked out into the rain. We watched her go, heels clacking as she stalked away, and then the diminutive mechanic at my side turned and offered her hand.

“Sarah Robinson,” she introduced herself, a smaller but no less infectious version of the beaming grin on her face, and I instantly decided that I liked her. No-one who smiled like that could be a bad person.

“Simon Seys,” I replied, pronouncing it 'Sayze' as all right-thinking people should. And by 'right-thinking people', I mean 'people who don't want to get punched for making me sound like a parlour game'. We shook hands. “Is this a convenient time?”

“Yeah, no problem,” Sarah replied, casting a dark glance in the direction of Mrs. Jealousy, who was looking at my taxi and clearly wondering whether I'd stolen it or whether the real driver was around somewhere and might be persuaded to take her on as a fare. “So, what can I do for you?”

“Well, it's the exhaust,” I started to explain, “it sounds a little loose, and...” I trailed off, listening, then felt an icy weight of recognition settling into my stomach. “Shit.”

“What?” Sarah asked, clearly completely confused by my reaction, then frowned as the same high-pitched chittering reached her ears. “What's that noise? Bats?”

“Right idea, wrong time of year,” I said grimly, peering out into the rain and wondering what the hell I had on me that I could use as a weapon, “and way, way too small.”

I don't think Mrs. Jealousy even saw them. She certainly didn't hear the scrape of the storm drain cover being lifted up and moved aside from beneath, and if she didn't hear that she'd have no chance of hearing the silent pads of multiple pairs of soft feet padding towards her, if feet is the right word to use. The only noise she might have noticed was the sonar, but the calls were right on the edge of human hearing and perhaps partial deafness had set in a little early in life.

“What the *fuck*?” Sarah said beside me, and I felt her fingers gripping my arm even through the thick leather of my jacket. An entirely understandable reaction if you hadn't seen these things before.

I had. I suppose it's time for a quick explanation.

First of all, I said I'm a taxi driver most of the time. The rest of the time, I and a couple of friends of mine do our level best to eliminate the weird, supernatural and downright spooky threats to innocent, ignorant humanity that lurk within Nottingham. So far, we've managed to do it without being sectioned for a psychological assessment or being caught breaking any laws, which is a minor miracle in and of itself.

Secondly, the reason my exhaust was loose? I ran over one of these bastards a few days ago, when Archie and I were clearing out a nest of them that had abducted and eaten a pair of teenage girls in Colwick Country Park. Not that it died as a result, mind you.

“Hey!” I shouted desperately at Mrs. Jealousy, waving. A few heads (again, if that's the right word) turned my way in the advancing mob, but their advance didn't waver.

Sarah screamed. Only to be expected. Her customer's outraged wife glanced up at that, then must have caught sight of movement out of the corner of her eye. Now she looked, and now *she* screamed, and now it was too late to do anything else as they rushed her, tumbling her to the ground in a wave of chittering bodies.

And then they ate her.

They didn't do it with teeth, because they don't have them. They do

have what you might call a mouth, but that's just the orifice the sonar issues from, it has nothing to do with feeding. What they do have is multi-digitated appendages that we might as well call hands at the end of long, thin things that you could argue were arms, and these attached themselves to the screaming woman and plunged into her flesh. It was too dark to see, but I knew that there would be threadlike filaments coursing through her body, stripping the nutriment from her, drying her blood and digesting her flesh, even burrowing into the marrow of her bones.

Her screams stopped after about three seconds that felt like an eternity. Beside me, Sarah Robinson was trying to scream again as well, but I'd clamped my hand over her mouth and wasn't letting go, instead whispering "Sssshhhh..." in her ear. It wasn't working, which didn't surprise me, so I tried a different approach.

"*If we make a sound, we're next,*" I murmured in her ear, as quietly as I could. She stiffened and stopped struggling against my grip, and after a careful second I removed my hand. She looked up at me, then her eyes flickered to the security door we stood next to. I shook my head slowly and formed words with no noise, exaggerating the motions of my mouth so she could read my lips. *Not yet.* The noise might spark them to investigate, and we'd still have time to close it if they proved to be of a curious disposition.

The pile started to unravel. I counted a dozen of them, quickly. Four took hold of the woman's partially-digested body and started tugging it back to their storm drain, but only four. The other eight turned towards us, and once more that high-pitched chittering filled the air. I could almost feel it vibrating in my teeth, it was so powerful. Now, as they started to slowly advance towards the light that they couldn't see, we got a proper look at them.

Somewhere between four and five feet high, they were so pale that even the most dedicated goth would have considered their pallor unhealthy. Roughly man-shaped – if you can call something man-shaped simply because it has four limbs and walks upright on two of them – with spindly-looking arms and legs that I nevertheless knew were possessed of a dangerous strength, and a neck that seemed too thin to support the head.

Ah, the head; an eyeless wedge of matter with the dark, cavernous opening of the mouth emitting that sonar call; large, mobile dishes that served as ears; wide, fleshy nostrils that sucked in air hungrily, both to power the call and to monitor their surroundings through scent. It looked unfinished, as though some creator had got bored before they'd finished the sculpture and put the creature away to come back to at another time. Not true, of course. There is simply no need for eyes underground, and that was

where these things spent virtually all their lives.

They were coming for us, there was no question. I stood aside and motioned to the door, and Sarah Robinson swung it shut, then bolted it hastily. She backed away, so white that she nearly matched their colouring, and turned eyes to me that were wide enough to nearly extend past the frames of her glasses.

“What...?”

I sighed. I really hate having to bring a newbie in cold. On the other hand, there simply isn't an easy way to lead up to telling someone that half the things they thought were fictional actually exist, and they're not even the nastiest things out there. In such events I find a calm, matter-of-fact approach to be the most efficacious.

“Kobolds,” I said, inspecting our surroundings. Strong walls, no obvious gaps, good. “Subterranean. They're blind, so they see using sound, sonar. Also have a fairly good sense of smell. Nottingham's riddled with caves, so they're fairly common here. Normally they stay out of the way of humans, but recently there's been some that have made an exception.”

She just stared at me, mouth hanging open. It would have looked comical had I not been seriously calculating our odds of getting out of here alive, and then, finding the numbers to be unfriendly, recalculating the odds of getting just me out of here alive, which weren't too promising either.

“Basically,” I said, taking her shoulders and leaning down a bit to stare into her wide, green eyes, “they're a sort of walking fungus. They're not animals, no matter what they look like. They have no bones; their bodies are sort of... rubbery. You can't break a limb, you can't crack a skull, and you can't smash their ribs because they don't have any. The only efficient way to stop them is to cut them up. Do you have anything with an edge on it in here?”

“Huh?”

“An edge!” I snapped, giving her a small shake. I responded to my first induction to the obviously supernatural by going catatonic and developing agoraphobia for about six months, so believe me, I understood her reaction, but if she didn't get on the team very quickly she wasn't going to have the luxury of developing medium-term psychological trauma due to being digested by threads of fungus rampaging through her body. “Something that can cut!”

“I... no,” she said, brain apparently slightly kick-started by being given a task, “not like that. We've got wire cutters, or a bread knife in the office for when we want a sandwich...”

“Bread knife?” I asked, wincing inside. “Better than nothing. Go grab

it, quick.” I reached in my pocket for my mobile and remembered again that it was in the taxi, and of course there were eight kobolds between me and it. Of course, getting to my car would be good enough anyway, as I could just drive away faster than they could follow, but I might as well wish for a S.W.A.T. team for all the good it would do me. I patted through my pockets frantically anyway just to make sure, even though I knew I wouldn't find it, which is how Sarah found me when she returned from the kitchen bearing the utensil she'd been sent to find.

“What're you doing?” she asked, slightly breathless. The dash to the kitchen and back wouldn't have done it, so she must have been starting to hyperventilate.

“My mobile,” I explained grimly. “It's in my car. I've got friends who would be able to help, but...” I shrugged helplessly.

“I've got a landline!” Sarah said, pointing to the office. I grimaced, frustration warring with embarrassment within me.

“Yeah, I don't actually *know* anyone's number. That's what the phonebook on the phone is for.”

“How about the police?” she demanded. “Couldn't we call the police?”

I paused. The notion honestly hadn't occurred to me. I spend so much time trying to avoid the notice of the boys in blue that my first instinct is to call my friends or run rather than to trouble Nottingham's law enforcement agencies. However, the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. If we called saying that we were trapped in the garage by a mob (not really a lie) then they'd probably send a car out. It wasn't a Friday or Saturday night so odds were they'd get here fairly quickly, and the Meadows station couldn't be that far away. Of course, what would happen once they arrived was anyone's guess; the siren might scatter the kobolds and overload their sonar, but two cops with batons and CS gas would have nothing that could seriously hurt these things. That also assumed that they'd actually stick around to fight instead of hightailing it the other way screaming in abject terror. This was why I really wanted to contact Archie, who habitually carries a samurai sword around with him in a kitbag.

What the hell. Even a brief distraction might give us enough time to get to the car and away.

“Do it,” I said. Beside me, the security door banged and flexed as something threw itself against it. Sarah squeaked in alarm and two more bangs followed. “Quickly...”

She turned and ran. I backed off more slowly, looking around for something I could use as a weapon. I have a few bits and bobs on me at most times, but most of them – my cross, a bag of salt, some chilli powder,

the silver and iron rings I wear on my fingers, the sports bottle of holy water in the glove compartment of my car – are based around the natural vulnerabilities of the creatures I encounter most often. Kobolds aren't even *creatures*, as such; they don't have the hostile spirit that can be damaged by holy water, or the violent allergies to iron, silver or salt of so many supernatural beings, or even a respiratory system that can be messed up by the application of a powerful condiment. I'd be better off with a chainsaw and a spray can of weed killer.

“The phone's dead!” Sarah shrieked. I turned around to see her frantically pressing the call button on a cordless handset. I frowned; was this just bad luck? Surely the kobolds hadn't thought (I use that word in its loosest sense) to get up on the roof and take out the phone line. Had they?

“Have you got a mobile?” I asked. Sarah stared around at her office, eyes flickering over the mounds of paperwork, an old desktop PC, the odd mechanical parts scattered here and there, a CD player, the same calendar of barely-clothed women that I swear is on the office wall of every garage in the land, abandoned coffee mugs...

“Somewhere?”

The lights went out.

The electric heater that had been whirring busily away to itself died and the PC's hum abruptly stopped. In the sudden silence all I could hear was the rain drumming faintly on the roof... and then a slithering sound from above.

They were up there. They'd cut the power, and the phone line.

“How... what...?” Sarah sounded close to tears from fear, which wasn't surprising. I myself was getting more and more alarmed with each passing second.

“The power lines,” I said grimly, shutting my eyes to try and help them adapt to the dark more quickly. “They'll have been humming slightly, I guess.” I opened my eyes again; not much better, but I could determine the edges of shadow here and there. “Too quiet or high for us to hear, but kobolds would be able to detect it.”

“I thought you said they were fungus?” Sarah said, an edge in her voice just short of hysteria. “How does *fungus* know what a power line is? *What the hell is going on?*”

“Maybe they're smarter than I thought,” I conceded, reluctantly. “What do you know, you really *do* learn something new every day.”

“Is that all you've got to say!?” Sarah shrieked. “Why aren't you *doing* something?”

“Well, have you found your mobile yet?” I asked, turning on the spot

and listening out for movement either above us or at the door.

Silence answered me.

“You stopped looking, didn't you?”

More silence. Slightly sullen, this time. However, it was quickly followed by the rustling and sliding of paper and assorted other oddments being hurriedly sorted through by hands. I thought I heard a faint thump on the roof above the noise and cocked my head to listen, but then I became aware of a sliver of light from the streetlamps outside falling across the concrete floor I was standing on.

The letterbox was being pushed open.

I regarded it carefully, heart hammering in my chest. There was no way a kobold could get in through there, but there was still something terrifying about seeing my immediate physical environment being influenced by one of these things, somehow even scarier than the loss of power and phone line. I guess that can happen anyway when a storm hits or a pole goes down, but your letterbox doesn't just slowly open of its own accord.

Then a skinny white hand crept through, followed by a skinny white arm, and it started to reach up towards the bolt.

“Knife!” I yelled. “Now!”

“What-?”

“NOW!”

The blade skittered along the concrete floor as Sarah slid it to me from the darkness of her office. I stopped it with my boot, picked it up and shrugged out of my jacket. I'd never seen a kobold do that digesty-fungus-thread thing with any part of the body but their fingers, but I wasn't taking a chance; I ran to the door, grabbed the arm at the wrist through the leather and started frantically sawing with the bread knife at what approximated the elbow. There was a keening wail from the far side of the metal and the thing tried to pull away but I gritted my teeth, held on and kept cutting. The resistance suddenly ceased and I staggered away from the door holding the severed and mildly dripping limb in my hand, all semblance of vitality suddenly gone from it.

“No leaflets, no free papers, and no doorstep salesmen!” I yelled defiantly, and threw the arm at the door. It thumped dully against it, but my puny gesture was answered by a series of much louder bangs as the kobolds outside hurled their weight against the steel. As before, it flexed but held. I didn't have much worry about them being able to force their way in, but I didn't trust them not to try for the bolt again if they thought they'd distracted me. Clearly, my opinion of them as instinct-driven creatures was off the mark. I just had to hope I hadn't fatally underestimated them.

There was the tinkle of breaking glass from the office, and another shriek of alarm from Sarah. I hate the sound of a breaking window. It always sounds malicious, and on this occasion it was downright predatory.

“Sarah! Get out of there!” I shouted, moving towards the office in alarm.

“I haven't found the phone!” she replied, still moving stuff about.

“Forget the phone!” I told her, looking over my shoulder to see if anything was trying to get to the bolt yet. No movement. “They'll be coming through the window, and they can see in the dark!”

There was the chitter of a kobold's sonar and a silhouette appeared at the jagged remnants of glass in the frame, blunt muzzle turning as it scanned the office. Sarah let out a strangled yelp and turned for the door, but the thing jumped to the desk and then, with a clatter of assorted items and papers being knocked to the floor, leaped onto her back and bore her to the ground.

When it comes down to it, I've found there are two sorts of people; those who fight, and those who don't. Sure, there's a difference between the people who cower into a gibbering ball and ignore the reality that they can't handle and the people who calmly accept their fate, but in the end the result is broadly the same. I'm not one to judge, but personally I'll fight until the bitter end to keep myself in this world. Maybe that's because I have no faith in there being a next one; maybe it's because I'm a coward.

Regardless, it seemed that Sarah Robinson shared my mindset, as she twisted around under the creature and fired an elbow back into what would have been its jaw, then grabbed hold of the doorframe to propel herself up and headbutt it. Of course, that wouldn't have made much difference normally, this being a boneless creature of fungus, but it knocked its head up enough to be at just the right height for my running kick to catch it square.

The thing was knocked back off her into the desk, making a mournful wail as it did so. I grabbed Sarah, pulled her back over the threshold and slammed the door shut behind us. “Does this lock from this side?”

“Padlock,” she panted, scrambling to her feet with her glasses ajar and grabbing the very same item from the sill of the internal window between office and workshop. She reached for the clasp on the door, but it was suddenly jerked open again from the other side. The kobold had got up, and had clearly figured out doorhandles.

I was still holding on of course, and it didn't get the door completely open, but it got an arm through the gap. Even though I pulled the door back as hard as I could that arm wedged in the way, and the door lacked an edge

sharp enough to cut it off. Its hand reached towards the handle on my side... the handle being gripped by my bare hand, from which my bare arm extended up to where my Dangermouse T-shirt sleeve ended halfway down my bicep. My leather jacket was still somewhere on the floor behind me, no doubt slightly stained by kobold vital fluids. I screamed and hacked with the knife, but it didn't cut deep enough to deter the thing and, with my other option being to stand there and get digested on the spot, I let go of the door.

It swung open and the thing stepped through into the workshop as I backed away, pitifully inadequate kitchen knife clutched in my hand. I could open up a few wounds on it, but I wouldn't be able to do anything to put it down without giving it a chance to start eating me.

"Keep it busy!" Sarah shouted from somewhere to my right, and I heard the click of the padlock on the office door. She was sealing us in with it? The thing's head twitched towards her for a second, but then focused back on me as its chittering rose in volume.

"What did you have in mind?" I shouted incredulously, "Canasta?"

"Just let me find some gloves!"

Gloves?

The kobold stepped forward and I slashed with the knife, gashing its muzzle but not deterring it much. Realisation dawned as I tried to judge the distance from its hands to my bare skin in the darkness; Sarah was covered top-to-toe in overalls. The only bare skin on her was her head and her hands, so if she could find some gloves...

"Yaaaah!"

The light glinted off the small mechanic's glasses as she tackled the thing from behind, bringing it down in a reversal of what had happened in her office a few seconds ago. The kobold keened and struggled, but she managed to get its arms twisted behind its back and locked her legs around it. I grabbed my jacket from where it lay on the floor, threw it over the thing's head as she rolled onto her side, and held it down as I cut into the neck.

The kobold fought, of course. Its hands clamped onto Sarah's thighs, her hips and her stomach in turn, but the heavy denim of her workwear stopped it cold in its attempts to eat her. I knelt on its thrashing head and kept cutting until the neck gave way and the keening alarm call suddenly abated, but even then the body didn't stop struggling.

"How do you kill this thing?" Sarah asked in alarm, grimly holding on.

"We have," I replied, kicking the head away, "it'll just take a little while. It can't smell, hear or echo-locate anymore, and even a kobold can bleed to death. Let it go, and as long as we don't let it crawl into us we'll be

fine.”

She relaxed her grip and got up hurriedly. The thing started to spasm away drunkenly across the floor, and I kicked it purely out of spite.

“So what now?” she asked. “Don't think we can do that to all of them, can we?”

“No,” I agreed. There was a thump from the office to our left. At least one more was coming in that way, and it wouldn't take them long to figure out breaking the internal window as well. After that we'd have nowhere left to run and virtually nothing to fight with, but trying to make a break for it out of the front door would be equivalent to suicide. Still, that was possibly better than waiting here for death to come to us. “Looks like it might be Charge of the Light Brigade time.”

I could see Sarah's face fall in the dim light, and I felt for her. She'd discovered that the world wasn't anywhere near as happy and cosy as she thought it was, she'd faced up to it, she'd fought against it and she'd *won*... and now she was going to die anyway, all in the same evening. At least I'd got a few years of being terrified, fighting for my life and doing the occasional good deed out of it.

“There must be something we can do?” she protested, but I could hear the uncertainty in her voice. “How did you say we could kill them, again?”

“I've only ever found blades to work,” I replied, looking over at the office. “This knife won't cut it, pardon the pun.”

“Okay,” Sarah said, taking deep breaths in an apparent effort to calm herself after the recent adrenaline spike. “This is a garage. I have petrol. Petrol burns. Do they burn?”

I felt the faint stirring of hope inside me. “Right, that could work. But we need to find some way of getting it onto them and setting them alight without burning ourselves up.”

Sarah looked at me thoughtfully. “How tall are you?”

Which is why I ended up standing between the service lifts, on my own and wearing a slightly soggy leather jacket when the office window broke and those creeping fingers found and drew back the dead bolt on the front door.

They slipped in from two directions, half a dozen pale figures sending out ultrasound waves that felt like they made my skull vibrate. They quickly focused on me, standing there waving the kitchen knife, and didn't even pause. Instead they broke into padding runs, just like they'd charged Mrs. Jealousy, their semi-circle rapidly contracting.

In a way, that helped me. I'd been wondering how long to leave it, how close to let them get before I made my move, but abject terror and

self-preservation made my mind up for me in a way that wouldn't have been as obvious if they'd closed in gradually. I threw the knife at one of them, jumped upwards and grabbed the body of the car above me, then hauled myself into the passenger's side through the door that Sarah had left open for me when I'd boosted her up there a minute ago. She handed me a can that stank of chemicals, opened the driver's door and leaned out. I did the same, and we started pouring.

There was already petrol on the floor beneath us; this was just the finishing touch. The volatile liquid splashed down on the confused, hooting kobolds, and no sooner had we emptied the cans than Sarah dropped the red-hot cigarette lighting attachment from below the dash.

The garage was suddenly lit up with bright yellow flame and doused in thick, noxious smoke, and the kobolds' voices reached new, pain-riddled highs. We closed the doors and locked them just in case, waited for the noise to die down and hoped the flames wouldn't get high or hot enough to touch off the petrol in the car's tank.

It took about thirty seconds for the screams to stop, and the flames died out shortly afterwards. We cautiously opened the doors and carefully made the drop down to the concrete floor, lungs burning from the acrid smoke drifting around. Sarah took a look at the charred lumps lying around her workplace and gave a wild war whoop, then turned to me with the biggest grin yet plastered over her face. I found myself grinning back and caught her in a spontaneous hug that saw us waltzing crazily across the workshop floor, laughing so hard we were in danger of passing out from lack of breath.

This might have been why we didn't notice the last one.

It must have crept up on us just by listening, because I certainly didn't hear any sonar; the first thing I knew was when Sarah was jerked back out of my grip and hurled against the steel security door, where she went down hard. I was off-balance and unprepared, but managed to catch the pale hand as it snaked towards my throat.

The kobold was missing its right arm. It must have been the one I'd maimed as it tried for the bolt the first time; stupidly, I'd neither counted my recently-immolated attackers nor noted that they all had both upper limbs. These thoughts flashed through my mind as I took a firm grip on its wrist and shoulder – my concerns about its digestive processes being somewhat moot at this point – pivoted my hips and took it over to the floor with an *ippon seonage*, a flashy-looking but relatively simple Judo throw.

Of course, the advantage of an *ippon seonage* on most opponents is that crashing back first onto a hard surface will knock the wind out of them and

give you a chance to follow up. Kobolds have no use for air other than powering their sonar, and the impact didn't trouble the thing in the slightest; it bounced back up again and swarmed onto me like a big cat onto a deer, its three remaining limbs still up to the task of out-grappling a Nottingham taxi driver. I struggled to keep a firm grip on it but it slipped to my back, clearly not wishing to stand in front of me where I could punch or kick it.

I fought to at least get a grip on the wrist above those pale, deadly fingers, but my own hands were slick with cold sweat and the kobold seemed to be made of wiry jelly; hideously strong but impossible to hold. I bucked and spun, trying to shake the thing off my back, but to no avail. I couldn't see the kitchen knife and there was no more petrol; even if there was, I would have no way of either getting it onto the kobold or lighting it, let alone doing that without burning myself. I tried to shout to Sarah, but she had either been knocked unconscious or woozy enough that she didn't respond.

I lost my grip on the kobold's hand just as I saw the one thing that might help me, on the wall by the office door. I took a chance and dived for it as the thing's fingers found my neck, just where it joins my shoulder.

I have a scar there. Quite a large, shiny one. It's from the time a vampire tried to snack on me when I was fifteen and not intelligent enough to heed my mum's advice about not taking shortcuts through the park at night. I beat the vampire in question off with a wild right hook and a panicked sprint away, but not before he'd torn my neck open. It didn't heal that well. Until a few years ago I'd always assumed it had just been some deranged human night stalker rather than a supernatural predator.

Scar tissue is thick and tough. It stopped the questing tendrils of fungus long enough for me to grab the nozzle of the Carbon Dioxide fire extinguisher, aim the horn over my shoulder and squeeze the handle.

Icy cold pressurised gas blasted into the kobold's face. The strength wilted from its limbs and it dropped away from my back, but I turned around and kept up the bombardment, watching its tissue start to darken as the frost damage set in. Virtually immune to blunt force trauma the things might be, but extremes of heat or cold can do them in quickly. I emptied the extinguisher onto it, scanning the garage for the kitchen knife, then when I'd run out of gas I walked over, picked up the blade and set about dismembering it.

Sarah Robinson weaved her way over to me as I was hacking off its head. She looked in pain and I could see a faint trickle of blood from her temple, but hell, she was alive. That was an improvement on how I'd thought this was going to pan out five minutes ago.

“Is that it?” she asked, a little plaintively.

“That’s it,” I replied. I saw her face and smiled tiredly. “Promise.”

“What do I do now?” She looked around the garage, then back to me. I could see the uncertainty in her eyes, the fear of what she might learn, but also a determination to learn it. This wasn’t a person who would accept anything less than the truth from me. She didn’t deserve anything less, either.

“Now I guess I tell you everything I know about the *real* world,” I replied. “It’ll take a while. And then I think I’ll introduce you to some friends of mine, because we always need more help and,” I gestured around at the charred kobold remnants, “you could certainly help.”

“No, I meant what do I do about *this*,” she clarified firmly, her gesture taking in exactly the same thing that mine had. “Jess is coming back in at eight-thirty tomorrow morning. What the hell am I supposed to do with all these?”

I looked blank. I’d never before had to consider how to dispose of eight nearly man-sized fungus creatures so that my employees don’t ask difficult questions. Then I brightened.

“Vegeburgers?”

And that was how I met my best friend Sarah Robinson.

Simon has previously been featured in the short stories *Under Construction*, published in *The Trigger Reflex* by Pill Hill Press, and in *Hunting Shadows*, published in the *Night Terrors* anthology from Kayelle Press. Mike Brooks has been reading and writing fantasy and science fiction for most of his life and has completed three novels to date (two of which feature Simon), and an increasing number of short stories.

MARTIAN WATER

by Greg M. Hall

None of the movies Curtis loved as a kid captured the *smell* of Mars, a bouquet of polymers marinated in sweat that rushed in to greet him as soon as he popped the neck seal on his environment suit.

Nearby, Pete removed his helmet and asked: “You think it’s true, Cowboy?”

“What, the supplemental run? Or the spinach?”

“The spinach,” said Pete, sitting to remove his boots. “Too much gossip about the sup-run. It’s gettin’ on my nerves. Someone oughta just ask Fukoda about it.”

“Aw, come on. Senator Janssen and the rest of those Earth-Comes-Firsters have been *praying* that we’ll request it. They’ll rub everyone’s noses in the expense and make another push at shutting us down. Doesn’t that make you a *little* curious?”

The other engineer drooped his square-jawed, crop-haired head and rubbed his temples with the grunt of politics-haters everywhere.

Curtis shrugged out of his suit. “Fine, forget I asked. As far as the spinach goes? Yeah, I believe Molly. She said the leaves were finally big enough that we’d each get more than one.”

“Big day, then.”

“You bet.” It *was* a big day. The spinach would be the first food that hadn’t been prepared and packaged back on Earth. While each of the twenty crew members wouldn’t get more than a couple dozen leaves, it was a huge step in the development of the base. More than that: it was a *statement*. They *could* become self-sufficient. Let Janssen and his cronies stew on *that*.

They finished stowing the suits in silence. Pete broke it by saying: “Lemme guess: You’re daydreaming about her right now, aren’t you?”

“Huh?” Curtis shut the door of his suit cabinet and punched the *clean* button.

“Don’t ‘huh’ me. Molly. You *like* her, right?”

“What the hell are we, Pete? Seventh graders?”

“Oh, quit dodging. I won’t get in your way. I like ‘em shorter and darker than me.”

Curtis squinted. “Dang. Is that possible?”

“Oh, yeah, it *definitely*—” He stopped, then pointed at Curtis and smiled. “Hey, I see what you did there. You *not* answering is all the answer I need.”

“We’re not supposed to date. Fukoda wouldn’t approve, and neither would Mission Control.”

Pete broke out in a sappy grin. “What the hell are we, Cowboy? Seventh graders?”

“Well, if it isn’t Pistol Pete and Cowboy Curtis, my two favorite engineers.”

Pete always answered first. “If a third engineer gets sent here, Molly, I might feel better about that statement.”

She’d already been smiling, dimples on her freckled cheeks, when they came into the mess room. “Hope you two ranch hands brought your appetite with you. We’re going native tonight!”

Curtis, used to a different context for that term, quickly drooped his face toward the floor and put a hand over his mouth. He looked back up in time to see Molly raise a coppersy eyebrow toward him.

Maybe she *hadn’t* said it as innocently as he’d thought. This time he let himself grin.

Pete said: “Now all we need is for Rohit to breed us up some lobster.”

“Like he’d go along with that,” said Curtis, breaking into a back-of-the-throat cartoon voice: “Completely inefficient use of water, and not nearly enough nutritional yield per unprepared kilo.”

Pete guffawed at the horrible mimic, but Molly let go of her smile. “Speaking of water, is it true that Fukoda’s putting in the request for that supply run?”

It had been a week since she’d confided to Curtis about her water worries. The agricultural loop she’d developed for the colony was five hundred liters short of true self-sufficiency. Prodded by her anxiety, he’d begun filling up his spare time scribbling out ideas on how to make a dent in the shortfall. The best one involved recovering microcrystals of ice that merged with the Martian soil, but it required a lot more spare time than he had.

Pete smacked his face with a palm. “I can’t believe you guys.” He snatched his ‘droid from its holster and pecked at the screen. “Hiroka? Are you on?”

Through the little device, a woman said: “Of course... you’re on speaker, aren’t you, Pete? You know I *hate* when you use speaker. It makes

you all squawky.”

“Yeah, sorry ‘bout that. Say, I hate to be a pain, but I’m sick of all the rumors. Are you going to ask for that supplemental run?”

“You realize,” their boss said, “that when I make that request, it might trigger the cancellation of our funding. It might set further missions back for decades.”

“That’s not an answer,” Molly grumbled.

“I hear you, Molly.” After a pause long enough to have Curtis wondering if she’d hung up on them, Fukoda said: “But yeah, I plan to make the request during tonight’s conference call.”

Curtis tried to not show the wave of relief that swept through him, while the others either didn’t try or weren’t very good at playing it cool. He piped in: “Remember, if they start chewing your butt you can put ‘em on *mute*.”

“I’ve never been worried about Mission Control’s reaction,” came the reply. Even through the tinny speaker he could hear how false that statement was.

Pete asked: “You coming down for dinner?”

“Oh, yeah.” Fukoda’s voice lifted. “I’d forgotten all about that. Save a pile, or clump, or whatever you call it for me.”

Curtis said: “*Thank* you for not boiling it.”

The gathering of the entire crew around the dinner table made him long for the clinking of silverware on plates and the sound of a football game in the background. He didn’t get homesick often - none of them could have passed the psych evals if they did - but sometimes, innocuous things could yank a pang out of nowhere.

“And *how* would someone boil something here?” Molly took the last open seat, which happened to be next to Curtis. It had just worked out that way, but Pete still threw a sly grin at him from across the table.

He ignored it and stuffed more leaves into his mouth. While pleasingly crunchy, they were flavored by nothing more than Molly’s hard work. He didn’t care; they were still the best things he’d stuck in his mouth since the start of the mission.

The others nodded and grunted their own approval. Fukoda, sitting at the head of the table, even managed a thin smile as she chewed. “The first of many great meals to come.” As she took a second bite, her ‘droid chirped. She furrowed her eyebrows, snatched the rude gadget, and glowered at its screen.

“Hmm. That’s odd.”

Curtis watched her push away from the table, not in a hurry, but with a face clouded by concern. He asked: “What’s up?”

For a moment it looked like the Mission Administrator would ignore the question, but as she reached the door she turned. “Don’t stop the feast on my account. For some reason, Mission Control moved our little chat up. Maybe they read my mind?”

Pete pointed to her plate and said: “You going to finish that?”

Molly balled up a paper napkin and tossed it at him. “Touch it and I’ll T&D you. Go on, Hiroka. I’ll take it up in a minute.”

Pete, with a ‘who-me?’ expression, asked: “T&D?”

Curtis laughed. “You must’ve slept through that part of training. ‘Tase and Duct-tape’. You know... if one of us completely loses it?”

Molly’s smile faded. “Have they ever changed the time of that teleconference before?”

The question was a chance to look her in the eyes. “You know, when you bring her dinner up, it’d give you an excuse to hear why for yourself.”

She frowned. “You want me to *eavesdrop*?”

Pete said: “Go with her, Cowboy. Keep her from chickening out.”

He followed it up with a wink, which Curtis hoped nobody else saw.

“I feel like I’m sneaking around behind my mom’s back.”

“Nonsense,” Curtis said. “This has to be a pretty stressful time for Fukoda. Mission Control won’t be thrilled.”

“Yeah. And I’m sure she sees Janssen on the major networks calling her a failure.”

“Exactly. And just because she’s in charge doesn’t mean she should have to face this alone.”

Molly rested a warm hand on his forearm. “Your concern for her is charming, but I’m a little more worried about our survival than politics back home.”

“Don’t be,” he said, trying not to be distracted by her touch. “Since you told me about the water, I’ve brainstormed a new way to extract some from the Martian soil.”

“As soon as we find out what’s going on, you’ll have to tell me all about it.”

Curtis fought an urge to put his hand on hers as they arrived outside the communications room.

Molly looked at the sealed aluminum door, then at Curtis, then back at

the door. “Now what?”

Curtis handed her Fukoda’s dish and said: “Pete would just barge in.” He reached for the door lever, hesitated, rapped three times on the panel, and then yanked the mechanism.

He expected a rebuke from inside. Instead, Fukoda sat at the console, listening to a garbly synthesized voice, face ashen and eyes wider than Curtis had ever seen them.

“...completely on your survival. Good Luck to you.”

Molly pressed a hand on his back, so he stepped aside to allow her in.

From the communications console came a click, two beeps to signify a restarting loop, and the garbled voice:

“This is a broadcast of the Nostradamus Beacon network. This is not a test. An Earth-catastrophic event has initiated this signal which will repeat as long as the network is operational. If you receive this message, you must assume Earth is not capable of assisting you. All attempts at self-sufficiency must be made. Humanity’s existence may depend completely on your survival. Good Luck to you.”

The click and two beeps sounded again, and Curtis leaned over Fukoda, grabbed the communication set’s mouse, and clicked on the *mute* icon. “Is there any way that could be a malfunction?”

Fukoda didn’t answer right away. After a moment’s hesitation, Curtis put a hand on her shoulder. It felt small and bony under his palm, the opposite of her authoritative personality. The Mission Administrator looked up at him with hollow eyes. “I don’t know how it could be.”

Curtis sat on a nearby desktop and rubbed a palm over his face. “Besides us and Lunar Station, who else might be receiving this?”

“I don’t know. There weren’t any black missions, if that’s what you’re asking... Janssen’s bloc did a number on funding for any project after ours.” Her gaze shifted. “Molly—what’s wrong?”

“Lunar Station...” She tried to finish the sentence, but no more words came out.

Back in the mess room, so recently the scene of happiness and hope, Curtis admired Fukoda’s steady demeanor as she broke the news.

Hannah Evigan, a manic pixie of a geologist, said: “What about Lunar Station? Can we talk to them?”

Curtis avoided looking at Molly as he answered. Something about Lunar Station was eating her up. “Uh, yes and no. Their comm gear was set up to talk to Earth. But if I was stationed there and got the same signal

we did, I'd be busting my hump to re-aim my array."

Fukoda added: "But Hannah, let's not kid ourselves about Lunar Station. Self-sufficiency was never one of their parameters. Their MA is having a *much* more serious talk with his staff right now."

"I know it's too early to bring this up," said Ingimar Bjorklund, a biochemist. "But we're going to have to think about reproduction. We don't want our population to exceed our resources, but... uh, since our youngest woman is twenty-eight, we're working with a window, biologically speaking."

How very Swedish of him, Curtis thought as his gaze drifted over to Molly, staring at the floor between her feet.

Fukoda said: "You're right, Ingimar: it *is* too early to bring it up. But once we're sure we can hang on, it becomes a primary concern."

"So speaking about primary concerns," said Pete, never afraid of the elephant in the room, "if that supplemental run we wanted isn't coming, *can* we make it?"

All eyes went from Pete to Molly when she said: "Probably not." She kept staring at the floor, head propped up on her hands, elbows on her knees. "We need more water."

Over a rising current of murmurs, Curtis said: "I've actually thought a lot about water. We may have to sacrifice some comfort, but the soil's full of microscopic ice particles. We can extract it...it'll be slow, but it's only five hundred liters. We'll get there. We don't need it all at once, right?"

"It's a goal, which is what we need most right now." A little color returned to Fukoda's face, and she started to pace as she talked. "And let's not forget, people: the ship is now fair game. About fifty liters of water are on board, as well as solar cells... And we ought to be able to find a use for its fuel."

Molly looked up, her eyes taking on an unnerving depth. "*Is* the ship really fair game?"

"What do you mean?" asked Pete.

"Hiroka made a really good point a little bit ago. Lunar Station is *not* self-sufficient." She looked at each one of them, then squarely at her Mission Administrator. "Those people are *dead* without assistance. And if we've got a ship, one with the range to bring us back to earth—"

"We're challenged to even manage our *own* survival, Molly! If we send off the ship, and its resources, and it costs *us* our lives, *nobody* makes it!"

Pete, more gently, said: "There's only enough fuel for a one-way trip, Molly."

“Curtis is smart enough to solve our water problems. He can also figure out how to generate more fuel.”

An icy tickle raced through Curtis. Water was child’s play in comparison to fuel. But the way Molly looked at him kept him from saying so.

Fukoda said: “I’m not authorizing that *now*, without more data and a chance to weigh the facts. For now, everyone, your jobs, which were directed at our station’s self-sufficiency, remain the same. Curtis, you’ll... Curtis?”

He tore his eyes away from Molly, and said: “Yeah, I’ll grab Pete and get started.”

Hardened steel smacked into basalt, creating another insignificant divot with a *ping* and sending fragments skittering. Curtis swung again, and again, and again.

A knock at his door threw his cadence off, but nothing more. He shouted: “Yeah!”

The lever worked, and the hatch to his room opened slightly.

“Hey, Pete said you’d be... huh. I thought you’d be asleep.”

Curtis kept bouncing his dad’s rock hammer off of the wall opposite his door. “You can come all the way in.” The tight quarters of the station had given an individual’s sleeping room an almost mystical sense of privacy, but Curtis didn’t mind people dropping by. Especially *her*.

Molly entered, but stayed by the door and kept it open.

He chipped away for another minute before she repeated: “I thought you’d be sleeping.”

There was tension in her voice, and maybe a trace of hurt, and finally he stopped. “I *can’t* sleep. So this is what I do. I make my room a little bigger, one fragment at a time. It lets me shut my brain off. Sometimes a pointless task that I know I’ll never complete can be really therapeutic.”

“I asked Pete what you were doing about the fuel. He said I needed to talk to you about it.”

“You’re about the most intelligent woman I’ve ever met. You can figure out what *that* meant.”

“I hoped...that maybe you’d work on it because it was... You know, *me* asking.”

He looked back at the wall he’d been chipping on, at the pile of basalt flakes at its base. “Maybe, because it was you that asked, that’s why it’s been eating at me.”

She approached but stopped short of touching him. “So *do* something about it, if it bothers you so much.”

“Water’s the priority,” he said, “and Pete and I have been averaging four hours of sleep a night.”

“Pete said you’re only a day away from turning the first unit on.”

“We don’t even know if it’ll work. Besides, I...” Curtis met her eyes, but only for a moment. He picked his hammer up off the bed, running his thumb over the rough, hardened face. “I’m *stumped*, Molly. I don’t know where to begin. We’re not *making* water, just extracting it from the soil. There aren’t any fuel particles in the soil here, and besides the water, Mars doesn’t have much hydrogen at all!”

Molly looked down, and turned to leave.

“Wait.”

She rested her hand on the edge of the door panel, had her foot on the jamb. Her eyes looked red and wet as she turned to face him.

“I want you to know, I agree with you. We *should* try to help Lunar Station out. But every scenario I play out in my head only works if we, the rescuers, have our problems handled first.” He recoiled as a metal spur on the hammer slashed across one of his fingers. He squinted at the fresh gash, and when he looked back up, she’d left without closing the door.

To the empty room, he said: “Once we get the water figured out, we’ve got our hydrogen source. Then it’s just a chemistry problem.”

Curtis hated soldering. It was Electrical Engineer crap, as difficult as working with complex numbers and figuring out what made capacitors tick. The metallic stink rankled his nose, and wisps of smoke always found his eyes.

Steps from behind broke the brooding silence.

“Pete said—”

“Pete’s a stinkin’ tattletale,” Curtis interrupted.

“Don’t blame him. I kept asking questions until he let something slip.”

“And what was that something?” He knew *she* knew, but thought that the longer he strung the conversation out, the longer he’d be able to keep working on his new device.

Instead of playing his game, Fukoda drew up alongside him. She watched him attempt another solder. “It’s no secret you and Molly like each other.”

He didn’t look up from his work. “I’m just a friendly guy. *Everyone*

likes me. Admit it: you do, too.”

The Mission Administrator couldn't help but chuckle. “It's noble that you want to make her feel better by trying, but you could be working on another water extractor right now. The ones you and Pete have rigged up are working, but we're still at risk.”

“I'd think, since I spent twelve hours today on an extractor, that this is my own time right now.”

“And how long can you keep *that* up? I talked to Doctor Sesson, and ___”

“Doctor Sesson's a stinkin' tattletale.” Okay, so asking the doctor for a stimulant, just *one* dose so he could pull an all-nighter or two, just to get over the hump with this fuel converter thing, might have been crossing a line, but he could blame his fatigue for the lapse in judgment.

He could *hear* the frown on Fukoda's lips. “You understand, Curtis, why Molly's so emotional about Lunar Station, don't you?”

When he didn't answer, she said: “Her husband's assigned there.”

Curtis' hand wavered with the soldering gun, and a blob of liquid metal splattered on the circuit board under his work.

“Aw, crap,” he said, “I'm terrible at soldering.”

She put a hand on his shoulder, and Curtis did his best not to flinch away from the touch. “I'm sorry. *Really*. I finally got her to admit she was married. And...I thought long and hard about telling you. I guess... Well, *desperate* isn't quite the right word, but water is *critical*.”

Curtis set down the iron and the spool of wire, rolled his neck with a pop, and turned to face her.

“Hiroka,” he said, “we *will* have enough water to make it. That's my assessment as an engineer, and that's my gut feeling as the oldest member of this crew.”

She studied his eyes, and apparently saw what she needed to because she nodded.

“And this thing here... I'm approaching it like an engineer should approach any problem, with my brain, not my heart... or reproductive organs. I can still fight to save other lives, and it doesn't have to be because of a schoolboy crush.”

A beep sounded from Fukoda's hip. She grabbed her 'droid. “What is it, Mark?”

“We just got a communication signal. It's Lunar Station.”

There wasn't enough space in the communication room for all of

them, so half of the crew milled around in the hallway outside. When Fukoda told everyone else to leave the room so Molly could have a moment on the equipment alone, it made for mass confusion, but eventually the room was clear.

Curtis was one of the last to leave. Molly said: “Can you stay with me?”

“I... uh, think you two need some time alone.”

“You heard them. They only have enough oxygen for another week, enough power for this one communication. I...can’t talk to him alone. “

Curtis gave the door a longing look, but sat down next to her.

“Besides,” she said with a touch of bitterness, “with the lag, it’s not exactly like we’ll really *talk* to each other, is it?”

He continued to say nothing, but held out his hand. She squeezed it. “Married people weren’t allowed on the mission; we had to hide it. And... we’d talked about other people while we were apart. Pragmatically. I know he’s a man and Lunar Station has female—”

“Don’t.” Curtis shook his head and pointed at the console. “He doesn’t...this should just be about him right now.”

They sat in silence for another minute before the speaker flared with a double-ping, followed by a male voice: “Molly... Hey, it’s Jorge. I really wish there was something we could do about the lag... it really sucks. Look: don’t worry about us. Take care of yourself and your crewmates.”

For not knowing how he’d react to hearing her husband’s voice, Curtis had to admit he admired the man on the other end of the transmission. Or maybe the vast distance did much to mask any fear that would have come through.

“Hey, we both knew it was going to be a long couple of years before you came back, huh? Now, I guess we just wait a little longer. I’ll be there for you on the other side. Heh, nothing like a disaster to bring a man back to religion, is there?”

His words were punctuated by sniffles from Molly, and she drew the back of her hand across her eyes.

“I love you, hon. You know that. But you need to get on with saving mankind, OK? I guess I’ll sit back and wait for your response. It’ll be good to hear you one last time.”

Curtis said: “You want me to, uh...”

Molly fiercely shook her head. As she rolled the mouse over the *transmit* icon, she took in a deep, shuddering breath and gave his hand a fresh squeeze.

Her voice was warbly when she started talking, but it gathered

strength. “Hey, I...I’m *really* glad I got to hear from you. We’ll make it. We have good people and a lot of resources. I’m sorry we couldn’t...”

She rested her face in her hands for a second, sniffled once more and took another gulp of air.

“No, never mind. Now’s not the time for apologies, is it? You’re right: the lag *really* sucks. I wish I could just *talk* to you. Make the most of what you’ve got left, okay? Put on a suit and go golfing or something. I...” She choked up, tried again to continue, but after a few seconds nothing else came out. She clicked on the *transmit* icon.

Curtis realized his free hand had been on her back, his fingertips making circles.

“What else could I tell him?”

“I... don’t think you said you love him.”

“I can’t,” she said, turning to press her face into his shoulder, “It hurts too m—” She began sobbing on him, her grief so honest that Curtis didn’t feel weird about enveloping her in his arms. She was a friend, one that needed comforting, and he was glad to be there for her.

Below the *transmit* icon was a text-entry field. He held her with his left arm, while with his right he clicked and typed:

i love you

And hit the *send* icon.

“There. Now you said it.”

She managed a *why* between sobs, and he said: “Because I’m here to help a friend. And because you do.”

Curtis led Molly past the others, sat her down in the mess hall, and ducked out to fetch something from his room. When he returned, he filled a mug with hot water, dumped in the packet of hot chocolate mix he’d smuggled to Mars, and set it down in front of her.

She straightened up and sniffled again. “Umm. That smells *heavenly*.”

“He sounds like a hell of a guy. I’m sorry I couldn’t do more for them.”

She took a drink with her eyes closed and face turned up. A little liquid spilled as she set the mug down. “There wasn’t enough time. I wish I knew, so I didn’t put you through all that—”

“It was nothing, Molly. I need to be pushed every now and then.”

She rubbed her temples before looking over into Curtis’ eyes. “I hope you’re right... because there’s something that I’ve been afraid to tell you.”

“Lemme guess: you’re married?”

Molly bounced a mock hit off his shoulder. “No. It might be worse.”

“You can tell me anything. I hope you know that by now.”

“Okay.” She cast a fearful glance at the door. “Do you remember when I said we were five hundred liters of water short?”

“Yeah, but with the ship, there’s fifty, and Pete and I figured the extractors will get another twenty a week coming, probably more—”

“I was wrong. It’s five *thousand* liters.”

It didn’t rock him the way the news of her husband did. “No need to panic. We’ll handle it.”

“When I reran the numbers, and realized how far off I was... I didn’t know how to tell anybody.”

“It’s just another problem to solve.”

The despair he saw in her eyes faded a bit. “How?”

“I dunno, maybe we can use the ship to make a trip to the polar caps. Pete might also have something in mind. We’ll solve this one, too...unless you keep making more work for me!”

Molly appeared to take the jab as the joke it was meant to be. “I promise nothing.” She sipped once more from her hot chocolate, and then took his hand in hers. “Besides, I think you *like* jumping through hoops for me.”

“Yeah. Keeping *you* happy: that’s my place in life.”

She looked like she wanted to smile, but wasn’t ready. “*You* were the one that said it: Sometimes a pointless task you never can complete can be really therapeutic.”

Greg M. Hall had a story included in *Outer Reaches* last year. Since then he’s been a lot busier online with content on Smashwords and Feedbooks, and has added podcasting to his body of work.

THE LISTENER

by Bentley Reese

It was in September that I first saw him. A cold September morning, one of those days where the sky was only slightly grayer than concrete and the ground was more mud than grass. As usual, the buses had arrived right on time, eight o'clock sharp, like a chain of school buses ready to unload a pack of starry eyed children. Only these buses weren't yellow, and they didn't have all those safety lights and signs, all those numberings and italics... no, these buses were gray, gray like the clouds, gray like the concrete.

They'd wheel into the prison, cutting along through the outer courtyards, right past cellblocks A and B's exercise area, which was itself a little lake of brown and black. Then they would reach the inner courtyard, passing down like little worms through the core of the prison's perimeters.

After a customs check and a few brief glances from the guards, the buses would come to a stop in the dead end gully that was the entrance to Fort Baranov. Of course, my block, Cell Block C, looked right down into the entry way and security check. So through my twelve by twelve window, I had a front row seat to watch my new prisoners take their first steps into a new world.

Fort Baranov is an old prison. Hooked right up along the Russian-Ukrainian border, it is in Russian jurisdiction, but gets a healthy diet of Ukrainian criminals that skipped over the border. Sequentially, its networking is more or less a cluster fuck of security checks and customs... as the Russians want to know who exactly they are babysitting for their good friends the Ukrainians.

In theory, the prison is supposed to be more of a transitory place. A "I found this fucker, I'll keep him in this shithole until I kick him back on over to you," But in practice, few who ever entered this snaring barbed wired fortress, full of international laws and short workings, ever leave its outer perimeters.

So usually when I saw the sorry sort that would file out from one of those bloated gray whales of steel, I felt a small amount of sympathy for some. The sorry eyed ones, the ones that looked like little does, not sure where they were or how they ended up there. The ones that looked as out of place in their subdued orange jumpsuits as I would in a ballerina tutu. They

were the ones I pitied. Not the ones with the black knuckles and yellow teeth, the ones with the serrated smiles and the ten year fermenting Salvatrucha tats. They belonged here, right here, this was their world. Anything past those walls was alien to them. I had no pity for their kind, only distrust.

But, that day... that day only one man stepped through the slate silver breaths of the transport buses. A man that was neither of the two categories I mentioned prior. No, no this man was different.

Tall and lank, the man had a shock of ash blonde hair resting over grey eyes. Crow's feet cropped up from temples that were smooth otherwise, laugh lines dug into unblemished cheeks. His face was hard and thin, with high cheek bones and sunken eye sockets with a sharply pronounced chin. He looked as if he hadn't aged well, as if he could have been thirty, maybe even forty, but had just received a hard life and a short stick. He stood taller than the two guards that materialized on his flanks, but looked lighter than either.

He seemed like someone you could talk to, like someone you could trust. Not defeated, the man just looked calm, like he was returning home from a grocery store instead of stepping into a super max prison.

After that morning, life went on in the prison, as it always did. With a population of sparsely two hundred prisoners and only a quarter of that number in guards, we were a little island of society in a three hundred mile span of frosted grassland and pine forest. The border, Russia, the Ukraine, their boundaries were about as ambiguous as the bouts of fog that would come rolling over our walls and wires, to gray our already gray lives.

We were an ecosystem, a self-sufficient cell. Most of the guards lived on the premises, coming from the poorer towns and villages south of Borgovod. They were as much prisoners of Baranov as we were. The Warden, Mr. Aston, had been born in these walls. His father had been a guard in the northwest watchtower all his life. Aston had followed his father into the service, eventually rising through the ranks to take command at the ripe young age of sixty seven. Some say Aston had never passed the third wall, never left the prison.

The next day I watched this new man, this fresh meat, from across the cafeteria. He sat there, alone, an island of calm in a sea of chaos. Men in orange suits passed by, laughing, swearing, their mouths half full of food and their eyes half glazed with the tranquility of everyday routine.

No one approached the man that day or the next. Not in the food court, not in the exercise yard. He stood, he sat, he ate, all alone, always silent. His chin always tipped down and his eyes always slightly tilted up, lazily

trailing prisoners as they walked past. There was something unsettling about that stare of his... it was hard to articulate then, as it is now. It wasn't cold, no, but it wasn't warm either... it was neutral, an emotional limbo, placid to the utmost extent. Something was missing in that stare, something that shouldn't have been.

We never learned his name. The guards... the ones that sold cigarettes for a euro a smoke... they said the system had nothing on him. No name, no specs, no nothing. The only thing any of us ever got out of them was that the man had been sent here only after about half a dozen other prisons. The Black Dolphin, Pyatak, Vladimirsky Central, you name it and apparently he'd done time in it. Thing is, through all the legal bullshit, system inner workings, and span of time the man had been passed along, no one knew exactly what he was in for or who he exactly was; they only knew he'd been in a long time, a real long time.

Cold Eyes, the guards called him. We prisoners, well like sixteen year olds in high school, we couldn't use a nickname crafted by the higher ups. So, we made our own.

The Listener is what we called him. The Listener is what we named him.

For his part, the Listener didn't make much of the name. It was said in whispers, in whickering laughs within cells, between smokes, between stories. He became a joke of a sort. The Listener, always watching, always listening, always waiting. You better watch out, or you'd find the Listener perched up in your bed, wanting a snuggle.

Frankly, I was surprised; such fresh meat wasn't generally left that fresh for long. One of the gangs should have been on him. Even with two hundred prisoners, we still had plenty of gangs, let me assure you. But, life went on in the prison as usual, with the Listener untarnished. No one seemed that interested in him to be honest. There were two things a gang would want to recruit a guy for; one, obviously for man power, two, well you know what happens between us men in prison... gangs were never short when it came to concubines of the andic type. But, not the Listener. He was too frail, too lank and too withered to be of any interest to the gangs, for either of their desires. Even the cell block bullies seemed fairly disinterested in him.

Or so I thought.

It all really started that winter, around December, when the Listener had been a member of my cell block for well over two months. Oleg Khaskovo was on the prowl, choosing the library as his stalking ground. A pickpocket turned car thief, Khaskovo was a brawny brute, heavily tatted

and mean faced. He looked sharp... not intelligent sharp... just sharp, like a knife's blade, and he knew it too. Khaskovo had been the local cell block bully since I arrived in Baranov some three and a half years ago, my head freshly shaved and my eyes freshly watered.

Khaskovo was one of those few behind these bars that held no regrets, whether about his crime or the fact he didn't get away with it; Khaskovo was right where Khaskovo wanted to be. He was someone who thrived in this environment, had adapted to it before he even entered it. When that bastard stepped into his first cell, his surroundings finally matched his disgusting pit of a mind. Khaskovo wasn't just a bully; he enjoyed darker tastes as well. You know those stories about inmates being beat to death by some disgruntled cell mate... Khaskovo was that type. You know those stories about prison showers, and what dropping the soap meant to some of the prisoners... Khaskovo was that type.

The library was a good stalking ground for two reasons. One, it was big, full of empty book shelves, full of hard plastic tables and reading desks all desperately wanting to be filled, but only ever stuffed with half a dozen prisoners. Cameras weren't the only thing that had too high a budget for Baranov, so did books. So only if you liked to read the backs of cigarette cartons or the occasional letter from home would you ever venture into that maze of ghostly bookshelves, vaguely glossed over with seemingly century old cigarette smoke.

Well, the Listener was one of those people. Only he didn't read, he never read. He'd pace through the aisles, whistling every so often, until he found the book he was looking for... the book he was always looking for; an old Bible, real old, one of those from the real hard hitting Orthodox years. He would take it to a table, always holding it tenderly to his chest and sit down as if to read it.

Except the Listener didn't read it, he never read it, he only watched. Me, he watched me for one. I was in charge of the evening clean up detail and I always caught his eyes trailing me through the patchwork of shelves. Never pausing, never wavering, they fluttered along silently with me every step.

So on that December evening, I was making my nightly run through the library, cleaning what needed to be cleaned, picking up anything stuck on the puke colored floor, when Khaskovo found his would be prey sitting calmly at the right hand of the room, perched up in one of the reading desks, his Bible in hand and his eyes solely resting on me.

"What're you reading, Freak?" Khaskovo asked in snap-throated Russian as he swatted a hand on the hard plastic of the reading table. The

noise was loud and sudden, snapping through the silence of the library like a fire cracker in the dead of night.

It was enough to make you jump, or well, at least enough to make me jump, not as much for the Listener. His gray eyes never flinched, never wavered. As always, they methodically worked their way up Khaskovo's arm, eventually meeting the Russian's hazel orbs.

There was no answer... only the return of a newly rejuvenated silence.

"Religious are we?" Khaskovo flicked the pages of the book back and forth, a hooked smile slowly growing along his fleshy cheeks. The Listener's chin bobbed down just enough for me to think it was a nod... though to this day I'm not sure if it was or not. Khaskovo took it for one though, just as I had. With a savage laugh Khaskovo grabbed the inner pages of the book, crinkling them into a muddled wad and then tore the book away from the Listener, letting it fly and slide through under the tables.

"God ain't with you now, Boy. He skipped town as soon as you stepped off the bus that brought you into this shithole." Khaskovo paused, his eyes suddenly flickering with intuition as some new devilry came to his less than brilliant head. "You have anything to say to that?"

Of course, the Listener did not. The fact of which didn't entirely please old Khaskovo. He had been fishing for a fight, an excuse to throw the first punch. But, the Listener only sat there, staring.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Khaskovo hissed. The inmate's face flashed over with boiling confusion, heavily salted with anger. "You some kinda dumb person? Got no tongue do you? No voice, come on, say something. I won't bite." Khaskovo's smile made it look all too clear that he might, indeed, bite.

Yet even then, even in that break neck tension that was clouded over by an all too apparent silence; the Listener never replied. He only stood up and quite slowly pressed his index fingers to his thin lips. Then, before Khaskovo could react, he tapped the inmate's forehead with those fingers. The motion was quick, fluid and awkward all at the same time, but before the Listener had even lowered his arm, Khaskovo was on him.

A punch. It began and ended with a punch. Khaskovo threw a hard right hook, the kind that involved turning your arm into a cast iron whip and using your torso to whip it in your target's general direction. He connected, smashing his fist right into the Listener's chin. With a spray of blood and a small convulsion, the Listener dropped like a sack of shit-filled potatoes.

Khaskovo wasn't done however, and the kicking began. Hard kicks, aimed for the gut. Khaskovo pelted them down on the Listener with his

usual tenacity, laughing all the while.

The idea came to me slowly, like a fruit budding from a stem. But, before I knew it, I was running across the library. My sneakers tearing across the cheap puke colored carpet.

Khaskovo's body was warm and hard when I barreled into it. It flinched on impact, but stiffened before we hit the ground. His elbow hit my chin before my back hit the floor. The rest was all cut through a bloody tint and an irony taste.

"Well looky here, Metz is defending his new fuck buddy, ain't he?" I remember Khaskovo screaming something along those lines. But, it was hard to entirely discern as fist after fist was thrown into my face. The Russian had somehow managed to land on top of me, ramming his knees down into my gut. He held me by the shoulder with his left arm while he battered my face with the right. "Looks like this Frenchman don't got much of a fight in him... what a surprise."

The guards arrived half a second before I blacked out. Screaming forms of blue and gray, they flowed around us, enveloping our pitiful trio with a cacophony of shouts. By the time Khaskovo was pulled off of me, I was sure I was going to look like the elephant man next time I looked into a mirror. The pain told me that much at least. I felt as if my face had played chicken with a bus, and lost.

Khaskovo was still swearing as they escorted him back to his cell. I didn't watch him long though, mainly because there was too much blood in my eyes, but also because the Listener was up and walking. He was still stone faced, ambient with a glistening yellow bruise slowly making its presence on his cheek. It'd turn purple or black soon. That was obvious.

But, it was what he did after that, I remember so distinctly, as wrecked as I was. He looked me in the eye, with those grey orbs of his, and nodded. Just like he had to Khaskovo, but a little deeper with the chin, a little more apparent. It was chilling. I don't know why. I couldn't tell you why if I tried, yet it was. But, when I was escorted back to my cell I felt oddly content. I was a hero after all; Granted, somewhat of a useless and bloodied one, but a hero nonetheless.

I also, as probably any prisoner would, thought that would be the most interesting thing that would ever happen to me after this. Of course, since I knew I'd never leave this prison, and I knew I'd probably never tackle a two hundred pound Russian to the ground again... that it was probably a safe bet.

I was wrong. That was the night Khaskovo disappeared from his cell.

We all found out about it at lunch, in the food court. Anatoly had all of

the digs. The Ukrainian rapist had a cell right across from the Russian.

The details weren't all that clear. But, apparently, that night, right after Khaskovo was dragged back into his cell, he went to sleep. Lights out was at nine. Then come morning, the Russian was gone, simply vanished from his cell. Nothing was out of place. His door wasn't busted open. His bunk was even made. His cell mate, who slept on the bottom bunk, said he heard nothing from the Russian after he went to sleep. Obviously, the guards didn't trust him too much on that. How can someone as big and as loud as Khaskovo simply disappear without someone noticing. Had he escaped? Had the bunkmate been covering for him?

Some people thought so. I don't really know what I thought at that point.

The weirdest part was that the only thing that was out of place in the entire cell was the mirror. The little square of reflective stainless steel hooked right up above the sinks. Buffed and beaten, the mirror would show you your reflection about as quick as it'd show you a lottery number. But, it was missing, not shattered, not broken; it was just gone... along with Khaskovo.

A mirror, a simple mirror, and a missing convict. Sounds great for some kind of horror story, doesn't it? Well, it was. It was the beginning of one. I'll tell you that.

In all honesty, at that point, I think basically everyone only considered the fact that Khaskovo had somehow escaped, probably using his ignorant mind to fashion a teleporter to the Canary Islands. No one ever really considered it was a murder, a killing. How could it be? I mean he was in a prison; whoever killed him obviously would have a pretty fucking hard time getting rid of the body. Not to mention it's hard to believe Khaskovo wouldn't have put up a fight, a bloody one.

So when the guards put up a search for Khaskovo, scouring the outlying fields and villages, whipping track dogs into a frenzy, and overall jacking the media into hypertensive hysteria... everyone thought that Khaskovo's flight would be short lived.

But, then a month passed, and another, and still no Khaskovo. "Not a hint, not a whiff." Is what the guards said. Nothing.

That was when the Listener caught the public eye again. I don't really know why, I don't really know how. But, stories started surfacing from the inmates in his cellblock... a lot of them.

The stories never quite correlated, but they all agreed on one thing. Whistling, it always started with whistling they said. There were no notes, there was no rhythm. It was a noise without correction. It was a noise

without function. It was sharp and yet it was subdued, cutting down along the cells as if it was carried by legs and feet... not air. No one exactly described the noise the same, no one could precisely tell me what it was reminiscent of. They only said it was unnatural.

The Listener was the culprit, they said. The noise came from his cell, they said. But, it wasn't the only noise either. Anatoly Verden, who had the cell opposite the Listener, often said he could see movement through the pockets of glass at the top right of the prison's steel and polymer doors. Flashes of movement, he'd say, 'like someone was wrestling around in there.' Other times, other times he heard voices. Faint whispers, their breaths barely escaping the steel of the door.

"It sounds like an orchestra in there some times. Like a hundred people are crammed up in that cell, all trying to talk and scream at the same time. Only they don't ever seem to be saying anything. Their voices just sound scared, real scared... breathless and terrified would describe it pretty well, like they're so scared they can't quite get out what they have to say" Anatoly had told me once in the food court.

But, even that wasn't all of the weird accordance revolving around Cell C17. The guards started to be up in arms around February; someone was getting out of their cell at night... someone was wandering the prison hallways. No one knew how, no one knew why, but the cameras were showing him.

"Hidden in the shadows," the guards would say in paranoid voices. "We don't get it. Whoever the bugger is, he don't head for any exits, and he don't try to escape. He just wanders; he just wanders down through the halls between cellblocks. And somehow, somehow the bastard avoids our cameras. We catch him on them, sure, but his face, his face is always hidden."

So with these new problems, these new events, Baranov eventually let the Khaskovo incident fade into the mists of memory. That was, until it happened again.

They found the cell empty just like before. Perfect, pristine even. Bed made, toilet scrubbed, the white brick of the walls immaculate, even the books balanced on the back of his toilet tank were in alphabetical order. Yet Dmitri Esefer was nowhere to be found. He was gone... along with his sink's mirror.

An older prisoner, I hadn't known Esefer too well. He was one of the kinder ones, the ones with the defeated eyes. So in a way I guess I kinda liked the old guy, if only on a superficial level.

With the entire prison on high alert, this wanderer of the cells seemed

like the most likely culprit. Whether he helped Esefer escape, or he killed him... most guards and prisoners agreed he was involved somehow. Was the Listener suspect by this point? A little, but only by his nearby cell mates, the ones that could hear the voices in his cell. At this point the Listener was still largely off the radar.

That was in February though, and when only prisoners had simply vanished into thin air. In March however, March was when Baranov started losing guards.

Mr. Kazimir was assigned to our Cellblock, Cellblock C, on March second. The guards switched night shifts on a weekly rotation and Kazimir was one of us prisoners' favorites. With a sharp widow's peak and an ever smiling face, he looked like he could be your long lost pal, always ready to give someone a hug. Only Kazimir didn't give many hugs, what he did give us were smokes, smokes and some even more... adventurous drugs.

It was like pizza Monday at an elementary school when we heard Kazimir had the night shift. Smokes, crude jokes, and overall ill-supervision are about the best thing you can hope for in a Russian prison... hell in any prison. Kazimir gave us all that, and of course a little more.

But, that night on the second, he wasn't quite himself. When he reached my cell his uniform was sweated through and his hair was a ragged mess of porous sweat. His eyes were that of a trapped animal. He still smiled at me though; I remember that, he still smiled.

"Hey, Metz," He had said in a whickering husk of a voice. An unopened set of cigarettes materialized from his blue collared sleeve. I snatched it right through the bars, maybe a little too greedily. "How you been?" He had asked seconds later, after a lingering moment of silence in an increasingly darkening cellblock.

"Well, Mate, I'm in prison. I can't say I'm having the time of my life. But, things could be worse." I had an undying love of rhetoric in my twenties, something that faded quickly after I left that prison. "How's the glamorous life of a guard?" I'd then asked offhandedly, expecting a response in the nature I had given.

"You see that?" Kazimir had suddenly muttered, turning his back to me and peering down the long line of cells, all of which were shrouded in a thick coating of darkness. I glanced past him, still somewhat expecting a joke, and saw nothing but air and cell doors. "Never mind. Sorry, my nerves are just a little shot."

"Why would that be? I'd switch suits with you if you think that would calm you down. After all, I think orange suits you better than that blue."

"Metz, you were there when we hauled Khaskovo away from Cold

Eyes, right?"

"I was the one you boys hauled him off of."

"Yeah, right. Well, did you notice, did you notice how Cold Eyes had licked those fingers of his? How he touched them to Khaskovo's head?" I did remember just that, but hadn't thought much of it. The Listener was queer there was no question... but it seemed like an isolated occurrence. My nod of agreement was all I needed to do to set the guard off.

"He did it to me today. This morning, when me and Fitz were taking him to the showers, he pressed his fingers to his lips then just tapped me on the forehead with them. It was fucked up." Again, Kazimir glanced over his shoulder. His blue eyes seemed detached and distant, as if he was looking into something's eyes... the shadow's eyes.

"So what? Wet fingers aren't going to kill you." As disconcerting as this all was, I was losing patience fast. There was some part of me that related with the Listener, some part of me that didn't mind him all that much. I didn't like these accusations.

"Seems like they killed Khaskovo and Esefer,"

"What do you mean Esefer? He's not even in our cellblock."

"Out in the court yard, two weeks back. I saw him, Cold Eyes, touch Esefer's old wrinkly forehead. Just for a second, for the blink of an eye. Esefer gave him a good push afterwards, and some cussing, but that was the night he disappeared."

"Don't you guards think they escaped?"

"How would they have, Metz? There's no way you can escape this place... not without leaving something. A hole in the wall, an open cell, someone who helped them out. But, nothing from no one. They're just gone. Even if they had managed to pull a fucking Houdini, we haven't heard a whisper or a peep from outside the walls. Something happened to them... something not right." For the third time Kazimir glanced over his shoulder. This time whatever he was looking at, whatever was in the shadow, seemed closer. He barely needed to turn his head.

"Relax, Mate, relax. Even if the Listener did something to those pricks, not even he is insane enough to try and mess with a guard. Besides, what possibly could the man have against you?"

Kazimir's eyes shot back to my own. The intensity behind them was something new to me, something alien. Sweat was trailing down his cheeks and the veins popping out of the side of his neck didn't look too calming. "That thing has never spoken to anyone in this entire god damn prison. It just sits there, it just stares at you. It always stares... it always stares."

"Look, Kazimir," I would have used the guard's first name, but I'd

never taken the interest in learning it. “Go back to the camera room. Seems like you might have drank a little too much coffee. Try to take a nap.” And yes, I am totally aware of the irony of a prisoner not only consoling a guard, but also suggesting he take a nap. This is not lost on me.

“Alright, maybe you’re right.”

“I am.” With that Kazimir retreated down the hallway. The foot falls of his shoes were the last thing I heard of him that night.

The next day, when the next guards took their shift and their coffee into the camera room, Kazimir was nowhere to be found. He was gone, vanished into thin air.

That was when shit got weird.

The guards went on high alert. Whoever was on the cameras now was considered the murderer. And worse, well, worse for the guards at least, he was a guard killer. No one knew where the bodies were, no one needed to. They all seemed to know that if a guard disappeared, in all probability it wasn’t an escape attempt.

Cell doors were locked three hours earlier. Cross cellblock contact was nonexistent. Guards moved through the hallways with 47’s or 107’s. No one could piss without two guards helping them. A full investigation was now being put into these three so called “murders.”

Baranov had a way with questioning its prisoners... especially about crimes against guards... and this way generally involved two highly charged wires and a nice bucket of water. Thankfully, being international prisoners, me and the Ukrainian prisoners avoided this. But, our Russian contemporaries took the rod where we could not.

Yet, even then, the wanderer of the halls persisted. The cameras caught him every night, the guards said. In one cellblock or another, he erupted from the shadows to pace the halls where no guards were present. This caused some prison renovation by the guards, when they became convinced this murderer was hiding in the walls. That turned up nothing.

Then came April and with it came the wanderer to our cellblock. It was late at night yet again; about an hour from the time I had spoken to Kazimir only a month before. The lights were out, the cameras were churning back and forth—and there were no guards to be seen.

And then came the whistling.

High noted and heavy throated, it sang down through the darkness of our cellblock like an unwanted song bird. I literally felt the tension caught up between me and the other cellblock mates still awake. The clack of shoes soon followed in line to this now growing orchestra of noise. It was coming down from the upper cellblock, descending one of the steel staircases to our

1st floor. And from my cell I saw the wanderer cross through the shadows, right beyond my ability to see his face, his whistle slowly growing louder all the while as he stepped closer and closer to our cells.

And then, suddenly, there was only silence as the wanderer cut off this whistle... his ghostly whistle. The night drank that silence up with a sanguine thirst as we all stared out on this orange suited figure, standing tall and dark in the farthest corner of the block. The figure, for its part, stared back.

We stood there, watching this shade, for more time than I can remember. Time ceased to exist really, replaced by a limbo of darkness and tension. This figure, so calm and so slim, hid far away from our view, a wisping shadow in our ever eroding minds.

Finally, from the shadow, the figure shifted. Its arm drifted up and stretched out towards the cells. Its hand twisted into a hook, at the end of which a single bent finger pointed towards a cell three cells down from my own.

There was a shriek then, I remember that. From whom I can't be certain. But, I tell you this, it sounded not in the least human. It was a sound that on its peripheries could be identified as human; it sounded like a man's scream, full of fear and full of rage. Yet at its pitch, at its core, there was something else. There was something not quite right, something not natural.

I passed out soon after. I think a lot of us did.

When I awoke, I awoke to an upturned world. Guards were everywhere. I was in my cell. Outside, in the hallway, blue coats were scurrying and screening through the entire cellblock. My mouth was dry and a dull throbbing ran through the length of my entire body.

"He was here just minutes ago." Someone was saying outside.

"Damnit, Petrov isn't in his cell either."

"Where the fuck is Boris?"

"Half the Cellblock is missing!" The guards' faces were white, ivory white. They looked as if they'd just seen a ghost... and the ghost had promptly stuffed their balls into a salad shooter. They darted around the cellblock in droves, armed with their rifles, as if they were worried something was going to snatch them up in the blink of an eye.

"We need to lock down the prison. I don't want anything entering or leaving Baranov until I say it." That was Vasily, captain of the guard.

"Sir!" Some guard shouted down from the second floor. "The mirrors, the mirrors in the prisoners' cells, they are gone. All of them, they're just gone."

"We have more than a dozen prisoners out of their cells, Andrei and

you want me to be worried about their mirrors? Note it and book it. We have bigger problems at the moment.” Vasily was red faced by that point, making him a red tinted boar in a pack of white skinned hares.

The rest of the day was a haze of questioning and accusations. Those of us who were left in Cellblock C, which was about half of its original occupants, were heavily scrutinized. But, all we had to offer was already on the cameras, and anything else only served to incriminate us further. I said what I saw, nothing more or less. The Listener, who was one of the few that remained in Cellblock C, said nothing at all.

After that day though, after that day, little was the same in Baranov. The media had little less than a whiff of what had occurred... because no prison wanted to say it had literally ‘lost’ a tenth of its prison population.

Yet even as the spring mists fell into the forest and valley around Baranov, bodies still disappeared. Living bodies, breathing and seeing bodies, they vanished, into air... into mist... into the void. It was then that the guards started to suspect the Listener for the disappearances.

Only they suspected him in whispers, in short and brief breaths and rolls of the tongues did they whisper of the man. They never looked into his eyes, those ashen eyes. They only spoke and whispered, they only glanced and tread around him like he stood in the center of shattered ice.

I wasn’t sure what was happening in our quaint little Baranov by that point. I’ve never been the supernatural type, and even though I knew it wasn’t logical, I always held to the belief that somehow... some way the prisoners were escaping, even after what I saw.

Then came June and with it my life would change forever. My extradition was finally coming into effect. Some international official had finally pulled his head from a deeply incaved ass, and had finally managed to get my papers in line. I was going home... in chains, to accept another set of chains, but home nonetheless. It’s hard to describe, leaving for a prison and actually feeling like you’re getting a promotion to some ritzy job. But, that’s how I felt nonetheless.

On the day I was to leave, the guards marched me into the “No Go” room. The No Go room is actually the customs check, a small glass square where a prisoner is checked up and down before entering or exiting Baranov; and yes it usually involves stripping down to your skivvies.

Another prisoner was there that day. I think you can guess who.

The Listener sat cool and collected at the side of one of the waiting room couches. His thin wrists were hidden in the sleeves of his orange jumpsuit. He eyed me emotionlessly, wordlessly, as I stepped up to give my information to the customs clerk. I could smell whatever cologne he was

wearing as I did. It occurred to me later, though not then, that it was odd he was wearing cologne. It was odd he was at the customs check at all.

“He’s being transferred to Pyatak up north. I don’t know who gave the order, but I can’t say I’ll be missing him,” the wiry guard clerk had said upon my asking about the Listener. She didn’t look all too pleased to be in the same room with him, or all that calm either. “Let’s see how he handles the Fire Island,” she had muttered as she slipped me my papers from under the counter barrier.

“Oh, and I believe you have a package. We didn’t bother checking it; after all, you’re the French’s problem now.” The girl pulled a slim cardboard box out from behind the counter and slipped it through. I checked its sides, finding no return address.

“I don’t know if that’s exactly legal,” I had said laughing. After a pause, I’d added. “Do you know who it is from?”

“The fuck I should know. It’s only my problem if it explodes when you open it.”

The box opened quite smoothly, only taped at each corner. I managed to pry it open with only a couple pricks of my fingers. A calm open space of air greeted me as I looked down to see the majority of the box was empty. Only at the bottom was there something... something reflective.

Slightly worried someone like my alcoholic cousin had sent me a shank or a gun, I reached down to try and feel whatever I’d received before pulling it out for all to see. What I touched was as cold as ice, smooth and polished, it felt of steel.

With a knot forming in my throat, I slowly edged it up from the depths of the long little box. It was a mirror... one of the prison mirrors, stainless steel polished to a fault. I could even see the holes around its overtly dull edges where it had been drilled into the prison wall.

It had been taken from one of the cells in Baranov.

The hairs on the back of my neck decided to take a stand then, and a chill waltzed into my unprepared body as I looked at my own reflection in this subdued lighting. “You alright, Metz?” The clerk had asked. Her voice actually filled with concern.

Then, just as I looked down at this mirror, this mysterious mirror, an idea came into my head. A cold and cruel idea, it was a terrible, terrifying prospect. One of which I will always regret. I knew then who had sent me that mirror... and I knew why as well.

With the slightest movement of my wrist, I pulled the mirror from the case and lifted it inches from my nose. In the tilted reflection I saw the Listener back in his seat, staring out of one of the barred windows in the

room. For a second I thought I was insane, that I was paranoid.

Then he turned his head back to me.

Eyes. Golden eyes. Dark burning eyes. Full of an insanity indescribably dark. They stared at me through that cloak of flesh and skin. Huge and wide and ever encompassing they stared at me with a hunger infinitely insatiable. They stared at me with a hunger infinitely immense... infinitely wanting.

And his mouth, for seconds it stayed the same; a small thing, with thin lips and a tight frown. But, then it changed, in the blink of an eye.

It smiled.

A big toothy smile, full of yellow teeth. Full of yellow and golden and spit rotten teeth entirely out of row and order, they filled that mouth to the brim, threatening to explode outward in a cloud soot and ash. Ever so slowly the smile widened. It spread along those old cheeks like a plague. Ripping through flesh, tearing through skin, it seemed to split his face in two. Blood swathed down the side of the Listener's cheeks as this sneer reached each of his ears. Still full of teeth, so full of teeth, his mouth was ever encompassing, ever gaping, ever frothing with wet anticipation. A black tongue slid out from that jungle of yellow and red, too thick for its own good, it flapped back and forth like a swollen slug.

I don't know what I saw in that reflection, I don't know what it was, I don't know why it was. I simply know that what it was, was not meant. It was not planned. It was something that had no right to exist in this world or any other. What it was, was an abomination.

Seconds later the mirror slipped from my hand and smashed to the tile floor. The spell that was over me broke and I turned... to find the Listener staring at me with ashen eyes and a tight lipped frown. Silent as ever, he looked as human as ever. Just a man... just a thing under the flesh of a man.

"What the hell?" The clerk yelled as she rematerialized from behind the counter. "What the fuck is that?" She pointed at the mirror lying at my feet.

"Its... it's a mirror. Sorry, sorry I dropped it." Was all I could manage to say as I stared into the Listener's empty eyes.

"Well, stuff it back into the box, you know mirrors aren't allowed. I could lose my job for them finding you with that..."

I didn't hear anything else the officer had to say, I was too focused on the Listener.

It, the Listener, looked as it always had. It looked like a man. And after a minute of me surveying it, the Listener did something I did not expect. A wink, ash grey and as fast as a bullet, the Listener winked at me. It didn't

smile. It didn't laugh... it only winked, it only gave me that fraction of a second to show me that it knew what I saw and that it wanted me to see.

I don't know what kind of monster I left behind when I left those gray walls of Baranov. I don't know where it came from, or how it came to be. I don't know what it did to those prisoners. I don't know how many prisons it stalked before it arrived at mine. I don't know what it wants or why it wants it.

But, I do know that what it had was hunger... insatiable hunger, in those eyes and in that mouth. I do know that it was eternal, that it would never stop doing what it did in those prisons. It was a prison walker, traveling, crossing through each prison after the next.

And I do know that the Listener is always watching, always listening... always waiting.

MALL OF THE ORANGE KING

by Tone Milazzo

I didn't see the Locals waiting for me on the lakeshore, those who lived up here before everything went south. I'm bad at names so I think of them as Furious, Eddie Bauer and Mustache. Furious is always huffing and puffing, Eddie Bauer in rugged clothing that's never spent a night in the woods and Mustache has a mustache.

Qui and I were the last of the "tourists", the ones who escaped from the carnage below. The rest had all moved on to other parts seeking family.

I'd tossed my copy of *A Short History of WWII* out of the boat when Furious said, "Now throw them fish over and shove off, kid."

Furious and Eddie Bauer had shotguns, Mustache had his mustache, but all of them were soft. They hadn't killed anyone. I had.

I didn't drop the fish. Five mutation-free trout were too good a haul to give up without a fight or at least a debate. "Wow. I didn't expect to get robbed again now that money's worthless. What happened to our fish for oranges deal?"

"We haven't got the oranges to spare anymore. Besides, this is our lake and those are our fish. You and your kind have no right to be here." Furious pointed his shotgun at me. A shaky Eddie Bauer followed his lead.

"My kind? Are you being racist or classist?"

"What are you talking about... racist? Just because your little tomboy friend is Oriental?"

"Asian-American, please. And I'm Latino, can't you tell? But don't ask me to speak Spanish, I failed that class. As for Qui, she's no tomboy. She's sugar and spice and everything nice," I smirked. "Guns are nice, aren't they, Qui?"

"Guns are very nice," Qui said from the ridge above. I'd seen the brim of her hat and rifle barrel take position while I'd bantered with Furious.

Furious and Eddie Bauer swung around as I grabbed both shotguns by the barrels and held Eddie's pointed at Furious and Furious' pointed at Eddie.

"Wow!" I smiled, big and broad. "Check me out! Now whatcha guys gonna do? You're gonna let go, that's what, before I do the Hand Jive and

fill you both with holes."

They let go and I stepped back. I kept Furious' shotgun and casually tossed Eddie Bauer's over my shoulder and into the boat. Eddie's shotgun hit the hull and fired. Boom!

"Sorry! Sorry!" I apologized to everyone.

The Locals and I were hunched over like question marks. I'd lost all that awesomeness but I still had a shotgun and I still had Qui, who gave me an embarrassed shake of the head.

I shrugged and told the men, "Now get lost."

Furious didn't like that. "What about our guns?"

Qui said, "We're going to rig them up so they shoot bubbles. That's more your level."

The Locals shuffled off back to their vacation homes while I pulled the boat in.

"David, we're going into town."

I stepped back into the boat.

"David, come back here." She slung her rifle, as if that would put me at ease. "The Locals are getting restless and they outnumber us. Our days here are numbered, better to leave on our terms."

"No. I'm not going to go back down there." I pushed off with an oar. "I'll stay here in my boat. I like it here."

She slid down the ridge to the shore, her ninety pounds barely leaving a skid in the dirt. "It's been three months, aren't you curious about what's down there now?"

"Red. Red is what's down there, red blood on the streets and the red skin of the maniacs, but thanks for asking."

She pushed her wide-brimmed hat back and for a moment almost looked like a harmless, All Asian-American girl. But I knew better, I've seen her cut down five Reds with six shots before I could lift my machete.

"You can't stay in the boat forever."

"I beg to differ."

"And you owe me. I'm calling that in."

"Sure, play the I-saved-your-life card." I held up the day's catch. "Can I pay you back in fish?"

As we walked back to our camper I grew resigned. Like it or not we were going back to El Cajon. What happened to my old job at the gas station? Was my cashier's hut still there? The little cube of bulletproof glass between the pumps where I'd hid through the worst of the carnage. Living

off Slim Jims and Snickers bars, so constipated I didn't have to leave for three days. Listening to the radio as the newsmen and I tried to figure out what was going on. Their media clichés didn't hold up; terrorist attacks, biological weapons and political blame.

But neither did my zombie clichés. No space virus, no rage virus, no cannibalism. They didn't convert, they killed. One morning a big chunk of the population woke up as cold-blooded, red-skinned murderers.

Once we fought our way up here we were okay, back when the Tourists and the Locals got along. The power lasted for a week. Distant radio stations lasted ten days more, broadcasting madness; Detroit was covered in darkness day and night, packs of wolf-men rampaging across the Dakotas, apes on flying boats patrolled the Northeast, hunting people with harpoons and other bits and pieces of nightmares taken life. It all sounded too crazy to believe, until we saw a blue whale fly overhead, orbited by a dozen blue fireballs.

Impossible was the new norm.

"Tomorrow morning then? Should we tell the Locals?" My last pathetic little attempt to stall.

She shook her head and turned in for the night. Qui and I shared a camper we'd salvaged on our way up here. She was short enough to sleep in the cab leaving the whole back end to me because I snore.

I spent the night alone by the campfire, already missing the good days in our little home in the mountains.

I'm bad with guns and Qui thought shotguns were sloppy so we left them in a plastic bag. The Locals will need them if the Reds wander up this way. They were jerks but this world has worse to offer.

As we drove the camper down the road, past the last turn, we saw the El Cajon skyline for the first time in months. The blue, slanted roof of the Best Buy rose above the dusty skyline and I caught myself wondering what this week's new releases were, as if we were returning from a vacation, not salvation.

I'd dealt with the end of the world better than most. I never knew my parents; raised by a great aunt, distant by relation and distant in emotion. Few friends, none of them close. I'd never had much stuff either, my DVDs and my job, small loss that. I'd had nothing. Qui lost everything.

She'd been a state gymnastics champion and a biological engineering major at UCSD. There was a shelf full of trophies somewhere with her name on them. None of that mattered anymore.

And she had family...

"Say, Qui," I steered the camper around another wrecked car. "What were you doing in El Cajon? Isn't that a long ways from UCSD?"

"I'm from El Cajon. I was with my family when everything went crazy."

"That's the real reason we're coming down here, isn't it?"

"Is there a better reason? I didn't lie to you, David. We are doing reconnaissance and salvage. Those are our priorities. But I have questions and the answers are down here."

"I don't know why you waited so long to move. Not knowing if they were alive or dead all this time."

"That's not the only question."

Once we took a closer look at the destruction, personal illusions were shattered... a burned out building here, a woman's body, a Red's body, a child's body there... and there. I closed my eyes and told myself to stop seeing the people I made change for at the gas station. Convincing myself they were piles of clothes no one wanted, nothing to vomit over.

El Cajon never felt so empty. Survivors ran for the hills, desert or ocean and hadn't come back. We stood and stared. Qui was as reluctant to get a closer look as I was.

"You know what would be good to have?" she asked, "Binoculars. So we could scan an area for Reds before we move on."

I nodded. "And... we could stay further away from the smell, 'cause this is going to be foul."

"That, too."

Every couple of blocks the road would be choked up with abandoned cars stuck behind wrecks and ditched by drivers in a panic to get out. Navigating the mess was becoming a problem and we decided to advance on foot. If trouble popped up, Qui had a better chance of shooting it down on foot than from the passenger seat.

"We'd be making good time if we had bikes," I climbed over another wreck.

"Put it on the shopping list."

"If the list keeps growing like this we'll need a truck to carry it... the list that is, not the things on it. Maybe we'll find a monster truck. That'll be perfect for coming back up over all these cars." I broke out in my TV voice,

"Sunday! Sunday! Sunday! We're comin' at ya!"

Qui slapped a hand over my mouth and pushed me against a delivery truck. She was half my size but almost twice as strong.

She stared intensely into my eyes, then looked ahead. I followed her gaze to a Red, naked, legless and tied with some rope to a telephone pole. His bald head and wrists were bound with leather belts like a crucifixion. Tendons and empty veins dangled out the ends of his ruined stumps, gently drifting in the wind.

I found this Red far more frightening than ones on foot. I slid down and around the side of the truck.

Qui dropped with me and un-slung her rifle, whispering, "I can take it from here."

I put a hand over the sight to stop her. "What if that's what you're supposed to do?"

She didn't get it.

"No cars, no people, no background noise. You'd be firing the shot heard 'round the county."

"Damn, you're right. I don't know where we'd get a silencer but that's going on the list. Looks like this one's yours, David."

I nodded with grim determination. Fake grim determination. "Let's talk about that."

"All I have are my guns."

"God, that thing's ugly. Were they always that ugly? What do you think?"

"I think whoever or whatever put that up there, for whatever reason, it wasn't good intentions. The way its head's propped up like that makes me think it's a lookout. If we make ourselves visible it'll scream, if I shoot it, same effect."

"Okay. I'll do it. Give me a moment to crap my pants."

We crept up the road among the dead cars and around the bodies, past the bend in the road to higher ground. Checking telephone poles and other high points as we went, the legless Red was alone, hopefully. So we descended, back down through some trees, into a strip mall parking lot behind the Red.

Qui with her snub-nosed revolver. Me with Spanky in hand, the machete that is. Every step on the old asphalt sounded like a bus crashing through a window. My legs started to wobble and I had to stop and breathe.

Qui nudged me with an elbow and an urgent look. That helped me get

it together. Had I lost my edge up by the lake? I taken out a half-dozen of these things before. Now a lone, crippled Red had me shaking?

I gulped air, took aim at the rope, stopped thinking about the other side of the pole and whacked the rope with Spanky.

The Red hung by the belts around its forehead and wrists for a second before it slipped out and dropped, hitting the earth with a little slapping sound. The torso fell forward. I'd brought Spanky down on its neck with both hands before it moved and hit a sweet spot in between the neck bones. The head came off in a single, bloodless cut.

I felt relieved, relaxed and I had to pee so I ducked behind a minivan for relief.

When I came back Qui had pulled on pair of latex gloves and was cutting away at the Red's head with a knife. She had the top half of its face peeled off.

"You used to take the heads off your Barbie dolls as a kid, didn't you?" I asked.

Qui pulled the rest of the scalp off, dropped the skull on the street and cracked it open with a rock. "Barbie dolls are for girls."

Blood or no blood, I turned away, pretending to be on the lookout for any Reds that might have heard that sickening crack. I ignored the crunching and snapping as Qui dug around inside the thing's brains until she said, "Now that's different."

Qui held the brain up so I could see the strange marking on the frontal lobe, a bisected circle surrounded by a semicircle with a few lines and serifs here and there.

"Tribal brain tattoos, I knew they'd be the end of civilization."

"Don't be facetious. This is significant. This body is free of fluids, fatty layers and hair. Maybe there could have been a biological explanation for that but this symbol is precise." She put the brain down and peeled off the gloves. "Whatever made the Reds was unnatural and probably deliberate."

While she copied the symbol in her notebook, I bent down to take a closer look. "You know there's a metallic shine to this ink, paint, whatever. Maybe it's some kind of antenna. Could these things be telepathic? I sure hope not."

"Telepathic?" For the first time ever, Qui looked surprised and a little scared.

"Yeah, that's when two people can talk with their minds not their-"

"I know what telepathic means!" She stuffed her notebook and pen in her bag and hacked at the brain until it was jelly.

"Qui. Qui! I'm probably wrong here."

"We can't take that chance. We know so little about the Reds we should always assume the worst. Let's go."

Hours into town, we hadn't seen signs of any Reds, telepathic or not, and could relax a bit. But we hadn't seen any salvageable goods either.

Like a lot of desert communities, El Cajon was a vast plane of one story brick or stucco buildings, often painted beige like some kind of desert camouflage, compounded by all the dull, dirty windows.

Any place we thought to loot, someone else thought of first. Like the Gun Exchange or Home Depot. Currently we were in Hiram's Guns & Spirits which had been picked clean of both. I had an idea as I stepped over a spilled rack of porno mags. "Qui. We should check out the Unarians!"

"Who?"

"The Unarians. El Cajon's homegrown religion."

"You mean the flying saucer people on public access?"

"They're on YouTube now. Well, I guess they were on YouTube. Anyway, I'm sure they opened their 'cosmic window' and got out of here."

"Get serious."

"What? You were onboard with my telepathic zombies, but you draw the line at cosmic windows?"

We kept searching, walking north. Clouds of ash kicked up as we crossed a wide swath of ruin and burned out churches. A fire had come through El Cajon taking out about a half-mile strip, leaving behind gray ash and the skeletons of buildings, cars and people. This must be what Dresden looked like after the Allied firebombing. The mall was intact on the other side of the ruin and the highway. The I-8 had blocked the fire.

Survivors or supplies, we were bound to find something in the Parkway Mall. I'd learned that from Dawn of the Dead. But no buses blocked the entrances nor were there mobs of Reds trying to press their way in. Maybe I was the only survivor who'd seen that movie. Despite the colorful signage of all the usual chain stores, the mall looked as empty and wrecked as the rest of El Cajon.

Qui covered me as I went into the mall. It was a wreck. Partially looted goods spilled out of every shop into the dull light from the skylights. The double-decker merry-go-round was about the only thing left whole.

When I saw the scruffy little guy in the bathrobe and pajama pants in the mall I froze, overwhelmed by incongruity. The two of us had spent all day in this ghost town of ruin and death. Not one soul to see, except that

legless Red on the pole, and soul probably didn't apply there. This little guy was barefoot, unshaven and eating out of a jar with a spoon, like he was wandering outside his house on a lazy Sunday morning.

He was surprised to see me too, the spoon hung in his mouth while his eyes went to my hand, which had moved to the machete. So I put my hands up and open in the universal sign for *I have no immediate plans to kill you* and the guy in the robe relaxed enough to swallow.

"Ah man," his voice cracked, "I ain't run into a real live person in so long. I was sure I was seein' things." He dropped the spoon in the jar and held out his hand. "My name's Todd, man."

"Todd, I'm David. And..." I almost introduced Qui who was hiding behind me but thought better of it. She'll be my ace if this goes bad. "...I haven't seen anybody down here all day. How the hell are you getting by?"

"Peanut butter and jelly mostly. This is peanut butter. The bread and the milk all went bad weeks ago but I still find cans of stuff every here and there. Where'd you come from?"

I ignored his question. "What about the Living Reds? Where'd they all go?"

He smiled. "'The Living Reds'? I like that. Night of the Living Red." He made the monster arms, "Grrr. I guess they kinda seem like zombies don't they?"

"They're still out there. But they've moved on. A dozen or so come through every couple of days but I think their leader brought most of them into San Diego to be closer to him."

"Leader? They have a leader?"

"Oh yeah. The Orange King. He comes though with a big patrol, twice that I've seen. Can't miss 'im. Where have you been that you haven't seen this?"

I was about to tell him but Qui stepped out of the shadows and said, "Mexico." Her rifle held across her waist as she walked closer. "We thought maybe the border fence would keep them back."

Todd smirked, like she'd said something stupid. "Well, did it?"

"Not one bit. So we came back up here where we can read the labels."

"Desert, mountains, maybe Camp Pendleton. Natural borders probably keep them back, but who wants to live in the desert without AC? How long before the water cuts out? Naw. The Orange King's gonna stay in the city. Even after the end of the world that's where the action is." He stared off in the distance, idly scratching his chest. I was about to snap my fingers to bring him back to the conversation but he tuned back on his own. "I know that for a fact." He smiled, smug. "I'm his only neighbor, which makes me

the expert."

The first survivor we ran into was a know-it-all bore. Well, I was this team's know-it-all bore and there wasn't room for another. But since he was willing to talk I thought I'd better question him while I could still stand him.

"Why does he call himself the Orange King?"

Todd did the same palm-out, hand-shake thing I do when someone mishears me. "I don't know what he calls himself. He's always wearing an orange jumpsuit like an escaped convict or something. I guess he likes the color 'cause he has his Reds carrying him around on a big, orange chair."

"You mean a litter?"

Todd looked like I was picking a fight. "I don't know what the fuck it's called. I know it's big and orange and I can see it coming a mile away. That keeps me alive."

Qui said, "So the king of the zombies is a chair-riding weirdo? Do I look surprised? Because I am."

"They ain't zombies." Todd said to her like she was a child. Qui got that a lot because of her size. She didn't like it, but Todd didn't seem to care. "They're... something else."

"I opened one up," said Qui. "If they aren't dead, or undead, they're not alive either. Not in any way that makes sense."

"Then they're something that doesn't make sense. Did you not see that flying whale? Shit's insane these days. Lady Reason left the building. She felt unappreciated. They treated the oceans as a buffet and a sewer. Money was printed on good intentions and fairy tales. Reason was used against reason, so she abandoned mankind. Now we gotta live in what's left.

"That is..." He eyed Qui's rifle, "...unless you want to take a stand."

Qui turned putting her body between her rifle and Todd. "What are you suggesting?"

"I'm suggesting a little point-n-shoot. I point and you shoot at the Orange King, payback for humanity."

Qui looked to me, I wasn't sure what to say, "I didn't wake up this morning expecting to commit regicide, but there are few days that I do."

The gears inside Qui's head were turning but I couldn't tell which way. "Why don't we have a little talk, Qui?"

We looked at Todd and he smiled like he wanted to say something but didn't. Instead he waved and stepped back while Qui and I walked a discrete distance away. Voices could echo inside the empty mall so we whispered.

"You don't trust this guy do you? He gives me that, crazy-guy-at-the-bus stop kinda vibe. Let's give him a dollar, he'll probably go away."

"Of course I don't trust him. I also don't want him sneaking up on us later. We should keep an eye on him until we figure him out." She glared Todd's way without turning her head. He was looking in the Sport Scene window like he had nothing better to do.

"You're right. How the hell did a guy like that survive when so many others didn't? There's dumb luck, but luck runs out and Todd's still here. His secret might help keep us alive."

"Or maybe he's right and I can bring back a little bit of civilization by sniping this Orange King."

We walked back to Todd and told him we were in.

Agreeing with Todd's plan had won him over. He smiled broadly and said, "Wasn't that what the NRA was all about? Guns equal freedom. I took a few shots with a rifle once, couldn't hit anything. But you look like you can use that thing."

"Take us to the Orange King and we'll find out." Qui said. "But first, I have to go home."

We looted mountain bikes and a little food from the Wal-Mart. On wheels we made good time to Qui's parent's house.

If I hadn't been worried about an ambush by Reds, I would have waited outside while she dealt with her family business. Instead we searched the house for surprises. Well, Qui and I searched the house. Todd searched the kitchen and helped himself to a box of Nilla Wafers.

Qui's house was neat and clean, like they knew the apocalypse was coming and wanted to impress it. The décor was a weird mix of American old lady and fresh off the boat Asian with a white, frilly couch next to a black and gold lacquered end table.

While Qui was off doing what she came to do, I had to spend time in the living room with Todd. Awkward social situations were something I didn't miss about civilization. I kept checking the windows for Reds, it kept me busy and moving so that Todd couldn't come up behind me. He ate Nilla Wafers and watched me until, out of the blue, he said, "They still have those skulls in the Kaiser helmets?"

I cringed a bit and tried to hide it. "What?"

"You know, made outta plaster..." I didn't know. "In Tijuana... Didn't she say you were in Mexico."

"Oh yeah." He was talking about some of the crap they used to sell tourists at the border. "No, I didn't see any of them but the border's... kinda a mess", I stammered.

Clearly I was full of shit, but he didn't call me on it. My crappy lie hung in the air between us, better tell Qui that our cover was blown so we can ditch Todd before he does something dangerous.

I excused myself and found her sitting in one of the bedrooms, surrounded by sports trophies. I couldn't tell if they were hers or her big brother's. Every jock's bedroom looks the same.

She tried to wipe her eyes before I saw.

"Hey Qui, what are you doing?"

"Losing faith," she said with a sad smile. "I knew that my parents didn't make it. But I'd hoped that my brother did. But no one's been back here."

"Well, neither have you. Not until now."

She dried her eyes as she looked up at me. "I know there's still a chance, David, a good chance. It's just... It seems a lot less likely." She sighed and hopped off the bed. "Well, all I can do now is leave a note."

Todd stuck his face in the room. He probably heard the whole thing. I was glad I hadn't brought up my plans to leave him behind. "Hey kids, if we're all done strolling down memory lane, we have a king to kill."

Qui locked the front door behind her with a shrug. "Force of habit."

"If your camper's still where you said it was we can drive to San Diego before dinner. We should be free from tyranny by sundown," said Todd as he walked ahead.

I stopped, and grabbed Qui's sleeve. "Where are the bikes?"

"Where we left them." Todd turned and pointed across the street. They lay in a pile by a hedge.

"That's not where we left them." Qui drew her revolver, I pulled out Spanky.

Todd was incredulous, "Seriously? You think someone moved the bikes? What for?"

"We need to go and we need those bikes," I said to Qui, ignoring Todd. "If it's a trap, it's not very sophisticated."

Todd stuffed his hands in his pockets, impatient.

"Drawing us across the street and away from the house?" Qui suggested.

"That's what I figure too. But is it Reds? Why wouldn't they rush us like they always do?" I asked.

"Are you forgetting about this morning?" Qui reminded me.

"Why?" Todd interrupted. "What happened this morning?"

"Never mind," Qui and I told Todd in unison.

"Maybe it's not Reds," I suggested. "Maybe it's Mustache and Furious."

"Who's Mustache and Furious?" Dumbass-me kept slipping him information.

"I'll shut up now. Qui, what do you think?"

"We'll get Todd to bring them over here."

"Wait, what?" asked Todd, irritated. "You can get your own bikes."

"You said that's where we left them. You're the only one who doesn't smell a trap here. What's the problem?"

"The problem is I don't carry anyone else's shit for them. You want your bikes then you-" He slapped his hand over his mouth like he was going to puke and pointed behind us.

He'd caught Reds sneaking around the house, two on each side. Bald, ripped and shirtless like the one on the pole.

Qui fired at one on her side. Its left eye exploded and it dropped. The one behind it stumbled forward and she plugged that one through the top of its head, ending it too.

On my side, the first one came high, going for the choke. I put Spanky deep into its right pec and that arm went limp as the other hand caught my throat. I twisted to keep its thumb off my windpipe.

Qui squeezed a round off into the other Red while I hacked my Red's forearm to loosen its grip. I slipped out as Qui finished it off.

Through all that, Todd just stood there.

"Thanks for the help," I told him as we walked past him towards the bikes.

He shrugged. "What was I supposed to do? I don't have a weapon."

"So every time you see a Red you freeze? Is that your trick?"

"No-" was all Todd said before a Red busted through the hedge and pulled me down onto the bikes. A pedal jabbed me in the stomach, under my ribcage. The Red shook me, driving the pedal deeper into me.

Qui's revolver fired. She had five rounds in the rifle and now one in the revolver. If I weren't there for close quarter defense she'd be vulnerable.

Bang! She dropped the empty revolver by my head. "David, stop squirming! I can't get a shot."

"Sorry!" I grunted. No point in working the eyes, Reds don't feel pain, I grabbed a wrist with both hands and twisted away from my body, breaking its hold on me.

Bang! Four left in the rifle.

Finally, I managed to roll off that damn pedal as a deep rumble shook

me to my bones.

Bang!

I executed a sloppy wristlock, inspired by the three months of judo I took as a kid. It was a woman, small enough that I could shift and pin it with my knees, grab Qui's revolver and reload with the quick loader. Bang! Bang! One rifle round left.

I was handing the loaded revolver to Qui handle first when everything went dark and cool.

The Reds looked up.

I looked up.

The flying blue whale passed between the sun and us, maybe fifty feet off the ground. Its shadow illuminated by the light from its accompanying fireballs.

Qui hadn't looked up. She snatched the revolver from my hand, with three quick shots down the street and one in the head of the Red I had pinned. We were in the clear.

Meanwhile, Todd shielded his eyes and watched the whale drift away. "Save the whales, huh?" he chuckled.

Hours later we were on the 8, heading to the Fashion Valley Mall. Todd had followed the Orange King there once. The highway was mostly clear with clusters of cars congesting it at every onramp, not too different than before.

"Hey Todd," I called back from the passenger's seat. "You know who the Uniarian's are?"

"Were," he mumbled.

"No, the first church of UFOs, you know who they are?"

"Who they were," he snapped. "They're gone now. Don't know where but their building's gone. There's a big, black crystal in its place."

I looked at Qui. "Told ya they were on to something."

Qui rolled her eyes. She had a question of her own for Todd, "What do you think will happen to the Reds if- when we kill the Orange King?"

Todd stuck his head in the front. "Many bodies, one brain. I think they'll drop like rocks or drown in the next rain. Hey, that rhymed!"

"Well, we won't know for sure until it's done but there could be something bigger at work here. Remember I said I opened one up?"

"The one from the telephone pole?" asked Todd.

"Right," Qui shot me a knowing look. "There was something else about that Red, besides being dried out. There was a symbol on its

prefrontal cortex, inside the skull. I think this is beyond man and beyond your Orange King."

Todd sucked his teeth and looked like he smelled something he didn't like. "What'd this mark look like?"

I showed him the page from Qui's notebook and he brightened up like I'd shown him some good news. He chuckled. His mood swings made me nervous. "Don't worry about that. First we take out the Orange King and if we still have problems after that I'll deal with them then."

"We." I corrected. "We'll deal with them then."

"Yeah, whatever." Todd crawled back into the camper.

We stopped the camper in the Town and Country Convention Center. Across the creek they called the San Diego River was the Fashion Valley Mall. The plan was to proceed on foot to the trolley station. It was elevated so we could get a look into the mall or, if we were lucky, a sniper shot. But Qui's look told me we'd had a change of plans.

I gave Todd's nuts a quick introduction to my knee and Mister Smarter-than-thou crumbled.

"You probably saw that coming didn't you, brainiac?"

Todd rolled over, eyes filled with pain and surprise. "Why? What's wrong with you people?"

Qui took a stand by his head, pointing the revolver at him with both hands. "We never told you about the telephone pole. That's what's wrong."

Todd shot me an accusing glance. "He told me, back in your house. And- and you wanna know what else he told me? That he was sick of you moping about your brother all the time. People die and you should get over it."

While he lied I unclipped Spanky from my belt, thinking the sight of it would shut him up. "Trying to drive us apart is a waste of time. Qui and me, we're solid. A month of killing monsters together will do that." I tapped the ground between his legs with my machete. "You? You're just an Igor, a Renfield, a step we have to take to get to your big, bad boss."

He squirmed, his eyes were watering from the pain. "What now? You're going to kill me? You think because you killed a bunch of red skinned maniacs in self-defense you can kill a man in cold blood? Murder?"

"Not murder." Qui kicked Todd hard across the jaw, knocking him out. "Answers."

We had Todd taped to a chair in the middle of the pedestrian bridge crossing the river. "But why drag us all the way to San Diego with his bullshit Orange King story? If he's in with the Reds there must have been a dozen ways to ambush us from there to here."

"Psychopaths like to toy with people, David, to convince themselves they're superior."

Todd said, "And how do you guys feel superior? Cheap shots and duct tape?"

I said, "Morals. That's what makes us better than you. We may become executioners, but you're the mass murderer."

"No I'm not. I told you it's the Orange King, he's running the Reds. You wanna know why I brought you here? Same as I told you, to kill the Orange King. I never told you I've been working for him, because if you fail I didn't want you turning me in."

Qui leaned in, "So what do you do for the Orange King?"

"What the Reds can't. Contact, talk and assess. Sometimes he needs someone to get to know a group of survivors and-" Todd stopped talking, there was nothing he could say now.

"What happens to these survivors, Todd?" I asked. I already knew. I wanted to make him squirm.

"Hey, man, I'm trying to survive. Just like you! I'm tryin' to kill him! I'm one of the good guys!"

"Collaborator," Qui cocked her revolver.

"Todd, you've reminded me of the things they did to the Vichy government and you got me thinking that they didn't go far enough."

"Who?"

"In France... after World War II? What are you? Stupid?"

That made him angry, more angry than scared and he burned a look at Qui. "I can help you find your brother."

"What do you know about my brother?"

"Nothing, yet, but I could find out. If you let me go I promise to find out what happened to him, dead or Red. I'll leave a note at your house with what I learned. You'll never have to see me again."

Qui was considering his offer. I had to shoot some holes in it. "That note's gonna come with a dozen Reds waiting in ambush."

"Why would I do that? The Orange King doesn't care about ones and twos. He only cares about the big groups that might fight back someday."

"You promise?" I asked.

"Scout's honor."

"But you're a liar, Todd. That's the only sure thing we know about you. You've been lying to us all day." I turned to Qui. "Any information or promises we get out of him will be worthless. He's trying to stay alive."

"But what if I'm not?" He asked, smart-assed and contrary.

"You are."

"But what if I'm not?"

"Then what are you trying to do?"

"Stall."

Something heavy smashed on the mall-side of the bridge, an LCD TV, it split open in broken sheets of glass and plastic. I turned and stared dumb-faced, Reds were throwing junk at us from the trolley track above. Reds poured down the stairs, three climbing out of the murky river on the other shore.

Qui unslung her rifle and shot a Red off the trolley station before it chucked a PlayStation 3 at us and I charged the other side of the bridge. Spanky split the skull of the first Red. I kicked it into the second and while they fell back, took the head off the third while Qui opened fire on her side.

When I went to finish off the fallen Red it grabbed and pulled my knee. Spanky's handle hit the Red's face, my knee hit the bridge's deck and my head hit the railing.

Next thing I knew, I had the Red's neck cut in half, pushing Spanky into it with both hands.

My side was clear. I turned to support Qui and saw Todd, looking smug and triumphant, squirming out of the chair. And then I figured it out.

"Qui! It's Todd! He's the Orange King!" With my head spinning and Reds coming, I needed Todd dead. Unfortunately my knee wasn't as enthusiastic. I staggered up, barely got Spanky over my head and wobbled forward as Qui turned her revolver on Todd but didn't take a shot. I was in the field of fire.

Qui was overrun by Reds. They raced past Todd and took me too. Another pain in my head and everything was stars and darkness.

A bucket of cold water in the face will wake you up after being knocked out, like on TV. I sputtered, wet, confused and in all kinds of pain on the crumbling asphalt.

My legs and head still ached from the beating I'd taken and I had a hard time focusing. All I saw was Red.

Qui and I had been dragged into the Fashion Valley parking lot, surrounded by grinning, shirtless Reds. I got scared, real scared, then I felt

nothing. No, not nothing, resigned.

Qui looked as beaten and wet as I felt but a whole lot angrier.

"We were getting tired of waiting on you to wake up." It was easy to find Todd on the edge of the circle, also shirtless, his white skin in contrast. The empty bucket at his feet, Todd looked even smugger than before. He tilted his head slightly to his left, and so did the Reds, everyone in perfect synchronicity. Damn, I hadn't considered the zombie hive-mind cliché.

"That's the royal 'we' by the way. You can call me the Red King." He stood between the two biggest Reds I'd ever seen. They must have been bodybuilders or football players in the life before. Todd looked tiny by comparison.

Qui said, "I can call you a lot of things but I'm not calling you that."

Todd dismissed her with a wave of his hand. "Your intentions are irrelevant. Not when we have a point to make. An hour ago you were claiming moral superiority while preparing to kill us in our helpless state. We've decided to forgive you and furthermore prove our moral superiority.

"Only one of you is going to die today. You will decide who and the other will do the killing. That's the Red King's mercy."

While Todd talked, Qui and I got to our unsteady feet. But what I heard was appalling and I wanted to sit down again.

"Mercy? You think that makes you superior? How many people have you killed? And enslaved?" I pointed around to the mob of Reds he'd brought in to keep him safe. Did we scare him that much?

"That wasn't a killing. That was a culling. The surviving, smaller herd of humanity is better for it. Too much stupidity was mulling about."

Qui looked ready to kick some ass. If she had her guns she'd have shot us out of here already. The meanness in her manner gave me an idea. Hopefully I wasn't as stupid as Todd thought I was.

"Well, Todd, you got us in a hard place all right. But you did make one big, big mistake."

Todd cocked his hips and crossed his arms in disregard. "Oh Really? And what's that?"

"This circle of goons you put us in? It's far too small." I jumped one of the bodybuilder Reds, grabbing him around the neck. It grabbed me too, around my waist, squeezing and pushing me back. I kicked off the ground, pulled, and brought 300 pounds of Red down on top of me.

And I gave Qui an opening.

She tumbled forward, past one big Red and out of the clumsy reach of the other. She hopped up in front of Todd and used her momentum to barrel into his chest with both elbows, knocking him down, dropping on top of

him and pinning him to the ground.

Before Todd could think she grabbed his head and slammed it on the pavement with a smack. His arms jerked up. The Red on top of me loosened its hold. The others shuddered.

Qui brought Todd's head down again with a crack. His legs twitched. The Reds stumbled.

She brought it down again with a crunch. He lay still. The Reds fell like bags of meat.

Sure that Todd's head didn't need any more damage, Qui stood, turned away from the mess at her feet and helped me push the massive, dead Red off of me.

"Well played, David. That's what I call teamwork."

Still out of breath I said, "Not really... I was... trying to trick... him into killing... me quick so he... had to let you go... Like this better."

Qui smiled, not taking my admission seriously. She kicked a Red experimentally.

"It looked like all was lost but we came out on top. I went from suicidal to king of the world in ten seconds." I walked over to Todd's corpse. "You hear that, Todd? King of the World. Me, not you. Thought you could toy with us, huh? Dragged us across the county, ambushed us outside Qui's house," I looked at the smashed TV, "And then you were going to use a Playstation against us?"

"Not to mention the mass murder of everyone we knew."

"Yeah, that too. What a dick." I cleaned Spanky on Todd's robe. "I still don't get his fairy tale about the Orange King, why an *Orange K*-"

I stopped in mid-sentence. Across the parking lot, tied to the top of the parking structure was a hairless, orange-skinned man, his legs a twisted mess.

The Orange was looking right at us. And he started to laugh.

Qui put a bullet through his brain.

Tone Milazzo is the author of *Picking Up the Ghost*, a dark fantasy from ChiZine Publications which Publishers Weekly says "...entertains with an original approach and mix of breezy humor and dark fantasy." There's more about Tone at <http://tonemilazzo.com> or get an abbreviated version from twitter: @tone_milazzo

ALL THAT GLITTERS

by Kurt Heinrich Hyatt

“Where we are now standing is the site of one of Earth’s major cities which was buried in one day by a sandstorm 900 years ago.” M’lich gazed out over endless dunes and scattered rubble. “The depression over there used to be a river; my research indicates the humans referred to it as the Hudson-”

“Look, M’lich, you spare me grand tour. Just tell me where I have my diggers send down next shaft,” said Zgoll. He was big, even for one of the worker caste and his pale green skin held a yellowish hue hinting at a partly Madon ancestry. M’lich hated having to work with him, especially when his slitted eyes travelled over the curves of her body, raping her in his mind.

“May I inquire what you are wearing on your arm?” she asked, pointing.

“Zgoll found it on mummy at level three. Me think humans called it wristwatch. Band am pure copper.” He held it out, grinning. “It am amazing, yus? Copper am as rare on our home world of Loth as gold was this world.”

M’lich’s gaze was stony. “This planet is a registered archeological site with the Interplanetary League. We’re here to collect data from their historical records, not on a treasure hunt.”

“Hey, me didn’t think stiff me took it off needed to know time she late for work.” He absorbed her caustic glare for a moment then shrugged. “Alright, alright, me put it back. Now, as much as Zgoll enjoyed little talk, sweetjugs, me got work to do.”

She watched him swagger back to the scaffold housing the shaft. A line of mechmen worker robots pushed carts of sand from the excavation lift to a growing pile.

“Sounds like you had another difference of opinion with Zgoll, Dr. M’lich,” said a voice behind her. She turned to see Professor Kzzto. He was a wizened dwarf wearing a perpetual expression of amused contempt. “Lover’s quarrel?”

“Zgoll is a toilet insect.”

“He is also the best excavator and mechman repair tech in the field.” He nodded at her hand scanner. “What are the latest readings?”

“Really good today. I’ve picked up the outlines of possibly a school or

administrative building about fifty zaid down on the Western slope. We're almost done collecting material from the library and can begin uploading data."

Kzzto raised his eyebrows approvingly. "Very good work, Dr. M'lich. I can see my decision to select you as senior archeologist for this project was wise."

The complement went unheeded. "I think we need to bring up one item for your attention."

"Which is?"

"I need reassurance all personnel in the expedition are adhering to the Protocol of Alien Artifacts." A gust of wind blew a wisp of blue hair before her eyes.

"I believe you are alluding to grave robbing." Kzzto pondered the swarm of mechmen clustered around the mine machinery and the twin stiletto shapes of the expedition starfreighter and the exploration shuttle standing guard before endless dunes stretching out to the horizon.

"I share your concern. The trafficking in copper from ancient Earth civilizations has been outrageously profitable. I understand a salvage ship from the Orod Brotherhood slipped past the orbit sentinels and sold a dozen primitive water control valves on Loth for twenty thousand boshh."

"But this won't happen on our expedition, will it, Professor?" M'lich persisted. "All the castes, from housekeeping to scientist have been reminded of the Protocol."

"Of course they have." He looked up at her and smiled. It seemed to M'lich a smile touched by insincerity and held a whisper of contempt.

"Your concern is duly noted."

"So what were these humans like?" They were sitting in the starfreighter lounge sipping their faux martinis, listening to reconstituted Earth music, surrounded by replica furnishings and a wall hologram of what Earth looked like before the climate change cataclysm.

"In what way?" M'lich asked, looking over the rim of her glass at Janne, one of the ship's engineers. Her eyes dropped to the muscular chest stretching out his uniform and wished for not the first time he was of her caste when she came into her breeding cycle. The expedition had relaxed the normally strict rules on interaction between members of the different castes from the codes set down on their homeworld of Loth.

"I mean, Doc, did they look a lot like us?"

"Being bipedal mammals, I would have to say yes," she replied,

considering. “Of course, judging by studies of mummified remains, they had a great deal of variations in skin color, height and weight.”

Janne emptied his glass and studied the faux juke box at the end of the bar. “I hear there’s been a lot of looting going on during various expeditions here. It seems everyone on Loth wants an Earth artifact. It’s become quite the fashion. Not to mention anything made of copper.”

A cold light came into M’lich’s eyes. “As an archaeologist I see artifacts from a vanished civilization as windows to the past. Unfortunately, some Lothians think of Earth as some sort of mining claim.”

“A romantic idealist, I like the type.” He was looking at her, his grin both bantering and an invitation. “Your place or mine tonight, babe?”

M’lich blinked. “Excuse me?”

“I read your published commbook on Human Language and Slang Variations.”

“Did you? I’m impressed.”

“Were you really? Does this mean we can go steady?”

“No, impressed because I didn’t know ship engineers could read.” She favored him with an ironic grin. “Here’s a phrase from Chapter Twelve, just for you: Not tonight, dear. I’ve got a headache.”

The bearded human on the viscreen wandered into the chanting crowd who seemed to be setting fire to colored banners. He stood by an odd vehicle disgorging a load of juvenile humans and fumbled under his cloak. A moment later the screen erupted in a red maelstrom of fire and smoke.

“By the Moons of A’gonn, these humans were a vicious bunch,” Professor Kzzto observed, leaning back in his seat in the starfreighter conference room.

“I’m sorry Janne and the other engineers were unable to recreate sound from the ancient recording devices we obtained in the library,” M’lich explained. “We were also unable to accurately date some of the video scenes and I find translating the vast language variations challenging in the extreme.” More images flew across the viscreen, strange vehicles flying above the city, groups of humans gathering crops, a female holding a musical instrument and soundlessly singing to a crowd.

“Excellent work, Dr. M’lich,” Kzzto enthused. “I’m truly impressed by how much data you were able to acquire in so short a time. It all comes down to your skill in deciphering the city’s coordinates which enabled us to start excavating at all.”

M’lich nodded dutifully. She suspected this meeting was called less for

reviewing her findings than imparting some manner of bad news.

“So the data collected so far would indicate the humans somehow caused the climate change which resulted in the extinction of their species?” he continued.

“I’m not so sure.” Another series of images passed over the viscreen, swarms of ragged humans scavenging a blasted wasteland, fighting for scraps of food. “It would seem from the geodetic probes we sent down into the planet’s crust indicate a similar event occurred two hundred and fifty million years in the past. Evidence so far points to mindless and uncontrolled population growth, more than the resources of this world could support.”

“What would this odd structure be?” he asked, pointing at a cluster of buildings around a large fluted dome exuding a plume of steam.

“A nuclear fission facility. With the demise of petrochemicals and the failure of wind and crude solar power they increased their dependence on nuclear generation for all Earth’s major cities.”

“Fascinating.” Kzzto pursed his lips, drumming his fingers on the table, considering. M’lich took a measured breath. *Here it comes.*

“I believe we can wrap up our work here and move onto another site I have in mind. I’ve already arranged for Zgoll to fill the shaft and return this area to its original condition per the Alien Artifacts Protocol.”

M’lich stared at him, aghast. “Professor, I’m nowhere near cataloging the cultural and historical artifacts from the library. We’ve just uncovered a magnificent stone sculpture of a feline predator at the main entrance-.”

“We have an entire world to explore and catalog,” he chided her. “I would think you’d be jumping up and down with glad little cries of joy at the opportunity to move on to bigger and better things.”

“Yes, but my research-.”

“Another exploratory trip is scheduled for tomorrow morning,” Kzzto declared flatly, closing the cover of his lapreader with a decisive snap. “Goodnight to you, Dr. M’lich and thank you so much for this most instructive briefing.”

I would think you’d be jumping up and down with glad little cries of joy at the opportunity-

M’lich was still fuming while she strode down the passage to her cabin. So much yet undiscovered at the buried library. The decorative panels, the primitive yet exquisite glass lighting fixtures, stacks of undeciphered recording discs...

Something was happening. She paused in midstride as a sudden dizziness overtook her. A wave of heat surged up from her loins, her heart

began hammering.

“Zerid, not now!” she groaned, recognizing the onset of her breeding cycle. A jumble of thoughts ran riot through her mind. *Did I have my conception control scan this month...I would love to be in Janne’s arms right now...he’s not of my caste!...dangerous and forbidden...*

She found herself standing before the entry to Janne’s cabin. Her hand trembled, paused over the access button. “This is insane,” she muttered, pressing the key.

The airlock slid open. Janne was framed in the doorway munching on a snackbar. The discarded wrapper lay at his feet.

“Hey Doc,” he greeted her cheerfully through a mouthful of snarnuts. “Kind of late in the evening to be falling over the light fantastic. What’s happening, dude?”

Damn, why did he have to read my book on old Earth slang phrases? A dozen banalities came to her along with an exquisite surge of warmth from her nether regions. “Are you busy right now?” she asked.

“Nah, just tossing down a bedtime before punishing the sack.”

“Glad to hear it.” She pushed him into the cabin, closing the airlock behind her. “And the correct term is ‘hitting the sack’”.

“Zorg’s Ass, Doc!” he yelled, dropping the snackbar. “Can you tell me what this is all about?”

“Get your clothes off and you’ll find out.”

M’lich untangled her arms and legs from Janne’s, lolled back on the pillow and sighed. She was agreeably oiled with sweat, enjoying a satisfied glow. She glanced over at her bedmate, already asleep and snoring. Good technique and endurance but needs to work on his postcoital skills, she mused. A blast of wind pattered grit over the viewport above the bed. She propped herself up on an elbow and looked outside.

A bank of podlights leading from the starfreighter to the shaft entrance swayed in gusts of wind driven sand. Something was moving out there. She put her face closer to the plexglass, squinted sideways.

A line of mechmen emerged from the elevator cage, pushing loaded carts across the desert and up the ramp into the exploration shuttle. Even dressed in sandsuit and goggles M’lich recognized the swaggering figure of Zgoll.

“What in Zerid’s name?” muttered Janne as M’lich pushed him into wakefulness.

“Open your eyes and get dressed,” she ordered. “Something strange is

going on at the library site.”

He blinked owlshly. “Just great. Take clothes off, put clothes on...”

The sands of time had not been kind to the old library. Sealed beneath the sand for hundreds of years a patina of dust lay over collapsed shelves, slabs of ceiling tile and the withered covers of books. Less kind had been the army of Zgoll’s mechmen, leaving their metal clawfoot tracks among shattered wall panels, broken furniture and shards of chandelier glass.

M’lich and Janne stood among the wreckage, taking it all in. “Holy shit, what a mess,” whispered Janne. It was the first human phrase of his she heartily agreed with. “What exactly happened here?”

“Copper. From the ancient plumbing and electrical systems of the library.” M’lich picked up a fragment of pipe. “That’s why Zgoll and his mechmen were out here this late. He knew the site was going to be sealed in the morning and Professor Kzzto was planning on taking the shuttle off to find a new excavation site.”

“Are you going to take this up with the Professor before he leaves?”

There was a box of old video discs in a far corner which had escaped the carnage, a box lovingly collected and labeled which M’lich was planning to decipher and record. It contained the lives of the vanished humans, their hopes and dreams for a future which never came. A window into the past.

“To use an ancient Earth expression: you bet your ass,” she replied.

The storm which had arrived during the night had ratcheted up to a gale sending blasts of grit across the viewport in Professor Kzzto’s office in the starfreighter.

“-and as you can see by the pictures I downloaded on my lapreader there is massive and unrepairable damage to the library structure, not to mention loss of visual and written records and mummified human remains,” M’lich declared, sitting on the edge of her chair facing the huge antique F’angolian desk.

Kzzto ran a tongue over knife-thin lips, idly scrolling through images on the small screen. “Interesting. Yes, very interesting,” he mused at length.

“Interesting? I would say this is a lot more than interesting,” she exclaimed, feeling somewhat deflated at his lack of sharing the outrage she felt. “This is going beyond a violation of the Protocol of Alien Artifacts. Zgoll’s theft and vandalism at this site stands to fall back on the entire project!”

“Yes, yes, of course. I must commend you, Dr. M’lich, for bringing

this matter to my attention.” He flipped her lapreader shut and dropped it into a compartment of his desk. “And now I think it’s best if we all drop the subject.”

“What?”

“I will of course file a report on this matter.”

“File a report?”

“I believe that is what I said. Would you like it translated into one of the extinct human languages?”

M’lich stared at the figure behind the ornate desk, seeing only a bland and complacent look in the little eyes. “But the Interplanetary League must be notified, Zgoll arrested and the looted copper seized! Can’t you imagine what will happen to our archeological expedition—“

“This is not an archeological expedition. This never was an archeological expedition.” Kzzto leaned back in his chair and eyed her with pity. “Who do you think financed our little jaunt to this ball of dust? Our impoverished university? Don’t you think the Orodhi Brotherhood has been drooling over the untold wealth of copper lying under heaps of sand?”

The airlock to Kzzto’s office sighed open and Zgoll sauntered in. He sat down on the edge of the desk, his slitted eyes sliding from her breasts to her face. “Hey, sugarcrotch,” he grinned. “You be saying bad things to Professor about Zgoll?”

“Not yet, but bad things will soon be coming your way.” She favored him with a caustic glare and began to rise from her seat. “If you’ll excuse me, Professor—”

“Just a moment, please.” He held up a restraining hand. “Before you rush off in a fever of idealistic zeal you might wish to take a look at this.” He touched a button on his desk and a viscreen on the far wall came to life.

It was a scene before Janne’s cabin. M’lich and Janne were locked in a passionate embrace, sharing a lingering kiss. The airlock slid open, they stepped inside and it closed behind them.

“Ship security noticed your departure from the starfreighter on your little quest last night and queried Zgoll. He had them send a surveillance drone to the corridor outside Engineer Janne’s quarters.” His eyes drooped in mock sadness. “I’m afraid the news of yourself, a member of the scientist caste, having carnal relations with one of the mechanical caste will lead to your dismissal from the expedition. As for poor Engineer Janne I have contacts in the Engineering Guild which will see him reassigned to the ice moons of Karthxx for the rest of his career.”

M’lich looked from Zgoll’s canine grin to Kzzto’s complacent smirk. With his hook nose and dwarf body she was reminded of the old Earth

legend of the troll under the bridge. Collecting the toll. What toll would she have to pay to save herself and Janne? She swallowed painfully and when she managed to speak her voice came out as a whisper.

“What do you want?”

“My research into vanished human civilizations, while not as expert as yours, has indicated the remains of a large copper smelter in what they referred to as Arizona. As one of the few Lothians who has deciphered the human hieroglyphics indigenous to this area you can provide me with the exact coordinates for its location.”

For a long moment they locked eyes. “And then what?” she asked.

“Then you can return to Loth for another archeology assignment from the League and Engineer Janne can continue putting his grubby mechanical caste fingers into fixing things on this ship.”

The sandstorm outside sent a final blast of grit over the viewport and a pale sun splashed onto the carpet and dappled a wall. It reminded M’lich of the sculpted wall paneling in the old library of the humans. Paneling now torn and scattered among broken chandeliers and the claw footprints of mechmen.

“Give me your lapreader and I’ll transpose the coordinates.”

Professor Kzzto smiled. “It is always gratifying for me to see self interest triumph over idealism, Dr. M’lich.”

The shaft reached down into the bowels of the desert through colored bands of rock, broken fragments of concrete and red stains which were once steel, and the odd mummified human. Far above shone a circle of blue sky and wisps of drifting cloud. The bottom of the shaft was a hive with groups of mechmen clanking about, loading carts with rock into the hoppers rising skywards.

“What exactly is this device?” Professor Kzzto asked, watching Zgoll adjust a piece of machinery attached like some bizarre metal insect to the concrete wall.

“My latest toy,” Zgoll grinned over his shoulder. “A fusion beam saw, it cut through anything but irradiated triteel.”

Kzzto studied the stained concrete dimly lit by podlights lining the lift cage. “Just think, behind this wall is the remains of the Morenci Mine Foundry,” he mused. “At one time in the distant past it produced 380,000 tons per Earth year of pure copper.”

“Zorg’s Ass.” A spindriver fell from Zgoll’s hand. “You could done buy a seat on Interplanetary League Council, Professor.”

“Actually, I was considering purchasing quite a few. I believe the Protocol of Alien Artifacts should be...ah, amended to allow access to copper and saleable wealth buried beneath this wasteland.”

The fusion cutter began to hum, moving up the concrete wall, sending down a shower of rock dust.

“Speaking of League,” said Zgoll, sliding his spindriver into a tool pouch. “Your chief archeologist with curvy tail. You still am planning exposing her on morals violation for humping lower caste engineer?”

“Of course. Since I have disposed of her recorded evidence and the library dig site has been refilled, she is a mere loose end-“

“Hey! This water me see?” The cutter had traveled up the concrete wall and was on its way down when a brown liquid began trickling from the crack.

Kztto leaned forward, splashing his foot around in the puddle. “Residual ground water trapped in some rock strata. Our geoprobes picked up traces of old aquifers.”

“By the gonads of Valgloom, it stink!”

A blue glow seemed to be coming from the track left by the cutter. “Is this some effect caused by your new toy?” Kzzto asked.

Suddenly, the cutter fell to the ground and the concrete wall disintegrated into fragments. The two Lothans managed a screaming duet cut short by an ocean of foul, scalding liquid which surged out, flooding the shaft.

It was winding down to closing time in the starfreighter lounge. The few remaining patrons, mostly from the housekeeping caste, were tossing back their last drinks and shambling for the exit. M’lich sat in a dim corner, staring morosely out the viewport into the wind driven desert night. She was past her limit of faux manhattans and could feel the zylocol working its way through her emotional cortex, touching on primal feelings; sadness, joy, melancholia, fear. And rage.

“Hey dude, how they hanging?” Janne slid into the seat beside her, exuding an irritating good humor.

“You know, I’ve written other commbooks besides Human Language and Slang Variations,” she remarked sourly. “Besides, you have the gender wrong.” She noted he was wearing his dress uniform, tailored around his lean, muscular build. “So what’s the big occasion, get promoted to chief engineer or something?”

He signaled to the bartender and leaned an elbow on the bartop,

studying her. It was obvious he was bursting with some secret and she peevishly refused to give him the satisfaction of showing curiosity.

“I guess you haven’t heard the news about Professor Kzzto?”

“Yeah, he found a new rock to crawl under.”

“A geology survey team came across his exploration shuttle on the Southwest side of the continent in an area the humans called Nevada.”

“Did he find another library or priceless historical site to loot?”

The bartender placed a bottle of Aghaid beer before Janne. He took a long pull and set it carefully down. “You know what the humans were doing for electrical power in the last century before they went extinct?”

“Nuclear fission power. Every city had at least one generating plant.”

“Right. And the spent radioactive rods were shipped to this Nevada where they were sealed deep underground in huge tanks of water and boric acid.”

“Very enterprising of them.”

“It was less than enterprising for the Professor and Zgoll. They broke through the wall of a containment cask and were buried under tons of radioactive liquid. Zgoll actually made it up the shaft before he died. The geologists said his body was giving off over ninety sieverts of radioactivity.” He searched M’lich’s face, seeing only a flat, noncommittal expression in the green eyes. “They found records in the shuttle indicating they were looking for the Morenci Copper mine at those coordinates. Kind of funny their calculations were that far off, huh?”

“You never knew I liked Aghaid beer, did you?” She picked up his bottle, tipping it to her lips. Their eyes met and an unspoken message passed between them. “So tell me why you’re so cleaned up tonight?”

He brightened. “Remember all the copper looted from the old library?”

“I’m trying to forget.”

“They found it stashed aboard Kzzto’s exploration shuttle.”

There was something more, M’lich sensed. “You know, Janne, this has been great hanging out with you but I’ve got a stack of paperwork waiting in my office-.”

“A telebeam came in from the Interplanetary League after they heard of the situation in Nevada. It says you’ve been promoted to replace Kzzto for the archaeology project on Earth.” Janne toyed with the empty bottle. “Anyway, I thought you might like to celebrate with me. The executive mess hall just got in a shipment of gorth steaks from Verdant 12.”

A slow smile spread over M’lich’s face. “Your legs must be tired because you’ve been running through my mind all night.”

Janne stared at her. “Come again?”

“I’m writing another chapter for my commbook on human slang expressions. This one deals with mating innuendos.”

“Really? This I’d love to read.”

She moved closer, running a hand over his leg. “In that case, dude, your place or mine?”

Kurt Heinrich Hyatt has had science fiction stories accepted by *Space and Time*, *Allegory*, *Raygun Revival*, *Etopia*, *Aphelion*, *Explorers Anthology*, *Orion's Child*, *Residential Aliens* and *The Nautilus Engine*.

THE WITCH, THE MAGE, AND THE MAID

by Tom Howard

The Witch fled through the marshes on a beautiful horse spun from moonbeams and her own pale blood. A pack of night-wolves pursued her over the desolate swamp, finally giving up and attacking each other in their frustration and rage. Night-wolves had been thought eradicated from the once fair land, and their growing presence was yet another example to her that evil magic was creeping anew across the countryside. The skeletal trees made one last attempt to snag her cloak and hair as she left the odorous lowlands and headed for the hill country. Here groves of oak trees and an occasional farmstead covered softly rolling slopes.

She slowed her horse and pushed her long silver hair - the same color as her four-legged companion - out of her face. Still youthful in appearance, her unlined face held a worried expression. She was conflicted. Would her former comrades continue to perish because she had sworn not to interfere with the lives of normal humans? Didn't she carry enough guilt for her part in the Great War a decade earlier? Recalling her immediate mission and its urgency, she set aside her promises and started to urge her magical mare onward when she spotted a large crow on an overhanging tree limb.

"What news?" she asked Landrau, her dark familiar.

"Aside from the fact that I should be sitting beside our fireplace sipping some mulled wine?" he squawked, sounding like a little old man. Without waiting for an answer, he continued, "You were right to warn your friends. I arrived just before they were attacked. Bigneck and his girlfriend were abed and busy when the king's men broke in. Both managed to reach their weapons and make their escape, killing many of their attackers."

"You know very well they are called the Knight and his Lady," scolded the Witch. "Did you give them my message to meet me at the Mage's inn?"

The crow tilted his head and gave a dramatic sigh. "No. Initially, I did not want to disturb their...not sleeping. Then, it was too dangerous when the arrows began to fly. The Knight and his Lady fled naked into the forest, and I thought it wisest to fly here and inform you. The Lady really has some big..."

“Arrows? They were attacked in their bedroom with arrows?”

“Of course not,” said the crow with disgust. “The men outside had arrows. The men inside had swords.”

“I see. You, who are completely black, were outside in the dark with the men who were not shooting arrows. Yet, you thought it safer to return to me than deliver my urgent message.”

“Exactly! You know the king’s archers are terrible shots. They might have hit me by accident if they had started shooting.”

This time the Witch sighed. “Very well. Search for the Knight and his Lady. It will be too late for them to meet us this morning, but they must help. Ask them to come to the inn when they can.”

“Really?” asked the crow. “I was hoping to accompany you. Seeing you trying to straighten out the mess you made all those years ago will be much more entertaining than finding two naked humans in the woods.”

“Watch your tongue,” she said. “I did what I had to do. And I’ve had to live with the consequences.”

“But don’t you ever wonder?”

She didn’t answer his questions nor acknowledge she’d been contemplating them herself. “We have bigger problems than second-guessing things that I’ve done in the past. Now I must go; I cannot arrive after sunrise.”

The crow flew away, leaving the impression that she was making a big mistake not allowing him to accompany her. The Witch shook her head and willed her supernatural steed to resume its journey.

She arrived at the inn on the same night she’d left her distant sanctuary, although it was many days travel by normal means. She dismounted and patted her horse’s head fondly, watching it fade as the moon set, a final flick of its silver white tail barely discernible in the darkness. The Witch gathered her long cloak about her and entered the courtyard. Her hair gleamed even in the dark. She covered it with her hood as she walked to the door of the inn, reminding herself she was sought after by king and countrymen. Greater plans than hers had been disrupted by an early-rising soldier with a full bladder.

The thick wooden door was locked against threat of robbers, a group becoming braver since the Bold Company no longer protected the land. The Witch smiled as the door unlocked itself and was sitting in front of a well-established fire when the innkeeper and his wife made their appearance shortly before the rising sun.

“You!” exclaimed the innkeeper as he saw who was enjoying the comfort of his hearth. He was an older man, and this Witch noted his

formerly fair hair gone to gray. He moved slowly, his warrior's body unrecognizable since he'd gone into hiding. He hadn't lost his instinct for trouble, however, and quickly moved to the front door and opened it, plainly expecting a troop of the king's men on his doorstep.

"What's happened?" he asked as he turned to nod an all clear to his wife. She was a much younger, dark-haired beauty, and, like her husband, a former member of the Bold Company.

"Maybe the Witch is just visiting," said his wife, smiling at their unexpected guest. "You worry too much, Gant."

The Witch shook her head. "No. He's right. You always were the smart one, Mage," she said. "I do not come to warn you about unrest in the land. You can see that for yourselves since the disbanding and outlawing of our company; the new king grows more vindictive and his men are little more than common criminals. Plus, I feel the return of old magic – dark, troublesome magic."

Locking the door, Gant joined the Witch at her table. "Marlyn, would you see if Cook has any breakfast ready? I'm sure our guest is hungry after her journey."

"As long as you don't talk business without me," she said, her dark eyes flashing. As the Maid, she'd been a fierce fighter, frequently her husband's protector.

"We promise," said Gant. "I'll tell her all about the new water system I'm putting into the inn." He turned to the woman in white as his wife hurried into the kitchen. "I'm using a series of wooden segments to transport water from the spring right into the inn. I'll show you when it gets lighter."

The Witch looked around at the empty common room. "Aren't you afraid some of the king's men might hear of your fancy water system?" She referred to the Mage's role in the Bold Company. He'd been the group's engineer, as skilled at inventing weapons of war as making home improvements. Incorrectly named the Mage for his seemingly magical abilities, he possessed none of the Witch's supernatural skills, but his devices had been ingenious.

Gant shrugged. "Running water downhill in wooden tubes will soon be commonplace. We know how to keep a low profile."

Marlyn returned and set three steaming bowls of porridge on the table. Turning to a shelf that ran the length of the room, she brought three ceramic mugs and filled them with fresh water from a matching pitcher. "I try to tell him," she said as she gathered utensils, "but he insists on a workshop almost as big as his old one at the palace."

“Of which you have taken over half of!” exclaimed Gant. “You putter around more down there than I do these days.”

“Well, I needed sturdier plates, dear. Those pewter ones were taking a beating.” She took a seat and came right to the point. “Why are you here, sorceress?”

Before the Witch could answer, someone knocked loudly on the front door. The Maid jumped to her feet and grabbed two swords from above the fireplace.

The Witch stood. “Rest easy, friends. I’ve invited another of our company to meet us here. I believe it’s time for the inn to open anyway.” As she spoke, a small group of overnight guests nosily made their way downstairs, and Marlyn replaced the swords and saw to the paying guests’ breakfasts while Gant unlocked the door.

“Juggler!” Gant exclaimed as he looked at the little man standing on his threshold. The bald headed man was thin, dusty, and road worn. “What are you doing here?”

“Innkeeper Gant!” the little man said brightly. “Beautiful morning to you, sir. It’s me, Tradesman Jyrome, back to enjoy the hospitality of your inn.” As he passed Gant on his way in, he muttered, “I was summoned by the Witch.”

The hooded woman greeted him, and they talked in low voices while Gant and Marlyn fed and ushered out guests. Chores done, the innkeepers rejoined their friends.

“Your news must not be too urgent,” Jyrome told the Witch, happily working on his second mug of ale, “or you’d have met us on the road with your message. Now we’re just four old friends who happened to meet in a comfortable inn.” She smiled at the dusty salesman, barely recognizable as the chief strategist for the previous monarch. His nickname, Juggler, came from his nimble fingers and tricky moves. In typical Juggler fashion, she heard he’d arranged a successful escape when the heir had ordered him imprisoned.

“Merio is murdering former members of the Bold Company,” said the Witch. “In spite of the covenant.”

“But he agreed to let everyone live!” exclaimed Marlyn.

“There’s still a reward on my head,” said Jyrome. “You two did the smart thing by changing your occupations and getting off the beaten path.”

“It hasn’t been too bad,” said Gant. “We’re making a living.”

“Barely,” said Marlyn with a sigh. “I do miss the old days of slaying monsters and saving the innocent.”

“We got too cocky,” said Jyrome. “We acted like royalty ourselves,

and when the prince came into power, he felt threatened by us. Although, as I recall, some of us were almost royalty.” He winked at Marlyn and she blushed.

Gant shook his head. “The Great War wasn’t our fault. We tried to save the villages attacked by the wizard Zeemis. They were wrong to blame the Bold Company for the battles that came after.”

“So who’s died, Witch?” asked Jyrome, staring down at his mug.

The Witch took a deep breath. “The Acrobat and Swordmaster that we know of so far. They were ambushed and killed. There may be more; we haven’t exactly kept in touch with one another.”

“So what can we do?” asked Marlyn. “We’ve changed our identities and livelihoods.”

“We can stop hiding; we can strike back,” said the Witch. “Since Merio has broken the covenant we swore to, we can reform the company.”

“No. That’s exactly what he’s hoping for,” said Jyrome. “He can say we’re the vigilantes he’s always accused us of being and outlaw us once and for all.”

“We’ve got to do something,” Marlyn insisted. “They could come for us next.”

“We must unite in secret and help our countrymen,” the Witch said. “We are not the only ones complaining.”

“I’m in,” said Jyrome, glancing at the Witch. “We have a plan, but we’ll need your help.”

Gant shook his head. “Not us. We’ve got a good thing going here. We can’t risk it by being part of some plot.”

“You must be joking,” said Marlyn.

“Really, dear, I was never comfortable as a knight,” explained Gant. “Now I’m too old. I just want to spend my remaining time in my workshop and taking money from grateful guests.”

She stood and looked around at the empty dining room. “But we can’t just sit and do nothing!”

“Of course we can. Let the young fight. We can’t help these people.”

“Maybe you can’t.” She gathered up her skirts to leave the room. “But I can. I’ll be in the workroom.”

“That was unexpected,” said Jyrome. “Despite your age differences, Gant, I thought you two were peas in a pod. Since she and the prince...”

The Witch stared thoughtfully at the door where Marlyn had disappeared. “I’m sorry about that, Gant,” she said. “Do you want to go after her?”

The man looked around. “The locals will begin arriving to eat soon.

Marlyn will be back.” He stood and excused himself. “I need to check on Cook. Stay and enjoy the fire for a time. Then you’d better be on your way.”

The Witch gave Jyrome a worried look. “I’m going to talk to Marlyn.” She left Jyrome and followed a path from the rear of the inn to a large stone building in a small hollow. Two heavy doors in the building opened to the outdoors, revealing a darker interior. The Witch stepped across a strip of polished bronze in the doorway and entered the workshop.

The purpose of the bronze became apparent. More pieces of bronze, pounded flat and connected by a series of ropes and pulleys, hung from the ceiling and reflected the sunlight from outside onto two long workbenches on either side of the room.

"Impressive," said the Witch, looking at the equipment whirling, bubbling, and occupying every available surface. The bronze reflectors gave a warm overall glow to the interior.

"I think I may have an idea for King Merio," said Marlyn, strapping a contraption of leather bands and springs to her arm as she rose from her stool. She turned to a scarecrow at the end of the room and pointed at it. A small lead sphere shot from her sleeve and struck the scarecrow in the chest where it shattered and released a small cloud of blue dust.

Marlyn lowered her arm and looked at the Witch with a triumphant smile. "What do you think?"

"What is it?"

"It's a way to deliver a potion to Merio. The ball can contain a charm or a toxin and is thin enough to shatter on impact."

"What kind of potion?"

"One of your powerful ones. You can make him good and then we won't have to worry about him anymore. He'll be like he was when we were younger."

"First of all, he was never a good man, Marlyn. He was handsome and charming, especially to you, but he was never good. Secondly, magic doesn't work that way. You have to pay a price for whatever you do. For me to make him a good person, an innocent somewhere would have to go bad. You wouldn't want that."

"But," said Marlyn, "couldn't you make him a medicinal potion like you gave me when I was young and...confused?"

The Witch shook her head. "An herbal cordial can clear one's head, but it can't give someone a heart. Or if it could, at what terrible cost?" She turned away, bothered by the thought of what her potion had really done to Marlyn those many years ago.

Marlyn began removing the small catapult she'd strapped to her forearm. "So this one even the great Mage can't solve. But we can't just sit here; we must do something."

The Witch took a deep breath. "Is Gant well?"

Marlyn tossed her device onto the workbench and sighed. "His old wounds trouble him more and more as time goes on. He's even started talking about me remarrying after he's gone. I can't bear to hear him talking that way."

"I'm sure he's fine." The Witch hoped Marlyn couldn't hear the lie in her voice. Gant looked like more than old wounds were bothering him.

A large black bird squawked as it perched on a post outside.

"Landrau!" the Witch exclaimed. "You startled me. You have news?"

"Yes," he croaked, "not all of it bad. Muscleman and Bouncylady are being harried by the king's men; I think they were allowed to escape on purpose."

"Why?" asked Marlyn, joining them at the doorway.

"To follow them when they come here for help, of course. I forgot you were the muscle and not the brains."

Marlyn ignored his comment. "And what was the good news?"

"The king's men they've killed have really juicy eyeballs."

Marlyn made a face and turned to the Witch. "Someone has to stop this. We can't let it happen all over again." She returned to her workbench and began slamming things around.

The Witch turned to the crow. "Find the Knight and the Lady. Tell them to meet at the Royal Wood."

The crow took to the air, and the Witch gave Marlyn one last look, her purple eyes filled with worry, before returning to the inn.

"She's gone!" wheezed Gant as he returned from the workshop later in the afternoon. He was winded and gray and almost collapsed onto the bench at their table. "She's not in the workshop. I can't find her anywhere."

"I'll check the stable," offered Juggler, giving the Witch a glance as he left the room.

The Witch moved closer to her ailing friend. "You've got to let me help you, Gant. I know you're dying. I can't cure you, but I can ease your pain."

He shook his head. "You'll need all your powers to find Marlyn. Leave me behind."

“No. You’re as important as Marlyn in all this. We can’t do it without you. You know where she’s gone and why.” She reached into her robes. “Here, I have a potion prepared. It won’t stop your bone disease, but it will help you travel.”

He took the vial reluctantly and drank it down. Soon his breathing slowed and his color returned. “Perhaps we can catch her before she reaches her destination.”

“No,” said the Juggler as he returned. “She’s got too much of a head start. We must follow her. I’ve ordered our horses saddled.”

The Witch nodded. “We’ll establish a camp in the Royal Wood and wait for the others. I’ll need someone to watch my body when I go forth in my astral form to search for the Maid.”

Gant stood. “So much hinges on her,” he said. “If your plan to use her to find out who’s behind this fails, I lose everything.”

The Witch agreed. “If she fails, we all lose everything. The darkness has left the swamps and begins to infect the land. Merio doesn’t realize what he’s unleashed. The Maid has to find out who we’re fighting.”

“Let’s go,” said Gant, a renewed bounce in his step. The Witch hoped it stayed with him long enough to rescue the Maid.

The Royal Wood had once been a grand forest – a place for boisterous hunting parties and romantic picnics. Now, it was overgrown and dark – a perfect place to meet for people who didn’t want their movements known.

“Are you sure about this?” Gant asked for the hundredth time. “How can you be sure she came here and that Merio hasn’t already killed her?”

“You know her and she knows the king,” said the Witch, spreading out a blanket on the moss-covered ground. “We have to hope everything goes as we planned. How are you feeling?”

“Tired and anxious.”

“We know how that feels,” said the Knight as he joined them. He and his Lady had been scouting the forest in the direction of the palace. His usual armor had been replaced by a leather jerkin, but his customary sword hung by his side. His black hair topped a wide face with a square jaw and flashing blue eyes. Beside him stood the Lady, a warrior maid with similar features. She’d been his companion since they’d formed the Bold Company.

“Did you get any rest?” asked Juggler, taking the saddle from his horse and placing it on the ground.

“No,” said the Lady. “We’ve been on the road since the Witch’s crow found us.”

“We can rest when we’re dead,” said the Witch. “Whatever Merio’s in league with is growing stronger. I can smell the stench of evil in the air.” She turned to the Mage. “Do you have any magic tricks up your sleeve to help us like in the old days?”

The older man shook his head. “I can’t think of any gadgets that might help us. I’ve run out of ideas.”

Juggler said, “I’ve talked to some of the village folk about a way into the palace. They seem to think the old tunnels are the best approach. They’ve also agreed to watch the Witch for us when we break in.”

“Then we should get some rest,” said the Knight. “We’ll make our move at daybreak.”

The Witch stretched out on her blanket and shut her eyes. “I’ll be back as soon as I find the Maid.” Taking a deep breath, she allowed herself to float free of her body.

Later that night, the Witch was reminded she was as helpless as anyone as she wandered ghost-like through the royal palace. Had she been more powerful, she could have stopped the Bold Company from being disbanded a decade earlier. If she had been an equal to the great wizard Zeemis – who had only been defeated by Juggler’s clever plan and Dancer’s own special brand of sensual magic – she’d have been able to turn Merio into a toad, squashed him, and been done with this entire bloody mess.

Her thoughts distracted her as she sent herself deep within the castle of her enemy. Sending her spirit form so far from her body was dangerous. It took a lot of power and occasionally resulted in the mind traveler being separated from her body forever. She tried not to dwell on the risks as she walked from room to room in the once opulent palace, saddened by the sorry conditions. Dust and cobwebs covered everything, and the formerly bright halls were dim and dirty.

The dungeons, where she expected to find her goal, were crowded and dark. She passed through walls and doors unobserved by the poor creatures chained within. Obviously Merio’s deprivations ran deeper than any suspected, and she wanted him squashed, whether he was a toad or not. She steeled herself against the people she saw, telling herself that her current mission would help them more than any small magic she could produce in her present, transparent form.

She found Marlyn in a small cell in the north tower, relatively clean

and fitted with one small window. A torch in the wall sconce outside the cell door provided flickering illumination in the late night hour. Marlyn was staring into the shadows on the other side of the bars, and it took a few minutes for the Witch's wispy presence to register.

"Witch!" she exclaimed, jumping to her feet. "What are you doing here?"

The Witch grimaced as she passed through the iron bars. They hurt, even in her spectral condition. "I came to find you." She smoothed her skirt as if it were really there and sat on a wide stone shelf, the room's only furniture. "I thought you'd come here."

Marlyn looked tired and dirty but uninjured. "How is Gant?"

"Out of his mind with worry for you," replied the Witch. "What were you thinking, coming to Merio?"

She bent her head. "I was a fool. I thought I could convince Merio to stop hurting us. But he'd never forgiven me for turning him down and marrying someone he considered old enough to be my grandfather. He threw me in here, hoping news of my imprisonment and public execution tomorrow will incite the Bold Company to attack."

"You are many things, Maid Marlyn, but a fool is not one of them. He wants to execute you just for pleading our case?"

Marlyn held up her arm by way of explanation. Her sleeve was shredded. "I thought I could use a spring-loaded knife to help convince him. Or remove him permanently. But he was too quick for me."

"Very...ambitious," said the Witch. "Merio is correct. Your husband and the others are on their way to rescue you. They are hidden in the Royal Wood, protecting my body and searching for a way in. Strangely enough, Gant doesn't seem to have any ideas for new devices to aid in your rescue. Can you think of why that might be, 'Maid?'"

Marlyn didn't answer.

"You've become the Mage, haven't you?" The Witch stood. "I can't believe I didn't see it sooner. He was a tinkerer before you became his helpful assistant. You provided him with ideas and support to become the Mage."

"He's very bright," Marlyn said meekly. "He's just lost some of his edge as he's gotten older."

"Possibly," said the Witch. "Does Gant even know you've been helping with his inventions?"

Marlyn shook her head. "He's more fragile than anyone thinks, always worried about his age and his health. If he realized I've been helping him, he'd be crushed."

“You still care for him?”

Marlyn stood. “Of course. You’ve got to stop him and the others. Merio will kill them and use their attack as an excuse to murder the rest of the Bold Company. I made a foolish mistake, and I’ll pay for it.”

The Witch attempted to rise and comfort her but realized she couldn’t move. The cell was quiet except for a crow cawing in the distance.

“What is it?” asked Marlyn, staring at her unresponsive friend. A sound behind her made her turn in time to see a crack appear in the stone wall and the two halves swing apart like giant cupboard doors. A brightly lit room on the other side of the wall revealed King Merio, several of his guards, and a dark figure. Merio laughed at Marlyn’s surprise.

“I’m afraid your friend’s sudden silence is our doing,” he said. “You see, we not only wanted to get rid of the Bold Company once and for all, but an old adversary wanted to ensure the Witch was unable to stop us.”

“Zeemis,” hissed the Witch, and the dark figure gestured at her, forcing her to her feet.

“Impossible!” said Marlyn. “I saw him destroyed.”

“Dead, but not destroyed,” said Zeemis, lowering his hood to reveal his pale face.

He moved into the cell and stood beside the Witch. “I’d prefer her here in the flesh, but I’ve blocked her astral self from joining her body. After you’ve defeated her comrades tomorrow, I will personally locate and destroy it.”

The Witch had enough mobility in her face to look disgusted. “How?” she whispered.

The man turned to smile at the monarch, still standing in the other room, a smirk on his handsome face. “How was I resurrected? The prince and I had a pact even before the old king died. He had certain...instructions on what to do to ensure my return.”

The Witch looked at Merio with sympathy. “He does not know...the cost...of such a pact?”

Zeemis laughed and the young king laughed with him. “He seems pleased with our arrangement,” said the dark wizard.

He turned to leave the cell. “Our people have told the heroes, quite incorrectly, that the drainage tunnels are the best way to enter the castle undetected. We will be ready when they arrive.”

Merio giggled. “And I apologize to Maid Marlyn for the noise outside. The carpenters are building additional gallows for your friends. I’m afraid you won’t get much sleep tonight.” He turned to the Witch. “Too bad you don’t have another one of your love potions, crone. Maybe

you could make me fall in love with her like she fell in love with him.”

His laughter died as the stone wall sealed itself, and the Witch jerked free of Zeemis’s spell. A quick check showed she was not going to be able to leave the cell, ghost-form or not. She no longer heard the crow in the distance.

During the long night, Marlyn examined every part of the cell again for something she could use to free them. The Witch sat in a trance, trying to find a way out of the cell before dawn. The carpenters hammered through the night in the courtyard below.

“What did he mean?” asked Marlyn, taking a seat beside the Witch. “Another love potion? Had you made him one before?”

The Witch opened her eyes, pale violet in the darkened cell. “Not him,” she said finally. “You.”

“Me? I don’t understand. Why would I need a...” She rose. “You made me fall in love with Gant?”

“You were already in love with him,” insisted the Witch, “but you were engaged to Prince Merio, and you believed you loved him more.”

“So you made me leave my family and my betrothed to adventure with you and your friends?”

The Witch stood. “I had a vision of the kingdom being totally destroyed. Every man, woman, and child slaughtered, the land burned, the rivers polluted with bloated bodies. I had to do something!”

“So you married me to an old man? That stopped the deaths?”

“Yes, for a time. Having seen Merio and his hellish companion, I realize now the vision could still come true. The neighboring kingdoms won’t allow Merio to conquer them. When they realize Zeemis has returned, they will destroy us all.”

“Can you remove it? The effect of the potion?” Tears were dripping down Marlyn’s cheeks.

“The potion only lasted until the first time you kissed Gant. Any feelings you have had for the man since then are entirely your own. I just had to get you out of the clutches of a madman. I’m sorry I never told you.”

“The first kiss?” Marlyn smiled. “It wore off with the first kiss?”

The Witch nodded.

“So I’ve really been in love with him all this time?”

She nodded again. “If it’s any consolation, I think you’d have been dead not long after you married the prince. The first time he hit you, he’d have discovered how capable you were with a sword.”

“Yes, Prince Merio’s turned out to be quite a catch.” She looked at the wall. “I wish you’d told me. I thought we were friends.”

“I wish I had, too. I’m sorry.”

Marlyn moved to look out the small window. “At least I found out about it before the end. The sun’s coming up.”

The Witch had more to tell. “About Gant’s health—” she began, but guards opened the cell door and dragged Marlyn away. The Witch discovered Zeemis hadn’t put a spell on her to keep her in the cell; he’d put one on her to yoke her to Marlyn. She was tugged down the hall after Marlyn and the guards.

In the courtyard, five gallows had been constructed, each one with a new rope affixed. Guards led in the Knight, his Lady, the Juggler, and the Mage, all chained and still covered in slime from the drainage tunnels. The guards dragged the four heroes up the stairs and held them while they placed ropes around their necks.

The Witch, standing with the guards and Marlyn at the foot of the stairs, noted the Mage was ashen but only had eyes for his wife. She too was watching her husband, concern for him and her comrades evident in the tears on her face.

“No!” she cried as Merio and Zeemis appeared and climbed the gallows. The gates had been opened and the townspeople crowded in, quiet and uncertain why they had been summoned.

“I’ll marry you!” Marlyn shouted. “Please let them go!”

Zeemis whispered something to his liege, and the young man’s face hardened. He turned to the crowd.

“Last night these men and women tried to murder me, your king! I decree that everyone who was or is a member of the Bold Company shall be hunted down and killed like the animals they are.”

The guards cheered and the people murmured. Many had been saved by members of the company in the past; many more had been punished by the new king with high taxes and harsh treatment.

Before the king could continue, the Mage drew himself to his full height. “It is you who are the murderer here,” he cried, looking directly at Merio. “You don’t deserve to wear the crown!”

The crowd grew louder and Merio became enraged at the interruption. Without hesitating, he strode to where the guards were holding the Mage and slapped him. Zeemis tried to stop him, but it was too late. A flash of lightning and a crash of thunder made the crowd cower and the guards look skyward. On the gallows, the Mage looked confused and the king stood taller.

The Witch and Zeemis disappeared.

The king turned to the guards. “Release these people, all except the

Mage. He shall be gagged and placed in the dungeon.”

The confused guards did as they were told, and the crowd cheered as the chains fell away. A cloaked woman in the crowd was able to get to Marlyn as she confronted the king and demanded the Mage’s release. “Marlyn,” the woman whispered, taking her arm and leading her toward the castle, “it’s me, the Witch.”

“How?” she asked.

“Some villagers smuggled my body into the courtyard with them. When Zeemis disappeared, his confinement spell was broken. Quickly, we must get inside with the others.”

Shortly afterward, Marlyn looked around at the odd group gathered in the king’s private chambers. Members of the Bold Company surrounded Merio. “What’s happening?”

“My Maid,” said the king, “always the passionate one.”

“How dare you speak to me?” she shouted. “Release my husband at once!” She grabbed a decorative spear from the wall and approached the king, but instead of cowering, he stepped forward and kissed her.

Marlyn struggled briefly and then kissed him back. She pulled away and looked at the king. “I know that kiss. What is going on?”

“It was my idea,” said the Juggler, taking a seat. “When the Witch told me a familiar evil was oozing across the land, she and I came up with a plan to find who it was and stop it.”

Marlyn looked up at the king. “So how come Gant is Merio? Is it some kind of glamour? An illusion?”

“No,” said the Witch, going to the window and opening it. “It’s a very difficult incantation, one that took me over a year to accomplish. Gant now resides in Merio’s body. Permanently. Merio resides in Gant’s old body. One that is very sick and won’t last long.”

Marlyn looked at Gant accusingly but dropped the spear. “You were sick?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “I didn’t want you to worry. The Juggler knew something was wrong the last time he came through, and he told the Witch.”

The Juggler held up his hands. “With Zeemis back, the king destroying the kingdom, and Gant sick, we had to come up with something.”

Marlyn frowned at the Witch. “So everyone knew about the body switching but me?”

“You were the keystone to the entire thing,” said the woman. “We needed you to run to Merio to flush out Zeemis, but we knew the wizard would know if you were lying. He was using Merio’s life force to exist.

With Merio now in Gant's old body, there's not enough life left to sustain Zeemis."

"You slapped...you," said Marlyn, looking at her husband. "The spell took effect when Merio touched you?"

"Yes," said Gant, taking her in his arms. "And it's permanent, I'm afraid. You're just going to have to get used to the new me."

"The only ones who know are in this room," said the Juggler. "And in the dungeon. We'll have to exile the real Merio somewhere far away."

Marlyn turned to the Witch. "But how did the others know Zeemis had revealed himself to us? You were in your ghost form and imprisoned."

"That would be me," said a scratchy voice from the window. Landrau hopped onto the ledge. "I was outside the cell window. I went back and told the Juggler and the Mage every word the smug rat said. It was the least a familiar could do." He hung his head.

The Witch smiled and ran her finger down the bird's chest. "Well done, Landrau. Thank you."

"So what happens now?" asked Marlyn. "I guess Gant won't get his retirement after all."

"I'm afraid not," said the Witch. "The king suddenly becomes a new man, a real monarch. His first action will be to pardon and reinstate the Bold Company. Then he needs to clean out that dungeon."

"Think you can handle being a queen?" Gant asked Marlyn.

"I was always a queen," she replied. "I just have a lot more to dust now."

She let the others make plans for the future and joined the Witch at the window. Below she could see the courtyard where carpenters were already at work dismantling the gallows.

"A new, old husband," she said. "That'll take some getting used to. So, what did it cost you?"

"What do you mean?" asked the Witch, still petting Landrau who was being uncharacteristically quiet.

Marlyn gestured around the room, suddenly brighter with her friends laughing and talking. "You said magic costs. What did it cost for you to transfer Gant into Merio?"

The woman smiled and hugged her friend. "Well, you're going to have to call me Wanda from now on."

With a mournful caw, Landrau left his former mistress and took to the air.

Tom Howard is a banking software analyst in Little Rock, Arkansas. He is a

dad, grandpa, photographer, world traveler, and science fiction and fantasy author. Primarily a short story writer with nineteen short stories sold, Tom is a member of the Central Arkansas Speculative Fiction Writers' Group and the Little Rock Science Fiction Society. Tom has had stories published in *Andromeda Spaceways In-flight Magazine*, *Crossed Genres*, *It Lives, Volume 1: What Has Mother Wrought*, *Epocalypse*, *ParABnormal*, the *Corpus Pretereo (Escape the Body) Anthology*, and *Resident Aliens*.

UNDER THE BED

by Mike Phillips

Something was under the bed. Hearing people in the house, it scrambled deep into the shadows of the bed skirt. In darkness it took comfort, knowing this place afforded protection while it waited. Making a bivouac of elephants and panda bears, sweatshirts and tube socks, the creature readied itself for the night's scare.

As it settled in, the creature found its backside pricked by a spring. Stifling a cry of pain, it rolled over and clutched its bottom, bringing up its hand and tasting fresh blood. The wound was not a bad one, but it was a reminder not to be careless.

"Who's that?" came a voice from the closet, though to humans it would have sounded like the scratching of a tree branch on the windowpane. "Who's there?"

"Thudrott, is that you?" said Puttygut, the thing under the bed. He too could not be understood by people. He was speaking the secret language of monsters, and might have sounded to humans something like the settling of the house on its foundation or the creaking of floorboards in the next room.

"Worm guts and ashes," Thudrott swore, "you come for the new kid?"

Puttygut and Thudrott were trolls. They were of the smaller type and had very little magic about them. Often times they worked together, thieving eggs from bird nests or selling oddments they found in backyards, nothing to get them into serious trouble. Monstering was just a way for them to have a little fun, to make a sacrifice of human terror to some nameless devil, to fulfill their duty as creatures of the night.

"Bad little bugger, this one," Puttygut replied. "I seen him bullying some kids in the street, and he likes bugs."

"Yeah? You was always one for the proper study and all. Glad to see you're still doing business the right way. You know me, just popped in on a hunch."

"Glad to have you, cuz. I would have asked you to come, but you was nowheres to be found."

"Bad business at the creek. There was a dead skunk what was claimed by three or four of the boys, thought I might get some."

"Did you?"

"Naw."

“Raw deal that one, plain selfish.”

“Flies on a dung heap,” Thudrott agreed.

“Why don’t you come down here and we’ll work the little bugger together. Twice as much fun for us, uh? What do you think?”

“I’ll have a go, learn a bit of something from the master, too, I’d warrant. A new tricksie maybe?”

Puttygut gave a snort of laughter. “Maybe so, maybe so.”

The closet door slid partway open. A bulbous nose, thick with warts and tufted with green hair, appeared in the crack. Thudrott gave a cautious sniff. Getting caught was the worst mistake of all to a monster’s reputation. Each step slow and sure, an artist in the craft, he made his way across the floor.

Though small for a troll, Thudrott was bigger than Puttygut. He was crafty at raiding food-court dumpsters and had a prized stomach to show for it. Fitting under the bed proved difficult. No matter how he turned or how he sucked in his breath, he still could not make himself small enough.

“What you playing at?” Puttygut said, hearing footsteps on the stairs.

“If I can’t get bleeding stuck like a pig in a washtub,” Thudrott replied.

Hurrying to help his cousin, Puttygut braced himself against the bureau and pushed. With a tremendous effort, the bed frame lifted and Thudrott slid underneath. Even so, his belly pressed against the mattress, making a distinctive bulge above.

Lights came on in the hallway. It was bedtime. Tommy complained of not needing to go to the potty as the evening’s negotiations began. There was a sip of water to be had, and the hall light should be left on. Finally, the boy and his mother entered the room, the whining and scolding of bedtime like music to the troll’s ears.

Tommy flopped down on the mattress, knocking the wind out of Thudrott. “What was that?” the boy said, sounding nervous.

Puttygut put his hand over Thudrott’s mouth. He needn’t have bothered.

“That’s just the water heater, sweetheart,” the mother replied with finality.

Tommy knew better than to push his luck. Pulling up his knees, he allowed his mother to lift the covers. Into the bedclothes he slid, nice and comfy. The last kiss was given and another and one last and then one more and really I mean it.

The door was closed. The boy and the trolls were alone.

“Where shall we begin?” whispered Thudrott.

“Noises,” replied Puttygut. “It’s got to be noises for a start.”

“Excellent choice, a real classic.”

Employing his art, Puttygut moved his hand back and forth across the floor. The boy heard the slithering of scaled beasts, and his mind fixed upon the memory of a television show where a great serpent slid through a forest half a world away. Though huge and ungainly, the snake had caught a monkey and swallowed it whole.

Now the snake was in his bedroom. It moved over coloring books half finished and armies defeated in battle. As the snake came closer and closer to the bed, the boy’s fear became electric, crackling like static in the air.

“Mommy!” Tommy cried. “Mommy!”

Thudrott gave Puttygut a congratulatory pat on the shoulder as the mother stormed up the stairway. “What is it?” she said as she threw open the door, a reaction even better than the trolls could have hoped for.

Tommy had no reply.

“Not tonight, I don’t want to hear it.”

“But...”

“But nothing, young man. Tonight you are going to bed and we’re not going to go through all of this. Understand?”

“Can Buddy sleep with me? I’m scared.”

“No,” she said. “Go to sleep.”

“Can you leave the door open just a crack?”

Relenting, the mother said, “Okay, but go right to sleep.”

“Watch this,” Thudrott said when the mom had gone.

Scraping a fingernail, thick and black with age, along one of the slats of the bed frame, Thudrott made the boy hear something in the attic. Vampire bats might make a sound like that, claws digging the wood as they crawled from their roosts to feed. They would be hungry, having spent all day hiding from the light, doomed to a life of darkness for the evil deeds they had done. They were coming. They wanted blood.

A dog started barking. The window was open to accept the cool night air, and the dog sounded like it was right outside. Full of suspicion and anger, the dog kept up its protest, a warning the trolls recognized with no small amount of fear.

Below, the slider door rolled open. A man stepped out onto the patio and his voice called roughly, “Buddy? Buddy, quiet down.”

If his whimpering was any indication, Buddy wasn’t happy about the situation, but he obeyed his master. The dog growled deep in his throat,

deciding upon his next move, but he was outside and the danger Buddy sensed was inside.

“Time for more,” Puttygut said a little while later. He collected bits of old toys and loose threads from clothing and staples from the bed frame. “Time to make him suffer. Tommy likes bugs. I’ll show him bugs.”

Finding what he needed from the oddments under the bed, Puttygut went to work. An iron nail for a spinal column, a broken plastic building block for a body, wires from a radio for the many legs. Last was a spring clip with teeth, perfect for a head, more than adequate when sharpened.

“There’s a pretty bit of work,” Puttygut said to the crude spider.

Thudrott laughed, “Yeah, let it go. Let’s see what it can do.”

“Not yet. You have to give it life first.”

“Show me?” For all his usual bluster, Thudrott had become pleading. “Teach me how it’s done? I’ll give you half my spoils for a week. No, a month.”

Returning a sly look, Puttygut said, “It’s a pretty trick. I wouldn’t teach just anyone.”

“A year then, first pickle of whatever I find.”

Puttygut spat on his hand. “Done!” They shook and the deal was made.

Using what treasures he found, Puttygut showed Thudrott how to craft a body, giving it legs to move and teeth to strike. They worked together the mean shape of half a dozen beetles before they were finally satisfied with what they had accomplished.

A beetle in his hand, Thudrott gave it a savage push, saying “Go now and get him.” But it didn’t move.

“No, no, that’s not how it’s done,” Puttygut said. “Remember? You got to give it life. You got to give it a part of you.”

“Like a sacrifice?”

“Yes, like a sacrifice.”

Sticking a finger into his nose, Thudrott began feeling his way around. He had used up most of what was in there. Like so much human food, food-court spoils were in desperate need of some nasty flavoring to make them edible. Farther and farther he stuck his finger, coming up with very little until he was knuckle deep. There, as his finger went into his skull, he found something wild and wriggling.

Thudrott speared it with his fingernail, dragging the thing along the inside wall of his nose. The thing in his nose was long and rubbery, and fought to remain in the safety of its refuge, but Thudrott was determined to

have it. He pulled and pulled as it stretched and then broke off in his grasp.

“Yes,” Puttygut said approvingly. “That’ll do. That’ll do nicely. Spread it on nice and thick. There should be enough for all the beetles we’ve made.”

Covering the beetles, Thudrott recited the few words Puttygut had given him. It sounded like nonsense to his ears, but he could tell the power was beginning to ebb. The beetles were coming to life.

“Tell them, now. Tell them what to do.”

Not bothering to hide his voice, Thudrott said, “Get that little brat.”

The beetles scurried away, across the floor and towards the blanket hanging at the foot of the bed. The boy must have heard. His fear was tangible already, filling the trolls with pleasure.

Not to be left out of the fun, Puttygut went to work on the spider. Reaching down to his bottom, he contemplated the gash the spring had made. The blood was fresh and would begin flowing with little effort, but Puttygut was not certain of the nature of blood magic, so he pushed onward into the crack. The field was fertile there. His searching fingers found all he needed to give the spider life. With his sacrifice and the words, the spider was on its way.

Even then, the beetles were climbing the blanket. The boy knew something was happening, could feel the danger pressing in. The trolls drank the intoxication of his fright, sweeter than the finest wine, stronger than the harshest whiskey.

The spider climbed the wall near the headboard. The scratching of its legs was like the beating of drums in the quiet of the room. Tommy began to shake, mumbling nervously under his breath. The bugs were getting closer and closer, paying him back for all he had done to them, taking their revenge.

The trolls joined in the fun, making sounds of cockroaches the size of baseballs and desert scorpions with humongous pincers. The insects were all around. They swarmed over Tommy, crawling onto his clothes, his face, his hair.

Something was happening downstairs, something that filled the trolls with alarm. It was the faintest of scratching at the slider door. The trolls heard it and stopped what they were doing. The dog whimpered, ready to come inside the house, but deceptive, not acting agitated in any way, giving his master no cause for anger.

“Come on in, Buddy,” said the father, opening the door. “Good dog.”

Once inside, Buddy sprang into action. He hit the stairs at what sounded like a horse in full gallop.

“Come on, Buddy. Come on,” Tommy called out, elated.

“Show’s over, time to go,” said Puttygut, turning himself invisible. He was out from under the bed and to the window in a moment.

“You can’t leave me,” Thudrott cried.

Fat stomach stuck under the bed, he was trying to push on the frame with his hands while digging into the rug with his heels for leverage. Struck with compassion for his cousin, Puttygut went to help. He pulled and pulled on Thudrott’s legs, but couldn’t budge him.

“Stop it, stop it. You’re killin’ me.”

Hitting the top of the stairs, Buddy growled low in his throat. His paws thudded on the floor as he raced down the hall.

“Sorry cuz, you’re on your own.” Puttygut was off to the window, knowing he must escape or suffer the fate of his cousin.

Buddy had arrived. He was a shepherd mix, broad shouldered and in his prime. In a moment, he caught the scent and saw the movement no human could perceive. Muscles rippling under his fur, he crossed the room in a bound.

Puttygut was halfway out the window when he felt savage pain. Buddy’s teeth ripped into his backside. Struggling to be free, Puttygut gave a hard push and tumbled onto the lawn. Feeling like half his backside had been torn off, and it nearly had, Puttygut slipped into the bushes and was away.

Buddy wasn’t finished. He smelled Thudrott. The troll had just then managed to free himself. Now Buddy was after him. He bit into a leg, whipping his head back and forth, slamming Thudrott against the wall.

But this was not the first time Thudrott had encountered a dog. Often had he come across strays while raiding food-court dumpsters. He kept a small pouch in a place he could get to in an emergency. Even as he struggled, he managed to open the pouch and give it a gust of air.

“Take that, you worm farting mutt.”

The powder sailed into buddy’s face. The dog sneezed once, twice, but that was enough. In the confusion, Thudrott made his escape.

With the trolls defeated, there was little holding the beetles together. Buddy leaped onto the bed, smashing them to pieces. He headed straight for the boy, nipping the spider as it threatened to strike. Tommy threw his arms around Buddy and gave him a grateful hug.

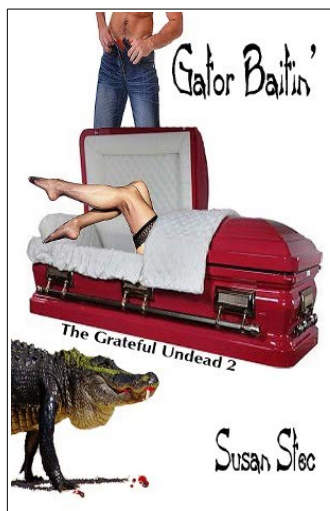
“Honestly, the two of you,” said the mother, standing in the doorway with her arms crossed over her chest, but she was not upset. “If I let him

sleep with you, will you promise to go right to sleep?"

"Yes!" Tommy said, already sliding down in the covers. Buddy yawned and laid his head on the boy's lap.

"Sweet dreams," the mother said as she smiled and pulled the door shut. "Good night, sleep tight, don't let the bedbugs bite."

Mike Phillips is the author of *Reign of the Nightmare Prince*, published by JournalStone. He has published several short stories both in print and online, including ParABnormal Digest, Sinister Tales, Dark Horizons, Pulp Empire and many others. He is best known for his *Crow Witch* and *Patrick Donegal* series.



THE GRATEFUL UNDEAD 2: GATOR BAITIN'

Susan's budding romance is taking a back seat in book 2 of THE GRATEFUL UNDEAD series, and her sexy immortal lover, Marcus, is having none of it.

In book one, THEY'RE SO VEIN, the women in the Stech family went from dentures to fangs, Depends to thongs, Dr. Scholl's® to stilettos, and bumbled their way into an undead lifetime of Critter Control when one of them inadvertently turned a raccoon into a vampoon.

GATOR BAITIN' begins as the team is dispatched to destroy a vamp-gator wreaking havoc at Gatorland in Orlando, only to get sidetracked by a serial killer investigation, a vamp-bull at a rodeo in Kissimmee, and a colorful demon named Rafael. Between bronco busting, dragon riding, Jesus-freak chasing, gator hunting, demon summoning and dead bodies

popping up everywhere, Susan's finding it hard to fit in a little romp time. Available on Kindle and Nook ereaders and in trade paperback.



Also available on Kindle and Nook ereaders and in trade paperback: THEY'RE SO VEIN (Volume 1 of THE GRATEFUL UNDEAD series).

Be careful what you pray for. I merely asked to live a long healthy life and hinted that I wouldn't mind starting over while keeping the knowledge I had accumulated in my 58 years. And if a better set of tits and less wrinkles were involved, I certainly wouldn't complain.

Well, I'm here to tell you, God does listen... to everything... and he's got quite a frigging sense of humor. I'm the undead proof.