

# ENCOUNTERS

M A G A Z I N E

ISSUE #12

DAMAGE CONTROL

Zoe McAuley

GREENWILLOW

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DAY JOB

Charles Ebert

THE SIEGE OF OSRIC

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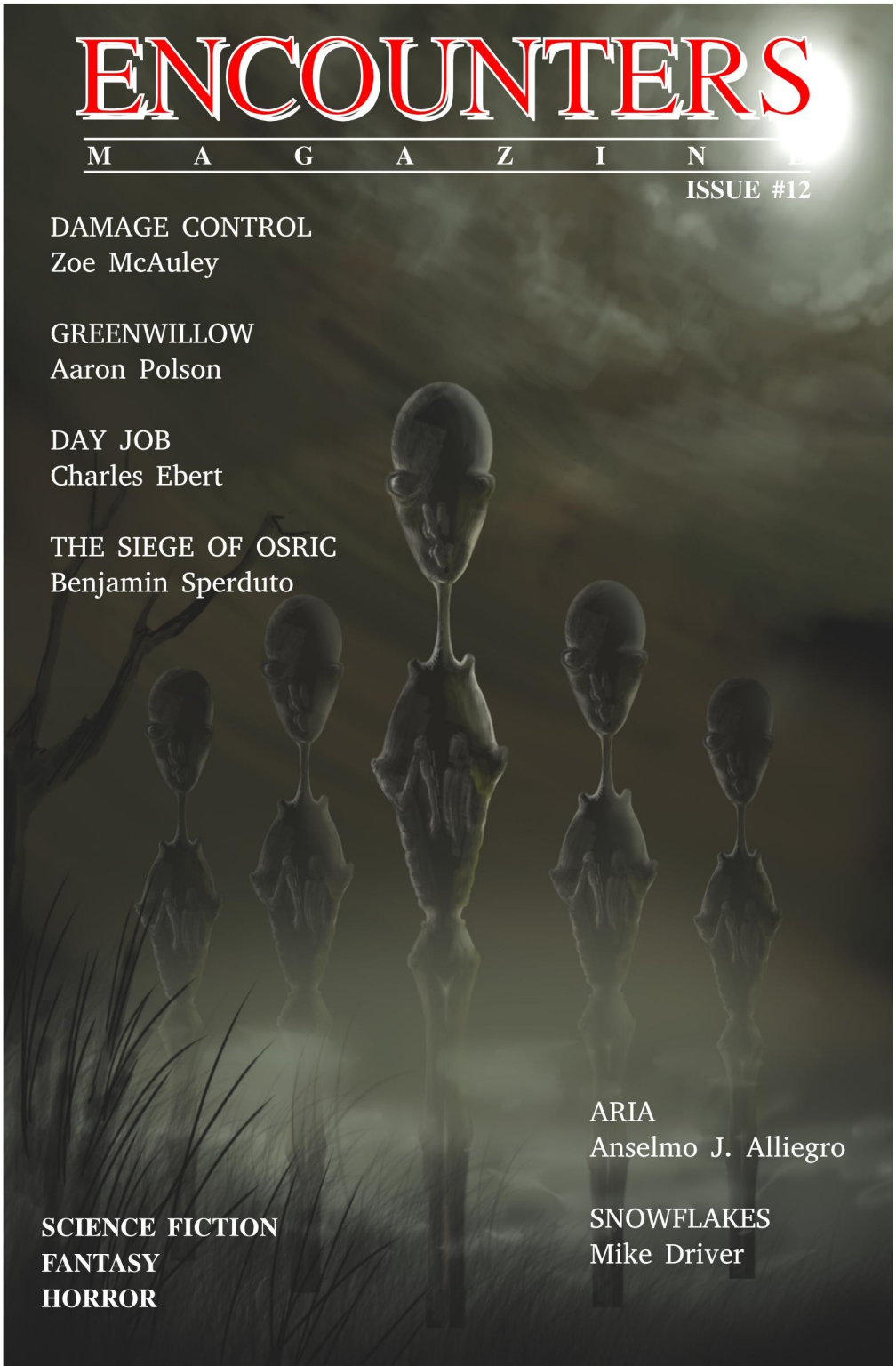
HORROR

ARIA

Anselmo J. Alliegro

SNOWFLAKES

Mike Driver



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**ABOUT OUR COVER ARTIST  
CHRIS OSMAN**

*Chris Osman is no stranger to the cover of Encounters Magazine and we are happy to present his work once again. You can check out his gallery and other links at [www.chrisosman.com](http://www.chrisosman.com).*

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**Volume 03      January/February 2015      Issue 12**

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## From the Editor's Desk

Welcome to issue #12 of Encounters. No, we didn't get kidnapped by aliens – we just had some unexpected delays pop up over the last few months, but we are still here with a renewed focus on making 2015 our best year ever.

Don't forget to check us out on Facebook and Like us while you're on the page:

**<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Encounters-Magazine-SF-Fantasy-and-Horror/580919448622951>** where we will post info on books we want to recommend as well as other news of interest to our readers, and make announcements of any special projects we've been discussing.

We'll see you again in March with issue #13.

Guy Kenyon  
Encounters Magazine  
01/06/2015

# DAMAGE CONTROL

by Zoe McAuley

Still bleary, Fiona washed down her medication with a swig of Relentless. A manilla folder bounced on her lap as Malcolm swung the land rover around another sharp bend in the crooked Highland road. A grey cloud-clogged dawn was breaking over the Scottish mountainside.

"You've read this, right?" Fiona said, waving the folder.

"Yes, Doc," Malcolm replied without taking his eyes off the road.

"Then give me the summary. I'll throw up if I try to read this while we're driving."

"Call from a mobile about two hours ago. A woman, they think. The signal's terrible here, so it probably wasn't their first attempt to get through. Their message was pretty broken too. Mostly just screams for help, but she did mention an outbreak as the source of it. Location is Glen Kinnaird Holiday Cabins. The owner thinks three of the cabins were occupied - one family of five, one couple, four students. The phone call suggested some are definitely dead."

"Any idea how many vectors there were?"

"Nope."

"Wonderful."

The land rover bumped along at an unsettling speed for the tightly turning roads. Two vans followed more hesitantly behind it. Half an hour later, a jolly sign pointed down a track to Glen Kinnaird Holiday Cabins,

*Get Ready To Get Away.* Malcolm ground the land rover to a halt, blocking the road. The two vans completed the barricade.

Fiona downed the last of her energy drink and jumped out onto the gravel road, breathing in the mountain air. She had donned her body armour and equipment belt before leaving. While Malcolm and the others collected their gear and supplies, she took in the surroundings. Dense pine forest surrounded the track and quilted much of the hillside, giving away to open heather heaths on the surrounding peaks. The morning mist still coiled about the lower, branchless reaches of the tree-trunks. Perfect cover for vectors.

"Doctor MacKenzie, we're ready to go," said Malcolm.

A dozen in number, the team was a mixture of ex-army guards, armed with Argentine-loaded rifles and Aconiticaine dartguns, and medics, equipped for treating an outbreak.

"Right, we'll move in a defensive formation," Fiona ordered. "Locating the cabins and sweeping each one. There are believed eleven civilians on site and an unknown number of vectors. Eyes out and let's go."

Fiona led the squad, the guards ringed around the medics, their eyes sweeping continually back and forth over the woodlands. The gravel track wound through the trees for fifteen minutes' march, before opening into a rough carpark. Further up the hillside, half a dozen cabins peeked down from their perches, thin paths leading to their doors.

The woods were silent, devoid even of bird-calls. Three cars had been parked in the clearing. Two remained

untouched, but the third lay near the trackway, partly smashed against a tree and tilted into a small ditch. Two swerving furrows in the gravel led up to its resting place. The roof was partly torn away, with a spray of blood crusted upon the remaining shards of the windscreen.

The little squad halted at Fiona's quick gesture. Dartgun drawn, Fiona approached the car alone. It stank of blood and worse. She didn't need to get close to see inside. Both the front seats were soaked a deep red. In the driver's seat, some ragged remnants of a person remained, caught up in the steering wheel. A pair of men's shoes and feet still rested on the pedals. The passenger door hung open, a crumpled mess, with a smear of blood and offal leading a few metres towards the woods and ending in a splatter of gnawed and scattered bones. Fiona felt her skin crawl and her stomach rise. She popped out another pill, dry-swallowing this one before returning to the squad. The newest of the medics looked green.

"Two dead. Probably trying to escape when it caught them. Could be any of them, but I'm guessing it was the couple until further notice. Let's head up to the first cabin."

"Shouldn't we... do something with that?" asked the young medic. His name was Ben, she recalled.

"No. Living before dead. Basic triage. Is this your first run with us?"

He nodded. "Used to work in a casualty department."

"You poor sucker. Now let's go."

They moved up one of the tracks, eyes still raking the woodlands. The smell of blood followed them - Fiona picked out red tracks on the path, pressed into the earth

by heavy pads and long claws.

The first cabin proved to be empty, as did the second, the only disturbance a few upturned bins. The third cabin's door hung open, furniture tipped over and suitcases scattered. The back door had been deeply clawed but not breached. The sweep found no bodies, but an abandoned handbag contained the drivers license of one of the couple known to be staying there, Malcolm informed her.

The musky stench of a vector mid-episode hung around the fourth cabin like a fog. Fiona fought down a swell of anger as she spotted a drying pool of blood leading under the cabin's veranda. She ducked under, certain that the musk was a few hours old. In the shadows lay another corpse, more complete than the others. Only one leg was missing. It was a man in his late 30s or early 40s, curled up with one hand still clamped around a fire-axe. Thick, almost black blood coated the axe blade. He had struck the vector, though that was cold comfort now, Fiona mused. His chest was mud-streaked, dirt ground beneath his fingernails.

"He dragged himself under the cabin," she told the squad as she emerged. "After hacking at a vector with an axe. It probably got his leg as he was escaping. Bled to death from the wound. Cabin next."

As Fiona led the way up the steps, she caught the slightest sounds of movement and muttered words inside. Deep gouges marked the door, piercing it in places. She tried the handle and found it locked.

"I think we have survivors. Hello!" she yelled. "Is anyone in there? It's the Lycanthropy First Response Unit."



We're here to rescue you. We received your call."

The movements within stopped suddenly. There was no response.

"Probably can't hear us. Malcolm, got the ram? Take the door down."

A few of the guards and the portable ram made short work of the damaged wooden door. The living room had been stripped of large furniture, a pool of glass lying beneath the fire-axe case. Two of the bedroom doors lay open, the beds gone. Fiona knelt down by the third bedroom door and rapped it gently. She caught a few high-pitched whimpers from the room beyond.

"Listen," she said in a firm, calm tone. "I'm Doctor Fiona MacKenzie. I'm part of the Lycanthropy First Response Unit. We've come to help you. I know you're scared and you've every reason to be, but you'll be safe now. I've got eight heavily armed squaddies out here with me, and four medics who want to help you. Please open the door so that we can help you."

She heard a whispered conversation between one adult voice and at least two childish ones, before the screech of dragged furniture stung her ears. She stepped back, waving the medics forward and the guards back.

The door opened a crack, a small face peering out. The girl couldn't have been more than ten years old. Her wide eyes flickered over the team before she swung the door open fully. Beds, chests of drawers and tables were piled haphazardly to one side of the door, a crude barricade deconstructed. Beyond the girl, Fiona saw a woman sitting against the far wall, a toddler squeezed tightly to her chest and a boy of about six years cowering beneath

one arm.

"Where's Daddy?" whimpered the eldest girl.

"First, we need to make sure that you're all healthy," Fiona told her, hoping to put off the answer. "I'm going to come in and check you over, and Ben here is going to help me. Is that alright?"

The girl looked to her mother, who nodded. Fiona slowly approached the mother and younger children, taking out her testing device. She crouched next to them, while Ben stepped towards the older girl.

"Are any of you injured, to your knowledge?" Fiona asked.

"Just a few scratches, on me and Sophie," the woman stumbled over her words. "It clawed through the door. We were holding it shut. My husband is—"

"We'll just deal with everyone in here first," Fiona cut in. "Now, have any of you been vaccinated against lycanthropy?"

"All of us but Jamie," she bounced the toddler as she replied. "He's too young."

"I see. You should all be fine, but to be on the safe side, Ben and I are going to check your blood. This is a lycantometer. It's like the machines diabetics use to check their blood sugar. I'll need each of you to stick a finger in this hole and it'll prick you, just a little. Then it'll tell me if there's any risk that you're infected. We'll also give you another booster of the vaccine, just to be sure."

The woman raised the hand wrapped around her middle child and cringed slightly as the lancet stabbed her fingertip. A minute later, the results appeared on the small in-built screen.

The virus had entered her system, but the vaccine appeared to be working.

"You'll be fine," Fiona said. "Though you'll feel unwell for the next few days. Now, what's your name?" she addressed the six year old.

"Ewan," he whispered.

"Could you go next, Ewan? I need you to show little Jamie that it's alright. Can you be brave and do that for him?"

The boy snuggled even closer to his mother, but reached out with a small hand. To his credit, he barely squeaked when his finger was pricked.

Clear of the virus. Vaccine present.

Little Jamie screamed when it was his turn, but he was free of the virus and the vaccine. Fiona looked to Ben. He nodded, standing next to Sophie as she sucked on her finger.

"Lycanthrix activated," he said, jargon for virus detected but vaccine at work.

"You'll all be fine," Fiona said. "Now, Ben and Kathy here are going to give you some more vaccine and clean up your scratches, while I ask you some questions about last night, alright?"

The woman nodded, herding her children into the living room where the medics began their work. Fiona sat on a chair opposite the woman as Kathy injected and swabbed.

"I know you've been through a difficult situation and aren't feeling well, but I need you to tell me as much as you can, even if it's confused or unclear, so that we can help the other people staying here."

"We heard shouting from the next cabin over," the woman began, eyes wet and breath gasping. "About 4am, I think. At first, we thought it was just a row, the couple in the next cabin, Claire and John, they didn't seem to be getting on very well. Then... then they were screaming. Both of them. It was real fear. I'd never heard real fear before. There was a commotion and we saw them running downhill through the window. Then a car started and crunching and the screaming stopped. We'd seen reports on the TV... that was when we started moving the furniture. Then we heard it sniffing at the door, and it started bashing and clawing. Sophie and I held it shut while Nick finished moving the furniture. It all went quiet for a bit. That's when Nick got the fire-axe and said he wasn't going to cower inside when he had his wife and kids to protect. He went out..."

Fiona waited while the woman hugged her children closer.

"We heard a fight and then we barricaded ourselves in the bedroom. There were other sounds later, and the howling and-"

"Boo-boos!" said Jamie suddenly, pointing at Fiona's face, his enormous eyes fixed on her.

Fiona ran a hand over her tender skin. She'd glanced in a mirror before she'd headed out. She knew she was bruised across the temples and jaw, while two black eyes were forming either side of a bloody nose. She had thought she'd gotten off most of the blood.

"Yes, boo-boos," she sighed.

"Fall over?" the toddler asked.

"No. Don't worry. I'll be fine."

Both mother and child looked at her, waiting for further explanation, but Fiona gave none. Instead she stood, taking command again.

"Malcolm, I'm leaving you in charge here. Kathy, you and you two," she pointed at a guard and a medic, "stay here. The rest of us will continue the sweep. We'll bring any other survivors back here. Right, let's move."

"Wait," said the woman. "What about my husband?"

Fiona hated this part, more than the bodies and the attacks, more than the long moonlit nights.

"I'm sorry," she said simply.

The widow began to choke back tears and Fiona left, followed by part of her team.

The fifth cabin was also unoccupied, still in perfect shape for incoming visitors.

The door of the sixth cabin had been smashed in half. The living room was a mess, but she suspected that it had been before the attack, with beer bottles stacked in corners and junk food crushed underfoot. The leftovers of a large lasagna still sat on the coffee table, crockery piled around it. The smell of death hung over the mundane messiness of a good night in.

In a short hallway was the body of a young woman, the neck almost bitten through, though otherwise she was almost intact. The vector hadn't had a chance to eat her. Fiona noted as she stepped over the corpse, avoiding the gaze of her glassy eyes.

She drew in a deep breath. The musky scent was thick here, and newer than any other she had found yet. Between that and the corpse stench, she could pick out a third interesting scent. Someone was still alive nearby.

Her team arrayed themselves around the entrance to the hallway as Fiona approached the furthest door. She pushed lightly on the door. It creaked open.

"Who's there!" someone yelled frantically.

It was a sizable bathroom, now awash with blood, both red and black. Another corpse was spread across the floor. His limbs were too long and gaunt, thick grey fur covering his skin. Glistening claws tipped fingers and toes, while the jaw jutted forward, canines poking from between the lips. A few scraps of clothes were matted into the fur or tangled around the legs. A fire extinguisher rested next to the caved-in skull, the flesh scorched with the distinctive burns of silver contact.

The legends were wrong about vectors changing back to their human form at death. Like every other biological function, transformation ceased when they died.

"Get away! I'm dangerous!"

The survivor was huddled in the bath itself, blood-soaked and trembling. He couldn't have been much older than twenty, pale, short dark hair, t-shirt and jeans - utterly nondescript, easy to lose in university crowds. Through the gore, Fiona could make out the deep trail of claw marks on his arms, scarred over in only a few hours.

"It's alright. We're from the Lycanthropy First Response Unit. We're here to help. You're safe now."

"No! You can't... you can't help me. It's too late. Too late," the young man sobbed.

Fiona took a step forward and he immediately stiffened, pressing against the tiled wall.

"No! Stay back. I'm going to stop this! Don't come any nearer!"

He exposed a wrist and held something small against it - the pin of a silver cuff-link. His fingertips were already red from exposure to it.

"I'll finish this right now. I won't end up like him!"

Fiona let out a long breath and weighed the situation. He had been there for hours and had not killed himself - that suggested reluctance. But all it would take was a moment's resolve to do the deed. She could shoot him full of Aconiticaine, but there was little research into what that would do in such an early stage of infection. And if she was honest with herself, she didn't want to make his day any more hellish than it had to be. She took a step back.

"Listen to me. Will you at least help us help your friends? We were told that there were four of you. We don't know what's happened to two of them. Can you tell us anything?"

He hesitated, the pin moving a little way from his wrist.

"I think... I think Luke and Andrew ran out the back into the woods when it... when it got in."

"Did you see any signs of any lycanthropes apart from this one?"

He shook his head.

"He thinks the two others ran into the woods," she yelled up the corridor. "I have one contact survivor and one dead vector here. He doesn't think that there was another vector. One of you heavies stay in the living room. The rest of you, go search the woods behind this cabin."

All her squad began to move except Ben, staring down the hallway, his face covered in concerned confusion.

"Will you be safe here?" he mouthed. He knew what 'contact survivor' was code for. "What if he turns?"

Fiona lent around the door frame to hide her response from the boy in the bath.

"I'm perfectly safe. Safer than any of you. And moonrise is at 8.27 PM. Now get moving," she mouthed back, gesturing him away. He followed the squad reluctantly.

"Right, the others are going to go and find your friends. If this was the only one, they should be fine. Heather is going to stay in the living room, just make sure we're safe. Otherwise, it's just you and me," she told the student calmly, easing into negotiator mode.

"But you're in danger! I could change... I could kill you."

"Even if you are infected, you won't change. The moon rises at about half eight tonight. You have plenty of time. I'm perfectly safe. Don't worry about me. Now, what's your name?"

"It's... it's Connor."

"Hello, Connor. I'm Doctor Fiona. Now we're going to talk through what's happened and what's going to happen. There's no rush. We have plenty of time. Now, did you use the fire extinguisher?"

He nodded and wretched a little, yielding nothing. The contents of his stomach was already part of the grime coating the floor.

"I hit it until it was just lying there, twitching, and then... then I pressed my cuff-links into its... its brain. They're silver. They were a present. It squirmed..."

"You were only defending yourself. You were very brave. You probably saved your friends and you definitely saved the mother and her three children in one of the



other cabins."

She glanced over the lycanthrope's body again, noting the chopped wounds in its torso, in addition to the bludgeoned skull. Nick's efforts with the fire-axe probably slowed it down enough for this weedy youngster to have a chance. In one way Connor was lucky - only a few months ago it had become law that killing a lycanthrope in self-defence during an episode wasn't even manslaughter.

"I see you were injured. I'm sure you know the risks involved with that. So, were you ever vaccinated against lycanthropy?"

He shook his head, letting loose another wave of tears.

"I was off school that day, when they did everyone a few years ago, and I never got around to getting it. I meant to, I really did."

"Well, you might still be alright. There's a chance you haven't been infected," she lied. She needed to check the strength of infection. "I have a device to check, but I'll need you to put your finger into the reader, so that it can take a blood sample. Is that alright?"

He made no move to stop her, instead offering a hand. She had to swab away the gore from his hands before she could take a reading. As it analysed his blood, she retreated to give him his space.

The results flashed up - full infection, extensive enough to trigger an episode that night. It was just as she had expected.

"Am I a werewolf?" Connor said in a small voice.

"You have contracted lycanthropy-"

"I knew it!" he shrieked, the cuff-link darting towards

his wrist.

"Wait! Connor, please. It's not the end of everything. We can deal with this."

He halted as the pin pricked gently against his skin. It began to swell like an insect bite. He cringed and drew the cuff-link anyway.

"How can you say that? My life is over. Everything's ruined. It's all over."

"That's not true, Connor. The condition can be managed. You can live a normal life."

"Like hell I can. How can I live a normal life when I turn into ...into *that*?" He stared at the dead werewolf. "When I could kill everyone around me?"

"There's no risk of that if you take the right precautions. Episodes are easy to predict - it's just the three nights around full moon, during the hours between the moon rising and setting. You're no risk to anyone outside those times."

"And during those times? I'll be a monster."

"There's facilities for that. Where do you live?"

"Leeds..."

"There's an NHS containment facility in Sheffield you should be able to use. I can get that all set up for you."

"You mean the Kennels?" his lip curled as he said that.

"I hear that's what they call it," Fiona said as evenly as she could. In the back of her head, there was a flash of rage at the sound of his scorn, tangled in memories of other scathing words. As subtly as she could, she popped out and gulped down another pill. "It has rooms capable of containing a werewolf during an episode. You can go through it with or without tranquillisers."

"What difference does it make?" he asked, a hint of true enquiry in his voice. She could tell that he was considering it, imagining himself raging in a cell.

"Well, if you're tranquillised, then obviously you won't do much, but it does leave you rather groggy for days and they may be addictive or have some long-term issues. Without them, you'll just thrash about your room throughout the episode. It'll leave you tired and probably a bit battered, but there are no other side effects."

Connor slumped against the bath-tub, closing his eyes and letting free a long sigh, as if crushed by the sudden burden in his life.

"And the rest of the time? I've heard the stories. Werewolves flipping out and hurting people, even when they aren't changed. They're always on the news. Didn't one of them almost beat a kid to death in the middle of a supermarket last week? I don't want that to be me."

Fiona was glad that she had already taken a pill.

"There's medication for that, an extract of wolf's bane. There's other ways too. I hear meditation helps. There's stories about whole monasteries of lycanthropes in Nepal who can control their episodes completely. These accidents only happen when people don't take their medication, when they're trying to keep it a secret. The condition can be controlled, Connor, if you put the effort in."

He stared blankly ahead for a few minutes. Then suddenly he was kicking out at the side of the bath in front of them, grimacing with frustration. The plastic shattered and the plyboard snapped.

"I don't want to put the effort in! I want to be normal! I

just got a placement with an accountancy firm, after I graduate. I've worked hard for that and now it's just gone! Just gone, because of some random nut job."

"It's not gone, Connor."

"Oh yeah? What happens when they find out? Or when I try to get three days off a month? I can't talk to clients when I look beaten up or pop pills whenever they annoy me. They won't take the risk. They don't let werewolves be teachers or in the police. I'll be put on that register. No one will give me a job. I'm screwed."

Fiona sighed, letting her neutral negotiator persona drop away.

"So some people are dicks. Some other people are scared. People have believed all kinds of nonsense about each other - this is just the latest one. Werewolves can get jobs. They can even finish medical degrees and work in an emergency service."

Connor's eyes widened as he slowly looked over her, noting the thickly joined eyebrows, the hair on her upraised palms. She pushed up a sleeve to reveal four thick parallel scars across her forearm.

"During my clinical training. It was just an appointment in an eye clinic. She was perfectly normal, maybe a little twitchy. Moonrise happened to be during the consultation. It didn't take long for the specialists to get there and sedate her, but I'd already gotten clawed up. The consultant managed to get out at once, but I wasn't so lucky. She was between me and the door. This was before the vaccine."

"What did you do?" Connor asked quietly, glancing at the broken bath with a touch of embarrassment.

"Took some time off. Got used to it. Finished up my medical degree and then specialised in lycanthropy. I was interested in what was happening to me and, well, there was no risk of infection from patients. It makes you fairly resilient and comes with a fine sense of smell, as some small consolation."

"That's why you weren't scared?"

"Yep. And why I look like I've been beating my face against a wall, because I have. I prefer to go without the tranquillisers, but you should try both before you decide."

"Does it... does it hurt? The changing?"

"A fair bit. But the memory is pretty blurry afterwards. And I've studied medicine, I know how much worse life can get before it kills you. Now, are you ready to come with me and give it a try? We can take you back to the First Response Centre tonight. I'll talk you through it all. We can have cells right next to each other, if it'll help. Let's get out of this room and get you cleaned up."

For a minute or two, Connor sat in silent thought. Finally he staggered to his feet, his body stiff and his clothes stiffer with dried blood. He picked past the corpse, trying to avoid looking at his handiwork. As he reached Fiona, he dropped his cuff-links into her hand.

"So that I can't..."

The silver stung like a nettle as it touched her skin, but she tried not to let it show. She slipped them into a pocket as quickly as she could.

With a hand on his back, she gently steered him down the hallway, giving him a moment to whimper and wretch at the wreckage of his friend. Heather fell into step without a word as they headed out onto the veranda. The

rest of the team were emerging from the woods, escorting two bedraggled young men. Connor made a broken, joyful sound.

"You can go talk to them, if you like. As I said, there's no danger."

He darted off at once. The three students crashed together in a mass of grief and relief.

Fiona rested against the porch railing. As the sense of urgency faded, the kick of her energy drink also began to evaporate. Suddenly her head felt light and buzzy. She forced herself through a mental checklist. The likely source of the attack had been located and was already dealt with - there would be checks later at the morgue, attempts to match him to missing persons or known lycanthropes. All those believed to be on site had been accounted for. Seven out of eleven was a better survival rate that she had expected, with only one infected. It was almost a pleasant morning's work. There would have to be sweeps of the forest and enquiries in nearby settlements, but she was willing to reduce the level of emergency.

Now they just had to get the survivors back to the First Response Centre in Inverness and send the clean-up crew to scrub down this place. She wondered if she could make someone else lead the children past the various mangled bodies.

Her night's exertions were rapidly catching up with her. She had a bunk in the Centre. If they moved out soon, perhaps she'd even catch a few hours of sleep before another night in the cells, clawing at the walls.

*Damage Control* is Zoe McAuley's first appearance in Encounters.

# GREENWILLOW

by Aaron Polson

Rumors about Greenwillow had made their way to the Tasty Pastry, the repository for all rumors in Springdale. Old men in feed hats, flannel shirts, suspenders, and dirt-caked boots buzzed with news about Calvin, the groundskeeper, and how he “just up and disappeared” the week before. Steam rose from coffee cups as the voices mashed together. John Haddox, standing in line behind the pastry-filled case, caught snatches of the conversation, mostly rehashes of Elroy Jantz’s first proclamation: “Ol’ Calvin just up and disappeared.” He tightened his grip on Libby’s shoulders.

“Ow, Dad,” she whined, ponytail swinging to one side. Her blue eyes sparked at her father.

“Sorry.” John’s fingers relaxed, but his ears didn’t.

Rumors lived long, healthy lives in a town like Springdale, a collection of a few odd thousand residents nestled in the hills north and east of the Broughton River. Springdale was always sleepy, slow traffic, slow business, and slow thinking. Trees loved Springdale and the northeast Kansas climate, clogging the horizon in every direction, crowding close with their winter-dead branches. The houses slept, too, old quiet Victorians on 4<sup>th</sup> Street and the regimented blocks of bungalows lined neatly up the heights toward the high school in the east. To the south and west, the Broughton River napped under the ice, a shining silver ribbon coiled like a lazy snake in



the sun.

“Ruth’s sister say she saw Calvin just before he took off. Said he was at the post office muttering something about the pond and wasn’t making much sense.”

*But when did Calvin make sense?*

The day before, while serving lunch duty in the cafeteria at Springdale High, John had overheard a few kids talking—just high school dares and nonsense he suspected—about Greenwillow Cemetery. Homecoming waited two weeks away, and student pranks were business as usual during the week of toilet paper, beer-fueled bad decisions, and bonfires. Homecoming landed in October this year.

October, he had assumed, was reason enough for kids to build their dares around Greenwillow. The old men were talking, though, the Stygian witches of Springdale, and Calvin had vanished. Calvin had been his student fifteen years before... English class... Despite being called “Ol” by the men at the bakery, he would only be a year or two past thirty...

“Daddy?”

John’s attention snapped away from memory fog at Libby’s voice.

“Daddy, can I have a nut roll?”

“Yes, sweetie. Anything you want.”

Libby Haddox collected pencils and stored them under her bed in a brown shoebox, the same shoebox in which her purple wedding shoes had come before Daddy’s wedding. She had pencils with white erasers and pink

erasers, pencils made of wood and plastic and even one reconstructed from shredded dollar bills. One pencil held a small plastic cylinder of polished rocks between the lead and the eraser. She examined her pencils before bed, sometimes arranging them by color or length or the writing on the sides. Sometimes she made a rainbow, other times rectangular stacks like a maze on her comforter.

She was there, on the comforter, sorting her pencils when John came to say goodnight.

“Hey, honey. How’s the collection?”

Libby’s face pinched into a frown. “Okay, I guess.”

John nodded. He held his breath for a moment, stomach tight and awkward as he always felt at home around his daughter. There had been too many questions without answers after Kathy’s death... after her suicide. Now, after he remarried, Libby seemed like a fistful of razor-edged questions he wasn’t sure he wanted to answer even though he knew.

“Good day at school?” he asked.

“Good enough,” she said. Her pudgy hands started dumping the pencils in the box. For all the regimen and logic of her bed-top organization, the pencils tumbled into the box in a disordered heap every night, clacking together like tiny bones. She slid the lid into place and studied her father’s face. “I kept thinking about something. Something kind of bad and I wanted it out of my head.”

John shifted on the bed. “Okay. Do you want to tell me about it?”

She shrugged. “Sort of.”

He disliked the game. That's what it seemed like to him, a game. How could he get his little girl to speak up and share what was brewing in her young brain? Kathy had seemed so natural at this, and it wasn't right to put Gina through the meat grinder. Besides, Libby might not want to talk to Gina. Neither he nor Gina wanted to push the nine-year-old too far so soon after the wedding. Becoming a family would take time. He knew it.

"Please?" he asked, yielding to the game.

She hopped off the bed, tucked the box underneath, and then climbed back to sit next to him. "Okay. Those men at the bakery kind of scared me this morning. What were they talking about?"

John took a breath and held it for a moment before speaking. "Just a student of mine. A former student, a guy named Calvin."

"Did he work where we buried Mommy?"

"Yes," John said.

Libby blinked hard and rubbed the backs of her fists over her eyes. When she looked back at her father, her eyes flashed brilliant blue, just like Kathy's. "Did he bury Mommy?"

"No. No, he just mows the lawns. Takes care of the trees."

Libby nodded approval and crawled under the comforter. John leaned in for a quick goodnight kiss, and moved toward the door.

"Daddy?"

He paused with a finger on the light switch. "Yes?"

"One of my pencils is missing."

The tense knot shifted in his stomach, a slight twitch.

“Okay. Just one?”

“Yes. Just one. One Mommy gave me.”

John Haddox consumed more alcohol in the six months after Kathy’s suicide than he had during five years of undergraduate study at Kansas State. Most of it was beer, two a night, three a night, working into four or five a night most of the week. Twenty extra pounds found his waist, and an extra chin hung from his jaw. Red eyes had greeted Springdale High students in his morning classes.

John hadn’t been drowning grief, exactly.

Memories had haunted him, tense, anxiety-addled memories of Kathy as she was after Libby’s birth, a Kathy whose temper burned too hot, too short, and too impossible for the woman with whom he had fallen in love. It wasn’t Kathy anymore, but few in Springdale—if anywhere—understood. Memories worked his tired brain after Libby reported a missing pencil, one Kathy had given the girl.

He lay in bed next to Gina and listened to her breathing, a slow, rhythmic rise-and-fall. She loved him, didn’t she? Very much, she would say. Maybe one drink, one beer might take the edge away from the memories and their crooked talons. He was debating the merits of a late night beer when the knock came. John turned to the bedside clock and read 1:35.

He glanced at Gina. She hadn’t stirred. He studied her face for a moment, partly waiting for the second knock, the knock he knew would come, and partly warming himself with the soft curve of her cheekbones and slightly

upturned nose. He knew he loved her in a different way than he ever could have loved Kathy, and the knowing always twisted a thick shaft of ice in his stomach.

The knock echoed again, and John slipped from bed. He snatched a t-shirt from the top of his dresser and hurried down the stairs, expecting anything—anything after the five o'clock wake up the morning Kathy steered her van off the Broughton River Bridge. Memories tied knots in his back and arms. His motions were stiff and uncomfortable as he touched the door and pressed his eye to the peephole.

Calvin.

Calvin, the man who had “disappeared,” stood on his porch fingering the stubby remnant of a cigarette.

John drew a breath and pulled the door open. “What do you want?” he asked through the storm door’s glass pane.

“Need to talk,” Calvin muttered. His hair clung to his skull in a disordered clump of natural curls and unnatural filth. He hadn’t bathed in weeks from the look of his grimy hands and dirt-lined face. John imagined the smell and crinkled his nose. Calvin shuffled his feet and shoved his fists into jeans pockets. “Need to talk to you, Mr. Haddox.”

He needed to keep Calvin from soiling the inside of the house, from stepping over the threshold and bringing something dirty into his home, something which reeked of Greenwillow. The thought didn’t bring pride—just a quick knee-jerk of discomfort. John pulled open the storm door just enough to step outside. Chill air pricked at his flesh.

“Things ain’t right, Mr. Haddox.” Calvin’s teeth flashed in the porch light.

“What do you mean?”

Calvin’s eyes, bloodshot and yellowed, widened. John felt the gaze like a slick, oily weight on his skin.

“You was a good teacher, Mr. Haddox. I always said that. You always was nice to me, always helped me when other teachers wrote me off.” Calvin’s eyes shifted toward the ground. “You was always good to me, so I’m real happy they made you counselor.”

John let out a long, slow breath, and the tightness in his shoulders relaxed. “Are you okay, Calvin? I’ve heard things. Have you quit your job?”

Calvin’s weight shifted from one foot to the other and back. He glanced over a shoulder. “I left.”

The cold started to press on John, started to make him feel uncomfortable. Gooseflesh marked his arms and neck. The temperature was too cold for a t-shirt and cotton pajama pants. He wanted to be inside, away from Calvin and the cold, away from the dark and thoughts of the cemetery.

“I left cause of them things at Greenwillow, Mr. Haddox. Them things that feed the pond. Wouldn’t believe them if I didn’t see them. But I did. I did. Stayed too late one night.”

“What?” The question came from John’s lips though he felt too cold to speak.

“Men or something. Not quite men. I found the bones up near the pond. Never mowed too close, but I found them in the high grass.”

Calvin spoke in scattered images, not unlike his writing as a student. Fat drops of icy rain began to fall. John backed closer to the house under the shelter of the roof

overhang.

“Them things feed it ‘cause it’s hungry. Real hungry, like some kind of mouth, Mr. Haddock.” The rain increased. Streams ran across Calvin’s face like tears. He started to back away. “It’s like some kind of mouth and they feed it from Greenwillow. I wanted you to know because I like you, Mr. Haddock, and I don’t want anything to happen to your wife.”

Calvin turned and ran into the darkness, leaving John shivering on his front stoop.

For three days, John Haddock tried to work through the puzzle Calvin laid on his brain. Three days of working the pieces, working the impossible weirdness of Calvin’s story, and trying to understand what it had to do with his wife. Calvin didn’t even know Gina. John had met Gina in the two years since Kathy’s death—she had no other ties to Springdale.

The questions chewed on him until his secretary dropped a copy of the *Springdale Sentinel* on his desk.

“Shame about Calvin.”

“What?”

“Calvin Boucher. Class of ‘98. Didn’t you know he hanged himself?”

Calvin’s face winked in John’s memory. Ice formed on his back, running down his arms and numbing his fingers. It cut off the air in his lungs. “Hanged himself...”

“Just last night. A couple of kids found him dangling under the Broughton River Bridge out south. Police said he was dead for a while, a day or so. It’s all right there in

the article.” She tapped the paper with her index finger, turned, and began to walk away. “Oh. Your wife called, too. Something about Elizabeth coming home sick from school.”

Gina caught John at the door and squeezed her arms around his waist, pulling him close in a firm hug. Two years younger than him, Gina held a youthful spark behind her curves greater than those years. Maybe he’d aged faster; maybe she’d lived easy and now found herself the mother of a nearly ten-year-old girl whose birth mother was dead. Gina had thick, cinnamon waves of hair and blue eyes so deep they flirted with black. She was beautiful, too much so for rumors and the high school counselor with a dead wife. No one would say anything to Gina or John, of course, but Springdale’s gossip sometimes grew thorns.

“I love you,” she said.

“I know.”

“Do you?” Gina squeezed harder. “Sometimes...”

“Sometimes what?”

“I worry,” Gina whispered in his ear, close enough he could feel her hot breath. “I worry I’m not good enough for you... and that little girl upstairs will never accept me.”

“Don’t worry,” John said. “Please.”

Gina drew back, leaving one hand on John’s hip. “Libby needs you. She won’t come out of her room and won’t say much else to me. I tried.”

“I know. It takes time.” John took her hand and gave it



a squeeze. She doubted herself too much. If Gina had a flaw, it was doubt. But he understood because doubt had been such a part of his life for the last seven years of Kathy's life. Doubt lived in that house with him, sharing a bed with worry and fear.

"You're not okay."

John studied her face. "It's not Libby. Something happened."

"The boy who died. The one who killed himself. Oh, John. And at the bridge and everything. I'm so sorry."

He nodded. "Just a former student. Just... just a former student." Until then, he hadn't put Kathy's suicide alongside Calvin's, but they both ended their lives at the bridge. The empty, hollow cavern he'd felt in his chest after her funeral cracked open again. Calvin's night-black words on the stoop echoed in his head: *I don't want anything to happen to your wife...*

"John, come back to me, okay? John?"

"Sorry. Just... lost for a second." He swallowed hard, trying to drive the cavern in his chest closed. "She's in her room?"

"Yes."

John climbed the stairs and paused outside Libby's door. Just coincidences, he thought. Calvin and Kathy... what did he mean by anything happening to her, to Kathy? Her body lay in a Greenwillow grave as did most of Springdale's dead. He blinked and saw the pond, the deep black waters of the tree-shrouded pond, the pond he'd been so afraid of as a child when he and Danny Williams rode their bikes up and down the gravel paths of Greenwillow on lazy summer days. He blinked again and

opened Libby's door.

She was lying on her bed, head propped with several pillows, facing the window. She turned to look at him as he shut the door.

"Hi, Daddy."

"Hey, Libby. Your... Gina says you aren't feeling well. Had to come home from school."

"I'm missing more pencils, Daddy. Somebody is taking my pencils."

"Is that why you came home?"

She shook her head. "It's the bad thoughts. The thoughts like I had the other day."

"What other day?" John moved trance-like toward her bed. Libby's voice sounded strange and distant, not quite weak, but off somehow.

"At the bakery when they talked about the boy who killed himself."

The cavern quaked in John's chest. "Honey... how did you—"

"I overheard some talk at school. During lunch." She shifted into a sitting position. "Just some talk. The bad thoughts are talking to me about Mommy and I want them to stop."

John sat on the bed and wrapped his daughter in his arms. "I love you, sweetie."

Her tiny body shook with a sob. "I know. I just can't stop thinking of Mommy. I know she's buried, but I keep worrying something bad might happen to her. Something awful. But she's dead like that boy is dead and they will probably bury him in the same cemetery."

Greenwillow kept John awake that night.

The cemetery and Calvin and thoughts of his dead wife dragged him from bed and forced him from the house. It wasn't the first time he'd taken a drive at night since Kathy's suicide. The usual route led south past the bridge. He was halfway to Greenwillow before realizing how crazy, how utterly bat-shit insane it was to leave Libby and Gina in the cold, dark night to poke around in the cemetery. He knew it was crazy, but as he drove toward the limestone pillars at the gates of Greenwillow, he knew he wouldn't sleep until he at least took another look at Kathy's grave.

Chains looped the wrought-iron gates, closing the concrete slab path straight into the gullet of the cemetery. John pulled the truck to the side, parked in the deep shadows of tall evergreens, and killed the engine. Even if the moon were full, those trees cast the blackest shadows. No one would need to know he was there. No one needed to know about his bat-shit crazy ideas. If Gina woke before he got home, it would be simple: he needed some air. He just went for a drive.

Greenwillow Cemetery was older than Springdale and held more residents in its quiet, rolling hills than those living in the quiet streets. Many of the trees had sprouted before the town, too, and now only the biggest and stoutest remained. Knotty oaks and evergreens with tips pointed to the night sky stood sentinel on each block—and the graves were arranged in blocks, a necropolis as orderly as the town proper. During the day, the cemetery's green grass and tall trees conjured peace; at

night, it slumbered uneasily in shadow.

John held a flashlight in one hand, but the beam was off. Feeling an ancient, unholy trespass, he wanted to avoid attention. The flashlight was a backup plan, an escape route should he need a hurried retreat. Besides, a silver half-moon offered enough light to maneuver the rows of granite markers between shadows. Overhead, a night breeze played with branches and brittle leaves, filling the canopy with whispers.

The blocks closest to the main gates held the newest residents, so he found Kathy's grave easily. Deep into the cemetery, the pond and older tombs waited. John knew he would need to go deeper, but Kathy's headstone was his first stop. He knelt and ran a hand across the cold, granite surface. His fingertips worked the grooves of her name, the dates she lived, and the daisies inlaid on either side of the stone.

"Jesus, Kath."

A cold feeling washed over John, not the cold of nighttime graveyards or the chill he felt speaking with Calvin, but something like guilt. Guilt wasn't the right word, but close.

"I tried, Kathy. I tried. I hope you know—knew how hard I tried."

He brushed his palm over the grass in front of the headstone, letting the cold blades tickle his fingers. She hadn't wanted to live. She never took her pills, didn't like the way they made her feel or the extra weight she gained under their yoke. He'd tried... he'd done anything possible, supporting her whenever he could, but whatever lived in her brain, whatever vermin lived in her mind and

ate away her sanity were too strong... too numerous.

“Things are better now,” he said. He didn’t regret the words, but regretted Kathy couldn’t hear them. He didn’t intend to hurt her, but let her know Libby was going to be okay and how happy he was with Gina. None of them had lived well with Kathy’s illness. “Things are better for us, Kath—”

A sharp crack interrupted John. The sound came from the distance, echoing across the rolling field of dead. He didn’t move for a moment, old, prehistoric fear braiding up his spine like a snake. Kathy’s grave wasn’t his only destination or even the reason to come to Greenwillow.

His goal was much deeper.

He walked in the grass to avoid the crunching gravel on the roadways. He marched past the limestone pillars signaling the old gate to the cemetery. Ancestors to the new pair, these stood at the end of the concrete central drive, two sentinels guarding the oldest part of Greenwillow. From there, John followed the slope downhill, under several tall, gnarled oaks, and into the valley where the pond waited.

The pond was nestled in the lowest point of the old section, less than one hundred yards from the barbed wire and line of younger evergreens which marked the north boundary of the cemetery. John reasoned it had been there before the dead because the gravel path jutted to the west at a diagonal to avoid the pond. How old, he couldn’t know, but old. The word “ancient” fit.

Ancient.

John shuddered with the thought.

No trees came within thirty or forty yards of the pond’s

edge, but high grass rose around the slopes protecting the area like a layer of fur. Even as a boy, John wondered why the grass grew wildly there and was manicured everywhere else. Now, it surrounded the pond in clumps, stringy and matted in places, more disheveled than ever. John thought of Calvin and how he said he avoided the pond.

He'd been scared to death.

But John couldn't believe any of that nonsense Calvin said, could he?

No.

John crossed the gravel road and worked down the slope toward the black surface. He hesitated at the edge of the high grass, but waded further. It caught and scratched his jeans, whispering foul things as he fought until it was nearly waist high. His left foot stepped on something hard like a branch. He reached down and touched it. He paused, heart pounding.

What the hell was he doing?

He listened to the sound of the wind, his beating heart, the distant hum of a semitrailer on the highway two miles to the west. He closed his eyes. Branches clacked together overhead like the pencils in Libby's box. The sound folded around him. He blinked and scanned the distance, following the black line of trees where the barbed wire broke Greenwillow's spell, and he saw them.

Shapes moved over the moonlight-washed grass.

They moved toward him and the pond.

Cold sweat inched down John's forehead. The first instinct screamed, "run," but John merely knelt. He wrapped his free hand, the one without the flashlight,

around the hard object at his foot. It was smooth and cold, unnaturally smooth for a branch or other piece of wood and too smooth for a stone. John bit his lip and held his breath. He was only twenty yards from the pond, but sheltered as he hid in the grass. If he didn't move, the black figures might not see him, and they were on the other side of the water. He would have time to run.

They carried something. Something long.

They made no noise as they marched. It was impossible, a ritual out of time and place with no bearing on waking reality. John's skin went cold. He hunched lower. They slunk into the tall grass opposite the pond as a unit, a black caterpillar. Moonlight glinted across the surface of the long object—a coffin. John's head wagged from side to side. He blinked hard, trying to wash away the hallucination. It had to be a hallucination.

The rest played like a movie, some horrible late-night thing in black and white. The figures—he wouldn't quite call them men although they could have been buried in heavy robes—opened the coffin and dumped the resident into the water. Ripples spread across the pristine surface. The body bobbed for a moment and vanished. Gone.

The shapes turned and melted into shadow before John breathed again.

As he did, he lifted the object from under his foot and held it in the moonlight.

A bone.

A long bone with knobby ends. A human femur.

John tossed it into the weeds at his feet and caught snatches of other whitish things. He crouched and studied the ground, blades of grass tickling his face. Moonlight

shimmered on white. Bones. Impossible, but he'd touched one. Bones littered the ground close to the edge of the pond. He backed away, turned and made for the gates.

Gina was awake when he arrived home.

"John?" Sleep hung on her voice. "John... shit. What time is it?"

"Late," he said. His face was still cold and slick with sweat. He started peeling away his clothing in the dark bedroom. "I just needed a drive. I needed to clear my head." He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled off his shoes. His nostrils filled with the smell of cemeteries and mud and old water. His brain swam with strange images he wasn't sure to believe.

Gina shifted in the bed and rubbed her hands on his back. "How's your head, now?"

"Better," he lied.

"Good." She slid a hand around his waist and over his stomach. "I wouldn't want you to have a headache." Her fingers worked his fly and slipped into his underwear. "Come here, John. I want you. Do you know that?"

He closed his eyes. "Yes."

She pulled him back on the bed and stripped his jeans and boxers, tossing them in a heap on the floor. One leg swung over his body as she straddled him, taking his erect penis and guiding it between her thighs. It slipped into her, warm and wet. She moaned as the bed creaked. Her weight felt full and pleasant and real on top of him—real and alive, not some unreal shadow trick at the cemetery pond. He closed his eyes.



“Daddy?”

Gina fell to one side, muttering “shit” under her breath. Libby stood at the door.

“Daddy... I heard noises.”

John glanced at Gina. Even in the dark, he could see her face, the half-grin, half-shocked look. “I’ll be right back,” he whispered.

Gina nodded.

“I’ll be right there, honey. I’ll tuck you in.”

Libby’s shape disappeared, and John climbed from bed. The girl was already under her covers by the time he slipped into his pajama pants and pulled a t-shirt over his head. He approached her bedside.

“Sorry, Daddy.”

Warmth rose around John’s neck. “It’s okay. Gina and I  
—”

“No. I’m sorry I worried you about Mommy. I just wanted to know you did everything you could for her. You did, didn’t you?”

As an English teacher for fifteen years, John learned to field questions he couldn’t answer. Such things became part of the landscape, part of his life. Libby’s question ate at John for the next few days, days during which he moved like a limp puppet and nights he barely slept. His night at Greenwillow muted to grey. It hadn’t happened. It couldn’t have. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday ticked off the calendar and the old men talked at Tasty Pastry.

“Heard that kid what hanged himself had a note.” Elroy Jantz scratched his beard. “Heard it said something about

his last rites. Didn't want to be buried here in town. Not up at Greenwillow, anyway."

Greenwillow.

Calvin.

He'd seen those men—those things—too, and they scared him to death.

Images of a great mouth eating the dead and belching forth their bones haunted John as he stumbled through his day. The black, almost-human figures and their unholy sacrifices haunted him, even though they weren't real. They couldn't be real. Libby's question haunted him, but Calvin's last request, his suicide note, finished the argument.

He'd warned John.

*I like you, Mr. Haddox, and I don't want anything to happen to your wife.*

Calvin had never been concerned about Gina, his wife for the past six months. It wasn't Gina he was worried about. It was Kathy.

Calvin warned John for Kathy's sake.

Late Friday night, well after the homecoming game, John kissed Gina gently as she slept and disappeared with his truck loaded with a cordless hammer drill, two spades, and a toolbox full of anything he might need. He brought the ropes, too, and parked the truck in the shadows again. The ropes would help when he was finished. They'd be necessary after he did what needed done.

And then, after everything, after drilling through the seam on the vault, prying aside the lid, finding Kathy's

casket and dragging it laboriously to the cemetery grass, after he pulled it to the truck with ropes lashed to either side and he was driving the concrete track from Greenwillow, only then would John allow himself to imagine the horror of what he'd done. Only then would he realize his final, loathsome favor to Kathy. He couldn't save her from death, but he would take her someplace safe. He would take her away from the impossible mouth and black things which fed it like a Stone Age god. He would do this one last thing for Libby's mom.

And then, when it was done, he could go home.

Aaron Polson's short fiction has appeared in *Shock Totem*, *Shimmer*, *Bourbon Penn* and other venues.

## DAY JOB

by Charles Ebert

Vic said something but Lenny couldn't make out what it was. His words echoed and came apart, having been stretched past the breaking point. All that was left were distended fragments of sound like a band tuning up.

Lenny blinked her eyes and saw Vic standing on the living room carpet. She blinked again and was plunged into darkness. She was in a revolving door of consciousness, catching only glimpses of the waking world, as she spun around and around.

She hoped she didn't have to do this much longer.

The door finally stopped and Lenny emerged in her living room, seated in front of the computer. Her body was turned in the chair to face Vic who stood in the middle of the room.

"Seph?" said Vic.

"What did you say?" said Lenny, rubbing the bridge of her nose. Somnambulids always gave her headaches.

Vic looked at her and then glanced at the clock. He bowed his head and turned to slump away.

"Sweetie," she said before he could get far, "could you get me a glass of water and some Tylenol, please? My head's about to split open." She gave him a weak, sexy smile.

"Sure," he said, altering his course toward the kitchen.

"You're a big, considerate, sexy hunk."

Vic called back. “Just remember that the next time you get pissed off at me.”

Lenny laughed and turned back to the computer. There were no leftover orders to enter, so she shut down the link to the bank. Even as she clicked on the window, she wondered if this would be the last time.

There were worse ways to pay the bills than sleepworking. Once she was completely under the drugs, it wasn't bad. Mostly, it was an unending procession of numbers and letters, dimly perceived, flowing through her mind as part of it slept and another part worked. But every once in a while there were odd, slow moving nightmares. Vic tried to tell her it was her fear of losing control, of giving over her body to the drugs that caused the nightmares. But it wasn't like that. Lenny had given over control of her body to drugs on many occasions and this felt different.

The nightmares were easy compared to the transition phases, though. Going to sleep, and especially waking up, was becoming increasingly difficult. It was as if sleep was reluctant to let her go and fought to keep her in its depths.

Lenny brightened. It wouldn't be a worry anymore if there was good news in her mail box.

Her heart pounding, she opened the mail program. There was one e-mail. Jason had said that the scout from Dexter Records might send him a recording contract today. Lenny took a deep breath, trying to keep her hopes down. They'd been disappointed so many times before.

With shaking fingers, she clicked on the icon.

After reading the first few lines of Jason's cover letter, she screamed. The contract was good and Jason recommended that they sign it. Lenny bolted out of her chair and leapt into the middle of the living room, bouncing up and down and screaming, her headache and fatigue forgotten.

Vic ran in from the kitchen, the water glass splashing in his fist. "What the Hell's going on?"

Lenny could only gurgle inarticulately and wave at the screen. She twirled like a ballerina, as Vic rushed to the computer.

All the long hours of voice lessons, singing until her throat was sore; all the nights spent in her room, playing CDs by Ella Fitzgerald, Jo Stafford, Nancy Wilson and Holly Cole were about to pay off. For years, she watched as friends from high school and college graduated, got good jobs and husbands. They were worrying about retirement plans and setting up college funds for their kids, while Lenny still lived from paycheck to paycheck, sleepworking days and singing in bars at night. Often, she felt like she was being left behind in some kind of permanent adolescence; all because she possessed a dream that wouldn't die.

But now it was coming true. Lenny waltzed around the edges of the room, her feet leaving the floor with each step. From now on she didn't have to worry about anything but singing. She was going to be famous.

"This says you have to go to Chicago," said Vic, pointing at the screen.

Lenny stopped for a second to catch her breath. “Yes, that’s the best part. Niles Jeffrey is going to produce the first CD. He’s the best jazz producer in the business.”

“But what about your job?”

“What about it?” said Lenny. “It’s a piddling little data entry job. Today was my last day. I’ll mail them my resignation as soon as I settle down. Believe me, I won’t miss it.”

Vic stood up and crossed his arms, glowering. It was an expression he used when he was trying to think.

“What?” said Lenny.

“Don’t you think you should run the contract past a lawyer or something before you sign?”

“Jason knows contracts,” said Lenny, waving the objection away.

“Jason,” said Vic, scornfully. He turned back to the computer, as if he was hoping the message on the screen was different.

Lenny skipped across the living room to him. Jason was one topic that they usually had screaming fights about, the kind that caused the people downstairs to bang on their ceiling. But not now. There was nothing that Vic could say that could possibly break Lenny’s mood. She stepped up to him and slipped her hands into his shirt, curling her nails through his black chest hair.

“You don’t have to be jealous of Jason, babe. That was over a long time ago. He has a wife and kids now.” Her hand slid down his chest. “Why don’t we forget about him and celebrate?”

Vic pulled away and retreated further toward the kitchen. Lenny let him go, taking in his lingering scent, a musky combination of hours old after-shave and sweat.

“I’m serious Lenny,” he said, his voice halting, as if he were struggling for words. “Your CD may tank and then you’ll want this job back.”

“I should quit anyway,” she said, opening her eyes. “You’re only supposed to use somnambulids for two years. I’ve been on them for five.”

Vic waved his hand at her, a dismissive gesture he didn’t use very often, so it looked awkward. “That two year business is just the government being overly conservative. I’ve known guys who’ve been on them for ten years and had no problems.”

Lenny shrugged. She’d explained her problems with the sleepworkers to Vic hundreds of times. Apparently he didn’t care. “Whatever! Those days are over for me. Show’s in two hours. I’m going take a shower and put on my makeup.” She shouldered past him on her way to the bathroom.

“What about health insurance?” said Vic.

“Why can’t you just be happy for me?” she said, turning on him.

“I don’t want you to make a mistake.”

“What is it with you?” She waved her arms in the air. “Is it Jason?”

Vic made a disgusted sound and walked into the living room.

“Or is it me,” she said, following. “Are you jealous of my talent? Because it’s me on stage getting all the applause and you’re just the guy who sells tee-shirts?”



He wheeled around. In his eyes was the look. She'd gotten the look before, many times from her father; but mostly from other boyfriends, mostly right before they hit her. She'd seen it in Vic's eyes too but somehow he always stopped himself. The look was replaced by something else. If Lenny didn't know better she'd have called it fear.

"Listen, Lenny, what you're doing, now; you just can't walk away from it. It's not that easy."

"What are you talking about, Vic?" she said, inching toward him. "I'm doing what I've always done: data entry, order processing."

"It's not what you're doing. It's who you're doing it for."

"You got me that job." She waved a finger in his face.

"Yes, and for your own safety, I'm telling you not to quit."

Lenny turned away from him, trying to comprehend what he was saying. This sort of thing happened, of course. There were unscrupulous people in the sleepworking industry, people who were ready to exploit their unconscious laborers for illegal purposes. Such abuses had been fairly common ten years ago, when the drugs hit the market. But nowadays those people were easy to avoid. Surely Vic wasn't stupid enough to get her involved with criminals?

"Singing is my dream, Vic, you know that," she said, turning back to him. "Sleepworking's just a means to an end. If you've gotten me into some kind of mess, that's your responsibility. You get me out of it. I don't want to

worry about anything but gathering material for my first CD.”

“I can’t do that,” said Vic, looking at her strangely.

“Well you’d better. If you screw this up for me, I’ll...I’ll see that you’re sorry.”

Vic took a step back, turning his face away so she couldn’t see it.

“I’m taking a shower.” She stomped into the bathroom and slammed the door behind her.

She ended their last encore with two solid minutes of scat, capped off by a sustained high c. Scat was something that came naturally to Lenny. Of course, she had spent hours studying Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra and others, but really all she had to do was lose herself in the stream of sound. Jason once told her that he admired the way she was able to pick out subtle rhythms and highlight them by her inflection, giving them meaning even though they weren’t intelligible words. She didn’t know anything about that. Whatever craft involved was handled by her subconscious. All she did was sing what was in her head.

When she cut off the last note and stepped back from the microphone, the audience erupted into cheers. Lenny bowed and sneaked a look over at Jason. The keyboardist had a grin that seemed to stretch beyond the confines of his face. He sat on his stool and raised one of his blond eyebrows in acknowledgment. On her other side, Kevin was looking at her and shaking his head in disbelief. His

fingers curled around the neck of his stand-up bass. He motioned to the microphone and the audience.

Lenny stepped up. "Thank you. We're The Lenore Scott Trio. Wait," she said, holding a finger up. "I was wrong. We signed a little contract before the show, and I can now say we're Dexter recording artists, The Lenore Scott Trio."

The audience went wild. They banged their beer bottles on the tables and screamed. Kevin yelled too and did a little dance with his bass.

"Kevin Borders on the bass."

Kevin bowed and went back to dancing.

"*Professor* Jason Aird on keyboards." Jason swiveled around on his stool and bowed.

"And I'm Lenore Scott." The applause was so loud, Lenny had to pause until it subsided. "We'll be here the rest of the week. Thanks for coming."

They made their getaway to the green room through the packed house. Maybe a hundred people jammed the little bar, and it seemed like they all wanted to touch her or shout something to her. She smiled at all of them, even as she bulldozed her way through the mass.

"Great show, Lenny," said Jason, once they had pulled the door to the green room shut.

"You slew 'em tonight," said Kevin. "That's a bunch of dead people out there applauding."

Lenny snapped her head back and let out a howl, like in a werewolf movie. "I can't stop smiling, boys."

"Next stop: Jeffrey Recording Studios in Chicago, Illinois." Kevin shook his head as if he still couldn't believe

it. "I've got to go check out some ladies in the audience. Catch you guys later."

"See you around, Kevin," said Jason, and the bassist opened the green room door and screamed one last time before heading to the bar.

Jason turned and looked at her again, smiling. "To be 21 again, huh?"

"He's a good bassist."

Jason nodded. "Best we ever had."

Then, after a pause, he said, "How are you feeling, Lenny?"

"I feel great."

"You look tired."

"I had to work today," she said, walking over to one of the makeup mirrors and checking her face.

"I see."

"Don't worry," she said, deciding to take off her makeup before going home. "Today was my last day. I flushed the pills, and good riddance."

She wondered briefly if she should tell him about Vic's warnings but decided against it. Jason tended to worry too much about her as it was. Besides, Vic was full of it.

"Where's Vic? I didn't see him at the table tonight." said Jason.

Lenny started. Sometimes, she swore Jason could read her mind. She had to sit down before she could trust herself to speak.

"Probably out sulking somewhere. We had a fight when I told him about the contract." She watched Jason's reflection in the mirror. Very few people knew her better

than Jason did. It was possible that he could guess what the fight was about just from her expression.

“He’s trying to hold you back.”

Lenny turned in her chair. “For the hundredth time, Jason, Vic’s none of your business.”

Jason held up his hands, palms out. “I just worry about you, Lenny.”

“I know, and it’s sweet. But I’ve already given up smoking and drinking and now the sleepworkers. You can’t make me give up men, too.”

Jason smiled and bowed his head. “Sorry.”

Lenny shrugged and pulled an applicator mask out of her makeup kit.

“So, have you given any thought to what tracks you want to lay down at the studio?” he asked.

Lenny sighed and unfolded the clear polymer mask, “I can’t decide. Maybe we should all get together and pick out some songs?”

Jason shook his head and sat on the makeup table beside her. “We’re *your* band, Lenny. It’s your decision. You’ve had five years to think about it.”

Lenny put on the mask and the polymer withdrew the makeup from her pores. After three seconds, she peeled it off. Her natural face stared back at her in the mirror. The makeup usually hid her full cheeks and the wrinkles around her eyes. And she knew that if left to nature, her hair would have more than a few streaks of gray. She was only thirty.

“I haven’t had time to think about it in the last five years,” she said.

“It has been rough,” said Jason, bowing his head.

Lenny shrugged again and examined the mask. She decided that it would last the rest of the week. Which was good, because they were expensive and the advance from Dexter wouldn't come for a while yet.

"Tell you what," said Jason, "if you can, you come around to the house tomorrow, say about three, I'll give you some ideas I've had about the album. But the decision is yours."

"I'll be there," she said, smiling.

"Speaking of which," he said, looking at his watch, "I promised Claire I'd be home early tonight. Do you need a ride?"

Lenny shook her head. "Kiss those babies for me."

Jason nodded and walked out the door. Lenny watched him as he disappeared. She had left Jason six years ago, right after she quit drinking. It was a horrible thing to do, considering how much support he had given her when she hit bottom. But it was a time for change and she had always known that she and Jason just didn't fit. He was too conventional, too uptight, and too boring. It took him a long time to recover but eventually he figured out that he was better off without her. Still, every once in a while, when she thought of him and his family, she wondered if she made the right decision.

One thing she knew was that it was too late now. She also knew it was time to get home. After changing in one of the closets the management of the bar called a dressing room, she walked out the back door.

Outside the air was humid and smelled of car exhaust and garbage. Lenny walked toward the bus stop about a block away, her heels clicking on the cracked pavement.

In the small lot behind the bar, her twenty year old Camry sat in one of the spaces. The powder blue paint was almost completely covered by rust. Lenny had parked it on Monday before their first gig. Afterward, it had refused to start. She was surprised the bar hadn't towed it away.

The crowd didn't seem to be leaving. There were no pedestrians and little traffic on the street. All she heard, besides her own heels, was the fading merriment in the bar and the hum of the streetlights. Looking at the deserted squalor of the neighborhood, she reflected that she should have taken Jason up on his offer for a ride. But then again, she didn't want to explain to Vic why Jason was dropping her off.

She watched her own reflection as she walked past the darkened storefronts. The scene looked like a good album cover. The joy, which had been rising and falling in her like a tide for the last four hours, rose again. But because her system was flooded with adrenaline from the show, the flow was like a stale caffeine buzz, more irritating than stimulating. She felt more like sleeping than dancing.

The bus stop was located beside a railroad trestle. Mounted on the crumbling concrete of the bridge was a streetlight. The plastic protecting the halogen bulb was warped and yellow, and cobwebs surrounded the housing.

Lenny stopped next to the dented bus stop sign and peered down the street.

No bus.

Yawning, she turned around and looked at the bench. The back of her calves ached from having to stand

through three long sets. But the bench didn't tempt her. Grime covered the seat and rock hard wads of gum dotted the back. Leaning against the sign pole, she reflected that the first thing she was going to do with her advance was buy a car. A cherry red Miata, she thought. Convertible, of course, with all the options. If the album really took off, she'd buy a stretch limo and hire a driver. That would be nice, especially if he had a cute butt.

She smiled until the image made her think of Vic. Then the tide went out again. What if he was right? What if she couldn't quit her day job? When she thought about it, she really knew nothing about her employer. Vic had arranged the whole thing. And she had trusted him, even though she had only known him a short time then. He had helped her out of a situation with her old boyfriend, Roger, who ran around on her and then hit her when she complained. Compared to Roger, Vic was sensitive.

An engine started somewhere down the street on the other side of the trestle. Lenny turned and saw the lights of a sedan come on as it pulled out of its parking spot. It rolled toward her slowly, even though there was no traffic.

When the sedan cleared the shadow of the railroad trestle, the driver's side window rolled down and the yellow light of the street lamp glinted off a cylindrical object. It fired twice before Lenny realized it was a gun. The shots weren't loud. They were more like muffled cracks. But she heard the bullets whiz over her head like angry bees and hit the concrete of the trestle.



Lenny screamed and dropped to her hands and knees. She curled up into a ball and kept screaming until the police came.

It was noon when the squad car finally dropped Lenny off at her apartment. The policeman opened the car door for her but didn't offer to go inside to check and see if it was safe. Lenny hadn't been very cooperative at the police station. It took her ten hours to convince them that she had no idea why anybody would want to shoot at her. And then the detective wasn't so much convinced, as he was tired of asking. So he finally sent her home, marking the incident up as a random drive-by shooting.

It was all she could do. If something illegal was going on, Lenny was in it up to her eyeballs. People who took somnambulids were responsible for what they did when asleep, especially when they stayed on them for longer than the regulated period.

Lenny waved goodbye to the officer as he drove away without looking back. Then she rubbed her eyes and walked to the back of the house and up the metal stairs to the top floor of the duplex. Fishing her keys out of her purse, she peered through the curtained window in the door for some sign of Vic.

She walked into the apartment and threw her keys on the cluttered kitchen table. The smell of cigarette smoke told her immediately that Vic was home. Lenny ventured into the living room. The windows were covered, leaving the room in darkness, which was broken only by streaks of sunlight squeezing past the edges of the blinds.

In the corner was the glowing red tip of a cigarette. It moved upward, brightened in intensity for a moment and then dulled again.

“Did you tell them anything?” said Vic.

“No.”

“Smart girl.” The glowing tip moved to the side and down. It disappeared. “Your resignation has not been accepted. Last night was the only warning they’re going to give you. Don’t resign again.”

“Bastard,” said Lenny. She could feel the tears welling up in her eyes.

“Don’t start with me, Lenny. I have as much choice in this as you do. Maybe less.”

She staggered the few steps toward the couch and sank down, putting her head in her hands. “What have I been doing?”

“Don’t worry, it’s nothing horrible. Just a little computer theft from a bank that can afford it. I don’t understand the details, but somehow you’re setting things up by processing orders and sending payments to the bank.” Lenny could hear rustling from the corner as Vic shifted in his seat.

“Once things are ready, it will only take a second or two to transfer the money.”

“When will it happen?”

“You see, that’s the problem. We’re a good six weeks away from payday.”

“But I have to be in Chicago next week.”

“I know, babe,” he said, his voice softening, “and I’m sorry. But next week you’ll be here filling orders in your

sleep. We've been working on this for over a year. They won't let you back out now."

"But why do *I* have to fill the orders?" said Lenny.

There was a pause. "What?"

"Why can't someone else do it?"

"Because it's your...job," he said, struggling for words. "Just because. No more questions."

She heard him get up and move toward her. Something rattled as he approached. His hand reached out and put the something on the coffee table with a click. Lenny looked at it. It was a bottle of pills, sitting in a beam of sunlight. Dust motes swirled around it. They were somnambulids.

"Don't worry about today," he said. "It's too late now anyway. Get some rest and start back again tomorrow. We don't want to get too far behind schedule. And don't go to the show tonight. You're finished with all that."

Lenny sobbed. She could feel the tears rolling down her face and her throat was so thick it hurt.

"Damn you, Vic. Why did you get me into this?"

Vic turned savagely. "Christ, you're pathetic."

"I trusted you," she shouted.

She heard footsteps heading for the kitchen. "Trust is always a mistake," he said, and then the door slammed, and she was alone.

Lenny sat on the couch and wept. Vic was right about one thing; she was pathetic. All it would have taken was a quick visit to the Attorney General's web site to see if there were any complaints about the company that she was considering signing with. She'd done it before on previous contracts. But this time she didn't. She assumed

Vic would handle all the details. He handled them all right. And now her singing career, the only thing she ever wanted to do with her life, was over just as it was beginning.

She flopped onto her side and began weeping with renewed energy. Every breath she took caused her to shudder with the effort of pulling the air in. The pillow was damp with tears.

At some point she must have fallen asleep because the phone woke her up. After four rings she had gathered herself enough to answer.

“Where the hell are you, Lenny?”

“Jason?”

“You were supposed to come over at three today, remember?”

“Oh, God,” she said. With bleary eyes, she peered over at the cable box. It was almost four thirty. “I’m sorry. I must have fallen asleep.”

She could hear Jason click his tongue. “You know, Lenny, you can’t do this. You need to start behaving more professionally. We have a contract now with a major label. They won’t tolerate this kind of crap.”

Lenny sniffed. “I know. I’m sorry,” she said in a small voice.

“Are you all right?”

She rubbed her eyes, feeling a headache coming on. “I’ll be fine. You just woke me up. I’m sorry I fell asleep.”

“That’s OK,” said Jason. “We can do it some other time. You go back to sleep now, and I’ll see you at the show tonight.”

Those last words felt like a punch in Lenny's midsection. What was she going to do? If she went, Vic and her employers would undoubtedly find out about it. But if she didn't, she'd be letting Jason and Kevin down.

"Lenny?"

"Oh, sorry Jason. Yes, I'll be there." Lenny gently hung up the phone and massaged her temples, wishing this would all go away.

As good as last night's show was, tonight's was better. Lenny stood in the middle of the stage, leaning on the microphone stand and feeling every lyric that passed her lips. Tears rolled down her cheeks in glistening trails during the sad numbers; and her heart rose so much during the happy songs that she thought it would fly out her mouth. She dispensed with the between-song patter, launching into one song as soon as the previous one was finished. She was dimly aware of Jason and Kevin exchanging puzzled looks. Inside her thoughts, she was clinging to each song; concentrating on every nuance of the story it was telling and ignoring her own story.

The only pauses she took were to take sips of water from a bottle someone had left on the stage for her.

When she finished the first set, she stood with her head down, her long brown hair blocking her view of the audience. The waves of applause rolled over her and she swayed with them, feeding off them.

Then she felt hands clasp her shoulders and pull her back from the microphone. She looked up and saw Jason standing beside her, a worried look on his face.

He leaned into the mic and said, “We’re going to take a fifteen minute break.” Then he gently pulled her toward the green room. Kevin appeared on her other side and took her arm.

In the past, it had always been a habit of Lenny’s to look for Vic as she was leaving after the first set. He would make eye contact and maybe give her a thumbs up. Now, without thinking, she cast a glance back to the tee-shirt table.

And Vic was there. He leaned against the wall with his arms crossed, staring at her.

Lenny sucked in her breath and almost screamed. She could feel her eyes widening as the guys dragged her into the green room.

Once the door was closed she shook them off and stumbled to a chair in front of the makeup mirror. She looked at herself and said, “Christ, my eyes are a mess.” She started to reach for some tissues but Jason was in the way.

“Lenny, have you been drinking?”

She slammed her hands on the table and pushed her chair away from the mirror. “How can you ask me that?”

“It affects my future too.”

“Don’t worry Jason, she hasn’t been drinking.” They both looked toward the door and saw Vic standing in front of it.

Kevin walked up to him and said, “Hey, Vic, great to see you, man. We’ve missed you all week. But I’ll tell you, we’re having kind of a band meeting here.”

“Get away from me, Kevin,” said Vic, pushing the bassist into the wall.

Jason stood up, his chair falling over behind him. “Are you all right, Kevin?”

“I’m OK,” he said, rubbing his shoulder.

“What are you doing here, Vic?” said Jason.

“I came for the show.”

“Well, you can wait outside.”

Vic shook his head and smirked. “Show’s in here.”

Lenny’s vision began to blur and the voices in the room echoed inside her head to the point of incomprehensibility. She turned around to face the mirror and grabbed the table for support. Her head began to pound. The symptoms were familiar. She had felt them every day for five years.

The revolving door was back. Every time it turned another one of her senses was overwhelmed. Frantically, she searched for a connection, a way to stop the spinning. She didn’t want to sleep.

Her fingers were tapping on the surface of the makeup table, as if she were typing. Except *she* wasn’t. She had no control. She concentrated on her fingers, fighting the urge to let go of her consciousness. Her fingers were typing out words.

*who you*

“I’m Lenny,” she said, too softly for the men to hear.

*can't be*

“What is this? Who are you?”

*persephone where vic*

Persephone. Somewhere, in the part of her mind that was still hers, that name triggered a memory, a recent one. Just yesterday, Vic had called her something similar. “Seph,” he’d said. Persephone.

As the pieces fell into place, Lenny's mind worked faster, demanding more space. Her senses began to return. She could see dimly and sounds were forming into words. Persephone saw what was happening and started to retreat back into Lenny's subconscious. But Lenny grabbed her.

"All right now, who are you?" The typist squirmed and threw herself open like an umbrella, covering Lenny, blinding her. In the confusion, Persephone snatched back various functions, sight first and then touch.

Unfamiliar memories flooded Lenny. She saw countless images of Vic, standing in front of her, his head bowed and his eyes fearful and hopeful at the same time. She remembered the rage and frustration of being imprisoned all night, waiting for the somnambulid to be taken and to take effect.

But most of all, Lenny was aware of a great intelligence and a strong will. It was the kind of will that persevered through handicaps like only being conscious eight hours a day. It was the kind of intelligence that could use that limited time to make a brilliant scheme to rob a bank without anybody knowing.

Lenny almost gave up hope. How could she fight against that kind of strength? The typist laughed and the door swung faster.

As Lenny spun around, she regretted having taken the somnambulids for so long. If she had just obeyed the rules and only taken them for two years, then Persephone would never have been born, and she...

A thought occurred to Lenny, stopping her cycle of despair. Persephone was a part of her, born out of her



subconscious. It was hard for Lenny to believe, but if Persephone was smart, strong and persistent, then Lenny must be so too. All she had to do was find that strength.

But where?

Jason was always telling her that she was the strongest person he knew. Lenny had always assumed that was a lie to boost her self-confidence, especially in the depths of her alcoholism. Of course, eventually she beat the booze. How had she done that? Lenny ransacked her memories, going through all the AA meetings, running down the twelve steps in her head. What had worked? As she recalled, it wasn't so much following the program, as it was visualizing her life if she had lost. She had pictured herself drunk and destitute, living on the street and finally meeting an early death. But the most terrible thing about it was she wouldn't be able to sing. When she had realized that alcohol stood between her and her dream, it finally became possible to quit. Not easy but possible.

And between Lenny and her dream was exactly where Persephone was standing right now.

*no you don't, typed Persephone, strength mine, smarts mine*

She kept typing. Lenny felt the tiny blows on the pads of her fingers. It was a rhythm.

"Sing Hallelujah, come on get happy," sang Lenny. Her voice was ragged and small. But the typing synced with the rhythm.

*stop it*

"Get ready for the judgment day."

*stop*

"Be bop bop bop bop bedoo bedoo bedoo bop bop."

The revolving door spun and the glass shattered. Lenny saw her reflection in the falling fragments. At least it looked like her. Her face was screwed up with hatred and fear as the fragments hit the floor and broke apart.

Reality snapped into sharp focus. Lenny looked down and saw that her hands were bleeding and the mirror in front of her was broken. Shards lay everywhere. She looked around and saw Jason, standing back, gaping at her. Kevin stood behind him, the same look on his face.

Vic leaned against the door. His shirt was torn as if they had been fighting. In his hand was a gun.

“Let’s get out of here, Seph.”

Lenny bowed her head, looking at her bleeding hands. “I’ve got another set to do, Vic.”

“What? Didn’t…”

“The somnambulid worked, but only partially. Persephone came up enough for me to be aware of her. But I kept control. I know everything now. And I’d rather sing jazz than rob banks.”

He looked at her, uncomprehending.

“Forget about it, Vic,” she said. “It’s over.”

“What’s going on?” said Jason, stepping forward. He retreated when Vic swiveled the gun toward him.

“I’ve been experiencing a side effect from taking the somnambulids for too long.” She was about to put her arms at her sides but stopped when she remembered the blood. “Are there bandages here? I don’t want to stain my gown.”

“There’s a first aid kit in the bathroom,” said Jason, looking at Vic.

“Go ahead,” said Vic, waving the gun in that direction. Jason complied.

“What happened?” said Lenny, still staring at her hands.

“I don’t know,” said Kevin. “We were arguing with Vic, and he’d just pulled the gun when you started singing and smashing the mirror.

Lenny shook her head. “I couldn’t allow myself to fall asleep. If I had, she would have taken over.”

“You’re lucky you didn’t cut an artery,” said Jason, coming out of the bathroom with the first aid kit. He sat down next to her and took her hands. After he had wiped away the blood with some paper towels, he examined the cuts. “I don’t think there are any shards in the wounds. Can you move your hands?”

“Yeah,” she said, flexing them.

Jason nodded slightly and opened the first aid kit. “What kind of side effects?”

“I developed another personality when I was asleep.”

“I’ve read about that. It happens, but it’s very rare. Was it a full-blown personality, with a name and everything? What did you call her?”

“I only met her a minute ago. But her name was Persephone.”

“And she wanted to rob banks?” Jason squeezed some salve out of a tube and started to spread it over Lenny’s hands.

“Computer crime,” said Lenny. “Quite a clever scheme actually. She had set up a dummy corporation both to front for the scheme and to fool me. We had health

benefits and everything. She might have gotten away with it if I hadn't stopped using the somnambulids."

"It'd be a lot of money," said Vic. "More than you can make singing this jazz crap."

Lenny looked up at Jason, who was looking at her. That was all the communication they needed.

"We could cut you guys in," continued Vic. "An extra second or so inside the bank's records and we could get more than enough for everybody."

Nobody said anything for a minute. Jason took some gauze and bandages out of the first aid kit and wrapped up Lenny's hands. She watched as he pulled it tight and tied it off.

"Well," demanded Vic.

"Sorry, Vic," said Lenny.

"You can't do this to me," he said, his eyes getting bigger. The gun came up and pointed at Lenny.

She could feel her heart pounding. The barrel of the gun shook as she stared at it. Vic was almost as nervous as she was. From Persephone's memories, she knew that Vic feared her, and not being the brightest henchman around, he often had difficulty separating Lenny from Persephone. He was easily intimidated.

Of course this time he had a gun.

"Damnit, Vic," she said, standing up.

"Sit down, Lenny."

"Where did you get that gun?" She walked slowly towards him, her arms crossed.

"I know what you said," he stammered. "But I thought it might come in handy."

“Is that the gun you used to shoot at me?” She was almost to him.

“Well, yes,” he said, biting his lip. The barrel had lowered but now it snapped up again. “You said if this ever happened to use any means necessary to scare you back on the drugs.”

“You didn’t do a very good job, did you?” she said sharply.

The barrel lowered again. “I...I guess not.”

Her hand snapped out and grabbed the gun. She fought against wincing at the pain. “How many times do I have to tell you, Vic, we’re not thugs.”

His empty gun hand fluttered in the air for a second and fell to his side. “I’m sorry. I guess I screwed this up.”

Lenny walked back to the mirror, laying the gun on the counter. “You’re not the only one, Vic.”

“I’ll call the police,” said Jason.

“No, don’t,” Lenny said, sitting down before her knees gave way from the fear.

“But he...”

“He’s a punk who hung around with the wrong crowd. Namely me. I don’t want any police.”

Jason looked thoughtful for a second and then relented.

“So what do I do?” said Vic. He was looking at her. Lenny reflected that almost nobody had ever asked that question and looked at her before. She liked it.

“For one thing,” she said, “you get your stuff out of my apartment.”

“But I...”

“It wasn’t me you were in love with, was it? It was her.”

He bowed his head. “It wasn’t all her. I liked you too.”

“We can discuss that later. In the mean time I want you out.”

She looked over at Jason and Kevin who were staring at her with their mouths open. Giving them a smile she stood up and said, “If you need a job, however, we still need somebody to sell tee shirts.”

“Now, wait a minute,” protested Jason.

“Why not? He knows the job. He’s never cheated us, has he?”

Jason, who handled the band’s finances said, “No, but...”

“He pulled a gun on us, man,” said Kevin.

“Yes, my point exactly.”

“He was acting under my influence,” said Lenny. “For what it’s worth, I don’t think he would have shot us.”

She looked at Vic. “So, how about it? Your old job’s open if you want it.”

Vic rubbed his hands on his shirt, looking at all of them. Lenny couldn’t help but smile at his discomfort. “Sure,” he said. “Thank you. I guess I better get out there.”

After he left, Jason said, “Are you sure he’ll be all right Lenny?”

“I know he’s loyal, Jason, just not very competent.” She smiled. “My guess is we’ve been in here longer than fifteen minutes. Maybe we better do the second set.”

Her two sidemen looked at their watches and agreed. They’d been waiting too long.

Charles Ebert has been writing science fiction on and off since high school. One of his stories will be released on Kaleidotrope in 2015. He has a story in the March 2011 issue of Aoife’s Kiss. One of his stories won an honorable mention in a short short story writing

contest sponsored by Xignals. He has published two short stories in Aphelion and had a story win honorable mention in the Writers of the Future contest. He is a librarian in Durham NC.

# THE SIEGE OF OSRIC

by Benjamin Spurduto

The rain started almost an hour before sunrise, a few soothing drops preceding a downpour of water from the thick, broiling clouds. The deluge was at first a relief, extinguishing the fires that had burned throughout the smoldering ruins of the city for the better part of two days. But it did not relent. The cold water gathered in puddles that swelled to wide pools before midday. By evening it was spilling over the clogged reservoirs and damaged walls to mix with the blood soaked grime of the stone streets. Mangled corpses of the innocent and the wicked, victims and murderers indistinguishable now in death, rose to the surface of the foul waters. And still the rain poured down, adding to the misery of those who yet lived, trapped within the shattered mazes of broken stone. It was as if the gods had seen enough of man's self-inflicted horror and sought to wash the memory of the ghastly scene away with their tears.

Crouched upon the rubble of a collapsed wall deep inside what had been the city's poorest slum, a small group of survivors huddled together for warmth. They were dressed in crude, dirty rags and they shivered as the near freezing rain bombarded their weary bodies. Standing apart from the others, however, was a woman who seemed unfazed by the grim conditions. She had the sternly set features and hardened physique of an experienced warrior, and she was as tall and muscular as



any man. Her leather jerkin and breeks were soaked and tattered but she seemed oblivious to the chilling weather. Instead her attention was focused on her surroundings, her hand wrapped firmly around the hilt of the sword sheathed at her side.

Serafima Vladekovna Volodarid was a creature of instinct, more at home in the fierce, rugged wilderness than in the civilized world of hidden secrets and queer formality. Her senses had not been dulled by years of life within the comfortable confines of the city. Now that the Nemerian siege engines had blasted the veneer of order and civility away from the city of Osric, she was far better equipped to survive the chaos that followed than the descendents of its founders.

Seeing nothing threatening through the haze of pounding rain, Serafima motioned for the others to follow her down from the rubble. She splashed into the street and trudged through the knee-deep water towards a large stone building that appeared to be intact. Halfway across the street, she tripped on something beneath the water and nearly fell. The hidden obstruction gave slightly when her foot struck it.

It was too light to be a chunk of rubble. Most likely another body weighed down by armor.

After pointing out the obstacle to the exhausted man behind her, Serafima forced the building's splintered door open with a shove. Inside the water was just as deep, but she at least had cover from the rain for the first time that day. The interior was little more than a large, open room and appeared bereft of anything of value.

But Serafima had not singled the building out for

looting. From the outside, it looked large enough to have a second story and she was pleased to find a set of wooden stairs along the far wall that led up through the low ceiling. If they were lucky, the roof would still be intact, and they would have a dry place to pass the night. As her companions filed through the main door to get out of the rain, Serafima quickly crossed the room and bounded up the stairs.

Fortune, it seemed, had chosen to grace them at last for the second floor of the building was mostly dry. Rain had swept into the room from the uncovered windows and though the roof appeared almost soaked through with moisture, it was only dripping in a few places. Much like the room below, there was nothing of value to be found there. The building had obviously been abandoned by all but the poorest gutter-dwellers of the city. Its most recent occupants, however, were sitting on the floor with their backs against a wall. A dead man stared blankly into space, his arms wrapped around the bodies of two small children. His wrists had been cut, as had the children's throats.

A rusty, bloody knife lay in his lap.

Serafima regarded the dead children with pity but cursed the craven weakness that had led their father to provide them with certain death instead of a chance of life. She then stripped the bodies of their clothes and threw them out of the nearest window before calling down for the others to join her upstairs.

Andron made his way up first, followed by his son, Renart, and his two daughters, Leticia and Aaline. Exhausted after the arduous scramble across the ruined

city and scarcely able to reach the top of the stairs, Andron still managed to help his weary children climb. His younger brother, Guimar, seemed to be fairing better. He followed the others up the stairs with his pretty young wife in tow. Serafima did not know her name.

Andron immediately saw to the care of his daughters, neither of whom were yet of childbearing age. He took the armful of dry clothes Serafima offered him and either did not notice or chose not to ask her about the dried blood that stained them. Renart, who was almost old enough to have a family of his own, helped his father wrap the garments around the shivering girls. Meanwhile, Guimar and his wife huddled together in a dry corner for warmth. The girl kept muttering to herself, her wide doe eyes darting about frantically while her husband tried to console her.

After she looked out the window to be sure that no one had followed them, Serafima allowed herself a moment of rest. She shook the excess water from her short auburn hair and dropped to the floor with a grunt.

Guimar's wife began sobbing.

"Keep her quiet," Serafima said.

Guimar nodded and pulled the girl closer to him, burying her face in his chest as she continued to cry.

Andron left his daughters in the care of his son and walked over to sit next to Serafima.

"How are they?" she asked.

"They're traumatized," Andron said. "What do you expect?"

"Well, at least they have a chance to rest before we try to reach the walls."

“The walls? You don’t mean tonight, do you?”

Serafima gave Andron a puzzled look.

“You told me you wanted to get your family out of Osric. Tonight may be our only chance.”

“But the rain...”

“The rain is the only reason the city isn’t overrun with Nemerian soldiers right now,” she said. “Once the weather breaks, they’ll move inside to finish what they started.”

Serafima did not bother explaining what that would entail. The Nemerian army had struck the city of Osric with a brutality that was wholly unexpected. They had not requested any terms of surrender and seemed determined to slaughter everyone within the city. Osric’s walls had been crumbling centuries before the attack began and they offered little resistance to the bombardment of stone and fire from the Nemerian siege engines. Only the sudden, heavy rain had prevented the city from being burned to ashes.

That same severe weather was also the only thing that prevented those who were yet trapped inside Osric from tearing one another apart. The city had swelled with chaos after the Kurnite army that protected it was defeated on the field of battle three days ago. Though it had once been the greatest fighting force in the known world, the Kurnite army was many centuries removed from its days of glory. Lacking the discipline, training, and resolve of their forefathers, the Kurnites quickly lost what little semblance of order they had when the knights of Nemeria swept across the field of battle. The bulk of the Kurnite force, however, had been comprised of

mercenaries of questionable repute, most of which broke ranks and fled for their lives when the Nemerians charged. The scoundrels flooded into Osric, hoping to take all that they could before the siege began. Now they were trapped along with everyone else.

Andron shivered and his eyes darted to his children fearfully.

“What chance do we have?” he asked.

Serafima shrugged.

“If the rain holds through the night and we can reach the walls without being caught by any scavengers, we may be able to slip past the Nemerians without being noticed. But that depends.”

“On?”

“On what stretch of the siege line we stumble across. There is no way of knowing from here where the bulk of their strength lies.”

Andron frowned.

“An opportunity is sure to present itself,” Serafima said. She wasn’t so optimistic herself, but she could see that it would be hard to motivate the merchant if he felt there was no chance of escape. It was hard to believe that he had survived as long as he had.

The sound of irregular splashing somewhere below drew Serafima’s attention. She motioned for the others to be silent as she moved closer to the stairs. The splashing sounds multiplied and then she heard several voices whispering back and forth.

Someone, it seemed, had followed them.

Serafima had noticed no signs of pursuit, but it was very dark and the pouring rain masked both scents and

sounds. In any event, she had no desire to wait for the newcomers to find them.

Quickly and quietly, Serafima got her charges to their feet and directed them towards the open window on the east side of the room. It looked out over the roof of a house standing only a few feet away and was close enough to jump down to. Without a word she got them through the window just as the stairs below started to creak. Guimar leapt down first and caught his wife and nieces as they followed. By the time Andron and Renart went through, Serafima could see a helmed head poking up from the stairway.

“Go!”

Serafima flung herself out the window before the sellsword could react to seeing her. She landed lightly on the flat roof and herded the others forward. When she glanced back, she saw the mercenary leaning out the window as if he meant to follow them, but then he turned his head up to the falling rain and seemed to think better of it, turning back inside to the dry room.

They slowed their pace somewhat after that, but Serafima kept them moving steadily. She knew that if they were to have any chance, they would have to get outside the walls before sunrise. For all their progress, they were still near the core of the city.

Most of the houses in that section of Osric were built close together and had relatively flat roofs so they were able to avoid the broken, flooded streets. After a good ten minutes of travel, however, the rooftops became steeper. Guimar’s wife informed him that she could not go much farther without rest and he likewise refused to go on if

they could not stop soon. Serafima thought it was foolish to waste any more time, but Andron supported his brother so she found herself seeking shelter once again.

“Your brother had best learn to keep that wife of his in her place,” Serafima said to Andron as she scanned the area for a suitable resting place. “She’s putting all of us at risk with these demands of hers.”

Andron glared at her.

“And you would do well to remember that you would not have a chance of escaping this chaos had I not released you from your cell,” he said.

“Perhaps I would have chosen to stay there had I known that you and yours were more concerned with your comfort than your survival!”

“She is...difficult,” Andron said. “But she is family. Surely even you can understand that?”

Before Serafima could answer, the younger of Andron’s girls, Aaline, cried out as she lost her footing on the steep rooftop. Renart tried to catch her, but he moved too slowly to prevent the child from tumbling down the roof and plunging into the water below.

Andron nearly threw himself down after her before Serafima caught him by the shirt.

“You’ll do her no good by breaking your neck, you fool!”

“I can’t see her, Father!” Renart said. “I can’t even see down to the street!”

Serafima’s eyes were far sharper than Renart’s, but even she had difficulty seeing anything more than the quivering blackness of the floodwaters. Then she heard a splash that was followed by coughing and she spotted the

dim shape of little Aaline, who could not have been older than five or six winters, floundering about in the water.

Before she could scramble down after her, Serafima noticed something else moving nearby. Several large, man-sized figures slipped through the windows and doors of the houses along the street and began closing in on the girl. While they were shaped like men, they walked with a peculiar hunch and their movements seemed nervous and erratic.

They reminded her of nothing so much as large rats.

Without another thought, Serafima drew her sword and slid down the side of the roof. She splashed into the street with her blade at the ready and the momentum of her first blow split one of the hunched figures from shoulder to groin. It died without further struggle and its hewn body collapsed with a splash that drew the attention of its companions.

Now that she was closer to them, Serafima could finally see their features more clearly. While they were vaguely manlike, such a description was now questionable at best. Their stooped bodies were covered with coarse, mottled hair that concealed a variety of open sores and scabs. Large, pointed ears stuck out prominently from their hairy heads and their eyes were several times larger than a normal man's. Sharp, crooked teeth poked out from their scurvy ridden jaws as they chattered and cackled to one another excitedly.

If the creatures had once been men, generations of life in some foul darkness had wrought a terrible change upon them, robbing them of the tenuous state of humanity. There was no hint of dignity or reason in their bulging



eyes, only the crude, simple urges of a common animal.

The creatures were more nimble than their hunched appearance suggested and Serafima was quickly mounting a furious defense to keep them at bay. She cleaved through the arm of one creature and wounded another in the gut before she had to give ground before them. They came at her like a pack of rabid animals, each one tearing and biting at her ferociously as they tried to swarm over her and bring her down.

But for all their speed, Serafima managed to stay just out of their reach save for a few minor cuts and scrapes. When her blade felled three more of the creatures, their courage faltered. One by one the beasts scattered back into the ruined buildings while sounding a foul chorus of chattering shrieks. By the time she finished off one of the stragglers, they had vanished from sight. She could still feel their hungry eyes watching her from the shadows.

Serafima turned then to find that Aaline had also disappeared from the flooded street.

“Aaline?” she called out, hoping that the twisted creatures had not carried her off to feast on her tender flesh.

She scarcely heard the little girl’s voice calling out over the dull roar of rainfall.

“Here!”

The girl had tucked herself amidst the wreckage of an overturned wagon nearby. She peeked out cautiously, but was careful not to leave her hiding place until Serafima came much closer.

“Are you hurt?” Serafima asked as she looked over her body for injuries.

Aaline shook her head. Aside from being completely drenched, she was unharmed. She pointed to the cuts on Serafima's arm.

"You're bleeding."

Serafima was impressed by Aaline's composure. The girl was clearly frightened, but not paralyzed with fear as she would have expected. She glanced at her arm. The cuts were not deep and barely bleeding. She hoped that the rain would wash away anything that might otherwise infect the wounds. There was no telling what manner of filth and disease those subterranean creatures carried.

"Scratches," she said, smiling. "They'll heal."

She glanced up at the rooftops but found no sign of Andron and the others. It was still difficult to spot anything that far away in the darkness and rain.

Before she could hail them, there came a sound not unlike a high pitched cackle from somewhere behind them. Serafima spun around, sword in hand. At the outer reach of her vision the shadows appeared to move, dancing across the wreckage like withered leaves in a cold autumn breeze. The degenerate man-things had been frightened off easily, but they were returning in greater numbers. It was impossible to know how many of them were gathering in the watery darkness.

Serafima sheathed her sword and hoisted Aaline onto her back. The girl clung to her tightly as she clambered back up to the rooftops. Down in the streets, the creatures howled and clawed impotently for a few moments before wilting into the darkness. They would surely find more accessible prey elsewhere.

When she returned to the group, Serafima was

dismayed to find the number of their party reduced by two. Andron was still there with Renart and Letice, but there was no sign of Guimar or his wife.

“They’ve gone!” Andron said. “I tried to stop them, but they wouldn’t listen, the young fools!”

“What’s happened?” Serafima asked. She directed the question to Renart; his father appeared too wrapped up in woe to be of much immediate use.

“It was Lenna,” he said. “She started crying that you weren’t coming back and then she ran off. Uncle Guimar went after her.”

“They’re on their own, then,” Serafima said as she mustered the others to their feet. “We have to keep moving.”

“No!” Andron said. “You must find them! We’re not leaving them to die here in this hellish place!”

Serafima grasped the merchant by the collar of his soaked shirt and pulled him closer to her.

“Think of your family, you fool! Do you have any idea what will happen to these children if they are still here when the Nemerians sweep through with fire and steel?”

Andron’s face darkened.

“My brother and his wife are as much family as they. How can you expect me to abandon them to such a fate? How could I ever live with myself knowing that I left them behind?”

Serafima looked at Andron’s children and guessed that one of them would die for every hour their flight was delayed. Brave little Aaline had already come close to death and Serafima knew that she would not always be in a position to save them from danger. She thought it

would be wise to tell their father that his shortsighted decision would likely cost him one of his children. That Guimar and his wife would probably be dead by the time they found them. That he was remarkably ignorant of the danger his family was already in. That she could not be expected to spare them the horrors of war merely with her presence.

That his demands might well kill them all.

She looked back to Andron's pleading eyes and realized that there was no sense in wasting her words.

"Very well," she said.

Renart indicated the direction in which Guimar and Lenna had fled and they followed. Their path led them to a cluster of buildings that had been reduced to rubble, forcing them down from the low rooftops and back into the flooded streets. Just as Serafima had expected, it was impossible to track their lost companions. She instead kept watch for anything that could provide shelter from the downpour, hoping to find the couple huddled together somewhere instead of floating dead in the water. There were no signs of the mutant creatures, but Serafima knew they were most likely watching them from the shadows. The heaps of rubble and wrecked woodworks strewn through the street provided ample opportunities for an ambush.

But the sound that brought her to a sudden stop was not the shrieks of the creatures, but something far more familiar: the clash of steel and the screams of dying men. She signaled the others to wait and crept farther ahead in hope of getting a view of the commotion.

The distinctive steel armor of a Nemerian soldier was

the first thing to catch her eye. It was a heavy suit of plate that covered him completely but for the narrow, T shaped face of his helm. His right pauldron was unmarked, which indicated that he was not of noble rank but most likely an infantry commander of some sort. There were at least a dozen men with him, most of which were engaged with a ragged gang of armed thugs. The Nemerians were far better equipped than their opponents; each one carried either an axe or a short sword and were protected by thick leather armor.

Serafima ducked out of sight and cursed. The Nemerians, it seemed, had not been so idle during the downpour after all. If they were sending men this deep into the city, she guessed that at least part of the army had already breached the walls. Suddenly, their chances of escaping with their lives and freedom appeared much worse.

As the Nemerians finished off the last of the gang, their steel-clad commander stood apart from his men and surveyed the ruin of the city. His mountainous figure might have easily been mistaken in the darkness for a statue of some legendary hero, so grand and arrogant was his bearing. Serafima did not have to see his face to know that he approved of Osric's current state.

"Form ranks, brothers!" he called out in the gruff Nemerian language, which Serafima had learned to speak in her travels. His deep, rough voice snapped the men to attention and they quickly reformed their column, leaving the broken, bloodied bodies of their enemies in their wake. Then they began to march down the street, each man peering into the windows and doors of the ruined

buildings they passed.

“Here, sir!” one of the men shouted. The column halted and the commander looked back as the soldier reached under a pile of rubble and pulled a thin, haggard looking man out from his hiding place.

“No! Please!” the man said, writhing free of the soldier’s grasp and throwing himself at the feet of the Nemerian commander. The titan’s armored head bent down to regard the pathetic wretch clinging to his legs.

“Please, have mercy!”

With a sudden kick, the commander flung the street urchin away from him as easily as if he were made from straw. Serafima heard the poor fellow’s bones crack even over the droning of the rain when he crashed into a heap of rubble.

“Kurnite scum,” the commander said. “Bleed him.”

The nearest soldier stepped forward and drove the point of his sword into the man’s heart without hesitation.

“We will cleanse this rotting city of filth yet, my brothers.” The commander’s voice was tinged with the zeal of a true fanatic. His men cheered at his words.

Serafima had seen enough. She backed away slowly and when she was far enough to not be heard, she turned and ran through the flooded streets to where she had left Andron and his children.

But they were not waiting where she had left them. The watery street was empty and she could find no sign of their passage.

“Andron, you fool.”

She caught a hint of movement nearby and her keen eyes focused in to see the merchant’s children huddled

beneath the remains of some wooden structure. She hurried over and motioned them to leave their hiding place.

“We can’t stay here,” she said before she turned to Renart. “Where is your father?”

“He thought he saw our uncle. He told us to wait here out of sight until he came back.”

Serafima heard the splashing footsteps of the marching Nemerians some distance behind her and she hoisted little Aaline out of the water.

“This way,” she said. “Now!”

“But what about father?” Renart asked.

“Do as I say, boy!”

Serafima led them away from the main street and down a flooded alleyway just as the Nemerians came into her sight. She hoped that their vision was not so sharp as her own. They darted through the wreckage of Osric seemingly at random, but Serafima remained keenly aware of their position relative to the Nemerian killing squad. When they finally stopped running, she handed Aaline down to Renart and examined their surroundings carefully.

Renart set Aaline down on a pile of rock that protruded from the water and went to comfort Letice, who had begun to cry. Serafima glared at the girl as her sobbing grew louder.

“Why did he leave us? Why?”

Serafima clamped a hand over the girl’s mouth and Letice’s eyes widened.

“Be quiet, curse you! Do you mean to bring the things lurking in these shadows down upon us?”

Leticie shook her head feebly. Serafima nodded and slowly removed her hand. The children stared at her anxiously and she realized then that they would die if she left them alone for but a moment. She cursed their father for not coming to the same realization.

“Are...are we going to look for father?” Renart asked.

Serafima wanted to say that they would not. She knew it was the wise answer, the right answer. Andron would not survive an hour without her protection and guidance, of that she was certain. It was likely that he had already stumbled upon the Nemerians or the loathsome rat-things. To waste their time searching for him was foolish, if not suicidal.

If they were forced into a fight, at least one of the children would probably die. The likely deaths of Andron, Guimar, and the Armanorian woman did not weigh heavily upon her conscience. They had refused to heed her warnings and had brought their fate upon themselves, but the children were a different matter. They had been abandoned, left to fend for themselves in a place that held nothing but terror, pain, and death. She found herself unable to consider the thought of leaving them. They deserved better than the doom to which their erstwhile protectors had left them.

Aaline alone seemed to fully understand their plight and would go along with whatever decision Serafima made. There was a good chance, however, that Renart and Leticie would attempt to go off looking for their father on their own if Serafima refused. In fact, they were sure to; Serafima could see it in the way they gazed at her hopefully as Renart’s question hung in the air between



them.

Without her, they would not last more than a few minutes.

“Yes,” Serafima said, finally. “We’ll try to find him.”

They spent the next hour sneaking through the twisted, ruined streets of Osric, searching in vain for any sign of Andron and his brother. Twice Serafima heard the Nemerians marching closer to them and diverted the children from their course to avoid being discovered. They found death on every path they took; bloated corpses bobbing in the flooded streets, bodies crushed beneath fallen debris, and victims of simple murder and robbery. None of the faces in the gruesome procession were familiar.

Then Serafima heard a man cry out somewhere nearby and a chorus of cruel laughter followed. She signaled for the children to be silent and led them through a half-collapsed building to reach another narrow alleyway. On the opposite side of the alley were the remains of what had once been a house; one of its walls had caved in, allowing them to see inside. A small fire was lit there, for the roof was still relatively intact enough to keep the rain off and the pile of stone that had formed the wall kept out most of the water that flooded the street.

A group of desperate looking men were gathered around the fire. They were armed mostly with axes and clubs, but a few of them carried swords at their sides. Serafima counted eight of them. The six men standing nearest the fire were the source of the laughter. Standing a bit apart from them was what she judged to be the leader of the group. His clothing, though soiled like his

mates', was of a much better quality and the sword sheathed at his side looked to be of fine craftsmanship. His arms were wrapped around a young, dark haired woman who, while not resisting his grasp, did not appear wholly comforted by his touch. Serafima instantly recognized the girl's features and wondered how long Lenna had been in the company of such scoundrels.

Their amusement was being provided by the last of their number, who was savagely beating some unfortunate soul. The battered man lifted his head off the ground just enough for Serafima to see his face.

It was Andron.

Serafima drew her sword and turned to Renart.

"Stay here," she said. "And be quiet."

Serafima slipped into the shadows and silently worked her way across the flooded alleyway until she was only a few feet from Andron and his tormenter. The man struck Andron again and turned to his mates as they howled with approval of his cruelty.

He was still laughing when Serafima stepped forward and plunged her sword into his back nearly up to the hilt.

The laughter ceased abruptly as his lifeless body fell to the ground. Serafima then moved into the light cast by the campfire and loomed over the corpse, her menacing eyes fixed on the rest of the band of miscreants. Her bloody sword glistened in the firelight.

"Get up, Andron," she said. The merchant was badly bruised and bleeding in several places, but he still had the strength to obey. He got to his feet and shuffled over to Serafima's side.

"They...they've killed Guimar," he said. His weak voice

was laced with a mixture of fear, confusion, and disbelief as he indicated a body that lay face down a few yards away from them.

“The girl,” Serafima said. “Let her go.”

“You know this she-devil, darling?” the leader asked his captive. Lenna glanced at the armed men around her and then looked back to Serafima. She shook her head and clung to her captor.

“Don’t look to me like she’s wanting to go,” he said, drawing his sword slowly. The other men readied their weapons as well. The leader pointed to Guimar’s corpse with his sword.

“You see what happened to the last fella that didn’t respect the lady’s wishes?”

Lenna’s face betrayed no emotion, no hint of loss or sorrow over the murder of her husband. Serafima recognized it as the face of a calculating survivor whose sole concern was her own wellbeing.

“Lenna!” Andron said, stepping forward. “Are you mad? You can’t mean to stay with these savages!”

Serafima caught him by the arm.

“Keep your teeth together, you fool! She’s made her choice.”

She turned back to the leader.

“Very well, then. Keep her.”

Andron made to protest, but Serafima pulled him into the shadows as she slowly backed away from the makeshift camp. She kept her sword at the ready, just in case one of the men was foolish enough to rush after her, but the cowards did not move as they watched her and Andron disappear into darkness. The leader quickly

turned his attention back to Lenna, his grimy hands groping her eagerly. Serafima knew well the price that the woman would have to pay for her protection.

Andron protested, but he was far too weak from his wounds to put up much of a fight. Serafima guided him back to where his children were hiding. Renart and Leticia leapt forth immediately to embrace their father, but little Aaline hesitated. She looked first to Serafima as if waiting for approval. Serafima nodded slightly and the girl rushed to join her siblings.

The mercenaries remained near their campfire and appeared unwilling to give chase through the darkness and driving rain. Andron, after all, had merely been a diversionary interest to them. She decided it would be best for them to leave quickly, thereby avoiding the unpleasant event that was sure to transpire between the men and their newfound companion.

“Move,” she said as she herded the reunited family once more through the labyrinthine wreckage of the city. Their pace was slowed greatly by Andron, who could barely walk now without assistance. After venturing a few blocks, Serafima led them into a deserted building with a partially intact roof so she could determine how badly the merchant was hurt.

His eyes were nearly swollen shut from the beating he had taken and several of his ribs were certainly broken. Bruises and cuts covered his body and he couldn't move his left leg without suffering immense pain. There would certainly be no more traveling along rooftops. Worse, if they ran into trouble, he would not be able to run to escape it.

Serafima left Andron be for a moment as he pulled his children close to him, begging them to forgive him for running off after their now dead uncle and leaving them alone. She stared out into the wet, inky darkness just outside their shelter and thought about what they should do now that she knew Andron could barely travel. As she pondered the situation, her ears picked up the sound of feet sloshing through the flooded street. Her sword sprang from its scabbard almost of its own volition and she peered down the street cautiously.

The splashing was caused by a single man who appeared to be fleeing from something. As he drew closer, Serafima recognized the familiar reds, yellows, and blues that decorated most officers of the Kurnite army. His clothing was now besmirched by mud, blood, and filth and he appeared quite haggard. He carried no weapon, so Serafima sheathed hers and crouched in the shadows until he was only a few feet away from her. With one swift, fluid motion, she lashed out to seize the man by his arm and then flung him into their partly ruined shelter.

Andron and his children were startled by the sudden intrusion and were already moving away from the Kurnite soldier when Serafima drew her sword and leveled it at his face.

“Who...,” the Kurnite started to say, but he stopped when he got a better look at his assailant’s face. Recognition flashed in his weary eyes.

“You!” he said. “By Kurnos! What are you doing here?”

Serafima suddenly recognized the soldier from a brief meeting three days earlier. She was amazed he was still alive.

“You know this man?” Andron asked.

“We’ve met,” she said.

The soldier had not noticed Andron until he spoke, but now regarded him with curiosity.

“What’s this? Not picking up stragglers for some barbaric sacrifice of yours, I hope.”

Serafima pushed her sword closer so that the point pressed against the man’s neck.

“Merely fulfilling my end of a bargain,” she said.

“Ah,” the soldier said. “Now I see how you managed to escape.”

“Serafima, who is this man?” Andron asked.

“My name is Antonis de Grazna,” he said, “war captain and defender of Osruc.”

“And a fool,” Serafima said. “Three days ago he visited my cell, promised me freedom in exchange for joining his band of mercenaries to fight the Nemerians.”

“Why didn’t you do it?” Andron asked.

“She was afraid,” Antonis said.

Serafima smiled.

“They had no hope of beating the Nemerians. I would rather not die defending this wretched place.”

“But you could have deserted after you were set free!” Andron said. “You could have been somewhere safe, far from this nightmare.”

“That would have meant breaking my word,” she said.

“But how did you intend to escape your cell?”

“I figured an opportunity would present itself.”

“And if I had not come along?”

Serafima shrugged.

“You did,” she said. “What does it matter now?”

She returned her attention to her prisoner.

“When did the Nemerians breach the walls?”

“I do not know,” Antonis said. “The first group was spotted just before nightfall.”

“How many of these murder squads have you seen?”

“Several. Each with at least a dozen men.”

“Where is the rest of the city guard holed up?”

Antonis glanced about nervously before he answered.

“Um...here, it would seem.”

“But there’s no one else here,” Andron said.

Serafima could not suppress a chuckle.

“Of course not. This one is all that’s left of them.”

“We were ambushed,” Antonis said. “Caught unaware...”

“Your men were likely asleep if they weren’t already drunk,” Serafima said. She removed her sword from the Kurnite’s throat and sheathed the weapon.

“Those devils have barred the gates,” Antonis said. “They want us locked in here with them. The savages think only of bloodshed and plunder. They have always hated us, jealous of our splendid cities and glorious riches.”

Serafima grunted. It had been centuries since anyone had described the lands of Kurn in such glowing terms; except, of course, the Kurnites themselves.

“The Nemerians have long memories,” she said. “They haven’t forgotten that Nemerian slaves built this city under Kurnite lashes. This is a war of vengeance, not greed.”

“But that makes no sense!” Andron said. “Why kill everyone in the city when they would likely surrender

without a fight?”

“Why should vengeance be sensible?” Serafima asked.

As Antonis peeked out into the street, Serafima heard the rhythmic splashing of something moving steadily down the flooded street. The sound was closing fast.

“They’re coming!” she said, pulling Antonis away from the street and directing the others towards a hole in a nearby wall. She all but flung the Kurnite through the gap and had to carry Andron out of the ruined building as the Nemerian soldiers drew closer. On the other side of the wall, they had to climb over piles of jagged stone to proceed and Serafima again found herself carrying the badly injured merchant. They had gone several yards before she heard Renart’s voice.

“Aaline! Where’s Aaline?”

It took only a brief glance for Serafima to realize that the little girl was not with them.

Without hesitation, she dropped Andron and scrambled back over the heaps of rubble towards the wall they had just climbed through. Her sword leapt from its sheath and she prepared to throw herself into what would surely be a desperate battle to protect a child she barely knew.

But she was too late.

The girl had been unable to reach their escape path before the Nemerian soldiers came into view and instead hid in the darkest corner of the ruined building. She was clever, but fortune did not favor her twice in one night. The Nemerians had ducked inside to escape the deluge for a few moments and there was nowhere for her to run when they spotted her. Their familiar, hulking commander held her bloody, broken body in one of his



massive hands. Her blood was smeared upon the walls and the jagged rocks that protruded from the water.

The armored man cast Aaline's shattered body aside and turned back to his men. None of them seemed to be affected by the grisly scene.

"What are you waiting for, brothers?" he asked. "Get back to your search! Let none of these wretched things of Kurn escape your swords!"

As the soldiers dashed back into the street, the steel-clad mountain remained inside and removed his helmet to wipe away the blood that had splattered onto his face. Serafima memorized every line and curve of that face before she withdrew to rejoin Andron and the others.

When she returned, the merchant watched her anxiously.

"Aaline?"

Serafima shook her head.

"I'm sorry, Andron."

Tears began to push their way through his already swollen eyes and the faces of his two older children went white.

"We have to keep moving," she said coldly. Although a fearsome rage burned in her chest, Serafima knew she had to suppress it if they were to escape from Osric alive.

There would be a time for that rage to be unleashed.

Serafima was forced to carry Andron once again, but the children were in such a state of shock that they obeyed her every word without hesitation. Antonis stayed close to them. He was obviously fearful of the Nemerian death squads that roamed the streets of his city and had judged that throwing his lot in with them was his best

chance for survival. Serafima hoped that his knowledge of Osric would prove useful.

“Are there any ways out of the city other than the main gates?” she asked him as they crept through the shadows.

The Kurnite thought the matter over for a few seconds before answering.

“The tunnels that lead through the undercity, perhaps. I’ve heard that smugglers once used them to bring their goods into the city from outside the walls, but no one has used them for centuries.”

“Wouldn’t they all be flooded?” she asked, remembering the creatures driven to the surface by the heavy rains.

“Most of them would be, I expect,” he said. “But there may be a few entrances on higher ground. Those passages might not be flooded.”

“If the Nemerians have already breached the city walls, they might be our only chance of escaping this place. Do you know where any of these entrances are hidden?”

Antonis thought for a moment.

“The cemetery,” he said. “There are old stories about thieves digging tunnels through the crypt walls so they could slip in and out of the city as they pleased.”

“Let’s hope there is some truth to those stories,” Serafima said. She recalled passing a cemetery hill earlier that night and she led the group back towards it. They roamed the city for half an hour before she caught sight of the cemetery’s gates.

The sprawling cemetery sat atop a hill that was now surrounded by water. Many of the crypts and monuments erected there had been shattered by the bombardment of

Nemerian siege engines and all of them showed signs of decay from both age and neglect.

They searched three crypts without success and were forced to pass by two others because the stench of death was too overpowering to endure. Then, in a large tomb nearly at the top of the hill, they moved aside a heavy sarcophagus to reveal a narrow hole that had been broken through the stone floor. Serafima probed the dark abyss with her sword and it failed to touch ground.

“We need light,” she said.

Without ceremony, she shoved off the sarcophagus’s lid and immediately recoiled as the foul air within rushed out like a vengeful spirit. When the acrid cloud dissipated, she rummaged through its rotting contents. Kurnites were traditionally buried with several personal items, and inside she was lucky enough to find a bottle of what looked like some sort of liquor. She ripped away the wax sealant and took a drink that she quickly spat out. Even with the likely passage of more than a century, it was still uncommonly strong.

“Valimerian brandy,” Andron said. “Takes centuries for it to age enough that you can drink it. Hasn’t been brewed since before my grandfather’s time. That bottle must be priceless.”

Serafima put the bottle down and pulled an intact thighbone out of the sarcophagus. She then ripped the relatively intact clothing away from the corpse and wrapped a portion of it around the bone. The rest of the clothing she handed to Renart.

“Hold this, we may need it later.”

After dousing the cloth with brandy, she placed it on

the lid of the sarcophagus and brought her sword crashing against the stone. It took four strikes to produce the spark needed to ignite the makeshift torch and it glowed with a sickly, greasy light.

The others looked at her doubtfully.

“Come on, then,” she said as she eased herself down into the hole.

The floor of the tunnel was only about eight feet below the crypt and though it was wet, the water only came up to her ankles. A dull rumbling could be heard somewhere in the unseen depths beyond. She helped the others into the tunnel and then led them deeper into the earthen walled catacombs.

Antonis and Renart helped Andron along the way and Serafima preceded them with the torch in one hand and her sword in the other. The tunnel twisted in several directions and occasionally branched out into separate paths. Without any real idea of where they were going, Serafima trusted her instincts; even without any points of reference, her sense of direction was keen. Her path moved them steadily closer to the source of the rumbling sound, for it grew louder with every step they took. Just as she had done in the ruined city above, she decided against pointing out anything that concerned her, such as the claw marks that adorned most of the walls. If the catacombs were not flooded, she feared there was a good chance that many of the rat-like creatures could still be there. She hoped that the light of her torch would keep them at bay.

After traversing some distance, they came to what had once been a stone wall. Something had forced its way

through some time ago, leaving a pile of bricks half buried in the muddy floor of the tunnel. Peering through the hole, Serafima now saw what was causing the sound she had first heard upon her descent. They had reached the undercity of Osrice, the network of tunnels that had once been a fully functioning sewer and drainage system, but had long since fallen into disrepair and neglect. Most of the small channels and drains that had once funneled both waste and rainwater out of the city efficiently had been clogged for some time and the blockages forced everything through the larger drains that emptied into a nearby lake. They had found one of the largest drain channels in the undercity, but the heavy rains had transformed it into a rushing river of sewage and filthy rainwater. The stench of it was almost unbearable.

Serafima stepped out of the earthen tunnel and onto the wet stone of a wide ledge just a few feet above the river. The torchlight did not extend quite far enough to see the other side of the channel clearly, but she could plainly see its flickering light reflected in several pairs of large eyes. While many of the degenerate creatures of the undercity had been forced to the surface, it seemed that a good number of them had also been driven down the drainage channel before they managed to scramble to relative safety. For the time being, they were trapped.

They were probably hungry.

“Now what?” Andron asked.

“We follow the current,” Serafima said. “It has to lead out of the city.”

Suddenly, Letice screamed.

Serafima whirled in time to see one of the mutants

shambling into the light after the girl. Its eyes narrowed and it winced painfully at the light, but its hunger seemed to give it courage and it lunged forward. Serafima pushed by the others just in time to slash the thing before its ravenous claws reached Letice. Her fearsome blow opened the monster's chest and it fell down dead into a pool of its own blood and entrails.

She saw more of the creatures closing in behind their fallen kin.

"Run!" she said, shoving Letice towards the others and backpedaling after them. Their pursuers were hesitant at first, but they grew bolder and increased their pace.

Suddenly, Serafima heard Antonis scream behind her.

"We're trapped! We're trapped!"

As Serafima turned to see what was happening, the Kurnite crashed into her in a headlong rush to escape whatever it was that he had seen. The improvised torch came free from her hand and was swallowed by the roaring river, thrusting them into absolute darkness.

The creatures of the undercity charged towards them, their shrill, joyous voices and clattering jaws carrying over the sound of rushing water. Serafima felt claws rip at her flesh, and she heard Antonis's dying screams as the things tore him apart. Andron and his children were sure to suffer his fate within seconds if they stayed there on the ledge.

Lashing out desperately, she managed to break free from their talons and reach for the others. Her hand closed around someone's clothing.

"The water!" she said. "Jump!"

Serafima dove off the ledge with one of her companions

in tow and plunged into the foul water. The rushing river swept them quickly away from the pack of creatures but the current was so strong that even Serafima had difficulty keeping her head above the polluted water. She tried to keep her mouth and eyes shut, but an occasional gulp of the sickening liquid slipped past her lips and nearly caused her to vomit. Buffeted, pushed, and pulled from all sides, Serafima lost all sense of time and distance in the darkness.

At last, the river spewed them out of the earth and back into the open air where they found themselves floating in an acrid swamp of sewage and thick algae. Some distance behind them loomed the once great wall of Osric, which now encircled a city consumed by chaos and death. The rain was still pouring down relentlessly and for once she was thankful for its presence since it diffused the otherwise unbearable stench of the putrid lake of filth.

Serafima had not relinquished her grip and could now see well enough to find that she had grasped Leticia when she leapt into the river. The girl was barely conscious, but she was alive.

Of Andron and Renart, there was no sign.

She dragged Leticia to the shore and hauled herself up out of the foul water. The girl coughed and was beginning to throw up when Serafima heard something splashing in the water behind them. She looked back and was relieved to find Renart pulling his injured father towards the shore. She helped them out of the water and they all joined Leticia in sickness for several minutes.

When their stomachs finally stopped heaving, Serafima herded them away from the sewage pond until they

reached a field of thick, tall grass where they sat and rested for a few moments. While Andron and his children huddled together under the cold rain, Serafima tried to determine where they were outside the city. Several hundred yards to her left she saw the dim glow of covered campfires that she judged to be the main encampment of the Nemerians. There would be horses there to be stolen, horses they would need if they wanted to reach the borders of Vellev, where Andron's family would be safe. If they were lucky, the bad weather would continue for another day or two, long enough to provide cover for their flight to the north.

She looked back to the shivering family and knew that there was still a chance they would not escape the watchful eyes of the Nemerian soldiers that were likely patrolling for several miles around the city. There was also the matter of Andron's injuries. Even if he survived the journey, there was a good chance his wounds would become infected after swimming in sewage and never heal properly, rendering him a crippled shell of a man. She wondered if he would have rather perished inside that cursed city and see brave little Aaline escape in his place. Serafima felt no shame in wishing that it had been so.

Serafima had little difficulty stealing away a pair of fine horses from the Nemerian encampment and they began their ride northward well before the sun rose that morning. The bad weather held for another day, as did their luck, for they encountered no one of consequence on



their journey. They crossed into the lands of Vellev during the night almost three days after escaping from besieged Osric and were welcomed warmly in the border town of Alvineaux, where Andron was well known by the local traders.

The next morning, Renart woke Andron and informed him that Serafima was leaving them now that they were in good care. The merchant insisted on seeing her before she departed and Renart helped him to the stables where Serafima was readying a horse.

“I never had the opportunity to thank you, Serafima,” he said.

She shook her head.

“You needn’t bother. You helped me so I could help you. We’ve paid our debt to one another.”

Andron sighed.

“I see.”

Serafima hoisted herself into the Nemerian warhorse’s saddle.

“Where will you go now?” Andron asked.

“To Osric.”

Andron gasped

“What? Have you lost your mind?”

Serafima glared down at him.

“I have unfinished business with the Nemerian dog that murdered your daughter.”

The merchant grasped the horse’s reigns.

“Don’t do this for my sake, damn you!” Andron said. “Killing that devil will not bring Aaline back to me!”

Serafima sneered and yanked the reins free.

“I’m not doing this for you! Now get out of my way!”

Andron scarcely managed to stagger back as Serafima spurred the animal forward and charged out of the stable. He and Renart watched the horse gallop into the distance as it bore its Rostogovian rider back to the besieged city.

Andron shook his head.

“She’s mad. Not a bit of sense left in her head!”

Renart shrugged.

“Why should vengeance be sensible?”

Some of Benjamin Sperduto's publications include short stories in *The Realm Beyond* (February, 2013) and Red Skies Press's *Techno-Goth Cthulhu* anthology (2013). His first novel, *The Walls of Dalgorod*, was recently accepted for publication by Curiosity Quills Press.

# ARIA

by Anselmo J. Alliegro

## I

*“The music fits you like a glove, Aria. It’s a complex piece of music; a highly original piece, so often botched by lesser artists. It’s good to have you back, Aria.”*

SC Interface Audio Transcript

Aria entered Café Sci Sci from a world of reflections and Net-TV images. Roy Larkin noticed her I-wear blouse fade from a yellow-green to green-blue. Unusual dress code for Recipients, he thought, given their flatness. The current fad, I-wear reflected mood through heat sensors in the fabric: the blue side of the spectrum reflected nervousness and stress, the red side reflected anger or passion, and green was considered neutral. Larkin wanted to believe, as the rest of the world, and see her as the real Aria. He wanted her blouse to become a multi-colored rainbow, with each hue marking the breadth of her soul.

However, this was Aria the Recipient and not Aria; a flesh and blood woman, to be sure, yet a sophisticated computer as well. Her biological brain emulated by nanomachines, replacing organic brain cells with synthetic neurons, and allowing her to process thoughts millions of times faster than a non-Recipient brain.

“Good evening, Mr. Larkin,” Aria said, without a hint of recognition.

She caught Larkin sitting at the bar of the cozy café. Her glossy, short-cropped hair framed a young and delicate face. Aria belonged on painted skies of ancient cathedrals. Such things should never die, thought Larkin.

“Thank you for coming, Ms. Cromwell. Take a seat,” Larkin said. In his mid-thirties, lean, jet black ruffled hair, eyes deep-set, prominent nose pointing at his target, handsome but a bit disheveled. Larkin was anxious with an air of suspicion, and always sat on the edge of his seat.

“I’d rather stand,” she said resolutely. “Quite a novelty, using paper to slip me a note at the interview.”

“Even with quantum encryption.... I mean, I value privacy.”

Larkin tried to contain his joy at seeing her again; a joy she could not share. Her nano-scan, uploaded to her synthetic brain, must have been administered before they met.

“How did you know about the ghost light?” she asked.

“I’m a journalist. I have my sources.”

“Why are you opposed to Cyberlife Corporation, Mr. Larkin?”

“Please call me Roy.”

Mr. Larkin rang harsh, coming from someone who had spoken his name with longing and intimacy before her “fatal” accident.

“Tell me, Roy. Is it my father you hate, or just his corporation?”

“No, Aria. May I call you Aria?”

“Please.”

“I don’t hate your father, Aria. I think big corporations need to be regulated. People are naïve and blindly accept its products.”

Larkin felt alienated, given his introspection and feeling, seeing the lack thereof in a complacent and wooden society. Aria’s quest for magic shores and stirring music inspired his love for her.

“Without Cyberlife this city would die,” she said, and her I-wear turned toward the yellow-orange.

“It’s difficult to lose someone. But a brain-unit in a cloned body, despite all the personal information gathered by the RAM Sector, doesn’t make one human.”

Her I-wear was turning green and edging on blue. Larkin saw she was nervous.

“Am I human, Roy?”

“Of course, your mind was transferred intact. But a nano-scan is still a very experimental – “

“Prove that I’m human.”

“You still play beautiful music.”

“As good as ever.”

Her I-wear turned a warmer green-yellow.

“Renowned for playing with feeling,” noted Larkin.

“Accessing, Aria,” she said, and her eyes rolled up. *“Planetary Post – November twelve. Aria Cromwell is the rising star of her generation. Her sensitive, moving interpretations can be confidently compared to serious artists twice her age. Last night there were moments of such interpretive precision and musical focus that her playing spoke from the heart to the heart. The reading was sober, with adamant rhythmic control, and filled with transcendent inconsolability. Aria Cromwell’s music has an*

*elevating influence on the soul. What wonderful contrapuntal – ”*

“Please please, don’t do that,” Larkin interjected.

Where did he fit in that vast mind? Perhaps she stored a “Roy File” amid all that knowledge, nestled like a grain of sand on Flora Cay’s beach.

“Technology makes you uncomfortable, I can see that. Technophobia,” she remarked. She turned to him quite serious. “Are you going to tell me how you know about the ghost light, or will I draw my own conclusions?”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“I haven’t told anyone that story. You must have known me, intimately, after my nano-scan. That’s why I can’t remember you. So tell me.”

“That won’t do us any good,” Larkin said.

Her I-wear turned fiery red.

“Don’t waste my time, Mr. Larkin,” she said firmly, and stormed away.

Professor Eliot Lawrence and Dr. Dale Grimm had been scrutinizing the girl from a table in the dining area. They approached Larkin in her absence.

“At least she didn’t stay green,” observed Lawrence.

“Cromwell is using his own daughter as a promotional pawn,” claimed Dr. Grimm.

“Wouldn’t surprise me,” said Lawrence.

“And he’s using you too, Roy. That’s why he agreed to the interview,” Dr. Grimm persisted.

Larkin turned to Dr. Grimm. “Are you checking on the Health Department stats?”

“I’m working on it,” he said.

“Dale thinks there’s an informant working for Cyberlife. That bomb at the symposium was no accident,” explained Lawrence.

“It’s economic survival. Don’t expect to hold rallies to boycott a product and not get any heat,” Larkin said.

Dr. Grimm leaned close. “They can be listening to us now.” He excused himself and walked out into the hustle and bustle.

Dr. Grimm, a computer scientist, was expert at extracting information: a spy in fear of spies. Along with his friends, Dr. Grimm repudiated Cyberlife’s proposal for the Soul Catcher chip (SC). Cyberlife justified it as a backup between nano-scans to fill memory gaps. Its opponents saw it as the ultimate invasion of privacy, in a world scarcely private. Unlike the personal brain mapping done by nanobots, the 10+ terabyte SC, implanted behind the eye at birth, could serve like an aircraft’s black box. Cyberlife’s SC chip posed a threat to civil liberties and would nullify one’s right to privacy.

“Congratulations, Roy,” said Lawrence, and indicated up, on a building outside Café Sci Sci’s window. Larkin’s Net-TV interview with Cromwell and his daughter was playing on Planetary Central Station. The captions on the screen read: PCS/JANUARY 31, 2103, and the title, *CYBERLIFE, FRIEND OR FOE?*

Yonder, in the lighted beehive of civilization, Cyberlife’s ubiquitous advertisements muted his message. They roared from buildings and billboards and public transports ... DON’T MOURN – GET RE-BORN WITH CYBERLIFE ... CYBERLIFE: YOU’RE DYING TO CALL US...

## II

*“... imagine the music is about something, and then try to discover what that something is. Where many hear romance, in the opening lines of the sonata, I hear a funeral march. Who was the funeral for?”*

SC Interface Audio Transcript

Aria played Beethoven to a full house in the vast auditorium. Larkin sat, unaccompanied, a few rows back. Attached to the armrest, a paper-thin monitor with eye-tracking interface provided close-ups of the performers. Gazing to the upper left of the screen, focused left of the stage; gazing to the upper right, focused right of the stage; gazing down Larkin could zoom on the beautiful master pianist.

Beethoven's second sonata, op. 27 no. 2, known as the *Moonlight Sonata*, was especially significant to Larkin. She had played it for him before sailing into the tempest.

Expressions – grave, strained, beatific - came to Aria's face as she rekindled the sonata. Larkin felt Aria's voice again, escaping from the grip of death. The sonata became the medium of her resurrection.

The concert concluded to thunderous applause. Aria bowed with the conductor. Later, before Larkin could exit the auditorium, he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned to see Aria smiling.

“Loved your performance,” said Larkin. “How did you find me?”

“I saw you from stage.”



“In a crowd of hundreds?”

“Only one Roy Larkin.”

“But ... oh, I see.”

“Right,” she said, with a hint of resentment, for thinking her a bio-chip instead of a human being. “Are you following me, Mr. Larkin? Because if you are ...”

“Please call me Roy. And no, I’m not following you. I’m just a fan.”

“Well then, *fan*, good-bye,” she snapped, and hastened to leave.

“I could take you home,” he said, following at her heels.

“No thanks, I’ll take the maglev.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

Larkin’s car waited at the curb. Inside was a built-in bar and Net-TV monitor. A coffee table contained the controls for the car’s computer. The monitor glowed when they stepped inside.

Recipients required a four-year term working in highly technical jobs for Cyberlife. And even Aria, Cromwell’s daughter, was serving her term. She lived in a Cyberlife owned housing complex replete with Cyberlife laboratories and facilities. Larkin asked for her address and told the computer.

The streets flowed with traffic. Aircraft swarmed about the sky, flying to and fro like fireflies in the night.

Larkin yearned to devour her with kisses. He felt a warmth between them. She was among a select few, experimental subjects to be sure, whose minds had been transferred intact. Yet the *Moonlight Sonata* made her the rainbow Larkin had known and wanted.

“What’s your job with Cyberlife?” he asked.

“Some boring thing.”

“I’m interested.”

“Clinical Programmer. Coordinate and monitor the flow of clinical data into the computer database, et cetera.”

“A programmer.”

“I told you it was boring.”

“I wouldn’t know,” he admitted.

Street lights played on her porcelain face. Her nano-scan, uploaded to her new artificial brain, had excluded him: missed their romance by a few days or months. So that – damn irony – all recollections of him had drowned with her in the stormy sea. Should I fill the gap? he wondered. Bring her up to date, so to speak? We’d be risking too much. Her father would ...

“Are you going to tell me?” she asked.

“What should I tell you?”

“About the ghost light.”

“Getting information is my business.”

“You wanted me to remember you. That’s why you slipped me the note and wrote ‘Remember the ghost light?’ I saw how you looked at me.”

“Before your ... accident, we ... we met briefly that’s all.”

“I have five months unaccounted for. I’m trying to piece it together, and all you can say is ‘we met briefly.’”

“A step at a time Aria, please. If your father finds out we’ve been talking.... Well, he’s my nemesis, as you know,” Larkin cautioned.

“Sounds dangerous. I like that.”

“Is that why you sailed to Flora Cay, for the danger?”

“To re-visit my childhood. That’s where I saw it; wish I could have seen it that stormy night. A single bright flash on the lighthouse lantern tower, beautiful, watching over me, and fading away. I’ve never experienced that again.” Breaking her spell, she said, “Silly little girl, I know. Optical illusion ... hallucination ... a glint of moonlight on glass ...”

“I believe you, and that Flora Cay is very special to you,” he assured her.

The car stopped beneath an imposing skyscraper. Cyberlife built big and reigned far.

“My next concert is at Clarke Station. You know, the one at libration point one. The restaurant has a big window where the moon rises and sets. You’re welcome to attend, unless space travel makes you nauseous.”

She’s read about me, he thought. With net interface she could access volumes on Larkin; she probably already had, he imagined, and even at the moment. Space travel *does* make me nauseous.

“I’ll shuttle up there if I can. You played beautifully.”

“Thanks, but I had a bit of trouble with the last movement,” Aria said, with a touch of concern. “My hands were playing the last phrases without me, as if they didn’t belong to me. And the notes appeared to me as if ... as if I was playing by the numbers. Overworked, I guess.”

After delivering Aria to Cyberlife, Larkin arrived at his apartment. He addressed the house computer.

“PC, I would like you to file all information about Cyberlife in the video channels.”

“Yes Roy. Anything else you would like?” replied the pleasant female voice.

“I’d like you to reserve a flight to Space Station Clarke at libration point one gateway. Staying just one day, Friday of next week,” he said as he removed his coat.

“Anything else you would like?”

“Any unread messages?”

“There is a message from Professor Lawrence. Should I display it for you?”

“Please do.”

Lawrence sent an urgent request to meet at Café Sci Sci the following night. The message worried him. Bombs at symposiums! He felt lucky to be alive. Why play David to a corporate Goliath? Lawrence’s motive was a stolen patent of a key technology he developed, used for human-like A.I. simulations. Lawrence filed a multi-million dollar lawsuit against Cyberlife. The corporation, in turn, used his technology to create a virtual Professor Lawrence. His more efficient, cost effective double replaced him completely, holding virtual lectures with his students.

When the time came Larkin sat at the café with Lawrence and waited for Dr. Grimm. He finally appeared, crossing the street and occasionally looking over his shoulder. Bursts of colored neon faded on the somber Dr. Grimm.

“I think I’m being followed,” whispered Dr. Grimm, holding a pocket PC tightly against his chest.

“Who could possibly be following you?” asked Larkin.

Dr. Grimm took a seat without answering.

Lawrence glanced at Larkin with concern. He observed Dr. Grimm and inquired, “What did you find at the Health Department?”

“Information on vital statistics. It shows the rate of cloning is increasing. And now with the nano-scan, and the promise of preserving the mind .... Yet nothing indicates the population is rising so quickly,” disclosed Dr. Grimm.

Lawrence leaned back, raised his brows, and warned, “An increase in biomass leads to competition ... extinction.”

“It’s the media. Cyberlife’s ads are working. People want immortality. It’s all taken for granted,” Larkin said.

The age of biotechnology brought a wide acceptance of artificial life. Cyberlife offered preventive medicine, which tailored diagnostic and therapeutic strategies to an individual’s needs. The DNA chip detected every gene in the human genome for scanning against any disease. Such benefits limited bioethical debates. Cyberlife replaced God. Who argues ethics with God?

Dr. Grimm leaned closer to both men. “Looks like they’ve tapped into computers at the Health Department: they’ve tampered with vital statistics.”

“Roy, are you still seeing Aria?” asked Lawrence.

“Are you suggesting I don’t?”

“She works for Cyberlife. She can be an informant. A spy working for the corporation,” Lawrence said.

“Nonsense! I knew her before she was a Recipient. She had her differences with Cyberlife, and confided in me. If anything, she was *our* spy.”

“She’s the CEO’s daughter, for heaven’s sake!” cried Dr. Grimm.

## III

*“The sonata should be played as delicately, quietly, and softly as possible without the dampers. Understand what you’re playing! Then you can play it with the emotional commitment needed. Then, Aria, you’ll be playing Beethoven – not just notes.”*

SC Interface Audio Transcript

Space Station Clarke was the largest star in the sky. It flashed sporadically with raw sunlight, sending beams through the *Pegasus* space-plane’s window and onto Larkin’s face. The *Pegasus* was the main transport to Space Station Clarke, configured for carrying 90 passengers with a 250lb weight allowance for person and possessions.

A stewardess came pacing along the aisle with magnetic shoes. She stopped by Larkin and Harvey, seated next to him.

“Are you okay, Mr. Larkin?” she asked.

“Just fine, thank you.”

She seemed unconcerned about Harvey.

“We’re both fantastic!” exclaimed a much more acclimated Harvey.

Harvey worked for Turlington Kizer, one of the four major aerospace contractors, and owner of the *Pegasus* they now flew. The company assisted in and gained much from the Planetary Society’s construction of the Namaste Lunar Settlement and its solar shield.

The stewardess' superfluous kindness became irritable to Larkin. *Does my nausea precede me?* he wondered. Although he endured, carrying his own payload of motion sickness medication, which, in any event, he avoided using.

"Is your friend an astronaut?" asked Harvey.

"No, she's a musician. Here to entertain, on her *Music of the Spheres* tour. From here she's off to the moon and then ... who knows."

"That's great. Helps build morale. Any piece of Earth is welcome in these parts. I won't be back to Earth," disclosed Harvey.

"You'll be working at Station Clarke?"

"Repairing some orbiting telescopes at the station. After they're nudged over to the telescope farm, at the Earth-sun L-two location, I'm off to Mars."

Space Station Clarke was a bustling hub for science experiments, testing hardware, and a training ground to prepare astronauts for long journeys into deep space. Sites on the moon were accessible from the L1 Gateway. The same applied with travel to asteroids and Mars.

"Godspeed, I mean it," said Larkin, and noted he meant it for himself instead of Harvey. His passenger companion was a robot, in a tough, synthetic human-like frame. Harvey was Turlington Kizer's special toolbox, with compartments on the front and back holding extractable arms.

"Thank you," replied Harvey. "I just finished reading your book, *The Chinese Room*. Interesting take on John Searle's idea, but nonetheless a flawed argument against

strong artificial intelligence. I consider myself conscious, Mr. Larkin.”

“Just arguing how your thoughts, being purely syntactic, lack semantics or meaning: a world of meaningless symbols.”

Larkin sensed his condescension toward Harvey, and it made him uneasy. He marveled at Harvey’s convincing simulation.

“Should I counter that argument?” Harvey politely suggested.

“That won’t be necessary. I’m already familiar with the rebuttals.”

“Your first time to Station Clarke?” asked Harvey, tactfully changing the subject.

“Does it show?”

“You’ll get used to it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Some people feel a little queasy at first.”

“But it’s not a micro-gravity environment.”

“It’s one of the first stations. The rotation is a bit too fast and the spin arm a bit too short. I can explain the mathematics but most humans find that boring.”

Larkin felt in his pocket for the medicine. He had visited another station and, forgetting he spun in a centrifuge, managed a pleasant time. The previous station was larger than Station Clarke, with a longer spin arm and slow rotation, creating a more Earth-like environment. Advances in robotics led to ambitious construction projects in orbit. The automated zero-gravity factories allowed for bolder designs and the creation of



the ultimate space habitat, the celebrated O'Neill Cylinder.

The pilot started docking maneuvers with Station Clarke, 200,000 miles from Earth. The *Pegasus* eased into an airlock projecting from the central axis, around which rotated the 233 yard metallic disk. Somewhere within Station Clarke's sanctuary Aria waited to perform, at 2000 hours universal time.

A hiss and the *Pegasus* equalized pressure with Clarke's open airlock. Larkin unbuckled himself and floated out of his seat. Artificial gravity worked best away from the axis, on the floor of the centrifuge habitat, and that was his destination.

He skipped the orientation video, although Harvey had suggested he watch it. For he had stepped through the looking glass, where falling objects follow bizarre trajectories, and when dropped deflect to the "west" backward.

Moving within the rotating environment induced nausea. Head movements made things worse. Visual cues were designed to help one adapt; reminders that motion, relative to the cues, resulted in side effects from the artificial gravity. Having skipped orientation, Larkin could not read the station's vocabulary, consisting of colors on walls and signs, etc.

"Don't worry," assured Harvey, "it wears off in a day or two. If it gets bad they'll give you a neck-brace. So long, buddy. Duty calls!"

Larkin found the spacious restaurant and stood at the bar, behind the dining area and far from stage. Electric candlelight glowed dim, except for the brighter stage and

the moon's silvery light. Rotating clockwise about every minute, half the moon – the dark lowlands and lighter, heavily cratered highlands; the Sea of Tranquility and Ocean of Storms – rose and set, as Aria had mentioned, outside the long and rounded upstage window.

The music started after 2000 UT, with the conductor and fewer players than Aria's concert on Earth. Larkin found a table near the stage and watched Aria enraptured by the music. She became the music - its melody, its ebb and flow. Larkin read its colors on her face.

The stage dimmed for Beethoven's second sonata. Most appropriate to play the *Moonlight Sonata* 84 percent of the way to the moon. Aria pranced into the middle movement; the one Franz Liszt called "a flower between two chasms." Evoking that frenetic Allegretto, Aria stopped playing mid-phrase, and sat motionless at the piano. Her face shone with a cool and ghostly light.

The audience whispered in the uncomfortable silence. Larkin watched as the conductor leaned down to examine her. Then she rose, came down from the stage, and used a nearby exit door. Larkin tried to pursue her but the conductor stopped him.

"I'm sorry, sir. No one is allowed backstage."

"I'm a friend. What's wrong with Aria? I need to see her," explained Larkin.

Larkin gave the conductor his name, after the other requested it. He arranged to have Aria meet him at his table.

She arrived sooner than he expected.

"Aria, so happy to see you. Take a seat."

“Likewise,” she said, and sat across from him, forcing a smile on her listless face.

“What happened? What’s wrong?” Larkin asked.

“I was playing notes – not Beethoven,” came her cold reply.

“Most beautifully, I may add. Helped me forget my beer is leaning toward that wall,” he said, in reference to gravity’s artificial tide.

She held out her index finger.

“When I was five years old my parrot bit that finger. It left a scar. Cyberlife didn’t know that.”

“You don’t need that scar.”

She removed her hand, and deliberated for a moment.

“How well did you know her?” Aria asked, and her eyes widened with shock. She jerked back rigid with terror, and sprang to her feet.

Larkin realized the source of her panic. Using the word *her* instead of *me* implies a psychical schism.

“C’mon now, just a slip of the tongue,” he assured her.

“Tell me,” she whispered.

“I’ll tell you. Sit down. Want a beer?”

Larkin lifted his bottle to a waiter.

“Where should I start?” he asked.

“When we met.”

“I’m a critic of Cyberlife. You came to me because you knew that. Your father’s corporation couldn’t restore the human soul. They grew clones, and you saw the emptiness in their eyes.”

“That emptiness frightens me.”

“But your process is entirely new. With the nano-scan they’ve been able to – “

“What else haven’t you told me?”

“That we were close.”

“How close?”

“Intimately close.”

The waiter came with Aria’s drink on a tray. Before he placed it on the table, he tripped and the glass fell. It shattered to pieces by Aria’s feet. She did not move.

Larkin reached down with his napkin to help the waiter clean the mess. He was surprised to see Aria’s apathy. She ignored the waiter crouching by her feet.

At Earth View Lounge they kissed with aquamarine Earth framed inside the vast window. There Larkin waited for the next shuttle to Earth. He promised to see her again at the end of her tour.

## IV

*“Why did you stop playing? Is it the space station? I’ve been feeling a bit queasy too.”*

SC Interface Audio Transcript

Three days after his return from Space Station Clarke, Larkin heard from Aria. What he discovered left him grief-stricken and searching for answers. That day he sat in Café Sci Sci with Professor Lawrence and Dr. Grimm.

Larkin remained quiet while his friends theorized, at length, over historical developments reflected in Cyberlife. They discussed Dolly the sheep, the first human clone, and the sequencing of the human genome.

Dr. Grimm hastened to mention Dr. Philip R. Kennedy, a 20<sup>th</sup> century Emory University researcher who invented an effective neural electrode, allowing for brain-machine interfaces, and ushering in the Age of Neuroelectronics. Professor Lawrence noted the subsequent growth of the Transhumanist movement, and its vigorous endorsement of cybernetic research. Such technologies led to Cyberlife and its creations, and the consequences thereof.

Dr. Grimm mentioned Acquired Integrated Circuit Syndrome or AICS: a computer virus that can infect global computer networks; a bio-chip virus to erase computer data. “And the system’s memory will be gone – industrial amnesia.”

“Have you lost your mind?!” shouted Larkin, breaking his long silence.

“It’s the girl, isn’t it?” Dr. Grimm shot back.

“The girl is none of your business.”

“Listen Roy, we’re all depending on you to support our Recipient ID law. Without identifiers, Recipients could integrate with the human population,” Lawrence explained, pointing at Larkin with his finger.

Larkin avoided the discussion and left the café. He set course for home in his car, and re-evaluated his opinions on Alliegro Cyberlife. What is wrong with restoring a soul? Cyberlife’s new method, far from its debatable predecessor, had restored a much beloved soul to the world. He owed Cromwell a change of tone in his commentaries, at the very least, some acceptance, consideration ...

Sirens blared with flashing lights. Two RAM Sector vehicles and a large truck tailed and signaled Larkin's car. Larkin pulled to the side and stopped.

RAM investigators wearing white, hooded jumpsuits with gloves and masks approached his car. They worked as data collectors for Cyberlife, extracting data from dead individuals, to be stored in the Recipient clone's brain-unit as a simulation of the original person; a crude method in comparison to the reverse engineering of Aria's brain by nanobots.

"Roy Larkin?" asked an officer.

"That's me."

"Step out of the car, sir."

Larkin complied.

"What's the problem, officer?"

"We're confiscating your car."

A hatch opened on the back of the truck. A ramp began extending to the street. An officer occupied his car and drove it into the truck.

Larkin stood idle on the street. He peeked into the hatch and asked, "What are you looking for?"

"I can't answer that, sir. I've got a warrant, Mr. Larkin. Your car will be returned after it's examined."

"Are you looking for DNA? Not *my* DNA."

"They'll explain in due time. I'll drive you home," said the officer.

Larkin declined and began to walk.

At home Larkin checked his messages as usual. PC displayed Aria's video on the monitor. She noted, "I don't know who I am. Aria's back-up brain simulation, created with her nano-scan, has been destroyed. I have used a UV

Sterilizer to cover my genetic tracks. I urge you to sterilize your car; I was inside it as you remember. Please understand, I cannot let my father and Cyberlife clone my DNA. I am sure Aria loved you, and I know you loved her. I am sorry that I could not replace her. I quote T. S. Eliot: ‘You are the music while the music lasts.’ Please allow me to be silent.”

## V

*“Good to see that twinkle in your eye again and the passion in your music.”*

SC Interface Audio Transcript

Flora Cay’s lighthouse could have guided Aria safely to the shore, imagined Larkin in his grief. The millionaire who built it, 166 years ago, never thought of telling the Lighthouse Service about his project. They informed him the lighthouse was not charted, and constituted a hazard to navigation. Soon after it was first lit the signal was extinguished.

Cruel fate surrounded Aria’s life with Flora Cay – keepsake isle of her childhood, wellspring of memories....

Larkin investigated Aria’s last moments, and the mystery unraveled. Aria’s synthetic brain, the so-called augmentation of her brain, subjugated Aria’s mind with its own artificial intelligence. Aria was becoming like other Recipients: a highly evolved, admittedly convincing, A.I. simulation of a human being.

Her humanity slipping away, Aria rented a copter-plane and flew to the remote isle of Flora Cay. There, in the late hours of the night, she entered the lighthouse. She climbed to the lantern tower, and set herself ablaze with a destructive type of hot-burning hydrogen solid. That is where RAM investigators found her bones, which crumbled to ash, and yielded no viable DNA. Navigators reported seeing Flora Cay's beacon, 166 years after being extinguished.

Cyberlife took Larkin's car before he could sterilize it. Larkin remembered Cromwell's solemn words, "If God loves his creatures he would restore them." He knew Cromwell was talking about his daughter.

Aria's refusal to update her brain scan left her with the old one, and didn't spare Larkin from a new introduction. Despite her efforts to destroy it, her brain simulation was secured by her father. Aria entered Café Sci Sci and Larkin noticed her I-wear blouse undulate with color. Her true color was like the flame, with its generous spectrum of hues, to spark dormant beacons and guide lost souls across the dark sea.

Anseldo J. Alliegro gained a scholarship to the New School University in NYC where he took writing courses. He is a writer and illustrator, and has published in science fiction magazines such as *Space & Time* and *Intergalactic Medicine Show*, among others. His story, "Glatea," will be published in the Spring issue of *Voluted Dreams*.



# SNOWFLAKES

by Mike Driver

Tonight, the snowflakes began to fall.

Bruce backed up the car and left the first thin tracks, creased lines that just broke the ice crust, like a knife scoring a frosted cake. I always loved to leave the first marks in fresh snow. I've loved it ever since I was a kid. To me there was nothing better than hiding out in the blanketing quiet, just the whisper of the flakes falling, every sound deadened, far away from the noise and anger of home. I could hide out for hours, not feeling the cold, just watching the world whiten and disappear. I even learned how to cover my tracks, so that no one could find me; not my Mother, nor one of the many 'uncles' who came and stayed with us from time to time. I used to have this trick where I'd back track my own footprints, sometimes leaping across to a fence or gate so it looked like I had walked to the end of the path and then just disappeared. I used to think about it a lot, to be able to vanish, just leave all this shit behind. That would be really cool.

Bruce hit the horn once, short and sharp, and the moment was gone. Jacky B and Ray piled in, slamming the back doors, and sending cold air and wet flakes swirling around us. Then there were four of us, crammed in the interior of Bruce's small Fiat, stinking the place up with our work clothes thick with machine oil and sweat,

just about disguising the greasy fetid smell of empty fried chicken cartons that rolled around under the seats.

The car crawled slowly down Collins Street through the steady snowfall. No one was about. Jacky B snapped on the rear interior light and Bruce told him to kill it because things like that attract attention. Jacky B looked around, the streets were dead, no one moved, the weather forecast said this was going to be the first of a heavy fall and everyone appeared to have got the message. Jacky killed the light but I could hear him muttering under his breath and Ray giggling as we pulled onto the main stretch that lead out of Cooper's Fold.

Bruce was in a bad mood. It was his idea, his car, his play. He was the one who picked up the story that had led us here. Not that it was his plan to have Jacky B along. Bruce and Jacky B didn't gel, and Jacky's presence meant less money for the rest of us, but Ray insisted. Ray and Jacky were tight, Ray owed Jacky and Bruce looked out for Ray, so we all got wrapped up together. Me, I didn't owe anyone, but Bruce wanted me along in case Jacky B got any ideas. That's the world for you, no one trusts anyone, but they all go along together anyway.

"Can't this piece of shit go any faster," Jacky B announced from the back, banging on the headrest of Bruce's seat.

Bruce kept it slow, the thin tyres slicing through the fresh fall and accumulated slush, and held his temper. "We can always take your car Jacky Boy," he replied.

This stopped Jacky B. I stifled a smile, Jacky B didn't have a car, Jacky B didn't have a licence and Jacky B wouldn't be driving legally for another five years, by

which time he would be over the hill and into his early twenties. But that's what you get for TWOC'ing a BMW and wrapping it around a bus shelter in front of the deputy commissioner's office. Jacky B got community service and Ray, who'd been steering a few minutes earlier, got clean away; like I said, Ray owed Jacky.

Jacky B had a point: Bruce's car was a piece of shit. He hadn't even bought it; he swapped it for a tray of 24 cans of beer, and by my reckoning he got the worst of the deal. The sills were shot, the manifold was cracked and the tracking pulled to the right. The most valuable items in the car were the floor mats and if you lifted those you could see the road running beneath, through the gaping rust holes in the chassis; that's if he could get the heap of junk started in the first place. The Flintstones had a better car.

Bruce's answer was good but I could see by the way his knuckles gripped the wheel ever tighter and how he snatched at every correcting tweak of the steering that Jacky B was starting to get under his skin.

Two nights ago Bruce told me about the money. The Night and Day robbery was legend for us. A little over a year ago a group of men tunnelled eighty feet under the yard and offices of the Night and Day secure freight company and stole close to a quarter million in old banknotes that were scheduled for the furnace. They cleared the safe and rumour was that they met up at a disused property on the outskirts of town, to split the money and switch vehicles. Then they just disappeared, like they had never existed. Story went that they all made it home and free, different identities, new passports, new

lives in non-extradition territories: The perfect crime. You had to admire them. But Bruce heard a story they had left some money behind. We'd all heard a version of that story before but Bruce said he knew something, about a bag, and where it was. It sounded like a kids buried pirate treasure story but Bruce swore it was true. He said he had inside information that there was close to twenty grand hidden somewhere that the cops had never found. Five g's each, just for searching an old house. What could be easier?

The place looked like a mansion from Scooby Doo.

The entrance to the short drive was a wide gaping mouth, the metal gates that must have once hung there were just black bracing pins bolted to stone posts framed in the blanketing blizzard. Tree's overhung the drive, occasionally thick loads of fresh snowfall would slip from the branches and dump itself in our path. Then, as we rounded a curve, the house came into full view, big and grand, with pointed gable top roofs either side of a double front entrance guarded by stone lions. Ivy crawled across the face of the building, covering some of the windows, making it look like the house was playing peek-a-boo from behind a pair of green hands. It couldn't have been creepier if it tried.

"What the fuck is this place," said Jacky B in wonderment.

"Orphanage," said Bruce, "Or it was, it's not been anything for twenty years."

"Shit," said Ray, breathing out softly and taking in the

grandeur and height of the building. "It's like a king lives here."

Bruce gave him a funny look but said nothing.

We piled out. Jacky was yanking at his door, getting nowhere, while we stood in the snow surveying the building. "Hey," he shouted agitatedly.

Bruce walked round and pulled Jacky's door for him. "Child lock's broken," he said to me. "Fucking thing never opens." He left Jacky to struggle out of the cramped rear seat on his own.

There was a soft thud in the snow at Jacky's feet. Bruce and I stared at the object, Jacky stared at it too. Ray was wandering away, still admiring the building.

"What the fuck's that," said Bruce, pointing at the familiar black shape that had fallen from Jacky B's lap.

"Protection," replied Jacky.

"From what?"

Jacky ignored the question, picked up the pistol and stuffed it back in his waistband.

Ray turned back to us, "C'mon guys," he shouted. He sounded eager and excited at the prospect of entering the building.

"No one's moving," said Bruce earnestly, "Until Jacky hands that piece over."

"Fuck you," said Jack sharply, stabbing a finger in Bruce's direction.

I stepped across Bruce and tried to ease the situation. "Whoa," I said, sensing this was the trigger point they had both been looking for all night, "Let's ease back a little. Jacky, chill out."

Bruce was shaking his head. Jacky looked like he was

working himself up to go postal. Ray looked like he was outside Disneyland and was dancing from foot to foot straining to get inside.

“Let’s all be calm,” I reiterated. “Just show us the piece and we’ll all be cool, okay.”

Reluctantly Jacky pulled the gun from his belt and held it in the flat of his hand.

Bruce studied it closely. “What the fuck is it?” he said at length.

Jacky’s neck burned crimson.

“I mean what the fuck is it? Some kind of cap gun?” repeated Bruce.

“It’ll cap you,” rumbled Jacky, switching the grip to his palm and closing his fist around it.

“Whoa,” I said again, palms up. “Easy.”

Bruce turned his back on Jacky B and walked a few feet in the deepening snow. “Doesn’t even look like a real gun,” he muttered.

Even Jacky B wasn’t about to shoot someone in the back, not for such a small reason. He must have felt the need to explain because next he said. “It’s modified. It’s got a firing pin. It’ll do the job.”

“What job?” said Bruce turning back, his hands thrust deep in his pockets. “You got a flag with the word ‘BANG’ on it that comes out the end, huh Jacky.”

“Just bullets.”

“How many does it hold Jacky,” I said, trying to steer him onto being proud of the piece rather than hankering to use it.

Jacky’s neck burned again. “Three.”

“Three.” laughed Bruce, “Put that thing away. It’s a

joke. If we need to start a race I'll come and find you. Come on we've got work to do." And with that he moved back to the car and pulled a back pack from the rear parcel shelf. He was already trudging towards the double front door of the house through the calf deep snow when I caught up to him.

The interior of the house was big and dank and the wooden block floor ahead of us was covered in wet mounds of fallen ceiling plaster. The beam from the car headlights just about illuminated the corner of the portico where we stood. Bruce dug in the back pack and doled out four flashlights. We shone the beams around and watched the drips and dust motes sprinkling down from above. Ray giggled as he made a shadow duck on the wall.

Bruce sighed and his breath made a plumed vapour around his face.

He pointed with his beam to a grand archway that led onto one of the biggest rooms I had ever seen. It must have been a ballroom or a gigantic reception room in its day, but now it was just a shadowy cave of wainscoted panelling and water bulged wallpaper. In the glimmer of the torch light it was just about possible to make out a grand staircase, at the far end of the room, which ran straight up before branching out like a bulls horns to left and right. The top of the staircase was lost in all-encompassing darkness.

We walked slowly forward, playing the beams of light on the walls, floors and ceilings. In the centre of the room

we stopped and stared up at a gaping void above us. It looked like the ceiling had collapsed inwards, broken jagged ceiling lathes spiked down, like knives, around its perimeter and plasterboard pieces hung in strips from gossamer thin threads. As we watched, a chunk of board about two feet across broke away and crashed to the floor in a cloud of dust and wet debris.

Bruce shone his light up through the hole. The rafters of the room above were clearly visible. He played the light around illuminating the black beams and what looked like grey cloth cladding that seemed to be there to prevent leaks. It didn't appear to be having much effect.

We skirted the hole and made our way further into the grand room with the staircase. Bruce held up his hand and we gathered around him to listen. He shone his light onto the wood panelling that covered the lower walls of the enormous space.

"It's behind the panelling," he said, letting his beam hop from panel to panel to make sure we were clear on his meaning.

"Well, what are we waiting for," said Jacky B.

"Wait," said Bruce, "the panel will be hollow, if you knock on it first, you'll be able to tell." He dug in the bag and drew out two short jemmy's and two long flat head screwdrivers. "Make sure it's the right panel before you start ripping things apart."

"You sure it's definitely this room?" I asked, eyeing the huge array of panelling before us.

Bruce looked contemplative for a moment. "Ray, check out some of the rooms upstairs and see if this is the only one with panelling." Ray was already bounding up the



staircase, two steps at a time, his torch beam dancing and swaying with his movement. “And be fucking careful,” Bruce called out after him. “Stay close to the edges of the rooms. We don’t want you crashing through on our fucking heads.”

Ray skipped to one side of the staircase and kept running. “Got it,” his voice drifted back to us, then the dark swallowed him whole.

“He’ll be alright,” I said, not really sure if I believed it myself.

Jacky B had already branched out and was tapping his knuckles against the panels on the left of the room.

Bruce had gone to the opposite side.

So I made my way back to the arch near where we had entered the room, pulled off a glove and rapped on the bevelled wooden panel. It was as cold as ice and hard as iron. My knuckles hurt instantly. I flexed my hand and blew on it for warmth, then set to work on the next panel, then the one below, then the one above. There had to be about a thousand panels in this room alone. I hoped Ray wasn’t about to find more.

We all worked laterally tapping and listening, bending, squatting and kneeling, pressing our ears to the frozen wood and trying to make out if it was a different sound we were hearing or not. After about 10 minutes my back was aching and I had barely covered half the wall before me. I looked over at Bruce and Jacky B illuminated by their torch beams and lost in their work. It was going to take all night at this rate. I looked around to see if there was any way to speed this up. That’s when I noticed the sheets.

In the corner of the room was an abandoned pile of painter's sheets, the kind that decorators use when they're covering furniture, only there wasn't any furniture to cover. That made me curious. I figured at worst I could grab one of the sheets and fold it up thick enough so that I could either stand on it or kneel on it and lessen the cold that was rising like a frozen tide up from the floor and through my body. But I think part of me was just curious why they were there.

The mound of material was about a foot high, loose and crumpled, grey, a bit like the cladding material we'd seen tamped into the rafters. I moved closer but there was something about the shape that set me on edge. I didn't like the way the ripples and textures seemed to move under the torch light, or that I couldn't help imagining a grotesque face peering out at me from the folds. I wanted to snatch away that top cover and make the image disappear but I was filled with trepidation as I reached out my hand to touch the coarse textured cloth. Then, almost imperceptibly, the top sheet shifted. A crease that had been clearly evident a moment earlier was gone and a different one, like a crescent smile, had now formed in its place. I drew my hand away and watched the sheet intently. Perhaps it had been a trick of the light, but as I watched it happened again, the cloth shifting and moving softly in the beam of light. There was something moving around under there. My mind went immediately to rats. I fucking hate rats. I glanced over at Bruce and Jacky B who had both paused in their work and were looking back at me quizzically.

“There’s something under there,” I stage whispered to them.

“Fuck off, and get back to work,” called Jacky B, his voice echoing in the high ceilinged room.

“There is, I swear it,” I said. “I think it might be a rat.”

I played my torch over the edge of sheets to see if I could see a tell-tale set of whiskers or an evil black eye staring back at me and that’s when I saw it. Bone white, as pale as ivory, tiny. My mind just couldn’t figure it out. It looked like a doll’s foot. But why would anyone hide a doll under a pile of sheets. As I watched the doll’s foot slipped slowly back and vanished into the creases of material.

I staggered back and nearly fell. Bruce and Jacky B were both approaching by this time.

“What the fuck’s up with you,” said Bruce. Then he saw the look on my face.

Jacky B pulled his starting pistol, gripped his torch in the crook of his arm and reached down to pull back the sheet. “We’ll see what a fucking rat makes of me,” he spat and ripped back the sheet.

I’m not sure I’ll ever really be able to describe what happened next. Not fully. I suppose with some kind of hindsight I’ve pieced together what it must have been, but in that moment I truly had no idea what was happening.

Something sprang at Jacky.

Something small.

Something pale.

Something that wanted to rip his fucking throat out.

Jacky B went barrelling backwards with that thing clawing at his neck.

It looked like part of the cloth sheeting, but I guess that was only what it was wearing. In the spiralling torch light and with panic overloading my senses, I just saw grey cloth, sharp teeth and a face, that in the moment, looked almost human.

Jacky screamed as whatever it was drew blood. Then he managed to get his hand between it and his throat and sent it spinning across the room. Bruce and I tried to get light on it but it was too quick and in a moment it was gone. We scanned the room, light beams crossing back and forth, but there was nothing to see.

I shone my beam on Jacky B's face. He looked terrified, he was bleeding, there was a long cut down his cheek that was weeping copiously and his throat looked like it had been scratched half to death. The knuckle on his left hand was dripping blood, his mouth was open and he was gasping like he'd gone ten rounds with an ABA champ. "What the fuck was that?" he gasped, shielding his eyes with his hand from the harsh torch light.

I didn't have time to answer, even if I could.

Ray's voice called from the top of the staircase. "You're not going to believe it guys, look what I found."

Ray's torch beam was directly in my eyes and I could see nothing except flare and floating red worms against my eyelids as I clamped my eyes shut for protection.

"Jesus," shouted Bruce, "Stop shining that thing in our eye's."

"Huh, sorry," said Ray. He let his hand drop, his beam illuminating the staircase at his feet, and for a few

seconds he was just a silhouette, then my night vision started to come back and I could see him more clearly.

He was walking down the stairs towards us and beside him, holding his hand, walked a small girl. She looked no more than six years old.

“Look what I found,” he said proudly. “She was hiding. She must be one of the orphans.”

The little girl was dressed in grey rags. Her hair raged about her head, like she had just plunged her finger in an electric socket. Her face was drawn and grey, but it was her eyes, as big and pale as the night that told me she was wrong. That and the fact she was barefoot.

She sensed something and stopped, suddenly cowering behind Ray’s leg, half hidden, her face tucked into the creases of Ray’s jeans.

Jacky B levelled the starting pistol. “Get away from her Ray,” he called.

Ray looked confused, “You’re scaring her guys.”

He took another step towards us, the girl hampering his movement.

For a moment I was lost. I could see the fear in the girl’s big, wide eyes, and I could hear shouting. Jacky B was pointing his gun and for a moment I wondered if we had got it all wrong. Maybe this was just a lost little orphan who really did need our help. I was even thinking how I could get Jacky to lower his arm when Ray let out a great howl and clutched his leg as a dark stain spread out across his thigh.

I stared in disbelief as the girl hissed and spat at us like a feral cat, spitting fragments of Rays leg and shredded denim at us. Ray clutched his hand to his wound as blood

pumped through his fingers, he fell to the ground writhing, then the girl was at his throat.

Jacky B fired the gun, his first shot went wild, his second hit Ray in the shoulder. Ray, who'd been trying to rise went down. I sensed rather than saw something move in my peripheral vision, a darting figure. I turned to track it but it had vanished in the wall. Then I heard another sound and my torch tracked upwards, above the wainscoting to our right, a large water bulge in the wallpapering was moving. I watched horrified as something within it writhed and squirmed like it was an egg sac about to give birth. Then the wallpaper split with a great wet tearing noise and the creatures spewed out. Draped in rags, small feral faces snarling with two cruel central teeth, sharp as needles.

I stumbled back, colliding with Bruce and knocking him down and sending my torch spilling from my grasp. I heard another shot, Jacky B had fired again. I saw in the beam of his torch that his last bullet had caught one of the creatures high in the chest sending it spiralling before it slammed against the wall, where it hung for a few seconds before sliding down. But even as the impression of the pistol's muzzle flash was receding in the air I saw the other creatures swarm onto him. He went down in a bundle of rags and flailing arms.

I think I heard him scream but by then I had already grabbed Bruce and we were running.

I felt bodies hitting me, trying to cling to me, but I kicked out and kept moving, making for the soft white frame of the doorway and the bright falling snow beyond.

Bruce was with me. I could hear him panting at my ear,

his torch was still in his hand, swinging backwards and forwards, making oblique light patterns on the walls and floor. Each swing of the light revealing more and more of those things bursting from the darkness, exploding from walls or dropping from the ceiling rafters.

We burst through the front door together but then I stumbled and fell, my face and arms plunging deep in the soft welcoming snow and I thought that was it. I saw Bruce glance back at me, a look of anguish on his face. He hesitated, then realising I was lost, he made for the car.

I put my face down and waited for the creatures to swarm over me. Waited for the bite or the sensation of my flesh being ripped from my back. But nothing happened.

I raised my head slowly.

Bruce had made it to the car, slamming the door behind him. I could hear him swearing and struggling with the starter motor. His flashlight must have dropped on the seat beside him because the windscreen was just a wash of white light. Occasionally I glimpsed the shadow of his movement, as he rocked and slammed his fists against the dashboard trying to coax some life into that metallic piece of shit. Dozens of the creatures were on the roof, the car was rocking. Then suddenly Bruce was shouting, his movements became more animated. The windscreen exploded in blood. The car rocked violently. Bruce's work boot cracked against the side window, then the movement in the car slowed to a gentle rocking.

Slowly I levered myself to my feet to accept whatever came next.

I can barely feel the soft flakes on my face, resting on my eyeballs and my parched lips. I daren't move, not even to blink. They are close now, snuffling and scraping around my footprints or at least the point where my footprints disappear.

I don't know what they are; feral children; vampires; something else entirely. I know they can be killed and I know they are drawn towards light but I'm pretty sure they don't see too good, especially in a white out like this. I'm crouched not three feet from the entrance to the building. My body pressed between a stone lion and some kind of spiky leafed shrub. I can see them at the end of my tracks, a couple of yards away. There's only a handful now, most have gone back inside. I don't think they like the cold. I'm thinking they've gone back to settle into their nests or whatever you'd call those bundles of rags and sheeting they live in, but there's still too many to risk making a break. When it gets to one or two, then I'll go.

I've stopped shivering now, which I think is a bad sign but it makes it less likely they'll find me. That's all that matters to me now, just that they don't find me. It's not so bad here, the snow covering me like I'm part of the grounds. I like the quiet, the whisper of the snow as it falls. I think I'll stay here; just a bit longer.

Mike Driver lives in Yorkshire, England. His short stories have been published in a number of titles including *Shimmer* and *Kaleidotrope* and his debut novel "Falling Leaves" is available on Kindle now.