



# *The Mocking Owl Roost*

*Fantasy  
Fiction  
Issue  
2024*

Issue 4,  
Volume 2

Featured Fiction  
The Ancestral Path

Featured Fiction  
Antediluvian

Featured Poetry  
Standing Date

# Masthead



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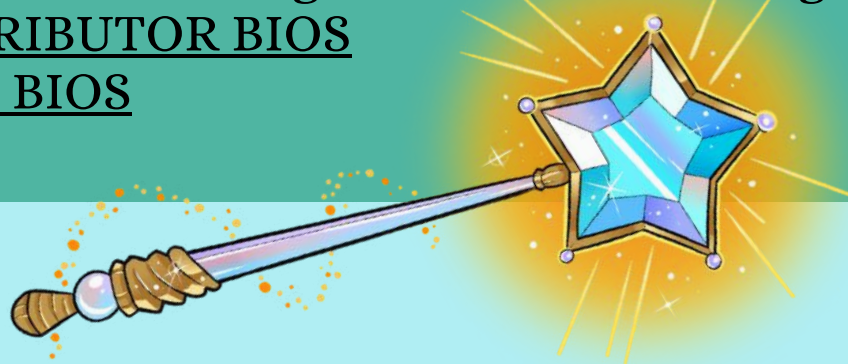
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“Fantasy is a  
necessary  
ingredient in  
living. It’s a way of  
looking at life  
through the wrong  
end of a  
telescope.”  
~Dr. Seuss



# Land of the Fae

Sue Cook

Poetry

My ethereal body enter the land of the Fae,  
Is it me or is it they who disappear as I near their home?  
I mean no harm!  
For friend I be,  
a passerby in need of hospitality.  
Do I stay and extend my hand in friendship  
or do I leave as quickly and quietly as I came upon this glen?  
My third eye opens, enables me to join one with the land.  
My heart chakra reaches for the soul of the Fae Glen,  
blessing it with my protection.  
I will forever keep this place present.  
Forest of splendor, inhabited by many,  
seen by none  
except family.  
Am I one of the Fae?



Who will welcome me home?

# The Ancestral Path<sup>03</sup>

## Nelly Shulman

## Fiction

The blizzard started as Laya reached the mountain pass. The autumn of the foothills turned here into harsh winter almost overnight and her tired feet slid over the icy rocks. The snow clogged her low boots and gusts of cold wind lashed her flushed face.

She knew she was getting close. She had spent the previous night in an ancient hut built in at a time when the Princes hunted the winged serpents. Now those beasts were harnessed to the luxurious carriages of the Mountain Lords.

Laya had watched such a cavalcade only a cold morning or two ago. The serpents raced, stretching against their reins, cutting through the dawn radiance. Their gilded wooden carriage bristled with spears, and the wind rushed about the bright veils of the noble ladies.

Not knowing which Prince's entourage was rushing towards the rising sun, Laya decided to hide in a rocky cleft. Her late mother had warned that Laya would meet different people in these mountains.

"Not always good ones, so be careful," Mother had said, fixing her keen eyes on Laya. "And if something unseemly happens, the Sisters won't accept you to their Abode and you will have to make your way in the world alone."

Taking a puff on the pipe, Mother handed it to Laya.

"This is what you had to do?" Laya wrapped herself in the sweet smoke of the incense only women could use as Mother chuckled.

"I did not have to, because I chose not to bring the vows. I followed your father after he arrived." Mother's eyes dropped.

The Honorable Rufus – Father – came from across the seas.

He'd given Laya her hair, black with a bluish tint, so rare in this land, but her eyes shone with the same coastal azure of her mother, and her white cheeks bloomed with freckles even in the dead of the winter.

"Pray for us," the old woman said. "The Sisters' prayers reach Heaven much quicker."

Slurping the barley stew, Laya muttered, "They may not accept me."

The gaunt farmer waved his hand.

"You are literate," he said, as if that decided everything. "Even the Princes can only sign their name." The old man sighed. "Pray for our daughter as well. Last year the prince took her for our debts and we have heard nothing since. She must have been sold or died."

The old woman said, "We'd hoped her husband would inherit the farm, but now the Prince will get it, because our son is dying."

From behind the ragged curtain came a heavy fit of coughing. The farmer's wife moaned and added, "The scarlet rot befell him in the Prince's own castle. He thought he would be safe there, working off our debts. But now he vomits blood." She sighed. "Pray for him too."

Now the wind howled even stronger and Laya groped at the rock for support. Her fingers discovered a deep niche in the stone filled with pieces of cakes, beads, and crude iron ornaments. Bile rose in her throat. Local folk still brought sacrifices to the mountain spirits.

Laya wanted to withdraw her hand, but she hesitated. Somebody had left a scrap of parchment there, but who? No mountain folk could read, and those in the courts would have no use for backwards customs like this.

Swallowing hard, Laya reached for the parchment. But just as she grabbed hold of it, calloused fingers gripped her wrist. She turned in shock to see a stranger's tall shadow looming over her, its features masked by the heavy snow. The stranger muttered something, but Laya screamed, jerked her arm from him, and rushed away. She stumbled on a stone, and flew headfirst into the abyss.

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Laya heard a displeased grunt, and her eyelids fluttered as sensations slowly returned to her body. Somebody had spread a foul-smelling fur underneath her, but her coarse-haired cloak still wrapped around her. The air's incredible warmth enveloped her aching body.

In the mountains, Laya had become accustomed to the bone-chilling, never-ending cold, and now she began to sweat. The air smelled of smoke and roasted meat. Another grunt broke the silence, and something growled.

A male voice said, "Wait, Tasso. The meat is for me and my guest. You'll get the bone."

Laya's eyes opened. A young man, barely of age, sat on the other side of a fire, his tousled black hair sticking out in all directions over an ash-stained face. His large eyes shimmered in the firelight like twin green swamps. He turned a piece of meat as it hung from a dagger and paid no attention to her.

Next to him sat a demon.

Laya tried to hold back the scream, and it emerged as a small yelp. She'd seen similar furry creatures painted on the temple walls at home, huddled in a miserable heap under the feet of the ancient, blessed King Erderic. But demons shouldn't exist any more!

"I'm almost a Sister," Laya whispered. She clasped her trembling cold fingers together. "No one dares touch a Sister." But the purity spell bubbled over her lips before she could stop it.

Dumping the meat into a clay pot, the lad unhooked a flask from the belt of his fur-lined tunic and looked up at her. Laya, still trembling but emboldened by the spell, pushed the hood of her cloak off her face.

"Please, eat by my hearth," the lad said. He spread his hands open in front of him. "See, I'm unarmed."

Laya stared at his hands. A fresh, crusted abrasion crossed the right one. The lad grinned.

"Had I not thrown the rope in time, your corpse would now be food for harpies."

Laya shivered, remembering the stories told on the coast about evil spirits and ferocious beasts that had fled to the mountains during the reign of the blessed Erderic. They'd always seemed more legend than truth, and yet – there sat the demon. The creature opened its mouth, revealing sharp, white fangs. The lad gave it the bone, bits of meat still hanging from it, and the demon let out a low, rumbling purr. It squeezed its eyes shut as it began to gnaw.

The lad took a sip from a flask, then pointed toward a twisted leather rope with a forged hook at the end.

"We don't travel without them," he said. His crooked teeth tore into the meat as he took a bite. "When a person is falling, you need to be able to act quickly."

Suddenly Laya thought she understood. Hadn't last night's hosts said that evil spirits could speak in human tongues? Now she saw: A red stain, a sure sign of the dark world, marked the lad's cheek. A consorter with demons might be one himself. Careful to keep her hand hidden beneath her cloak, Laya made the sign of righteousness.

The lad's eyes narrowed. "If you don't want to eat, at least drink," he said. He handed Laya his flask. "Mountain brews restore strength more quickly. Are you joining the Sisters? You don't wear their white, nor their haughtiness. They won't accept you."

The spicy liquid burned her tongue, and she coughed. "What is this made of?"

"Thank you too," the lad said, mimicking her coastal accent. "Local herbs."

Blissful heat spread through her body, warming her to her toes, but Laya could not relax.

This stranger could drag her to deeper caves if he wished, to where the wild mountain tribes lived, and she had no way of stopping him.

But the laws of decency required giving gratitude even to him. After all, he'd done her no harm thus far.

She mumbled, "Thank you." Then she straightened her shoulders, "Yes, I'm going to the Sisters' Abode. Is it far from here?"

"A day's journey," he said with a shrug. "But why go to those bitches?"

Laya paled. No coastal dweller ever spoke of the Sisters in such a way. The holy women could read minds! They punished the disobedient!

"Bitches," the lad repeated, and spat toward the fire. "They sleep on feather beds and eat fruits from the coast, while their slaves toil in the dungeons."

Laya swallowed. "They're praying for all of us!" she said. "And even for you, a pagan who shelters demons!"

The black wad of tangled fur growled, and the stranger laughed and stroked its body. "Yes, you of the coast consider these poor beasts unclean," he said, "but for us there are no better companions."

The demon licked his hand, and Laya shuddered.

"The Sisters are literate, just like priests," she said, "You can't even —"

The lad raised a hand, and pointed toward her. Her words caught in her mouth until she saw that he was pointing at her hand. There, still clenched in her fist, was that piece of parchment, covered with its strange symbols. The boy's swamp-green eyes sparkled with laughter.

"I wrote that," he said, "in the mountain language."

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In the silence that fell between them, the demon rose, shook itself, and galloped off.

"Tasso hunts rabbit," the lad said. "He is well-mannered and brings prey to me, only chewing a little. You see? A good companion. But now, please, introductions. I can be civilized like you."

He proved to have an unpronounceable name. Laya tried to master the string of consonants, but eventually he waved his hand.

"Call me Wellin. Half my name, and better than none at all," he grinned. "Laya," he said then, as if testing the name on his tongue. His face turned serious. "This note was my prayer to the spirits. I have come of age and I need a wife."

Wellin flushed and looked away as Laya looked at him askance.

"I don't have enough sheep to get a bride," he admitted. "Enough for my own needs, perhaps, but nothing more. So I begged the spirits to send me a girl who could love me and not mind my empty purse." He hesitated. "Yesterday I left the note, and today I met you. I do not believe in coincidences, Laya. The spirits answered." Wellin's eyes rose to meet hers. He swallowed. "I don't mean to shock. In the mountains, we have little time for rest or ceremony. We work, and we ask, and we are grateful to receive."

"And you write," Laya said, looking down at the parchment again. With a jolt, she realized that the strange letters she'd always seen in her father's notebooks looked similar to Wellin's handwriting.

"But this circle," she murmured. She shivered, not daring to touch the evil mark. Surely her father hadn't used marks of that kind!

Quickly she pulled out her father's notebooks and began to flip through them. Her eyes flicked between the parchment and pages, comparing everything, and slowly widened. Laya found several skilled drawings of round objects – the symbols, so she'd been taught, of the dark forces – and she felt her throat go dry. Under no circumstances could the Sisters ever be shown such things. Wellin had saved her from certain disaster.

She avoided his insistent gaze as she struggled to breathe, to find the words.

“What if,” she began. Her teeth chattered. “What if my father was from the mountain folk? I’d be considered a half-breed. Unfit for anything but the work yards.”

Now Laya recalled a toy she’d loved, which her mother had strictly forbidden her from taking out of the house. Father had attached spinning rounds to a wooden box – circles that looked identical to the drawings in his notebooks. They’d allowed the box to move across the floor with ease, even when Laya placed things inside it.

No one on the coast had ever heard of such things. People only carried goods on their shoulders or on the backs of oxen. To do otherwise invited the dark forces. A year or two after Father died, Mother had burned the toy in the hearth, claiming she was saving Laya from evil.

Wellin was saying something. Laya blushed and looked up. “I’m sorry,” she said. “My thoughts took me elsewhere.”

He nodded with a small smile. “Things long gone are sometimes easier to dwell on than the present. Our sages have written much. I like the oldest stories best.” He closed his mouth tightly and swallowed, watching her. Waiting for an answer.

Laya looked away. “I can’t accept,” she said. “Not yet, at least. So much has been hidden from me.” She paused, and let out a long breath. “I forgive them. But I need to know the truth and understand who I am before I can do more.”

She piled the notebooks up in front of her, then handed them to Wellin.

“This is the hand of my father,” Laya said. “I would like to learn his language, if you are willing to teach me.”

Wellin took the notebooks from her with a steady hand. “Thank you,” he said, “for your trust.”

*The End*



# The Follies of Fashion

07

Fiction

Rita Mock-Pike



Allen and David stared at each other for only a moment before the hot pokers jabbed them again. "For every woman who ever wore your nonsensical tripe!" The vicious cry would have seemed out of place anywhere else. But here the fiery squeal fit right in.

Darius and Roxey exhaled deeply, awaiting their turns. Eternity seemed short back in the day. But after Darius' many centuries and Roxey's two and half now, the hype of the word resonated soundly in all their souls.

"Truly forever and ever?" a voice they overhead asked in pitching shrill levels.

"Forever and ever and ever. Without end. No stop." The lead demon laughed violently, shaking its poker at the newcomer.

"But...what did I do? How did I come here? I've gone to church my whole life! I've read my Bible every day. I prayed regularly and gave to the poor. I rescued puppies and helped injured kittens!"

"Indeed, dire sir," the demon cackled. "But you invented the thong."

"It was supposed to hide underwear lines!" Rudi cried.

"And torture souls," the demon chortled. "Thanks for doing our job for us."

"Do I at least get a reward for that?" the designer asked breathlessly.

"Oh, sure," the demon grinned. "You get to wear all their inventions. The corset, hoop skirt, pantyhose, chainmail bikini... You name it."

"Welcome to hell," Darius muttered, crossing his ankles to show off his three-foot-tall high heels.

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# Do My Bidding

*Elizabeth Liang*

*Fiction*

“The first rule of summoning is to alternate between light and dark,” the Elder reminded us as she leaned against the village’s central, knotted tree. A tight ball of hair sat atop her gray head, and her hands held green leaves woven into a plait. She wove this plait daily, stopping only to snip at the edges once it was complete. I didn’t know why she did this, but she always stopped whenever she sensed something was amiss. Tonight she wove continuously, a serene smile on her lips. Her unseeing eyes remained on us as we gathered.

We Warriors sat together, surrounding her at the base of the tree. Tomorrow would be my first raid against the neighboring village. My hand reached into my side pouch, seeking my summoning stone, finding security in its warmth. The air buzzed with chatter as we prepared for our first summoning of a fairy of our choice. From this moment forth, we would be independent, free to summon whomever we wanted with our Sight and voice. I had strong Sight, a steady voice, and a good feeling about the raid. I could already see red flowing into the rivers. I could taste our victory.

“When you go into your first battle,” the Elder said, “call by following your heart. But remember to call someone different the next time. Alternate.” We all nodded and grinned at each other. We knew from our practices just which spirits we’d call.

An hour later my family stood beside our hut, watching as we made our final preparations. My father still wore the warrior’s belt across his ample midsection, though many years had passed since its last use. I thought he winked at me before pulling my mother and sister close. They turned to go inside as our procession streamed past. It was bad luck to watch. I glanced toward the hut as I walked past, and saw my sister’s fingers at the window, gripping the ledge to try to catch a peak of us as our shields reflected the last rays of the sun. We would camp outside the enemy’s village until the following evening.

\*\*\*

We assembled at dusk at the edge of the willow trees, on the ridge just above our enemies.

I heard the Elder’s voice in my mind as I prepared myself, “Call in the moments right before nightfall. They will be strongest then. They will guide you and help you find cover if you are wounded.”

My father had been one of the strongest Warriors of all before his injury. And now, my body tensed. This was my chance to fulfill what he had been forced to abandon. I adjusted the leather belt on my torso and took out the stone Father had wrapped and placed in my palm during the ceremony. It had been his summoning stone and now it was mine. It felt cool like spring water.

“I call Destruction,” I said.

The wind carried my voice, and a little face with pointy ears and hair covered in nettles appeared. He smiled at me and winked.

“I am yours,” he said.

One by one, the others around me murmured their incantations. Little sparks burst in the dark where the fairies appeared. They wore form-fitting tunics of different colors over their spindly legs, and their skin shone in varying hues. Their wings bore shades and transparencies that befitted their faces. Some were wide and plump like berries, and others were small and long like dragonflies, but mine was unique. He was the most human-like in every aspect and he had a smile that was warm and dark eyes that glittered.

“Bring us victory and blood. Do my bidding,” I said, repeating the familiar words. I heard the other Warriors around me repeating these words like echoes in the night. Then a collective yell tore through the night sky, and we descended into the darkness of the valley below.

\*\*\*

We emerged victorious in a mass, the slickness of our bloodied, sweating bodies slithering past each other. Our dark shapes blended together as we crowded around the river to give thanks. The first light of the sun illuminated our skins in red, and we grinned at each other. The blood washed away in the river, but our smiles remained. Our hearts leapt and danced. We were jubilant and unstoppable.

In the darkness of that night, my hands had shaken with fear and excitement. My smile, sometimes wide, sometimes shrinking, had been known only to me and my fairy. But he had known what I needed.

So on the next raid, I called him again, and so too on the next.

He led me into the thickest frenzies, and helped me to strike with force and finality. No one else emerged from those clusters we entered. I followed his path and my little Destruction always did my bidding. My name as a Warrior grew.

\*\*\*

It was only after that third battle that the Elder took me aside.

“You have not been alternating,” she said. “I can see it in your attachment. Victory is an addiction. Call Harmony next. Do you understand?”

Her silvery eyes gleamed like mirrors and I saw myself in their blank reflection. I mustered my most convincing smile, the top row of teeth showing. I crinkled my eyes to show I meant it, as if she could see my face.

“I will call a light fairy next,” I promised.

It was difficult, and I almost did it. But when my words came out, they were the same as before. I couldn't will myself to speak the name of light. His familiar face and glittering eyes appeared, and his smile warmed me. This could not be pure darkness. Both light and dark existed in all of us, and there had to be both in him.

So I chose to believe, until the day at the washing basin.

The children of our village gathered around flat rocks that overlapped each other. Fast water flowed between them, perfect for washing away dirt and grime. The older ones among us gathered around and scrubbed at each tunic while the younger children watched and played. My sister stood atop one rock, jumping to and fro on it, but no one felt concern — we had all known how to swim since infancy.

And yet, when June slipped and fell, the others saw that she didn't resurface. Her foot had caught between the stones and her small body spun in the same vortex that so powerfully and effectively rinsed our garments. Without thinking, I called on Destruction then.

His small light flickered and the others turned their eyes to me, certain I would summon the right fairy. They breathed sighs of relief when he appeared. He would save her — I knew he would save her. He was attached to me and would do my bidding no matter what. I had hold of her arms now, and I could keep her head above the water if only he would free her foot. The others reached down, trying to free her, but the rocks were too tight and her foot too small.

But when Destruction began to do my bidding, I saw it was not what I commanded at all. He dove into the water and began to drag her down. June's eyes filled with fear and her mouth opened in a silent scream. I fumbled with my stone, willing Destruction to leave, yet words failed me. He remained.

It was only by the grace of another Warrior nearby who called upon light, that June broke free.

June was saved, but her mind had tried to flee, leaving her spirit untethered to her body. She remained in a deep sleep within our hut. I sat near her bed, holding her small hands, my mind turning over and over with the words I'd used and the intentions he'd twisted.

"He could have pulled her out as easily as he pulled her down," I said, muttering to no one but myself. A flicker drew my eye, and I looked up to see his human-like face watching me.

"You want to know why I did it?" he said, his voice quiet with conspiracy.

He rubbed his small hands together, eager to tell his secret, and in those hands I saw clearly that he was not human. How could I have ever been fooled by his face? His hands were claws with nails sharp as the tip of a spear.

I bit my lip, certain that any answer I gave would give away my fear. He had never appeared without being summoned before, and this crossed a forbidden perimeter. I took a slow, quieting breath. The Elder would know of this transgression. Her weaving would stop and she would look up to the sky. She knew all with her blank silvery eyes. So I nodded my head.

"Without June, you would be stronger," Destruction said. "In battle, you would fear nothing. That is why I did it. For us. For the taste of victory that I knew you would crave at the next battle."

I froze. "But she's just a child. She won't be near any battlefield. I would never put her in harm's way."

"She is precious to you and all that is precious must be cast away so that you can kill without thought and gain what you seek."

I shivered, knowing I had unleashed him. This destruction was my doing, not his. June's breathing remained steady on the small cot beside me, and I held her hand, afraid of letting go. What might happen now if I ever left her side? The little fairy peered at me with curious eyes. He had thought his explanation sufficient and tilted his head to examine me as his eyes narrowed.

"Begone!" I commanded.

He pressed his lips to a thin line — and remained. I stared at him, my pulse in my ears, as I tried to remember if the Elder had said anything about what to do when an incantation failed.

Suddenly, the door opened, and the Elder was there. The small face disappeared.

“You’ve become fully enmeshed with the fairy through much use,” she said. “Light and dark are now the same.” Though her eyes were blank, she looked to where I sat and awaited my reaction.

I swallowed. “How do I stop him from killing June...or – or anyone else?” My hands trembled, and I squeezed them tightly.

The Elder crossed the hut, reached out, and touched my face. She traced her thumb over my lips. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to force away the tears that I knew would fall.

The Elder let out a soft sigh as she touched my eyes. “Speak pure light and see who appears. There may still be time to unbind yourself if a fairy from the light answers. But if not, you must forsake your Sight.” Her lips thinned. “His flame will be extinguished by the darkness your loss of Sight will bring. Destruction sees this world through you. He depends on your Sight. And a complete binding means he can’t refuse your command if you give up the Sight.”

A lump welled up so I couldn’t speak. I wanted to protest: This was unfair. I called him to save June, not to hurt her. Then as I stared up at the Elder’s blank eyes, I asked the question that so many of us had wondered, but no one dared to ask.

“Did you forsake your Sight?”

The Elder’s hands stopped moving. I thought she might strike me, but she only cupped the soft part of her palm under my chin and held my face.

“I never had the Sight, young Warrior,” she said. “That’s why I can lead. I cannot be tempted. And you — you who know the thrill of the Sight — you know now the weight that it carries.

The deciding battle is before us. You’ll make the right choice.”

“How can you know? You weave those plaits that no one uses. What’s the use in that? What’s the use in someone who can’t see?”

Her hands pulled slowly back to her side, and she stood tall above me. “When I weave, I can feel the rhythm of the world. When there is an upset to the natural order, the pattern becomes a knot. You can undo this knot. You have the power to bring our world back to its natural order. You only need courage.”

“I have none,” I confessed. “The summoning provided me with courage. Without him, I’m nothing.”

“Without him, you will have June.”

\*\*\*

The next day at the knotted tree, I climbed the stairs encircling it to the empty observation platform nestled over its strongest branches. Today was a day of rest. No battles would be fought. The creak of each step resounded through my legs and echoed in my chest. I felt the emptiness of the void before me, should I lose my Sight. If today went as I feared, sounds would be all I had left for the rest of my life. A small glimmer of hope still lived in my breast. I knew of one summoning that might be strong enough to compete against Destruction: A fairy of pure light.

Atop the observation, I looked out towards the forested horizon at what could be my last sunset. The pink and orange glow permeated the clouds covering our marshes. I could hear the river through its thin layer of fog, and I saw the birds drifting up from it as they fluttered about, settling for the night. I tried to memorize every detail, because deep in my heart, I knew the ending.

My first summoning had set my course in stones that no river could budge. I thought back to those first carefree days when I'd shared my stories of victory with June. Her little eyes watched me, admiration in every gesture.

My jaw clenched. Without my Sight, I would be nothing. I wouldn't be of interest. I would remain beside the Elder when the Warriors went to war, but I would not know her art of weaving nor be able to see without seeing as she did. I could never give up the Sight. I needed it. With that, I spoke the words the Elder had coached me to say.

“Bring me Light and Love. Do my bidding.”

A flame flickered before me and my heart leapt. Its light shone green with a spark of violet — not the white spark of Destruction. But when the small plume of smoke cleared, I registered the pointy ears and pinched nose with a numbed mind. The binding was complete. My throat thickened. I couldn't speak. My voice faltered, and my heart ached so that I couldn't think. I would never see June's face again. Destruction would smother her in her sleep because I lacked the courage to give up the Sight. I saw her face clearly in my mind — and I would never see it again if I gave up Sight.

But it would remain in this world to be felt and heard, if I acted. I swallowed. My feet moved. I stepped towards the familiar grin on my fairy's face.

“Take her,” I whispered. The fairy smiled and disappeared.

\*\*\*

My hut stood a short walk down the stone path from the knotted tree, and I knew something had happened before I reached its doors.

Everyone stood outside watching, murmuring, afraid to venture inside. Their eyes followed me. I swallowed, but walked forward. I wouldn't let their peeled-back lips and bared teeth deter me. My decision was made.

The Elder awaited me at the door. She nodded towards me, pointed toward my stone's pouch, and turned her palm upward, expectant. Taking a deep breath, I removed the summoning stone, dropped it into her open palm, and went inside. My parents stood beside June's cot. My mother's eyes searched mine, then she turned and buried her face in my father's shoulder. Her back heaved in silence. My father looked away from me.

Tiny Destruction lay across June's body, only the size of her arm. One hand caught around June's throat and I saw at once that the Elder had kept her word. Her spell had frozen him in his last position, raised dagger in hand to slit the throat of a sleeping human. His eyes could still move though his body could not, and they watched me. I faced him and held his gaze as his equal instead of as his master. A warmth took hold of me, and I straightened. I wanted to be the one to do this.

“Darkness becomes us,” I said to him. “Do my bidding.”

The fairy's eyes went blank and wide, as if he didn't understand. Then they narrowed. I saw the darkness enveloping us before he could, but when he did see it, he hissed and spat at me. He darted into the inner chamber of our hut, but escape was impossible. I watched the shadows encircle him, dancing around him like children at a game. Then he was gone.

Then my vision began to narrow, and I closed my eyes as I whispered, “Goodbye my friend.”

# The Poisoner

Fiction Claire L. Marsh

It was not small in size, but neither could a person accurately describe it as large. One thing was for certain, no one would ever dare call it average. And it was private though. Very, very, private. Whilst most people share their passions with others, Jacinta kept hers heavily concealed. This was by design, like all things which Jacinta did in life. If you did happen across her or one of her creations, this is because she made it so. Purposeful, precise, and premeditated. Jacinta did not tolerate the arbitrary, automatic, or adventitious.

It was with this forethought that she entered the exclusive members' club with the small gold symbol on the door and the bright red awnings, with dozens of gold embossed dragonflies. The Dragonfly Club had existed in the city for as long as there had been secrets and liquor. Jacinta loathed the club. The permanently low lighting, the hushed conversations of self-important men and the women coerced into miniscule satin playsuits and sky-high heels to serve them. She nodded to the doorman. He knew her and the club patron she came to meet by sight. The club was the only place where the member would agree to meet. The short, bald man nodded his intricately tattooed skull back to Jacinta and threw his brown eyes to the side indicating, as she expected, her host occupied his usual booth by the windows at the back of the club. They were the only windows in the entirety of the downstairs. Club business didn't invite voyeurs, and the daytime revellers didn't need reminding that their nocturnal party had long passed its sell-by date.

Jacinta steeled herself as her inner voice reminded her of the value of this visit: their working alliance. The sharp clacking of her heeled boots on the polished marble floor tiles punctuated her approach. All other noise seemed to stand by. The transaction was a necessity for her work to continue. That was all. She only needed to stay for as long as the handover of goods and payment required. No matter how many times she heard her own voice repeat it to the percussion of her footsteps, the reassurance echoed hollow. Her breathing and pulse quickened as her body betrayed her and reacted to his proximity. A fact he would not be gracious enough to overlook. Indeed, he would bathe in it.

Kristoff relentlessly coaxed Jacinta's usually balanced and considered thoughts to spin into unpredictable and impractical areas. Ones not borne of logic or tactical manoeuvring. No matter how many times their transaction repeated, he caught her eyes with his and he stole a breath or two from her chest.

His preferred table stood distinctly higher and wider than any other. Kristoff chose it, nonetheless, perhaps exactly because of this.

His attention remained down on the book laid open low on his knees, his left hand swishing a honey-coloured liquid round and round in a squat crystal tumbler. The substance lapped, curled, and coated the sides like tides on a beach. The fairy lights in the window behind him twinkled in jewel tones, laying small echoes of their illumination across his face. When she came within three, maybe four, steps from the table, he looked up, acknowledging her existence as if previously oblivious.

The pale blue eyes enveloped her like a clear expanse of ocean. Beautiful and deceptively deep. Immersed in his gaze, disorientated by it, no indication of depth or distance, no orientation to shore. Kristoff was exquisite. The two possibly three breaths she sacrificed to him acknowledged by embers of green flickering in his eyes and the hint of an amused expression momentarily passed his soft lips. Jacinta unconsciously ran her tongue across her own full lower lip. Her reaction entertained him immensely. Sitting across from him on the high bench, she could feel red heat pinkening her porcelain white cheeks from the inside out. Simultaneously hit with embarrassment over her reactions and an overwhelming desire to ensure she hadn't smeared her carefully applied red lipstick, pride and shame collided. She closed her eyes temporarily, giving herself the beat of a heart for recalibration.

"It is a pleasure to be with you Jacinta." His raspy yet silken voice glided over her skin. Her name sounded like an illicit invitation from his lips. Taking a sip of his drink, Kristoff replaced the glass on the polished wood and leant forward to rest his arms on the table. His eyes remained focused on hers. "How is your garden? My senses tell me that summer was particularly fertile for you, no?" The feigned innocence his features paraded, incensing her. She calculatedly slid herself closer, mirroring his body language.

"Behave yourself. I know you are not simply sensing me, Kristoff. I am not some doe-eyed ingénue for you to play with." Her cold delivery peeled his touch back from her skin.

"You are most certainly not, which is exactly why I'm so very fond of playing with you. I can almost taste your skin on my tongue." Kristoff let his eyes wander down Jacinta's long neck to trace the open neckline of her white satin shirt, his intent clear and exposing. Yet, before she could protest, his influence sprang back and he relaxed within his seat. Retrieving his glass, he sipped slowly, watching her face, his resolutely neutral expression with the games temporarily on pause.

"Must you repeatedly waste my time in this manner, Kristoff? You are too old for this nonsense and my patience for foolhardiness ran out around the time of the Kennedy assassination. Let's be allies, or at least professional," she stated, exasperated with the nature of her forced dependence upon him. Jacinta glanced through the window at the street beyond. Her view was distorted by the beads of rain and the long, wavering streams of the heavier droplets as they descended the pane of glass.

She calmly, silently admired the beauty of the neon signs of the Chinese restaurant across the street. The colours jumped, bled, and refracted, a dance performed behind a watery veil for her eyes alone. A wistful sigh escaped her lips.

"I do hope you already think of me as an ally. I think of you as such. And I do think of you, creatively and with frequency." His neutral expression abandoned a matter of moments after appearing. Jacinta stopped the journey of her inner thoughts just as they started to wonder what it would feel like to run her fingers through his shoulder-length dirty blond hair. Occupying her hands, she swept her long scarlet curls across one shoulder and twisted the thick locks around her fingers absentmindedly.

A loud bang wrenched Jacinta's attention back to the window, as an ex-patron was unceremoniously hurled from the first of the two bars that bookended the Chinese restaurant. Returning her gaze, Kristoff's features betrayed something unanticipated, something previously absent from the hundreds of encounters shared over decades.

He met her smokey grey eyes with routine depth and intensity, but the expression displayed uneasiness rather than arrogance, and compassion replaced mischief.

"What has you so fearful? Jacinta, if something is within my power to achieve, I will do it for you." Kristoff's voice was low, sincere. Folding his arms across his broad chest, he caused the fabric of his fitted black shirt to crease. This small detail formed another first. She had not before seen him with a defensive posture or anything but an immaculate appearance.

She stared openly back into the concerned eyes and wished she could chase that emotion to its source and interrogate its legitimacy. Yet, she felt completely free of his influence and, further peculiar still, had a strong desire to trust him. A desire, although independently her own, which she ironically did not trust. She knew him to be self-centred and capable of considerable manipulation. The disequilibrium in her thoughts was dizzying. Her brain wanted to solve the dissonance, but her mouth interjected first. "Coincidences can and do occur, but I find myself seeing patterns in these occurrences more and more. And I suspect a threat to my way of life. Thanks in part to your assistance Kristoff." Jacinta smiled warmly with the honesty of her own words. "I have not had to transition or relocate in so long and I have nurtured my garden and protected it at all costs. I fear being forced to sacrifice it and I have no energy to start over."

The disclosure reflected a level of openness her body's fidgeting signalled as uncomfortable. She felt small and exposed – an open target. Her eyes darted around the club. Potential threats could come from anywhere after all.

“You are safe here.” Kristoff leant forward, forcing her to focus on him. “Jacinta, I give you my word.” He kept his voice calm and low, hoping she would be soothed by it or at least see that he did not fear any current potential for harm.

He recognised the panic, the sudden overwhelming anxiety that turns everything into a source of danger. He had seen it many times before in people whose emotions and thoughts he had manipulated to ease their suffering. Most were haunted by traumatic events from their pasts or horrific events they'd witnessed. Once exposed to these extremes of suffering, it becomes hard to see the world as the same place it was before. The same place it had always been.

“I could calm your mind, if you would like me to.” Kristoff knew how proud Jacinta was, and whilst he enjoyed playfully pushing her comfort levels, he would never use his abilities without her consent when she felt so vulnerable.

She had never heard Kristoff speak of his abilities before. They were known but he never openly discussed them, at least not with her.

Initially defensive, she wanted to lash out at him, mostly to avoid admitting that perhaps she was paranoid or overly cautious. Chasing these initial impulses, though, she recognised Kristoff's sincerity and kindness, and appreciated him not removing her autonomy. “Thank you, Kristoff, that is very kind of you, but I don't think it is necessary. I know there is a possibility that I am overreacting. I just can't shake the feeling that something is being plotted. And you know how strong my senses are about these matters.” The grey of her eyes seemed to twist and swirl like a dense ground fog progressing forwards, swallowing up and concealing everything in its path.

“Tell me what has caused your concerns and we will go from there.” Kristoff dedicated his attention toward her. They sat in the booth for over an hour as Jacinta explained her repeated feelings of being surveilled. The dream that recurred was of a shadow figure walking the perimeter of her garden, tracing the unseen walls with two outstretched glowing palms. An elderly man, as well, with a severely burnt face appeared on the street opposite her house when she left it twice in as many weeks. There being three areas of suspicion did not seem a coincidence to Jacinta. Power expressed itself in threes.

Kristoff agreed the accumulation of happenings held peril but did not think they could entirely abandon the possibility of coincidence.

Jacinta clung tightly to the small trinket Kristoff gave her, the sharp brittle edges of the worn nickel talisman spiked her closed palm the entire journey home. Entering her property, she headed to her jewellery box, retrieved a silver chain, threaded the teardrop shaped object onto it, and clasped it firmly around her neck. Pressing her hand over it, ignoring the broken metal edges which caught her skin, she focused on the gentle warming pulse which radiated from the smooth black stone in the centre. A piece that – to most would seem worthless, even ugly – she was now bound to. Should any sentient being form dangerous intentions and a plan to enact that intention towards her, this talisman sensed their thoughts two and a half minutes before the action crystallised. As with most talismans there were caveats. This being, which Kristoff estimated had to be around a mile away, had to be within a certain radius.

Steeling herself to put aside what could be hypervigilance until proven otherwise, Jacinta pressed her hand against her talisman for comfort one last time before making her way to the kitchen at the rear of her house. Unlocking the door, she stepped inside her small conservatory and inhaled the scents of her herbs as she walked past them, gently stroking their leaves to encourage the release of oils.

Basil was by far her favourite, smelling like a balmy summer evening in Mediterranean climate. Jacinta had always been fascinated with stories from ancient beliefs and religions about the special qualities of specific plants. Burning sage to cleanse a house of spirits. Protecting a home with basil to ward off evil. Although not sharing these beliefs, she experienced calm and more control in the presence of her cultivations, each tiny creation a miracle.

In the centre of the glass structure's floorspace, Jacinta let her eyelids briefly close as she took deep breaths. Reopening her eyes, her irises temporarily glowed bright silver. She walked to the old-fashioned medicine cabinet in the corner, opened the third ornate drawer from the top on the sixth row of drawers, and retrieved the small purple velvet pouch that sat underneath the stack of seeds in their cardboard pouches. With barely a flick of a finger, Jacinta untied a slender, silver rope and extracted a dainty gold key.

The key hid itself the moment that the door to which it was purposefully crafted to fit had been secured. Only Jacinta could coax it to reveal its location and only at the exact point at which she needed it. Upon occasion, she and the key disagreed on whether her insistence upon entering the garden could be deemed a requirement or a simple desire. The key's determination ultimately held, partly due to its inherent stubbornness but also because it could see into the very core of Jacinta's will. Few possess the ability to turn insight inward with valid and reliable results, their emotions distracting them from truth.

The key, along with its pouch, disappeared once the lock clunked heavily on the other side of the white-painted wooden door. Jacinta smiled broadly as she noticed the key had taken the keyhole beneath the blue handle with it this time, musing whether the hole would simply reappear or be contained within another velvet pouch. *How does one store the absence of matter?*

She looked upon her garden, the greatest of all her achievements, of which gratefully there had been many. This one incarnation felt different, special. Possibly her final. Everything in her garden felt in balance, at peace with one another.

Taking off her heels at the edge of the only paved area, Jacinta walked barefoot on the damp grass, letting it fill the spaces between her toes and muddy the soles of her feet. The sun drew low in the sky ready to kiss the clouds. She expected it to arrive after the last burst of sunlight departed. She had never understood why irrelevant of the time the poison was administered, they always waited until sunset to complete their final journey. All the planning and preparation complete, patience was the only requirement that remained. Jacinta took tiny steps toward the ornate wooden bench, and with the gentle placement of toe to heel, she pictured what laid beneath. The grass, the soil, the deeper layers of earth and organic matter residing within, living organisms interconnected and cohabiting. The end of the night would see an addition.

The bench, a deep, dark mahogany brown, once polished but now scuffed and weathered wearing the decades it had stood proudly, rested on a sunken bed of stones tracing the pond's cross-shaped outline. Jacinta stretched forward, steadying herself with the high back of the bench. She extended a foot at a time over the arm, landing firmly on the cool seat's surface. She preferred climbing onto the seat to forcing her feet to traverse pebbled ground.

Sitting cross legged, her outfit was tarnished by the damp wood but she could not make herself care. She felt little attachment to possessions nowadays. Sitting, watching the tiny ripples in the pond from fish swimming under the surface and the reeds jutting from the water dancing in the breeze, felt meditative. Her favourite part came when the last of the light dissipated and the white uprights dotted around the garden came to life. Jacinta fixed her eyes on the graceful, naked back of a stone woman as the illumination captured the curves of her figure and folds of her stony robe.

The statue held the centre of the pond, raised high on a plinth, taking on an ethereal, haunting quality in that light. Jacinta found beauty and reassurance in her stone guardian and the last of her earlier tension and fear released, at least for now.

She felt the approach before she saw it. Her garden reacted as it came closer, like a surge of energy radiated from the deepest levels of soil and pulsated to the surface. Even the air around her felt charged and her skin tingled down the length of her body. Jacinta's eyes again flashed silver as she stared at approximately one metre of the tall thick hedge where a light shone from the ground at either side of this section. Nothing distinguished this fragment from the whole, not to untrained or normal human eyes. Jacinta's silver eyes were neither. Almost as if her pupils' gaze made it so, the hedge flickered like the burning flame of a candle. A large male-presenting hand followed by its bare arm pushed through a sputtering glint, taking advantage of where a solid, physical object became detached from itself. Jacinta rose lithely to stand on the bench and watched the body gradually push its way through towards her. The body was at least six feet tall, with a large bulbous nose, bulging eyes, swollen ears, and hands almost as large as the skull. All on a wiry frame that appeared too fragile to lug its ingredients. Those globular eyes shone in the darkness, the irises entirely milky white, a side-effect of the poison's hold.

Like the winter's frost to the ground, cold penetrated through to her chest. Placing the talisman between her palms, Jacinta hoped her body heat could warm it enough to be tolerable against her bare skin. The black of the stone tinged with a shade of midnight blue. Kristoff did prepare her, briefly, for this possibility. A tiny speck of the man's life force must be clinging to the body, the poison not wholly extinguishing all of it until her creation died, too. That speck of life resented her and the talisman peripherally sensed it and got agitated by it, but was not overly concerned. Jacinta found herself disapproving of the last semblance of humanity dedicating itself to hatred.

There were so many other motivations or emotions one could commit to, like survival or regret, even sorrow. She felt drained by how unsurprising she found this knowledge and how predictably disappointing people were. She let it go. The poison could not be reversed, the man was, for the most part, a meat sack. A walking, home delivery of fresh blood, tissue, and usable parts, of greater value dismantled and put to work effectively for Jacinta's ends. The means, she rationalised, were necessary and proportionate. She took only one per month. This was not excessive for she could certainly benefit from more, and she selected them diligently. A moral code of sorts.

Jacinta heard the vengeful thoughts of people who, on the balance of deeds, were more good than evil. The things they buried deep and feared to disclose. The plots that they couldn't believe they were capable of concocting. Their wish lists of cruelty and depravity so dark they were for turning over inside minds alone, for no hands should be capable of embracing such deeds. She reached out and felt their hostility pulling at her consciousness, dragging it towards them. The darker the thought, the greater the compulsion to secure herself to it. She spent time inside the bleakness, exploring, listening, feeling until she found one that suited her. They slithered in the darkest of shadows, hid and buried themselves. Jacinta strongly believed these vengeful thoughts took hold like a deadly virus. A person, more good than evil, exposed to something so extreme, some violence or degradation committed upon them by a human more evil than good. This leaves a footprint. Infected by a strong desire for justice to be done and revenge to be taken for the undeserving suffering. Their world should surely be fair. Once that thought infects a mind, though, it can replicate itself and feed on past woes, latching onto negativity, and growing infinitesimally until vengeance dominates.

Selecting the right thought signature required patience. She stalked them while lying dormant amongst hundreds and hundreds of competing dark cogitations until satisfied.

Vivid, detailed, terrifying, persistent, and very well-rehearsed, Jacinta required robustness. Thought signatures didn't want to be consumed. Like a virus, they resisted her until they could no longer hold back her magnetism. Extracting them from their original host, letting them intermingle with her own brainwaves, she reduced their potency and brought the host some peace in the quiet of their absence. Jacinta recognised this as a beneficence offsetting the sacrifice she took. She chose not to linger on the moral ambiguity, the non-consensual nature of her intervention, the theft of chunks of a person's memory with no attempt to stitch together the remaining baffling fragments. Jacinta concerned herself with only what she saw as necessary and controllable. Finding the person who was more evil than good was both. A person's vengeance fantasies, she learned, were packed with helpful information. She sifted through flashbacks, memories, imaginings and nightmares, syphoning exhibits that, pulled together, told her who and where.

Being methodical and conscientious, Jacinta also performed a final check and measure, piecing together the act itself. The very cause of the hateful thoughts, the suffering her sacrifice had inflicted, and she replayed it for herself, as if the memory belonged. Those huge hands both pressed tightly into formidable fists, hammering towards her ribcage over and over.

The large skull, a blunt force weapon, slammed forehead to forehead, making her stagger backwards. The bloated lips curling, snarling, forming into disgusting lies and insults thrown at her whilst she cowered in pain and disbelief. Jacinta felt decidedly content in her chosen sacrifice.

She watched his emptying vessel meander toward her long work bench at the far side of the garden. Leaping energetically from the bench onto the soft grass, she pursued from behind, cracking each one of her knuckles loudly in turn, as preparation for the dexterousness her night-time work demanded. The almost corpse laid itself down on the table in precisely the position required. The stone at her chest was amber and black. Jacinta rolled up her sleeves and gave her long neck a couple of stretches.

Pushing down the thick, waxy eyelids of the corpse took strength but the effort paid dividends, preventing her from staring into milky portholes. Right at the expected moment, she heard the familiar shuffling, scratching sound come from inside the skull, transmitting from the left eardrum.

Many moons past, Jacinta shared her life with a pet cat called Formaldehyde, a great big, lazy, ginger moggy with a bad attitude and a penchant for pizza. The only condition under which Formaldehyde moved with any degree of motivation or urgency was when Domino's delivered. Jacinta would catch the unmistakable shuffling sound of her sedentary feline with its plus-size belly bobbing against the hardwood floor and the occasional scratch made by the two claws that couldn't be clipped or capped digging shallow trenches in the wood. The noises were strikingly similar, despite the vast variation in their aetiology, and every time it made her smile at the memory.

Two tiny light pink feet protruded from the corpse's ear canal, having furiously kicked their way out, followed by tiny legs, a tiny torso and so on, all smattered with human gloop. She placed her hands palms upward, offering assistance, a final kindness honouring their service. Some of the creatures stubbornly climbed up the features of the corpse's face to get away from her, spitting and cursing as they went. Others attacked, savagely biting and scratching flesh from the bones of a thumb or forefinger. Their front teeth as sharp and pointed as scalpels pierced and tunnelled, whilst the back ones like fishing hooks locked into the meatiest part gnawing a promise not to let go. This one was passive, if a little testy, and dropped unceremoniously into her palms, and sat cross-legged in a pool of shiny, sticky viscera, then shook with the cold and muttered curses under its breath. Vengeance pixies were notoriously unpredictable, even for those who created and supposedly commanded them. They were feisty, feral little creatures who held grudges and enjoyed the taste of violence. Incidentally, they were also highly toxic to humans when ingested.

Jacinta wholeheartedly adored them. This part of the ritual brought her sadness and regret, no matter how necessary, inevitable, or consistent with the natural order she knew it to be.

Jacinta cupped her hands a little, hoping to offer some warmth to the pixie, as she walked the half a dozen paces to one of her long rectangular raised soil beds. The miniature form held in her palm had already started changing from a pale pink, the colour of ballet tights, to an ashen grey, its flame red mop of tangled hair both on its head and tail now a dull off-white. The translucency of the pixie's torso compelled her to witness its heart beating progressively slower, the microscopic lungs getting weaker and weaker, unable to fully support breathing. Jacinta's silver eyes tried to project comfort and warmth into the scared, panicky black ones of the dying pixie. She held it for the two or three minutes taken to usher its last breath in, then out. Making a hole, perfectly sized for a seven-and-a-half-centimetre pixie, Jacinta returned her creation back to the soil that birthed it. Within hours, the body would be dust indivisible from the matter surrounding it. Once completed, her routine could yield another pixie to grow big enough to push its fists out through that same earth.

She turned her attention to the corpse of a man more evil than good. A man who regularly beat the young brown-haired woman whilst she tried to make herself small enough to disappear. Jacinta yanked open the sticking drawer in the long work bench and perused the carefully selected equipment accumulated over time. Each tool had its own individual purpose. The exact tool could not always be obvious. This near perfect permutation of her drawer obscured the many failed attempts with lesser implements. This night, with this corpse, every single slicing, hammering, sawing, dissecting object fit its purpose. Moving her silver eyes left to right, she appreciated the reflections of twinkling lights and her own image distorted in the shiny metal tools before her. Jacinta started her favourite true crime podcast and got to work.

Fabric shears first to remove clothing, the mask of his civility. Next a scalpel to make a small incision on the right side of the neck, she inserted one rubber tube into the carotid artery and one in the jugular vein. Jacinta pumped the blood, forcing it out of the jugular tube, to drain into a purposefully designed irrigation system feeding sprinklers above the soil bed. Then came an extremely sharp implement to loosen and sever that pesky subcutaneous tissue, removing the skin like an overcoat to dunk in a barrel of tanning liquor. The remaining tasks were arduous and physical, but Jacinta learned early in life that even a whopping great problem can become manageable if broken into parts. This applied as fittingly in this context as any other. Hammers for the joints, followed by saws for dissecting the body into its constituent chunks. She preferred to use a grinder for the tissue, bones, and teeth, and, although the noise could be unsettling, the process resulted in excellent nutrients for her soil. Some of the more delicate bones she separated, grinding them singly for tinctures and powders, a lucrative commodity for trading amongst their community.

Indeed, pure bone powders formed her method of remuneration to Kristoff. The product received in return she could only obtain through him. Although her talents were strong and many, only one being held power to truly animate another. Some could raise the dead or create monstrosities that approximated life, but these new beings were malignant and almost always demanded the creator sacrificed their soul and organs from their own body. An authentic empath, however, one with the ability to sense and to project, could syphon from their energy and transfer it to another with gifts like their own. But the process failed more than it worked. Both parties had to equally desire the transfer and their energy signatures needed to be compatible. This congruity could only be determined through trial and error. The empath extracting a small vial of their blood and the recipient consuming it. If compatible, the recipient's body sparked life for one hour, for use in a single bloodletting. Of course, they did require the skill for producing a habitable vessel in the first place.

Pixies were Jacinta's most efficacious by far. When compatibility failed, recipients were plagued with violent bouts of uncontrollable vomiting and, if they recovered, they were to shoulder an unpredictable loss. She herself lost Formaldehyde through an empath named Janet. Others had forsaken children, their talent and all manner of thingamajigs including all their toes, genitalia, dreams and, quite unfortunately, their spinal cords.

Jacinta held the vial of Kristoff's blood to her lips and tipped it onto her tongue. The coppery taste chased the substance down her throat. Empath blood stayed warm and once adjusted to the taste, it became quite a pleasant sensation like a creamy hot chocolate. That warmth spread from her core outward to her extremities. Not just a feeling of heat, like a temperature raised to flu-like degrees, but a tickly, *fizzing* feeling the same as the popping candy she adored as a child. Little tingly fireworks exploded, accompanied by a sense of euphoria that made her want to dance naked under the stars. She didn't, of course.

Jacinta focused, mentally squashing the substance-induced elation that threatened distraction. She stood before the most established of her soil beds. Three tall and strangely beautiful protrusions grew from the soil, each a single trumpet-shape with a green stem that transitioned to a vivid magenta tip that curled outward daintily at the edges. The magenta colour was held in intricate capillary-like patterns over a transparent, glass-like membrane.

Her creatures always began this way, growing beneath the soil, their tiny bodies formed from a scraping of cells, the richness of the soil's inhabitants and Jacinta's own deep desire for them to be. She willed their blood vessels to grow from inside their bodies extending upward as their stems grew and grew. She whispered to the tallest one, promising it sentience. Adding extra sacrifice to the soil from their late-night visitor, to bring strength and mischief. Taking a clean scalpel, Jacinta scored a line down the inside of her left forearm, the blade too sharp for pain, the direction of the incision visibly marked in rich red contrasting with the army of silvery scars lined up on her pale arm.

Her blood flowed rapidly, rippling with Kristoff's gift. Holding her arm above the flute at the top of the stem, careful not to touch it with her skin, their blood ran down the inside of the cone coating the sides deliciously red. The fluted edges trembled and quaked, curling in the opposite direction, inward, downward, chasing the flow of blood to the soil. The stem collapsed in on itself and gradually returned to the dirt with the small crackling sound of static electricity. Jacinta's breath held in her throat, her hand pressed against her wound, her body tensely anticipating. She knew it could take seconds or hours. What if it failed her creature, not strong enough to push its way to the surface? Looking away seemed too risky, yet watching the small patch of surface disruption increased her anxiety.

Seventeen minutes and thirty-three seconds. The carefully observed soil started to roll, surface dirt tumbling toward a centre. A small, perfectly formed pink fist broke through that centre to the air above and thrust its hand to grab a sturdy grip on the surface. Then came its mirror twin to do the same. Jacinta clasped her hands together, bouncing in both glee and relief as she saw the new pixie wriggle and pull itself out of the dirt. The pixie turned to stare at her with its black eyes, its lips curled into a snarl and large forehead wrinkled with menace. It was the most beautiful creature she could look upon.

Shaking itself like a soaked dog, the naked creature sent dirt flying in all directions, including a large chunk that hit Jacinta in the eye, an outcome the pixie found hilarious and provoked several further attempts at replication. The dirt shed, the bright red hair jumped and sailed around the pixie's head, pirouetting to an unknown tune. Jacinta could see its heart beating and lungs pumping steadily in its chest. A healthy, spirited pixie. Determined to cause an argument, the creature had a go at kicking dirt at her this time. "I understand your disgruntlement, little one, but we both know it changes nothing." Her calm voice and genuine smile did nothing to assuage the pixie's temper but it did at least channel it from a seated position.

The next sacrifice was already selected and, at least from Jacinta's perspective, as deserving as the one just dispensed with. The pixie shared this knowledge. Jacinta's pixies grew and were born to despise them. Jacinta had experimented with other creatures, but none were so fitted, so single-minded in their commitment to causing a stipulated demise to a specified person. Their innate aggression combined with unrivalled propensity for fixating on vengeful and hostile thoughts meant once equipped with a target they were perfectly positioned to kill them almost every single time. They also seemed charmingly disengaged from any form of empathy or remorse. They never questioned why they held such thoughts against a person, how these grudges came to be or even if they were deserved.

The small concessions Jacinta made were to suffer their mild dislike of her and, to some degree, themselves. Once every so often, an errant pixie experienced so much self-loathing they killed themselves before completing. These incidents were thankfully rare and deeply unfortunate for Jacinta, for the individual concerned often unacceptably tried to obtain medical assistance requiring a cover up, or her own hands getting substantially bloodier. Mercifully, this iteration of pixie did not seem the type as Jacinta watched it sitting cross-legged, mesmerised by a worm it had just pulled into several separate parts after it dared exist. Jacinta smiled, shaking her head at the pixie's playfulness.

She put down some miscellaneous debris from her dissection in front of the pixie. This was mostly sinew and shreds of muscle or tissue that fell away or collected on her instruments, the matter that one would normally wipe from the surface of the work bench or pass down the sink when cleaning the tools. Except for the eyeballs. Pixies love eyeballs. The fact that a human eyeball is roughly the same size as a pixie head does not seem to perturb them. Jacinta always saved eyeballs as a special treat for her pixies, but ensured she was out of auditory and visual range when they were consumed. This she learned the hard way after witnessing the creatures treat the body part like an overly ripe nectarine.

Holding it with both hands and raising it to their widely extended jaw, sharp teeth sinking in and excavating a chunk, while they closed their mouth over the hole to loudly suck and slurp at any juice threatening to escape. The torturous event completed when any dangling nerves they'd initially wrapped around their small fingers were chewed like strawberry laces. Thinking about it made Jacinta's skin crawl and body shudder.

Her workspace and tools cleaned and tidied, Jacinta was ready to sleep just as the sun started to rise. The intrusion of natural light to the garden drew her attention to the state of her appearance. The fire pit now embers, she removed her clothing to be discarded when the moon came back slightly less full that night. She bagged up the blood-soaked outer and underwear and deposited them in a concealed, airtight storage cupboard. Her arm had stopped bleeding, but the dark, dried blood ran from her wrist to her elbow. Her face and chest had caught splatters, which reminded her of a toddler's first foray into artistic expression – whether the paint be acrylic or food-based, the product was haphazard and widespread.

Looking down at her body, most of her had some coating of death to it somewhere. Her hands wore it as gloves. She washed them in the outside sink and filled a large basin with hot soapy water, then placed it on the path and stepped in. She cleaned her feet and lower legs. Rubbing the bubbly liquid into the soles, in between her toes and the backs of her ankles made her realise how much they throbbed and ached, how greatly she desired a hot shower and a long sleep. Then a bacon sandwich.

Turning to her pixie to see the last of the strawberry lace get sucked up into its mouth, her lust for meat dampened. The pixie stuck the middle finger of its right hand up at her, before running and jumping at pace from the soil bed. Jacinta had no concerns. Having fed, she knew exactly where the miniscule menace intended going.

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Every close of its eyelids burned with images of a strange woman's face, her skin mottled with sun damage and crinkled like paper. It felt her pulse, the sound echoing in its eardrums, the pull of it a throbbing, nagging compulsion to follow. The memories filling its thoughts had been borrowed and planted there. None of this mattered. The creature ran toward that beat, pursued it as it grew stronger, louder, closer with every leap and stride. Flashes of her crooked yellow teeth through parting dry lips, painted a jarring orangey-red, as she threatened a memory to eat from a dog's bowl. Her cold bloodshot eyes sat too far back in her bent-over face and pushed close to the memory's. So close, it could feel the woman's rancid breath on its cheek, smell the combination of stale cigarette smoke, alcohol and day-old vomit. It felt the woman's calloused hand grab the back of its small neck pushing its face into the wet brown mush, making it eat and eat, struggling to breathe and fighting the urge to gag. It saw that face disappear and everything grew bitterly cold and darker than nighttime. It felt itself shivering, muscles aching as even its small body was too big for the small space it hunched. It covered inside for hours, sometimes days, sitting in its own mess, so ravenous it would beg for dog food. The creature's animosity grew as the pulse did, obsessed with fantasies of tearing at her face, chewing her eyeballs where they sat deep in her abhorrent sockets, all to the tune of her screams.

The palpitating of her heart was now the only noise the creature focused on, knowing she was inside the old, neglected house. The only visible sign of habitation was the big black dog barking and snarling in the yard, a rope biting at its shredded neck as it yanked savagely against it. The pixie fixed on the animal and released a reptilian hiss from deep within its throat. The guttural noise belied the creature's appearance, threatening cruelty and death. Collapsing its limbs, the dog submitted lying flat to the ground, emitting a fearful whining sound over and over to self-soothe. The pixie crossed the yard, so close now, peripherally aware of the animal cowering and shuffling backwards as it drew closer to the house.

Excitement, anticipation pushed it to move faster, to leap onto a windowsill that's paint peeled against its toes. It entered through the broken window, dodging the ripped, yellow-stained sheet hanging as a makeshift curtain. Down onto the dusty wooden floorboards, across the room past empty vodka bottles and food containers teeming with insects – the pixie knew it would find the woman in the kitchen.

Smell, the first sense violated upon entering. Putrid rot, decay, and the faecal matter of a myriad of species, with a top note of cigarette smoke that seemed to penetrate pores and acridly cling to the back of throats. The collection of clutter indistinguishable from refuse, masked all surfaces and clung in heaps to the linoleum floor. In amongst this, the woman sat on a wooden rocking chair, smoking and flicking ash onto the floor as she stared out of a window onto the overgrown field beyond. Her greying, thin black hair hung limply from her head. She occasionally pushed one greasy strand over her ear, but mostly she rocked and smoked and puffed in her faded blue dressing gown. Her tapping left foot made the pixie aware of the music playing low in the background, crackling from a poor radio connection – a country song about a cheating spouse. The heat, combined with the stench, shrank the room until the walls came to crush in.

Under her chair, the pixie eyed the thick, white, scaly skin of the backs of her bare ankles. A good place for the first bite. Taking its time, the small creature positioned itself and then pounced. The pixie grabbed onto the ankle with both hands, fingernails clawing for fun, and angled its head sideways and chomped. Chomped hard. Sharp front teeth sank down until it tasted blood. Then it hooked its back teeth to seize control and rip hard backwards, its head jolting as fresh flesh and tendon dangled from the pixie's mouth. The foot sprayed the pixie with scarlet mist, whilst its owner screamed in agony and dropped the cigarette into her lap, adventitiously setting her gown ablaze.

Finishing its mouthful whilst finding a new hiding spot close by to watch, the pixie giggled as the panicked woman put herself out with her own palms. It didn't care – she would taste flame-grilled.

Pixies enjoy torture. This was one of the many truths about her beloved pixies that Jacinta closed her mind to. Yes, they poisoned her targets and this took some time, but they also toyed with them for amusement. Some would bite off fingers for snacks, others liked to remove fingernails or toenails, and some the tongue. Then there were the creative ones that dangerously lacked patience. A pixie had to be inside a human for their toxin to take effect and it took at least ten consecutive days of a person ingesting that poison before they were ready for Jacinta. A pixie can climb inside your mouth and force itself down your throat, but most prefer to jump inside your ear, where they burrow through and take up residence in your brain. Brain matter is, after all, very yummy. For the first few days the person is unable to move whilst the poison floods their system. They feel pain but sit rigid, locked defencelessly in their own bodies. Impulsive pixies simply cannot help themselves from popping out of the body to show themselves to the person before biting off their noses or other such mischief. Each time they do, they set the clock back a little. This pixie, bouncing itself up and down with elation inside a cardboard box near the smoking woman, seemed just such a creature.

Bolstered by the success of its previous attack, the pixie climbed the back of the woman's chair with ease. Scaling the very top, her ear was within effortless reach. It could grab the top and swing itself right in. A little burrow and all it had to do was sit, nibble, and wait. But the little creature's beady black eyes were drawn to the woman's neck, remembering her hand pushing down painfully on the memory's throat. It wanted to bite that saggy neck so hard its teeth ached. Its hands formed adamant fists which beat against its own knees. The creature simply needed to.

Launching itself off the back of the chair, it landed cleanly on the woman's shoulder. A small run and there the exposed jugular with its tasty vein rested.

Opening its arms and jaw wide, the pixie struck. Thick, warm blood jetted into its mouth, coating its forked tongue and running down its throat. The corners of its mouth spilled the surplus. It couldn't hold onto the woman's shoulder. Seconds, maybe a minute, of biting and sucking afforded before a sudden crushing pressure on its torso.

The woman grappled at her neck with painful scorched hands which thumped down and felt for whatever was attacking her. She knew it must be the same thing that bit her ankle. She'd only just calmed the bleeding with a tea-towel from the floor. A big spider maybe? No, that couldn't be it. A great big rat made more sense.

Her hand wrapped around something solid and tried to prise it from her neck, aware that she was tearing away some of her own throat in the process. It was fighting, wriggling in her hand, biting and scratching. She almost lost her grip. She drew it down so she could see it clearly and smash the rat's skull with anything she could find blunt and heavy enough to do the job. There, trapped in her fist, squealing and hissing at her, was someone's "fucking pixie." Her cold eyes looked down on the creature, holding her contempt for it and by extension its master. Borrowing power to create an underling to do your bidding showed weakness and indolence. To make that underling capable of its own will, its own wants, well, that revealed remarkable stupidity. All three of these traits, the woman simply could not stomach. She also acutely detested pixies; their supercilious nature combined with frivolity offended her to the core.

The creature couldn't move with the woman's hand firmly curled around it, her long fingernails piercing skin. Her eyes bore into its skull, studying its intentions. The woman raised her other hand while it bit over and over at her fingers. She scratched at the skin of her cheek, her pointed thick yellow fingernail digging into her own flesh, and peeled away a long thin strip. The woman opened her mouth and placed the slither on her tongue, moving it around her mouth to form a ball. The pixie grew furious, squirming restlessly.

The woman barely parted her lips to mutter a series of words the pixie could not understand, just above a whisper. A curse of some kind.

Her grip released slightly, allowing the pixie to free its arms as she spat a dart of her own skin and saliva striking it, face to navel. Quickly it swiped at its eyes and mouth to remove the slimy, stinky concoction. Her palm opened more, so the pixie jumped to its feet. Then it hit. Its body started to froth, as if all its skin was dissolving and bubbling. Its throat felt hot, hotter still, now burning. It began trembling, short shudders at first, then enduring, teeth-chattering jolts. The woman smiled broadly, all her yellow, nicotine-stained teeth on show as the pixie bit off its own tongue. Movement ceased, only fear remained for the pixie, as the woman had taken its volition. Raising the tiny creature close to her face, in one clean snap of incisors, she bit off its head. Easier to decapitate than swallow, she gulped down the pixie head with several swigs from a vodka bottle. She chose a used strawberry jam jar as a suitable final resting place, then she popped the headless body inside, tightly secured the lid, and returned to her cigarettes.

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Jacinta felt a connection snap. She sensed the pulse of her pixies and the strongest had stopped abruptly. Closing her eyes, she confirmed the two slower, quieter pulses under the soil still beat. Even trying to sleep now would be futile. She swung her legs over the edge of the bed until she felt the soft rug with her toes. Opening the curtains to the late afternoon, her eyes started adjusting. She ruled out suicide; the pixie had a more vengeful spirit than most. This had to be an enemy. Perhaps the enemy, the cause of her suspicions. She grabbed the chain around her neck, and pulled the talisman from inside her silk pyjama top. No change in colour or temperature.

She threw on clothes over her pjs, then ran to her mobile charging in the kitchen, and texted Kristoff an urgent plea for assistance. She couldn't stop fidgeting, unsure what to do whilst she waited, so she busied herself with making a pot of coffee, if only to provide her unsteady hands a purposeful distraction.

More expedient than the emergency services, Kristoff knocked on the front door of her house. He looked out of place in daylight, in such a normal setting. Too eye-catching, almost opulent.

Quickly ushering him into her kitchen, she let him pour coffees whilst she explained her concerns. Kristoff's expression grew increasingly dark. "You should stay with me." His tone suggested this was more of an order than an offer.

"I can't leave them Kristoff, my garden, my pixies. It's everything I have. I would be bereft without them. This pendant, it can be relied upon, yes?" Her eyes pleaded with him for reassurance perhaps more so than truth. He put his empty cup on the counter and took the blue mug Jacinta had not touched, and placed it with his. Holding both her hands in his, he was almost uncomfortably close with their feet nearly touching.

He held her gaze and promised, "It is a guarantee. No one harbouring you any negativity and planning to act on it can come close to you without the stone's warning. I have had it in my possession for many years and it has not failed me once."

Jacinta remained silent for a moment or two, processing his words for loopholes.

"And they cannot enter through my boundaries, that is unless they have abilities I have not planned for or encountered. The talisman is an early warning system only, it is not protection." Her temporary relief sank heavily to the pit of her stomach.

Kristoff squeezed her hands gently. "You are perfectly capable of defending yourself, should it come to that, which is doubtful. I can stay with you, too, if that is of some comfort? I make exceptionally good negronis." His attempt to lighten her mood failed, but she appreciated the sentiment and offered a distinctly out of character embrace which he returned for a respectful three seconds.

Hours passed as afternoon became evening and turned into night. They sat in a comfortable quiet, side-by-side on her bench, watching the ripples on the water and the twinkling of the lights. Kristoff had helped himself to generous glasses of her Speyside whisky to mix into his Rusty Nail cocktails, which appeared to be comprised of liquor with lemon peel and created the illusion of balance. Jacinta politely declined the cocktails, preferring to remain resolute and prepared. She didn't know exactly what she feared would occur, but she knew that threat seemed immediate. The delay made her question whether her judgement or senses could be impaired. If she closed her eyes, she could still monitor threads of vengeful thoughts from people more good than evil, crossing and intertwining, some louder than others. A glance to her soil bed revealed the two remaining plants looked strong, each having grown substantially since they were recently enriched with nutrients in their soil and fresh blood from the sprinklers.

"Perhaps your poor pixie came to an accidental end?" Kristoff suggested delicately after clearly pondering a similar line of thought to Jacinta's.

"Perhaps an accident. Simply that," she conceded but didn't take it to heart. Kristoff took his leave after Jacinta's several assurances that she would contact him directly if the pendant even swung in the wrong direction. Approaching two a.m., she suspiciously scanned outside as she slowly pushed the door closed behind him. The streets were abandoned, the houses dark and still. No life visible, at least not on the surface.

Taking herself to bed, she battled to silence her thoughts long after her head rested on the pillows. Tiring her limbs with needless changes of positions, the blanket felt burdensome and then insubstantial in equal measures. Sleep came, but in fragments interspersed with confused moments of fearful lucidity. Something started to poke through the sleep. Her entire body prickled with it. Jacinta struggled to prise open her eyes as a blurry silver light broke through the darkness. She realised she was trembling.

The chattering of her teeth suddenly made her aware that she was freezing and jolted her fully awake. Jacinta grabbed at the glowing pendant but couldn't hold onto it as the icy frost bit at her fingers and pounded back to her chest. She threw herself out of bed. Something was terribly wrong in her garden. She absolutely knew it.

She reached for her mobile and texted Kristoff for help but couldn't afford to wait for him to arrive, not with the two and half minute timeline the talisman offered. She threw on her robe whilst running down the stairs to the back of the house. The quest for the key frustrated her almost beyond tolerance, but at least they agreed she needed to rush into the garden. Everything seemed unsettlingly normal as the garden started to pick up the orangey glow of sunrise in the clean fresh atmosphere. The ice cold feeling surged and intensified, like her blood had turned cold and her heart was frozen in her chest.

Roaming barefooted onto the grass, her eyes darted in every direction, scanning for threats. The hedge looked exactly how it had every day, yet something – somewhere – was out of place. She could not shake the feeling that there were eyes on her, watching, lurking. Her attention flipped back toward the soil beds. They were all ransacked, dirt displaced and excavated. Her heart raced as she dared to look at her two almost grown pixie beds. The ravaged stems laid broken, ragged, and turned up. Running toward them with tears flooding her eyes, Jacinta started to claw into the earth desperately in search of them amongst the soil.

A sudden stab of pain came from the back of her head and her neck savagely snapped backward. Shooting her hand to her wet scalp, she stumbled, disoriented backwards and collapsed onto the grass. A lump of her hair had been pulled out and the wound bled profusely. It didn't make sense; there was no one there; no one had breached the boundary.

A sudden rush of movement and colour came fast in her direction. A blaze of red, low to the ground, getting closer and closer, so fast it had no distinguishable form. The blood rushed from her lower leg before she felt the teeth that caused it. The creature repeatedly sank its teeth in, moving up her leg. She saw it then, the pixie, smaller than normal. Its fingers had no nails, its eyes had no pigment, and its lungs struggled to work effectively. The creature smiled as it leapt to her thigh and bit at her flesh. Another yank tore skin and hair from her scalp. She turned over onto her stomach and started to crawl toward the house. She felt them both on her, ravaging her skin. She prayed for the pain to stop. Her vision started to disappear and blurred from the edges inward. She laid still.

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The dark figure moved, no longer hidden by the shadows she had moved within during the night. She shifted past the invisible walls she knew were there. Deeply inhaling the air, she smelt the scent of blood and fear that it now carried. She closed her eyes, savouring it. Her burned hands turned an old glass jar and lifted it to her lips, throwing the headless body to the back of her throat like a shot, down in one, eased by the saliva she had covered it in earlier. The woman took herself back to the edge of sight, and moved further from the consequences of her actions, satisfied that “just deserts” had been ministered. For no bad deed she suffered would ever go unpunished. “An eye for an eye,” she muttered under her breath.

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“Jacinta! Jacinta!” Kristoff shouted at her, as if volume could resuscitate. At least she had a pulse, even if it was barely there. He tried to stop her bleeding – so much blood – but he could barely trace it to its source. She had said there were two pixies’ heartbeats she could sense. He was acutely aware he’d injured one; he’d not seen the second. He tried to keep alert to the threat but they were so fast and so small, and he couldn’t possibly scan everywhere. They would be hiding, that he could be certain of.

Whatever had made the creatures turn on their creator, he knew that pixies only submitted in death. Her bleeding slowed, Jacinta was scooped up in Kristoff’s arms and he headed for the unseen break in the hedge. Almost there, the grass suddenly rushed up to his face and his arms tumbled Jacinta to the ground with him. A pixie had leapt onto his back and bit into his flesh as it climbed him like a child’s jungle-gym. He flailed his arms, wildly trying to knock it off. Kristoff tried to get back to his feet but the miniscule creature that panted at the back of his neck threw itself inside his eardrum. He fell face forward to the ground as his entire skull reverberated with sensations so intermingled that he couldn’t tell if it was sound or pain or both. He only knew that he couldn’t think straight; he couldn’t hear anything except the inside of his own head. Then, that was all there was. Something scratched inside his brain, and constant pain trapped and paralysed him. As he lay defenceless, the injured pixie limped toward him, pulled itself up, and crawled up inside his left nostril.

Kristoff knew he would not survive. At least his death would come much sooner than others who shared his fate. For that he was grateful. He felt the hours as they passed, always aware of the creatures inside him – the scratching, the eating. Parts of him slipping away. His childhood, the books he treasured, his memory of a woman he thought he could love. The poison started taking his sight, clouding over the lenses of his eyes with milky white, entrapping the remainder of his consciousness in total darkness. At the last flicker, a glimpse of a beautiful stranger leant over him, as she cried and held onto his unfeeling body as everything stopped being.

The tiny creature pushed its way out of the ear of Kristoff’s body, panting and crawling. She watched. Ready and waiting. She crashed her arm down with all its remaining strength and weight, and slammed the rock onto its body. Then again, for certainty. Selecting a fresh rock, she waited, readily. For Jacinta did not tolerate leaving outcomes to chance.

# Standing Date

## Sue Cook

Years had passed since the accident.  
 He sat on the tombstone waiting for her to arrive.  
 They always met in their special cemetery,  
 his hat tipped to one side.  
 He looked to the skies, seeing the evening's fast approach.

Her car slowly drove towards the gravesite.  
 She looked to the skies as raindrops dotted her windshield.  
 His birthday, always a standing date.  
 Her heart beat fast, even today  
 as she slowly stopped the car near the familiar stone.  
 Her eyes watched,  
 alert for any movement...

Walking to the stone, her hands gently caressed  
 the uneven texture of its top.  
 He placed his hands on hers; she shivered.  
 His fingers touched her forehead as she leaned her head back  
 letting the rain soak up her tears  
 bathing the grief away.  
 His voice whispered "And still you come."  
 She looked around, hearing the wind rustle.

"Are you here?" she looked right at him. He smiled.  
 There was a time she could see him.  
 But now?  
 "You are releasing me, aren't you?" he sighed.

She spoke as if she hadn't heard.  
 "I will always love you." Her voiced stammered  
 "I am getting married. I know you understand."  
 He let his body sink onto the stone.  
 "I understand," he whispered in her ear.

Her words continued as if she did not hear him.  
 "Can you no longer hear me?" He asked with a soft chuckle,  
 his grief suddenly lifted.  
 His heart filled with possibilities at leaving.  
 "Spirit returns to Source," he cried  
 becoming one with the brilliant sunset as he crossed over.

Her hands clutched the grave stone.  
 Slowly she stood, smoothing her wet hair  
 as she walked back to the car.  
 Her heart filled with bitter-sweet joy,  
 as she had released him.  
 She could now make her way to the car  
 and into her future.

She drove away for the last time,  
 not looking over her shoulder.  
 He wasn't there any more;  
 they both had departed, freed from love's chains.

Poetry



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# God's Paws

Shikha Aleya

Fiction

As the old dog lay dying, a woman sat with him and touched his paw gently with her hand, leaving it lightly there so that he knew she was with him. But she didn't hold him back. It was her responsibility, she thought, to see this one through the passage to the other side. She didn't know what was on the other side, but she told the old dog that he would be fine.

God watched. God was male today and he stretched and arched his back and flexed his broad, slightly chubby paws as he waited. He really wished to tell the woman that she was right. She had desire – more than faith – that there be something more and beyond. Something that was good, kind, and gentle, and made sense.

God got up and padded to the pool surrounded by strange, hanging trees with bulbous flowers. This tree business belonged to a different department that didn't deal with paws or fins or feathers. Tree gods were always angry.

Paw god stared at his reflection in the water until it dissolved like a moving image in the misty crystal ball of dreams and imaginings. It was time.

Back at the side of the old dog, the woman heard him cough. This scared her. It was a rattle in the throat, a sound she had only read about, described by writers who had heard this sound; the sound impossible to forget; the sound that belongs to only this moment. The sound that signals passage.

A pain seized her chest; it was a knowing. Paw god felt it. He watched, sitting quietly next to her, as the old dog's breath and soul took form before them both. He curled against the woman, trying, as he had done in life, to rub comfort into her body and his own.

Paw god watched as this being, a formless, disembodied dog, clung confused to the human who held him not, saw him not, and did not scratch his head. She wept instead.

Paw god spoke now to the formless one. Come, he said. She will always love you. You will always love her.

The formless one now embodied confusion. Rebellion.

Paw god rose. Come now, you can't stay here. This is done.

No. I will not leave her.  
You have left her already.  
No.

The formless, once a dog, appeared to run. No. The formlessness of mist did nothing but swirl about in an angry, panicked, untailed dance.

The woman rose. She covered the body of her dead friend with a t-shirt. There was one other human with her in the room, and he, too, wept. Then he held her and she held him, and their noses ran and their eyes streamed and turned red, and they clung to each other because the dog was dead.

The panicked formless one danced angrily about them. I am here! The dog said. Look at me, I'm still here.

They cannot see you, said Paw god. You are dead. You are not a dog. There is no tail, no ears, you have no teeth. Do you see? Do you understand? To be anything again, you must come with me.

The two humans stepped back now from each other. The man knelt and gently scooped up the dog body, and the woman picked up the car keys from the table. They would go now and bury their dead. They would plant a tree.

Tree god will be happy, thought Paw god, aside to himself. It was his job to be patient. He had learnt how to amuse himself while these disembodied formless things adjusted to reality. Paw god grew new parts and shapes and dissolved other bits and waggy things and admired this other self in the bedroom mirror. What a beautiful mix of colours, thought Paw No Longer god. What lovely skin tone. What glossy scales.

Lost in transition, Paw No Longer suddenly heard the sound of breaking glass. The disembodied one had flung all it could of itself at the tube light on the wall and succeeded in breaking through the here and there, momentarily enough to smash the glass.

The humans who had walked out of the door froze, and then the woman stepped back into the room. She stopped and looked at the shards of broken tube light at the spot where the dog had died. Behind her, the man with the dog body still draped in a yellow t-shirt also stepped in. They looked at each other.

“Soupy? Is that you?” Asked the woman. “Go on now. It's time to go. You can't stay here, I'm scared of ghosts. You go. When it's my time you come for me. I know you will. But go for now.”

Paw No Longer watched the people trying to talk to that which they couldn't see. The disembodied one heard carefully. Paw No Longer saw that it listened to her voice as it had done when it was dog.

It was time.

The humans left the room.

Paw No Longer touched the new formless and drifted back to the pool knowing the new formless would follow. To be sure, Paw No Longer said, Come Soupy. You can keep your name. It is one amongst many names you have had and will have. It will be your name when you meet your humans again at the pool, when it is their time.



# The Days Seem To Drag On at the Black Orb

Sue Cook

Fiction

The Black Orb survived Millie's transformation into a Gargoyle, escaping into Gars realm during the day, returning to her alabaster stone angelic form at night. Millie and Gar watched over the store as stoney lovers en pointe.

The Orb was more subdued these days, with Toby, now a full grown chocolate labradoodle and Draco making up the night security team

Diao stayed on his perch muttering "Nevermore" at the customers in a less than enthusiastic voice, while Annabelle watched the counter. Her duties also included keeping the tea room stocked, ordering exciting and rare giftables for the store, and baking marvelous delights to keep the townsfolk happy.

The Black Orb was successful, but tired.

"She never even considered her Mother," Annabelle bemoaned as she filled the bakery goods counter. "Off she goes, leaving us all the work, whilst she plays in other realms." She stood, knocked the sugar from her hands, and dramatically exclaimed to nobody in particular, "What is a mother to do?"

Diao rolled his eyes as he watched Annabelle perform her daily soliloquy. "If you slap a hand to your forehead, I'm going to fall off this perch laughing."

Annabelle whirled around and took a menacing step towards Diao. "Listen, you shaggy dust mop! If you say that again, you may end up in one of my pies. Magpie pie!"

Diao ruffled his feathers indignantly and shrieked "Nevermore!"

As if on cue, the doors of the Black Orb flew open with such force they shook the walls. A fluffy white cloud appeared hovering in the doorway. As it dissipated, a small woman in a short, sleek green dress, with flaming red hair appeared. She walked slowly into the Black Orb and looked around before her eyes met Annabelle's.

"So, this is it? The Black Orb I've heard so much about." The woman spread a wide smile for such a small face. "If it isn't, my dear, sweet cousin Annabelle," she added in a saccharine voice. She strode across the floor to Diao's perch.

"And Diao, I haven't seen you since. What? A decade ago?" Her hand gently stroked his feathers as she spoke. "Have you missed your Kira, sweet boy?" She ruffled the feathers at the nape of his neck, meeting his eyes with hers.

The raven asked, "Hi, Kira. How are ya, Mon? Still, uh..." He flapped his wings, indicating flight, and cocked his head.

Kira laughed. "Of course! What did you think? That I was gone? That someone had *slain* me?" She spoke louder than necessary, intending for all inside the store to hear.

The customers turned to look at Kira for a brief moment, then returned to their shopping, each with eyes wide and alert.

Annabelle stepped to Kira's side to push her into the tea room. "Why yes, as a matter of fact we—"

Kira cut her off with a sweep of a hand. "Where is my dear cousin Millie? We haven't had a heart-to-heart in such a long time. I heard she took up with a garg—"

Annabelle cut her off before she could get the last syllable out. "With Gar, our caretaker? Yes, they did go away for a bit."

Kira snickered. "If that's what you want to call it. The reason I'm here, Annabelle, is not to spar with you, but to run this place in Millie's absence." Kira's eyes moved over the customers who heard the exchange. "I know she would want it that way. Besides, this place could use a little, uh, sprucing up."

Toby wandered in, sat at Kira's feet and listened intently.

"Hmmm. Well, aren't you the most delicious morsel?" Kira licked her lips as she spoke to Toby.

"Toby is our head of security, and we have another security officer who works nights." Kira arched her brow.

Annabelle urged Toby behind her. She leaned into Kira and whispered, "No eating the staff again, Kira."

Kira smiled.

"Of course not, cousin, they are necessary. Just like all of them." She indicated the customers with a hint of superiority. "Now, are you going to show me to my room, or should I just pick one?" She began climbing the stairs, taking advantage of the silence. "Never mind. I'll just take Millie's room. That will work beautifully."

Annabelle scurried after Kira, mouth agape, while Diao shook his head. "Dragon's are nothing but trouble." Realizing that the nearby customers must have heard him, he nervously squawked, "Ahhhh. Nevermore?"

The usual joy of closing time at the Black Orb never came tonight.

"I don't understand what gives you the idea that you can just walk in here and take over?" Annabelle glared at Kira across the dinner table.

Kira poked at her food, avoiding the question. "Why is everything you make so disgusting? It isn't raw. There are no bones. Not a flagon of blood anywhere. Have you forgotten your manners, Annabelle? Middle Ages, food, dragon. Hello?!" Kira gracefully lowered her hand down on the table, with a light pressure, making the plates and cups rattle slightly. Then, she fixed a disdainful look on Annabelle.

Annabelle dropped her head into her hands. "She will never understand our ways, Diao. Never! She raised her head and looked into Kira's eyes. "Dragons have a hard time with compassion, considering they're such cold-blooded creatures."

Diao, who had shifted to human form, moved the food around his plate listening to Annabelle as she wallowed in her fear. Kira was a dragon. What was the worst that could happen? She could burn them and the Orb to a crisp. Okay. But there is always a bright side. Right?

"Kira, this is another century. Dragons do not go around eating people or livestock and burning cities to the ground. You have to play by the rules of the town. Do you want to run the store? If so, then you are Kira, Millie's cousin. Got that, Mon?"

She smiled at Diao. "Awww, you are always so cute when you've shifted. Me, too."

And the room exploded with the sheer bulk of green dragonflesh. "Like me better now?" A booming voice asked.

Annabelle and Diao hit the floor as the walls bulged and the floor creaked. Kira laughed a deep, guttural laugh. She lowered her long, scaly neck and whispered into Annabelle's ear, "Get used to it cousin. Kira is staying."

From the hallway came a familiar voice. "You are?" Gar stepped through the doorway, with Toby and Draco in tow.

Kira swung her head to confront the gargoyle. "Oh my, so it is true. Millie snagged herself a gargoyle. Nice."

Gar's voice was soft but strong. "Correction, Millie is a gargoyle at the moment. Now shift out of that form immediately before you destroy this building. I am still the caretaker of this place, and I do not suffer fools."

Something in Gar's eyes spoke business to Kira and the shift was immediate.

"Well, I wouldn't want to get on the bad side of my cousins now, would I?" She smiled a toothy grin at Gar, and batted her lashes. "Welcome to the family, Gar," she crooned. "Odd as it may be." She helped Annabelle off the floor and noticed the tall pale man standing next to Toby. "Don't tell me this store has its own Vampire?"

Draco gave Kira a thirsty stare.

"Keep your little fang-ettes to yourself. You haven't seen fangs til you see mine." Kira flashed him a toothy grin.

Gar coughed.

"Okay, okay. I will be good," Kira smoldered. "That is, except for the occasional livestock nibble." Diao shot her a look. "No birds, Diao. Cross my heart."

Diao rolled his eyes.

Kira looked at Gar. "All forgiven?"

"See that you live up to your promises," Gar said, tapping her lightly on the nose, a nearly imperceptible smile at his lips. He then turned to Annabelle. "Do you happen to have your world class poppyseed muffins in the oven? I really could use one tonight."

Still stunned by the momentary press against dragonflesh, she stammered, "Um, ahh, yes, I think so."

"Something tells me life just became a wee more exciting at the Black Orb," Gar murmured.

Diao shifted to his raven form and landed on Gar's shoulder. "You are the master of understatement."

They both laughed.

# *Antediluvian*

## *Fiction*

### *Joshua Boers*

Kyle Stanton – Eldest God of Pan, Shepherd to the Free Folk, and Chief Patron of the Downtrodden, who at the moment was just going by Kyle – read the group chat in disgust.



Paul Abbott, 10:30 PM:

*“Guys, the same pan has been sitting in the sink all day. If you don’t contribute toward household maintenance I’m not giving your share of the deposit back.”*

Kyle collapsed onto his mattress, which also served as both desk and table, and stared angrily at the fabric where his bedroom wall should have been.

It had been Paul who had approached him to be the third housemate when his previous plans had fallen through. He hadn't mentioned until move-in day that the house only had two small bedrooms. Paul and Eric, having arrived first, laid claim to the prime real estate. Kyle's room was a small corner of the basement, separated from the "living room" section of the basement by a curtain made of thrift store sheets and PVC pipe.

Yeah, Kyle wasn't going to clean the pan.

He produced a sheet of paper from his laptop case, which also served as both binder and backpack, and began typing. He could hear Paul on the other side of the curtain - squeaking his chair, rustling his papers, making himself known - but Kyle was too busy to take the bait.

Several chapter readings and an essay later, he had outlasted Paul. It was two in the morning. Finally, privacy.

"God, why do bad things happen to good people?" Kyle thought it so loudly that he could almost hear it. Then he realized he hadn't thought it at all.

"If you are truly all-powerful, why does evil exist?"

It was a question - full-voiced yet somehow whisper-quiet - coming from upstairs. Kyle followed the voice up the stairs and searched. Paul's door was closed. Eric's door was closed - and he hardly ever left his room. He checked the closets - they were filled with so many neat rows of paper towels that there was no place for an intruder to hide. The living room was barren except for some barely-used furniture (Paul always studied in the basement, as if to make sure Kyle never encroached on the rest of the house). Nothing was out of place.

Except...

"Lord, do you have a plan for us?"

Kyle walked into the kitchen and stared. There it was: his dirty pan, colonizing one half of the double bowl sink. He took one cautious step forward, and was wracked by visions.

Encrusted meat and stagnant water congealing into a primordial ooze.  
 Crude creatures slithering free and blinking in the fluorescent light.  
 Predator and prey in a deadly dance, keeping each other sharp.  
 Stout little men with bent backs painting on cave walls.  
 Wars fought with sticks, then spears, then swords.  
 The Chosen Prophet, kneeling in the temple.

Kyle understood everything at once. He was the Creator, and his people were crying out to him. This meant that somehow, cosmically speaking, Paul was right: The pan was his responsibility. A huge responsibility, it turned out.

The prophet kneeling in the temple - whose name, Kyle now knew, was Ulrich the Pious - felt the presence of his Lord for the first time. He repeated his first question.

"My Lord, why do bad things happen to good people?"

"I don't know," said Kyle. "I live in a basement."

This was not the answer that Ulrich had wanted after a lifetime of meditation.

"Creator God, your people suffer under a heavy yoke. You who have the power of the sun at your right hand, what would you do to help us? What would you have us do?"

This was almost enough to make Kyle wash the pan and go back to bed.

Almost.

But Ulrich was right. The people of Pan were in dire need. Kyle reviewed all of history in an instant and saw hundreds of little villains – conquerors, tyrants, and law-givers – eager to crush their fellow man on their way to temporary glory.

A world full of Pauls.

Kyle decided that he must lead his people to freedom, not out of godly omnibenevolence, but out of spite.

“Ulrich the Pious, I have remained silent for too long.”

And so Kyle bestowed The Law unto his prophet. It was mostly based on an angry email to Paul sitting in his draft folder, but with a few creative twists.

Every man is to be his own sovereign and have his own space.

The people are to remember the Sabbath day by keeping to themselves.

The inner sanctum of the temple is to remain separate, not by a curtain, but by a thick soundproof wall.

Once he had covered everything, Kyle dismissed his prophet and returned to bed enormously satisfied. Ulrich the Pious was left alone on the temple steps. It was up to him to lead the people to paradise.

“I think I’ll leave out the part about the basement,” he thought.

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The people of Pan were ripe for a spiritual awakening. For all the years they had built temples and sent prayers to heaven, this was the first time someone had answered back. As Kyle slept away centuries, word spread far and wide of his Law and his Prophet, and when he awoke he looked down upon a Free Folk, united in glorious disunity.

“Well done, my good and faithful servant,” he said to a tired-looking Ulrich the Pious. Ulrich had been a young man when first Kyle had spoken to him but was now impossibly old. (Having spent so much energy on the spiritual and so little on the physical, his body had lasted hundreds of years.) He smiled. A long life well spent.

Kyle grabbed his laptop case and left for class. As the god of a thriving world, he felt in control for the first time since he’d signed the lease. This feeling carried him through four classes and a double work shift.

But it couldn’t survive Paul.

When Kyle returned and pushed back the curtain to his bedroom, it was empty. Every dirty mug, every stray paper, even the unmade sheets on his mattress were cleared away. It was like someone had turned the basement upside down and shaken it out. In place of all his stuff was a box, sealed up with packing tape, and a note, written in cursive so elegant that it was nearly unreadable:

“Please try to keep your room clean.”

This was a step too far, even for Paul. Fortunately, Kyle had someone – a whole world, in fact – to help him vent his frustration.

And so it came to pass that, behind the heavy door of the Holy of Holies, Kyle imparted another Testament unto his prophet.

This message was a little less polished, and Ulrich could tell. It seemed like half divine revelation and half stream of consciousness from a Consciousness greater than he could comprehend. From what he could tell, Kyle was warning his people about a horrible being called Paul, the Adversary, the Forger of Chains, the Cosmic Jerk Who Touches Your Stuff. He was a serpent who whispered promises of fairness and order, but delivered only tyranny. Those who followed him would cry out under a heavy hand, but Kyle would not hear.

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“Paul, Forger of Chains, I bend the knee to you in my most desperate hour.”

Paul had just finished putting his impeccably-lettered flashcards in a neat stack when he heard the voice. He was confused only for a moment – but, like Kyle, he quickly understood. He saw the man, Uriah, a humble farmer, kneeling in an ashen field.

“Yes, my son?”

“I have nowhere else to turn, Great Adversary. The bandits have raided my stores and burned my crops. By The Law, every man rules only himself. Yet the Free Folk live in fear, for no one may rise high enough to defeat the bandits. I will accept tyranny over starvation.”

Paul nodded sagely. Of course Kyle had screwed it all up.

“What of Ulrich? Isn’t he your prophet?”

Uriah spat on the ground. “Ulrich is a stupid old man. A thousand thousand years have clouded his mind. My children will eat grass this season!”

“Peace, my son. Rise.”

Uriah rose, slipping a little in the cinders.

“Behold! I give you the power to perform signs and wonders in my name. From this day forth you shall be called Uriah the Tidy. Go, paladin, and spread my message. From the ashes of your fields you will build a shining city and rule over it in my name. Then the real work will begin.”

As Uriah wept tears of gratitude, Paul severed the connection and smiled. He had taken to this godhood business much more naturally than Kyle. Cleanliness was next to godliness, after all.

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There was a new god in town, and soon everyone knew it. Uriah found disciples among all but Kyle’s most devout followers, and it wasn’t long after (theologically speaking) that a great many-tiered city towered over the landscape. The holy city of Paulsboro had everything – both trash and recycling receptacles on every perfect 90-degree street corner, blindingly bright public bathrooms where the toilet paper never ran out, and a crack inquisitorial squad that purified 99.9% of heretics. And in the center of it all: a lofty tower, where Uriah the Tidy could receive detailed directions from the Most High. It rose so high over the surrounding farmland that the silhouette was clearly visible from Ulrich’s temple window, where it looked unmistakably like a giant middle finger.

This was an act of war.

“The wicked city of Paulsboro is hateful in the sight of your Creator,” said Kyle to his prophet. “If I can’t have my own bedroom, Paul can’t have his own city.”

Ulrich the Pious raised up a band of holy militiamen, while Uriah the Tidy conscripted a legion of disciplined crusaders. Soon the forces of order and chaos battled across the world. The forces of Paul defiled the temple door with 95 suggestions as to how Kyle could improve his organization, hygiene, and general personality. The forces of Kyle besieged the great walls of Paulsboro with catapults, tossing in dirty dishes, unwashed clothes, and clutter detestable in Paul's sight. The forces of Paul laid waste to the fields of the Free Folk and salted the earth, so the returning vegetation would spell out the words: "Clean Your Godforsaken Bathroom". The forces of Kyle clogged every perfect toilet in Paulsboro, leaving behind a message in permanent ink: "Clean It Yourself".

Many lives were lost on both sides.

In the realm of the gods, things were no better. Kyle and Paul never spoke, but the holy war raging in the world below did nothing to relieve the tension between them. Kyle stewed in his corner, while Paul waited on the other side of the curtain - standing vigil, making sure that Kyle didn't spill out into the rest of the house. Worse yet, he would constantly rock his chair into the curtain, causing the entire frame to shake every few seconds. Infuriating... but Kyle wouldn't give Paul the satisfaction of saying anything, and Paul wouldn't give Kyle the satisfaction of stopping.

Creak. Shake. Kyle grit his teeth.  
Creak. Shake. No, he wouldn't say anything.  
Creak. Shake. Paul would get sick of this eventually.

A final creak, a tremendous shake, and the entire curtain framework shuddered off the pile of old textbooks holding it up and came crashing down onto Kyle's mattress. That was it. Everyone had limits. After a moment of shock and another moment of disentanglement, Kyle stood and pointed a finger at the unrepentant Paul.

"Roommate meeting!" said Kyle, with a voice like a thousand dirty dishes dropping onto an unswept floor.

"Now, now, it must be done at the proper time," said Paul, with a voice like the closing of a thousand well-organized filing cabinets.

The rival gods scheduled The Ultimate Battle Between the Forces of Order and Chaos for 6 PM Thursday, so as not to conflict with either of their class schedules. The rules were pretty standard: every devout follower was to get on their knees and pray to the god of their choice, the two chosen prophets were to conjure fire from heaven, and whichever produced the greater flame was to be the One True God of Pan from then on, and woe betide those who were found kneeling to the wrong alter on that day.

"Whoever wins also gets their own bedroom and decides all the rules for the house," said Kyle to his prophet, who had long ago learned to distinguish that which was meant for mortal understanding and that which was only for the Higher Beings.

Judgement days are rarely scheduled so specifically. The people of Pan got to work right away: temple attendance reached record levels, devotional groups mustered in every basement, and evangelical pamphlets spread across Pan like a plague. Everyone crammed for the final Test. And when the day came, the people of Pan were split into two groups of ruthless Prayer Warriors.

As spiritual warfare raged below, physical warfare raged above. Kyle had returned from his class to see Paul sitting imperiously in his usual basement chair. He was wearing a robe as white as driven snow and had somehow gotten ahold of a scepter. He was clearly dressing for the job he wanted. Worse than that, Kyle could sense that he was already practicing his conjuration - working together with the prophet Uriah to call down lightning upon the fields of the Free Folk. To Kyle's mind, this was clearly a foul.

"I'm not going to apologize for being punctual," said Paul.

"You can't start warming up while I'm stuck in class!"

"You should have..."

What Kyle should have done will never be known, because Kyle chose that moment to throw one of his old textbooks at Paul's head. Paul responded by lunging forward with his scepter. The titans clashed, and, in the scuffle, the curtain was rent in twain.

And then, as quickly as it had started, the fight stopped. Kyle and Paul both staggered back, deafened by the loudest and most urgent prayer they had ever heard, as though millions were speaking through the voices of the prophets.

"GREAT KYLE, FREE US FROM THE-"

"GREAT PAUL, CLEANSE NOT YOUR-"

Then nothing.

Nothing...

Nothing but the sound of the sink running upstairs.

The two of them rushed up the narrow staircase, pushing past each other, though they both knew it was too late. It was just as they feared. Eric, the little-seen third housemate, was washing the pan, entirely oblivious to the apocalypse he caused in the world below.

He nodded, acknowledging their presence.

Kyle and Paul stared for a long time, unable to speak.

"The group chat has been pretty quiet lately," said Eric, "so I took care of the pan."

And so he had.

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Zebulon the Hermit stared into the crashing waves with a mixture of hope and pity. He had once lived in a cave - far from the war - but he was a learned man and could see the devastation by means far clearer than physical sight. From that distance, the epic battles between Order and Chaos seemed petty and small. There must be a third member of the pantheon, he theorized. A god for people like him. The God Of Staying Out Of It. He prayed, and it was Eric who answered.

It was Eric who had listened. It was Eric who told him to build an ark.  
Zebulon retired to his cabin and dreamed of a quieter world.



# Perri Dodgson

## Fiction

The evening air was damp and I knew my painstakingly straightened hair was beginning to frizz. While I rummaged in my bag for my phone to pay for the car park, Rita drove around to the plug-in bays in order to recharge her electric while we were at the show.

"I can't believe we're doing this!" she said with a grin. "It's gonna be awful. How sad are we?"

"Hey, it'll be a laugh," I replied.

"We can have a good sing song if nothing else!" We were going to see an Elvis impersonator at The Golden Cockerel, a red brick pub somewhere south of the river in London. "The best in the UK," the posters announced. 'Proudly appearing for you on 16 April, 2024'.

While struggling to walk in my new skinny jeans, I spotted the pub sign hanging from rusty hinges and reflecting in the puddles below. Muted light shone through the dirty windows and a heavy base synthesiser punctuated the hubbub of voices from inside.

"I just need a quick ciggie before we go in," Rita said. She retrieved a packet from her leather jacket, and as she smoked, we watched two young lads tumble through the door, hair so short they were almost bald, laughing and slapping each other on the back.

"Right. Let's do this!" she said. We opened the peeling green-painted door and stepped inside.

For a moment we just stood and stared at our surroundings. Instead of the expected sticky paisley carpet, the floor stretched out to at least a hundred feet of pure white glossy marble. A row of stone Roman pillars lined the room, each set within the gold architraves that surrounded the Raphael painting on the ceiling. Huge posters of Elvis in a white jumpsuit, fringe flailing, lunging on one knee with his right arm outstretched passionately pleading, adorned the walls. "The International hotel of Las Vegas is proud to present ELVIS PRESLEY" they boasted. They were dated February 1970.

I looked at Rita to say, "What the heck?!" but stopped. She was gazing around in wonderment, her wide blue eyes accentuated by black eyeliner and her lips glossy with a pale pink lipstick. Her, now back-combed, hair displayed a gaudy hair band to match her simply cut orange tunic dress and on her feet she wore orange sling-backs with a buckle on the toe. She looked amazing. Then I noticed that the women all around us were dressed similarly in the styles of the late sixties. Including me. I looked down at my black and white chequered Mary Quant dress and shiny knee high boots. The men all had a thick bob of hair, huge collars on their shirts and wide colourful ties.

A live orchestra, heavy on the horn section, could be heard coming from the entrance to the showroom, and smartly dressed staff wearing straw boaters with a black band, were ushering everyone inside to their seats.

Still stunned, we joined the throng which filed into a massive theatre. It was dark with huge sparkling chandeliers hanging from the ceiling and spotlights lit up the edges of the layered balconies, half-hidden within a haze of cigarette smoke. In the area in front of the stage at least fifty round clothed tables and chair sets rested with lit candelabras and Babycham glasses laid out ready to be filled. People excitedly milled around looking for their seats while staff put out ice buckets on the tables. The excitement in the air was palpable and we luckily found some red velvet covered seats at the front of the lower circle that were empty.

# For the Love of Elvis

The lights dimmed. The orchestra started playing “American Trilogy” with aplomb and fierce spotlights aimed at the centre of the stage as the gold curtain was raised. The afros of the backing singers, the Sweet Sensations, glistened with silver in the shadows.

Suddenly, the crescendo of music exploded into applause from the crowd, and there he was. Striding onto the stage, all in white, jewels on his fingers and his engraved Gibson flung round his neck, he glowed like a freshly-cut diamond. All eyes instantly flew to him. He burst into “Hound Dog” and his body began to gyrate as the music vibrated through to his soul and he lost all control of his left leg. He was mesmerising. This was the real Elvis. Stroking his wayward quiff back with his fingers, he cheekily displayed that lopsided grin to the women along the front of the stage. How I wished I was one of them! He intoxicated everyone with his charm and playfulness and the rich tones in his voice melted the hearts of every swooning woman within earshot.

It was over far too quickly. After several encores, and laughing at the craziness of it all, Elvis threw the sweat-soaked red scarf from about his neck into the crowd. It floated down among the women at the front, straining with arms outstretched to grab his hand or, at the very least, touch the hem of his suit. The curtain lowered and finally, the commanding, deep voice of the compère announced, “Elvis has left the building!” We cried with disappointment along with everyone else.

Reluctantly stepping out of the magnificent lobby of the International Hotel, Rita and I immediately wrapped our arms about ourselves as the goosebumps made us shake and shiver. We were back in London, outside the Golden Cockerel and being splashed by a passing double decker being driven too close to the curb.

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We never told anyone about what happened that night. It was so farfetched that nobody would have believed that we’d travelled back fifty-four years in time. But we knew we were the luckiest women in the world. Not many English girls got to see Elvis as he never got to perform in Britain during his short life. His only time here was spent at Prestwick airport in South Ayrshire, waiting for a flight connection in 1960, when he was in the US army.

To our joy, we found the documentary film, “Elvis: That’s the Way It Is” on Netflix, which features many clips of Elvis on stage at the International Hotel. Excited to watch it one evening, we settled down with a bottle of wine and a bag of Doritos, and once again allowed ourselves to become absorbed in the same magical performance that we had seen performed live.

“Hold on!” Rita screamed suddenly. “Wind that bit back a bit.”

The camera scanned the audience for a moment between numbers while Elvis took a drink. Women’s faces everywhere beamed at the stage, oblivious to everyone around them.

And there we were. For only a brief moment, Rita and I saw ourselves, cheering along with the others, absorbed by the man on the stage and clapping as the next song burst into life.

# The Parrot and the Pirate

Makena Metz

Fiction

The girl scrubbed the deck of the ship, swirling the soap and grime. The suds mixed with the filth, tarnishing the boards. Whatever had been bright and shiny before was now just dirt, just like her life. It was the kind of grime that got into the cracks between the worn wooden boards, the kind that could never be fully washed away.

Sometimes, she envied the soap, able to trickle down the side of the boat and into the ocean, where it became one with the sea.

Yet as the flickering lights of the torches shimmered in the salt-sea air, the creaking of the boat soothed her soul. She wiped her hands on her dirty dress, then rubbed the back of her wrist across her sweating forehead.

The movement reminded her of another's caress on her cheek. Sea-green eyes and black windswept hair. "Hey, you," his voice murmured, like a shadow in her mind as his breath traced her lips. The glint of a gold coin vanished between his tanned fingers, then flickered into existence again, and the dream melted. She glared at the dirt-covered soap and splashed the bucket of water over it, as if that would erase the memory.

A seagull called, and the girl flinched. She looked up, eyes weary. She focused on the horizon over the island in the distance as the deep blue sky slowly melted into gray. The stars faded and disappeared, while the sun hovered just below the water. The deck creaked loudly under nearing footsteps, and she looked back down at the soap, quick to return to her scrubbing as a shadow enveloped her.

"Ey, you. Daylight's coming."

Eyu nodded, not looking up.

Captain Morgan placed a hand on the back of her neck. With the other hand, he slid her stringy hair out of her brown eyes. "Look at me when I talk to you," he said.

Trembling, she looked up into his sea-green eyes. She had been Eyu for so long now, sometimes she forgot. Forgot what she was – who she was – before.

The captain smiled, all sharp, white teeth. His blue coat draped around him, and his sword – that sword she'd always admired with its purple, jeweled octopus pommel – hung loose and careless at his side.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" he asked.

Eyu's hands clutched at the sponge and soap but she didn't move, didn't blink down the tears beading in her eyes. "Aren't you going to say anything?" She whispered.

His hand squeezed her neck. Then he laughed, released her, and walked towards the bow of the ship. Eyu let out a breath and pried her aching fingers from where they gripped the sponge.

"Captain Morgan!" The second mate yelled down from the crow's nest. "We wakin' the crew, sir?"

"That won't be necessary," he replied, leaning on the railing and looking out at the ocean. Eyu's legs started tingling as she stayed kneeling beside him, but she didn't dare stand up.

Misted sea-water hit the edge of the boat, drifting into their faces, and she swallowed a knot in her throat as the spray kissed her face. That spray used to melt on lips against lips, hands twined in the sand, water running over her bare legs. It held a salt that stung, that washed away her cuts and bruises. The memories were as cursed as this ship, as the man who forced her to stay tethered to it. The great, creaking boat used to be home, but now was a prison – and he nothing more than her jailer.

How his heart had changed. She knew he wanted her still – not to love, but to hurt. Not to cherish, but to break. And not to treasure, but to own.

The sun crested the horizon. The girl inhaled – and she transformed. As the sun's rays touched her pale skin, water and light swirled around her, shimmering with a thousand iridescent colors. The colors exploded out into a bright light then vanished, evaporating into fog.

A regal blue parrot stood on the sponge brush, head tucked under a wing. Small green feathers grew from her head and black stripes spread around her eyes like tear tracks. Eyu blinked and stretched out her wings, and the yellow feathers hidden under the top blue layer shimmered. Then she flew to the captain's shoulder.

Morgan caressed the bird's delicate feathers with a finger. She winced and leaned away, ruffling her plumage.

"Good morning, pet," he said. "Now go wake the crew or I'll clip your wings."

Eyu bobbed her head and craned her neck to the sky.

Morgan's eyes turned to the ocean. "And remember to keep a look-out," he growled. "I don't want to be surprised."

She flapped her wings and flew.

The only thing Eyu enjoyed about being a parrot was flying. She loved to drive her wings high into the clouds, circling the boat, and watch the fish swim beneath her in the water. She'd long since given up the disgust for this body – she indulged her instincts when diving to steal bread from the crew's hands, and enjoyed taking a well-deserved crap on the mast of the SeaBeast.

From high in the air, a blob far from the island's shore caught her eye. She flew closer and recognized it as a boat – a royal sailing vessel with red and gold sails. She circled back to Morgan at the wheel and landed on the weathered cabin head.

"*Ship's coming,*" she chirped. Eyu resented how her voice sounded in this form, but at least she could talk for herself. "*Straight ahead. Starboard side,*" she squawked.

Captain Morgan looked up, his eyes glinting with malice, and grinned. He spun around to a crew member crawling down from the crow's nest. "Call all hands on deck! We have a boat to pillage."

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Thick smoke hung in the sky like a tapestry of death. The red and gold sails drifted across the sea in tatters; canon holes punctured through the thick fabric. The masthead lay split in half. Bodies floated in the water, and sharks swam below, drawn to the scent of blood.

Eyu turned away, exhaustion weighing on her bones, and flapped into the underbelly of the ship. She flew through the hallway and dipped into the last door to the tiniest room to land on the bed. The hay on the pallet poking her feet, Eyu tucked her head under her wing to wait for the sun to set.

Soon enough, the familiar colored lights surrounded her, forming a brief cocoon that dissipated, then faded. Once more a girl, Eyu rolled over on her back, watching the unlit lantern as it creaked above her on the hook. She was so tired. Tired of the violence, of the fighting. She thought about the faces she'd seen, then of the battered captive yanked below deck before she'd caught more than a glimpse of him. Eyu bit her lip. Maybe she could do something, for once.

Slowly, she stood up, leaning on a cask as she navigated out of the space. She walked down the narrow hallway, past the galley, wrinkling her nose at the smell of eggs and pickles. When crewmates approached, she ducked behind barrels filled with oranges that were tied to the wall. The men swayed, swinging bottles from their hands as they laughed wildly. None of them saw her in the dim space.

Leaving the sounds of celebration behind, Eyu approached the tiny prison cell in the narrow stern. She saw something – someone – hunched in a corner. Eyu reached out to the bars, almost touching the cold metal before she stopped.

Whoever it was moved fast. A strong hand shot out from the dark and clamped down on her arm, pulling her in. She gasped as the hands spun her around, holding her against the bars, and began crushing her windpipe.

"Who are you? What do you want?" a man's voice demanded.

Eyu gasped, struggling to pry his hand off her throat, but he held on tight.

"Answer me!" he yelled.

"A-ans-swer m-me—" she gasped out.

"Are you mocking me?"

Stars floated in her vision as his hand tightened. She barely heard the slow footsteps walking toward them.

“I’d appreciate if you took your hands off my pet,” Morgan drawled from the shadows. He came into the light, eyes glinting like the coins he always carried.

Fingers tensed around Eyu’s neck. The captive man said, “Who – who are you?”

“I’m your host this evening, so I’d stop that, if I were you.”

The pressure around her throat released and Eyu stumbled forward. She coughed and turned around. A young man, his chin held high despite his ragged red finery, glared at her. His tanned skin glowed in the lamplight, and his short, tangled curls tossed as he turned his attention to Morgan.

The girl’s throat pinged with pain, and she scowled at the prisoner as she massaged it.

Morgan walked up to the bars. “What’s your name, Prince?” he asked.

The prince crossed his arms, a muscle in his face ticking as he glared at the captain.

“Don’t say much? Neither does she.” The captain grinned and nodded at Eyu. Then he grabbed her by the back of her neck. “Your name, or her pretty face gets it.” He pulled out a small knife from his belt and smirked, holding it up to her face. Eyes wide, Eyu tried to yank her arm away, but Morgan pulled her closer. His nose brushed her cheek, the sweet smell of rum drifting past her as the knife moved in.

The prince’s eyes widened, and he rasped, “Wait—”

The captain cocked his head to the side. “Yes?”

The prince’s jaw clenched. He shifted his weight, and let out a breath. “Caspar. Prince Caspar, of Kalisae.”

Morgan shoved Eyu away, and prowled toward the cell. He pulled out a letter from inside his coat and waved it under the lantern near the bars as he smirked at Caspar. The letter’s red seal had been broken.

Caspar stepped closer to the bars. “You intend to hold me ransom then?” he asked. Fire flashed in his dark eyes. “My parents would never trade with a *pirate*.”

Quick as an eel, Morgan dropped the letter and grabbed Caspar’s arm, wrenching him against the metal. “Then they won’t mind if I filet you a little —” And he pressed his knife into the prince’s skin.

The prince screamed and bucked as Morgan carved a bloody line from the prince’s forearm to his wrist. Eyu gasped and took a step forward. Then she caught herself. She touched her bruised throat. What was worse, a hand or a knife? It wasn’t the prince’s fault he was a captive. She bit her lip, leaning back against the ship’s hull for support. She wanted to help, but she couldn’t. If the Captain used that knife on her, if she got injured in human form, she wouldn’t be able to fly. And if she couldn’t escape to the skies every day, she might just go mad.

Morgan cut another line and looked back at her, shadows forming in his cold eyes.

“Stop it, Morgan,” he said to her as he cut another line into the prince’s arm.

“Stop it, Morgan,” Eyu repeated in a whisper. Her hands shook as she clenched her fingers at her sides.

“I love it when you say my name,” Morgan said. He lifted the knife, and the prince slipped his arm back inside the bars, cursing as blood ran through his fingers.

The captain nodded to Eyu. “Clean him up,” he said. “I want him ready for a ransom trade by the new moon. Or you’ll both be caged.” Eyes hooded, he strode down the hall, boots echoing across the floor.

Prince Caspar hissed in the cell as he gripped his arm. Grimacing, he slid down against the bars to the floor then slid away to lean against the wall. Eyu looked at him and sighed, feeling the weight of the deck above them pressing down on her. She walked over to the basin at the side of the prison cell, found a rag, and dipped it into the clean, salty water. Then, she padded to the bars and knelt down. Tentative, she held out the cloth to the prince. She shook it, frowning and staring at him as his blood dripped to the floor. He glared back, wincing through his pain, and said nothing. She blew out a breath, her lips puffing out air. The prince blinked. Eyu shook the damp cloth at him again. He grimaced, nodded, and finally shuffled over.

Caspar leaned against his side of the bars and caught his breath. “Do you have a name?” he asked.

Eyu shrugged.

“Do you speak?”

She shook her head. It was easier that way.

He slid his arm through the iron, and hissed again as she touched the rag to the wound. Morgan had carved a symbol there. The prince caught her eyeing it.

“Chum,” Caspar said, and grunted in pain. “It means chum.”

Eyu frowned, eyebrows drawing together as she put all her anger into the word. “Chum,” she repeated between her teeth. She wiped away more blood.

“Are you a...prisoner here too?”

She flinched as if struck. Then, biting her lip, she nodded.

“What happened?”

She looked up, away from the wound into his open face. His deep brown eyes stared down into her light ones, and she sighed, shaking her head. He’d find out soon enough.

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Caspar slept and Eyu sat beside the cage, keeping an ear out for the drunken crew. As the sky lightened outside the grimy porthole window, she tapped on the bars, rousing the prince. He sat up, blinking away sleep, and turned to look at her.

“Is something happening?” he asked.

She nodded, blushing and looking away. She’d never transformed in front of someone else before. What if he – but it was too late. The bright cocoon of light swirled around her and as it dissipated, the prince gaped. She flew her small form through the bars to perch on his open hand.

“I can talk. Can talk!” the parrot squawked.

The prince blinked and swallowed as he observed the blue-yellow bird on his hand. “You – you were cursed?” he stammered.

Something light and warm bloomed in Eyu’s chest as he stared at her, into her eyes, seeing her. “Cursed. I was cursed. Cursed!” She nodded her head.

“Then we will work together,” He whispered. “If you help me escape, then I will help you break your curse.”

The prince laid a gentle finger on her green head. Her tiny heart pattered loudly in her chest as he stroked her soft feathers. Eyu trembled. She didn’t want to trust him. If Morgan knew what they were discussing...But after a moment, she closed her eyes and leaned into the touch. Then, as the hungover crew began work, she quickly spread her wings and darted from the cage.

\*\*\*

Eyu thought about the prince’s offer all day and into the next night. She couldn’t leave the ship – the curse kept her bound – but she could help the prince escape. So she waited until the sun rose on that second morning. Then as the swell of magic overtook her body, she transformed and rose to the skies to put her plan to action.

Eyu swooped through the air to land atop the railing at the aft of the ship. Her keen eyes looked through the glass of the captain’s bunk. Morgan lay asleep, snoring loudly, velvet sheets crumpled around him. A rum bottle and a chalice were strewn on the side table, and sticky liquid pooled on the wood. Eyu jumped off her perch and squeezed through the gap between the panes. She landed on a large, velvet chair and looked around the room for the glimmering tell of gold.

The captain mumbled something and he turned over on his side. Eyu fluttered, then stilled, peering at Morgan’s face. He looked so different in sleep, like how he used to. Brows smoothed, mouth serene. Her heart caught. Then Eyu shook her head. That was the past, and this was now. The captain rolled over again, revealing gold keys with large, ornate handles jingling on his belt. Eyu took her chance – she flapped to the bed and hopped forward, biting the cloth of the belt as hard as she could. After a few snaps of her sharp beak, it split open.

As the keys spilled down Morgan’s leg, Eyu grabbed them in her talons. She was airborne and out the window before the pirate could resume his snoring.

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Eyu dropped the keys through the bars of the prison cell. Caspar turned over on his side and blinked open a weary eye. Not asleep, but waiting, and she tipped her head to look at him, feeling a tremor in her wings.

“It’s you,” he said. He sat up stiffly, and frowned as he palmed the keys from the floor. He shook off a yawn and looked at her. “Now? We’re escaping now?”

“Now,” the parrot squawked.

“In the light of dawn?” Caspar said. “What if they see us?”

“Now. Crew sleeps. We go now, now. Now!” she squawked, beating her wings.

Quickly Caspar stood and unlocked the door, wincing as the iron creaked and the keys jingled. Eyu fluttered up to his shoulder to perch there. The prince looked down the hallway leading to the deck – Eyu tugged his ear the other way.

Caspar turned to the right and began to run, following the silent directions from the parrot as he navigated the ship’s corridors. Finally, they made it to a storage closet full of pickles and tack. Eyu fluttered down to the ground and knocked on a crooked plank in the wall, bobbing at the prince. His eyes lit up as he reached down to pull the plank out from the sloppy dark tar. Cold water beckoned from a foot or two below the hole in the ship – a bad patch job from some battle long past.

Caspar pulled on the boards around the hole and yanked out another plank. Then he turned to Eyu., “I’m assuming you’ll join me in the sky?”

“No,” Eyu said. She shuffled in place, ruffling her feathers.

The prince sat on the edge of the hole, sliding his bare feet into the water. Her small heart twisted as she watched the only prisoner who had ever offered to help her make his escape.

He frowned. “Can you swim?”

Eyu whistled, “No, no. Water bad.”

Caspar winced and said, “Then I hope you don’t hate me for this.”

“What?” she squawked, but Caspar reached out and grasped her wings within his hands, and with a breath and a screech, they splashed into the water.

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The parrot coughed and released her talons from Caspar’s shirt as he sloshed out of the water. He collapsed onto the white sand of the beach as Eyu jumped off his shoulder. The ocean sparkled in the early sun, and clear, calm waves washed the shore. She beheld the ship, bobbing in the distance while Caspar rolled over onto his back, panting.

“I hope you don’t hate me,” he said.

“Hate you?” Eyu replied. “No. No.”

She was off the boat, for the first time since...she couldn’t remember. Her tiny heart pounded and she felt hot under her plumage. When Morgan had said she couldn’t leave the boat, she’d just accepted it at face value. Accepted that it was part of the curse, part of the vile magic that bound her to feathers. Rage filled her and she clawed her talons through the sand as she realized Morgan had lied. But worse than the magic, worse than the lie, worst of all, she’d believed him.

Caspar sat up. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s figure out where we are.” He pushed himself off the sand and surveyed the cliffs and jungle behind them, where palm trees rustled and swayed in the warm flower-scented breeze. He gestured to a path that led out of the sand and into the grass between two trees. “I guess we go up there?”

Eyu chirped, bobbed her head, and hopped forward through the sand. Caspar sighed. “At least my clothes will dry.”

\*\*\*

In the belly of the ship, Morgan shook the bars of the empty cell and roared. He left the dank quarters and stalked towards SeaBeast’s stern. As he walked, he fingered the hilt of the sword at his side, and ran his thumb along a tentacle of the octopus embedded in its pommel. If this prince thought he could steal Morgan’s pet and get away with it, he was sorely mistaken.

Captain Morgan headed for the crew’s quarters as his mind turned towards that nearby island. He would find this prince, take back what was his – and this time, ransom be damned, he would take no prisoners.

\*\*\*

Caspar walked down the road to the village, careful not to jostle Eyu as she swayed on his shoulder. Fishermen carried nets and women sat on the grass weaving baskets while children, tanned and healthy, ran around half naked and wild, playing with each other. Some of them stopped to stare as Caspar and the parrot passed.

Caspar muttered under his breath, “We need to find a place to hide. We’re too recognizable.”

Eyu chirped in agreement. The savory smell of nuts cooking wafted toward them on the wind, and the prince paused, inhaling deeply.

He licked his dry, salt-chapped lips. “A bite to eat, first?” He followed the beckoning scent across the village, coming at last to a woven stall.

“Are you hungry?” a woman’s warm voice asked from behind the stall. “I have fish fresh from today’s catch.”

Caspar wrinkled his nose. “Ah, no thank you,” he managed to say. “I thought I smelled something else.”

An older woman, her dark skin glowing with warmth beneath a simple green dress, emerged from behind the stall. She flicked her eyes up and down Caspar, making him conscious of the ragged clothing, the fresh scabs on his arm, and the bright bird on his shoulder. Then her eyebrow rose, and she smiled.

“Then fruit, perhaps? Or some greens from my garden?” The woman held up a bowl of herbs and vegetables and Caspar shifted his weight, considering.

He held out a hand. “I can’t pay coin, but I’m strong—”

The woman swatted his hand away. “Not you. I was asking the bird.”

“The bird?” he asked. Eyu ruffled her neck feathers and eyed the woman. The woman peered closer and nodded with a small smile.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” the woman said. “You’ve traveled quite a ways, my love.”

Caspar’s mouth opened as he took a step back and glanced around. The parrot squawked, and Caspar stammered, “Indeed, it’s been a bit of a journey –”

The old woman scoffed, throwing her soft braid of gray and black hair over one shoulder. “Again, I was not talking to you, Little Prince.”

Caspar swallowed, but before he could speak, the woman raised a gentle hand, palm upward, to Eyu.

“Come with me, my love,” she said. “I’ve seen what it is you need. I can help free you.” Eyu straightened and tilted her head to one side, and Caspar glanced sideways at her. After a moment’s hesitation, she bobbed her head. Caspar lifted his arm so she could climb down and step onto the proffered hand.

“I am Hamma,” the woman said as she brought the bird to her chest and stroked her head. Eyu’s eyes drifted closed at Hamma’s gentle touch.

“Come with me, Prince,” Hamma said. She glanced at Caspar, then turned, speaking dryly. “Unfortunately, she also needs you for this.” She beckoned to him over her shoulder as she began to walk away.

“But we –” Caspar started.

Hamma’s free hand pointed at a woven bowl full of pillowy bread and brown paste. Caspar looked at the food, then at Hamma’s back.

“Eat, Prince,” Hamma said with a small laugh. “And come. You will be safe. I swear it.”

Hamma strode forward, into the swaying trees. Eyu hopped up to her shoulder and looked back as Caspar grabbed the bowl. He was already dipping the bread in the paste as he fell into step behind them.

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Caspar struggled to breathe as he followed Hamma through the jungle. She was fast for her age, and unlike Caspar, knew what roots to avoid and branches to duck. Winded, Caspar followed as they broke out from beneath the massive canopy. Bright sunlight blinded him as they passed along a cliffside.

He heard their destination before he turned a corner and saw it. Hamma’s wooden hut stood covered in vines, the porch strewn with sun-reflecting seashells. Coral windchimes clinked in the sea breeze. A lush garden of herbs and vegetables crowded beneath her open windows, their stems reaching toward the sun.

Hamma opened the door and they stepped inside. A hanging cauldron bubbled over a fireplace in the far wall. Worktables and shelves that stacked up nearly to the ceiling ran along the other walls, and a bulbous-eyed iguana sat and stared at them from a perch.

Eyu fluttered off Hamma’s shoulder and landed on a worktable. Hamma settled into a faded pink armchair and Caspar sat on the edge of a workbench. Caspar stared at the woman, then at Eyu. The bird’s pupils enlarged and shrank in the dim light of the fire. Uneasy, he bit his tongue, tasting copper.

Hamma waved a hand. “I suppose this is where you want answers.”

“Yes,” The parrot squawked. Caspar nodded, leaning forward.

Hamma also leaned forward in her chair, speaking softly. “I have seen you in my visions, my love.” The fire crackled, and Eyu didn’t flutter a feather. Caspar realized he was holding his breath. “A living curse,” Hamma continued, “And a complicated one, at that.”

Eyu chirped and bobbed her head as Caspar frowned. “You saw her curse in your visions?”

Hamma shrugged. “I see the strings tied with magic. It is how I make my own spells.” She stroked the iguana with a sideways smile, and Caspar shuddered.

Hamma continued, meeting Eyu’s eyes. “But we can’t undo the present unless we understand the past, can we?” She gestured at the walls. The fire dimmed and the hut darkened.

Caspar flinched away as smoke from the fire unfurled. It changed colors from deep orange to green and purple as it lifted and spiraled outward, filling the center of the room.

Ocean waves and a two-masted boat swirled into shape, sailing around the edges of the smoke.

“Once,” Hamma said, “You fell in love.” The smoke spiraled, and the boat changed into a young man and woman, kissing.

“You promised the captain that you’d be together forever, but doubt grew in his heart, and darkness latched on to his soul.”

The parrot squawked and trembled on her perch as the man of smoke transformed again into long, inky tentacles. They lunged through the air, then curled in to hold the girl tight.

“But more than loving you, he wanted to possess you.” The girl struggled, trying to break free from the tentacles, but they would not release.

“He feared that one day, your love would fade, as the sun fades from the day –”

“Cursed,” Eyu said. Caspar bit his lip and glanced at her.

The image faded as the smoke swirled into the shape of a bottle, then spilled out droplets into a gray tea cup.

“So he bought a curse from a merchant and slipped it into your tea. And you, my love, lost the power to speak for yourself.” The smoke churned, forming itself into a massive parrot, wings outstretched. It overwhelmed the small room.

Then Eyu spread open her own wings, flapped powerfully, and the smoke vanished. A deep darkness covered them all, and Caspar shivered. Hamma clicked her tongue and the fire re-lit. The room warmed instantly.

Hamma leaned back in her chair. Caspar looked at the parrot, his brows drawing together. He opened his mouth, then shut it.

Hamma coughed. “That pirate sold his heart for the curse. So, only another heart is powerful enough to break it.”

Eyu let out a piercing shriek, “Morgan!”

Caspar winced, rubbing his ear as Hamma sighed. She steepled her bony hands under her chin. “None can give their own heart to the spell. But we can make one.” She stood and pulled a dusty leather tome off a shelf. She flipped it open and ran her finger down a page.

Caspar cleared his throat, nerves tripping on his tongue. He asked, “Make a heart? How is that even possible?”

“We need three items,” Hamma said. “The blood, the flesh, and the pulse.”

Eyu flew to Hamma’s shoulder to look down at the book. She screeched, “How? How!?”

“The closer the items relate to the heart of the one who cursed you, my love, the better.” Frowning, Hamma fingered the page. Eyu peered down at it, cocking her head.

Caspar swallowed. “I’ll help in any way I can,” he said. “I’d be dead without her.” He touched the scabbed lines on his arm, then fixed his gaze on Eyu. “I’ll help you break this curse, and then we’ll kill that pirate.”

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Hamma gave the prince new clothes – black fitted pants and a red cotton shirt. Caspar held it out in front of him, comparing the fit, then looked back at her. “How did you have my size?”

Hamma’s eyes sparkled. “Luck, perhaps.”

She spread a healing balm on his arm once he was dressed. Then Eyu hopped on his arm, and Hamma opened her front door to the jungle.

“Go down the path by the cliffs to the nearby cove,” Hamma said. “Look for the ingredients there. Beware of the cats.”

“Cats?” Caspar asked. Eyu’s talons squeezed his arm.

“Jaguars,” Hamma said smiling, and shut the door in his face.

Caspar sighed and turned to Eyu. “We couldn’t have found an island filled with sheep instead?”

They walked under the thick canopy at an easy pace, following the brown, rocky path. Caspar listened for every creak, every rustle in the trees, but no jaguars jumped out at them. Soon, the path led out of the jungle and narrowed into a descending ledge along the steep cliff face. Caspar blanched as Eyu squawked and took to the sky, flying high and then diving towards the beach hundreds of feet below. Caspar gritted his teeth and edged out onto the ledge to follow her.

The sun hung low in the sky as the prince stepped onto the sand. Shaking, he sat down on a large rock, and caught his breath. Nearly a full day had already passed. They didn’t have time for him to rest, but he had to wait for his heart to stop pounding. After several minutes, Caspar stood and followed Eyu across the beach.

Together, they combed the sand, looking for items that could represent the pirate’s blood, flesh, and pulse. Eyu hopped about the beach, pecking at driftwood and seaweed. She launched into the sky, circling for a better view, then dove back down. As the sun sank lower, they wandered further down the beach, curving around the sand under the edge of cliffs until they could go no further.

The prince’s eyes lingered on the edge of the cliff near the water, watching the surf crash against the rock. The current sent ripples under it.

“I think we need to go in there,” Caspar said. He pointed to the small opening, right above the water. “It’s too narrow for flying, but we can swim.”

Eyu screeched, “No! No water.”

Caspar shook his head, eyes flashing. “I have an idea.”

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Caspar bobbed up from the water into a cool grotto, Eyu clinging to his hair. The light coming in from a natural opening at the top of the cavern cast the walls in dappled shades of blue and green. “Do you see anything?” Caspar asked, treading the water with smooth movements.

“No,” Eyu said. Water dribbled down into her eyes, and she blinked. It was hard to see anything from such a low perch.

Caspar swam forward and grasped onto a rock shelf partially covered with sea moss that jutted out from the side of the wall. Eyu hopped off his head onto the rock and shook her feathers, shedding droplets of water everywhere.

Now her sharp eyes searched the lapping waves. Conch shells and nautilus, coral and anemones layered the grotto floor amidst the seaweed and pebbles, but nothing called to her as being the heart of a pirate. She fluffed her wings again, shaking out more droplets, and stalked to the other edge of the rock shelf. Eyu surveyed the room from this new perspective, still finding nothing. She keened in frustration.

Then her eyes lit on something else shimmering in the water: a large, white, iridescent shell caught in the marble hand of a sunken statue. She shrieked and bobbed, pointing with her clawed foot. The shell seemed to glow beneath the water.

“You found it?” Caspar asked, turning his head. He held his breath and stuck his head underwater, peering through the salt. He came up for air rubbing his eyes. “I can’t see it. Can you dive for it?”

Eyu stared at the underwater statue, feathers trembling. Water was death for a bird like her! She shook her head, spraying more droplets, and sunk onto her legs, planting herself on the rock.

Caspar whispered, “We’re so close,” and Eyu forced herself back up. She stared at the water, at the shell that only her eyes could see. Scraping her talons on the stone, she flapped her heavy, bedraggled wings, and ran for the edge.

Eyu jumped, spreading her wings wide as she let out a piercing shriek. Then she closed her wings and dove into the ocean. Water rushed around her and she shot through it like an arrow, heading toward the deep glow that became brighter as she hurtled closer. Thrashing her wings awkwardly, she collided with the shell, letting out precious bubbles as pain seared through her side. Her claws grasped for purchase – and somehow she gripped the shell and began to pull.

It wouldn’t budge.

Her heart pounded in her tiny chest as she watched more air bubbles bob towards the surface. She yanked again with all her strength. The shell wiggled against the marble. Black spots dotted her vision as her lungs burned.

With a sudden jerk, the heavy shell released into her claws. She pushed against the water, shoving her wings forward and up, flailing her way through the water towards the surface, but not getting far. Her vision flickered just as Caspar’s hands took hold of her body. Everything faded to gray, then to black.

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Eyu spluttered awake on the rock shelf, coughing salt water. Caspar stared, panting as he treaded water, and the blue light from the hole above them washed over his troubled features.

“I’ve never had to save a bird from drowning before,” he said.

“Me either,” Eyu replied, then gasped in surprise at her voice.

Caspar goggled at her. “Say something else!” he said.

“Do you have it?” she asked. “The shell?”

Caspar nodded. “In my pocket. But we need to get back to shore. Tide’s coming in.”

The parrot looked toward the opening they had swam through, now hidden underwater. She nodded, bracing herself for the cold sting of the ocean one more time.

“Let’s go,” She said as she hopped onto Caspar’s head, gripping his hair with her talons. He turned in the water, took a breath, and dove.

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The shore was covered in ragged seaweed that the rough waves had brought in. The tide had definitely turned – and the sun was almost set. In the reddening light, Eyu moved closer to the object by Caspar’s knees. It shone with a light of its own in the dark sand.

Caspar asked, “Was it worth it?” He pushed it toward her.

The perfect spiral seashell, white as the moon and the size of a human heart, glittered with a thousand reflected facets. Caspar gently brushed particles of sand off of it.

“It’s the flesh,” Eyu said. “The flesh of the heart. I can feel it.”

Caspar looked out at the sun setting behind the waves. Eyu eyed the horizon too, then hopped a few steps away. The waves behind her rushed toward her wings as she began to transform. Caspar stood up, brushing sand off and shielding his eyes as light swirled up and around the parrot. The colors glistened gray and white and silver like the shell in his hand, then evaporated into mist, leaving the girl standing in her true form in the sand, water splashing her ankles. She blushed, smiled, and walked back toward Caspar.

He held out the glowing shell in his hand as he returned her smile. But Eyu frowned as she took it. She ran her fingers across the salt-worn ridges.

“Can you talk?” Caspar asked, and she jumped. For an instant the shell had seemed to transport her far away. Sun-kissed skin, golden coins, endless love.

Eyu blinked, and opened her mouth, but her tongue twisted against her. “Can you talk?” she repeated. Her face fell, and she looked away. Sighing, she tapped her fingers against the shell and pursed her lips.

“Hey, it’ll be alright,” Caspar said. Eyu blew her hair out of her face. “We don’t know how the magic works, but we’re on the right path.” She nodded, then pressed her ear against the shell. “Any idea where the next ingredient is?”

Eyu shrugged and placed the glowing shell on the sand. She sat down beside it, sighing.

Caspar frowned. “I wonder why...” But his voice trailed off as he sat down too.

The girl pulled her knees to her chest and circled them with her arms. She leaned her chin on her knees, her hair drying in the salty breeze. They were so close to breaking this curse, yet so much remained. Sometimes, she thought she remembered what it had been like – to be human only – and it didn’t seem real. Could she ever be?

Caspar reached out and tucked a stray curl behind her ear. “I wish I knew your name,” he said.

The girl half-smiled. She picked up sand and let it drop through her fingers as she thought a moment. Then she leaned back and crossed her legs. She pointed at Caspar, then the ocean, then mimed a boat with her hands and raised her eyebrows in a question.

“Ah, what was I doing before I was captured?”

She nodded.

He stretched his neck to the side as he looked out over the water. “I’m the youngest of four, so my parents let me do what I want. I’ve been exploring the world hoping to bring home a great treasure... some draw for our kingdom. Times have been hard. And now I’ve cost them another boat.” Caspar sighed and picked up a small rock. He tossed it into the water, where it landed with a quiet plop.

The girl touched his arm and shook her head. She pointed at the water, miming fire.

“Water... fire...” Caspar guessed.

The girl shook her head again. She pointed at Caspar, then made a slicing motion.

“Not me? Not my... not my fault?”

The girl nodded, but Caspar winced. “If I hadn’t been out there to begin with...”

The girl grabbed his hand and placed it on her own.

He smiled. “Yeah, I wouldn’t have met you either.” He rubbed her hand with his thumb, then frowned. “That pirate,” he said. “You loved him. But he hurt you.”

For a moment, the sound of the waves echoed between them, then she dropped her hand. Her finger traced along a groove in the shell beside her. A single teardrop tracked its way down her cheek.

“Loved him. But he hurt y-y-om-ME,” the girl stammered out.

Caspar’s mouth opened. “You’re talking!”

The girl looked down at the shell, then back at Caspar, brows furrowed. She picked it up as another tear fell from the edge of her cheek. Caspar reached out and caught the drop on his fingertip. He placed it inside the shell, and they stared at it, waiting for something to happen. The waves crashed against the shore, glimmering with the rising moon’s reflection. Closing her eyes, the girl held the shell against her chest.

Then she felt a buzz, a vibration, rush into her throat. She opened her eyes and stuttered out, “C-c-caspar?”

The prince grinned and grasped her hand.

Her eyes sparkling with more unshed tears, Eyu leaned in and brushed her lips across Caspar’s.

“Wait—” Caspar breathed, but she kissed him harder. Panting, Caspar broke away.

“Wha- what?” she asked.

The prince looked out toward the ocean. “I can’t. I’m a prince and...”

Eyu turned bright red, then leaned away from him so her hair covered her face.

The sand shifted behind them. “It’s – it’s not that I’m not attracted to you,” Caspar continued.

The girl held up a hand, listening. They turned to look behind them as the jungle rustled. Caspar paused, brows coming together.

“What is it?” He swallowed, and his voice rose higher as he said, “Do jaguars come onto beaches?”

“No, they don’t,” a snide voice taunted. The girl pushed herself off of the sand, gasping as the second mate of the SeaBeast emerged from the foliage, folded his arms and grinned down at her. Three crew members pushed through behind him.

“Get ‘em,” he said. And the crew rushed forward, cackling and calling, crashing through the sand.

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They dumped Eyu and Caspar in the middle of the floor of Hamma’s hut. Behind them Hamma’s cauldron bubbled, its contents lit with an eerie glow by the flames beneath it. Eyu looked up, glaring daggers while Morgan smirked. She turned her head and saw Hamma, wrists tied together as she sat in her armchair. The rest of the crew lurked against the hut’s walls, watching with barely suppressed glee.

Morgan squatted down and tugged the girl’s chin towards him. He murmured, “Don’t tell me you’re mad, pet. The curse connects you to me. We belong together.”

Hamma caught the girl’s gaze, then winked at the cauldron. The girl frowned and pulled away from Morgan. She stood up, pulling Caspar up with her.

Morgan laughed. “What, you thought your prince could help you break the curse?” He laughed again, long and low, and the rest of the crew laughed with him. Their voices echoed off the walls and shelves and seemed to swirl through the hut. Eyu bristled and glared at him.

She palmed the shell filled with her teardrop from her dress’s pocket and opened her mouth.

“N-n-n-no,” she gritted out.

The whole room paused. Hamma softly chuckled, and Caspar glanced at her.

Morgan’s eyes flashed as he took a step toward her. “What did you say?”

Eyu raised her chin, eyes lighting with pure rage. “I-I-I am mhm-am b-b-breaking y-your curse.” The girl took a step backwards, then spun around to the cauldron.

“Stop!” Morgan yelled, grabbing at the back of her dress.

The girl threw the shell into the pot, and the water burst into a swirling rush of white. It sparkled, growing brighter than the sun and as silver as the moon. Morgan shouted, and Eyu turned and saw what else sparkled in that brilliant light – the jeweled octopus pommel hanging at his side. In a flash, she understood. Morgan had always wanted what others had; treasure in his hands, people at his beck and call, the world laid bare at his feet. Like an octopus, Morgan had wrapped his tentacles around everything near him.

The sword gave him life. It was his pulse.

Eyu turned around, grabbing for the sword, but Morgan pinned her arms. She yelped in pain.

“Don’t touch her!” Caspar screamed. He rushed forward.

As a unit the crew pulled their swords and charged into the fight. Eyu ducked as a sword swung near her head. Morgan threw her towards a table, panting as he stepped behind his crew. Looking for a weapon, Caspar grabbed a potion bottle and threw it at one of the pirates. The glass broke on impact, and green smoke spewed everywhere, filling the room.

Eyes watering, Eyu crawled along the floor, eyeing Morgan’s black boots beneath the haze.

“He’s a snake!” One of the crew screamed. Chaos ensued as more bottles smashed to the floor and more smoke plumed upward. Eyu stood, striding through the pirates-turned-reptiles to where Morgan now pointed a sword at Hamma.

“Enough!” he roared. Baring his teeth, Caspar threw another bottle, and Morgan ducked. Eyu took her chance, braced herself, and yanked the sword out of his hand. The blade cut deep into her hand.

Yelling through the pain, she threw the sword into the pot before Morgan had a chance to react. Blood dripped down her palm as the white liquid boiled, changing colors as an inky purple coalesced across the surface.

“Drink it!” Hamma yelled, “A full mouthful!”

Eyu dove for the cauldron, plunging her hands into the boiling water. She gritted her teeth, expecting it to scald her skin, but then she gasped as an icy cold swallowed her hands. She brought her numbed palms to her mouth and sucked in the pool of inky liquid as fast as she could. Then a weight crashed onto her back and the potion spewed from her mouth as she tumbled to the floor. Eyu rolled onto her back just as Morgan tipped the massive cauldron onto the floor. The girl braced herself, but the liquid turned to purple smoke as it spilled across her body.

She swallowed what little moisture was still in her mouth and coughed as the smoke cleared. Hamma cackled from her chair. Then Eyu screamed as burning pain lanced through her back and shoulders. Caspar’s arms swooped around her, holding her up as the few remaining pirates backed away from their reptilian crewmates to surround their captain. Lights of every color – blues and purples, yellows and pinks, reds and greens – the colors of sunrise and sunset, swirled around her as she cried out again.

The room exploded with light.

And two huge blue and yellow wings burst from her back.

The girl clutched Caspar, shaking as her wings stretched and relaxed. Slowly, she pulled away from him and began to stand. Hamma still chuckled from her chair, long and low. The crew members eyed her and stepped backwards again, leaving Morgan unprotected. A muscle ticked in the Captain's jaw.

"What is this?!" Morgan demanded. He looked at Hamma.

Hamma shrugged, holding up her bound wrists. She grinned and said, "Why don't you ask her?"

Cold eyes glittering, Captain Morgan turned to the winged girl. He lunged for her, gripped her upper arms, shook her. "You will tell me now! Tell me—"

"Aline." She paused as she looked up at him, fire and fury burning in her now-yellow eyes. "That's my name," she hissed. "Say it. Aline."

Morgan blinked, and licked his lips. "I-I did this for you – for us – so we could be together, always."

Aline pushed his hands off of her arms. "No, you did this so that I would never leave you." Her wings flared behind her, quivering. "And I never questioned you, like a fool."

Hamma twirled her fingers in the faint light. All the candles around the room sparked to life, scattering the darkness and illuminating the worktables still filled with other jars and potions. Morgan's remaining crew looked at each other, eyed the snakes and lizards and frogs on the floor, and rushed from the hut, their cursing filling the night air. Caspar rose, clenching his fists. Aline took another step toward the Captain. He stumbled back, tongue darting out of his mouth.

"Please," he said, "come back to my ship – our ship. Let's fix what's broken. Together."

Seething, vibrating with long-bottled rage, Aline picked up a pair of scissors from a worktable. "You said you would clip my wings."

Morgan raised his hands as he backed away further. "I never went through —"

"You kept me caged!" Aline yelled, following him across the room.

"I'll give you my heart," he begged.

"You've never had one to begin with."

Morgan's face twisted with malice. He screamed and lunged for her, pinning her hand with the scissors in his grip.

"Aline!" Caspar yelled, but Morgan toppled her to the floor. There was a sick thud and a gasp. Then Aline struggled and shoved his body off her, scissors embedded in his heart.

Caspar appeared at her side, kneeling down to help her up. "Are you alright?" he asked. Aline reached over and tugged the scissors out of the pirate.

Morgan convulsed, eyes bulging, as sea water spewed from his mouth and the puncture in his chest. With another heave, the captain spat something out, then collapsed on the floor dead.

Aline tilted her head, eyes following the small octopus as it struggled on the packed dirt. The purple creature dragged its swollen, pulsing body towards the door, tentacles gripping, reaching. As it crawled, moisture drained from it, shriveling it to a tiny, limp husk.

Aline gingerly folded her wings as Caspar cut Hamma's ropes. She stood up, stiff and grunting, but watching Aline with a soft smile.

Aline picked up the dead octopus and brandished it to them. "Who wants dinner?"

Caspar turned green.

\*\*\*

Aline and Hamma roasted the octopus in the cauldron, adding vegetables from her lush garden.

Caspar, with a shudder, chose only fresh vegetables.

Hamma patted her stomach and said, "Best stew I've ever had." Aline's eyes sparked with agreement.

After they'd eaten, Caspar and Aline went outside. They sat on the edge of the cliff, legs dangling over the side.

"I want you to come home with me," Caspar blurted. He looked into Aline's eyes, then ran his gaze over her bright blue wings draping down her back. "Let's charter a boat and set sail."

Aline sighed and pushed her hair out of her face. She could feel the wind call to her as it rustled her feathers. As it seeped into her bones. "Caspar, I—"

His lips dipped in to meet hers and they kissed, only the wind and moon as witness. "Please, Aline," he said. "Let me bring you home."

His fingers reached and brushed the back of her right wing, tracing a line down a feather. Aline shivered. She stood up, her wings unfolding as she crossed her arms, and stared up at the stars.

The girl clutched Caspar, shaking as her wings stretched and relaxed. Slowly, she pulled away from him and began to stand. Hamma still chuckled from her chair, long and low. The crew members eyed her and stepped backwards again, leaving Morgan unprotected. A muscle ticked in the Captain's jaw.

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"You've never had one to begin with."

Morgan's face twisted with malice. He screamed and lunged for her, pinning her hand with the scissors in his grip.

"Do you want me...or do you want this?" She gestured down her body. Her wings flared open, powerful and sure. She felt a rush of energy surge through her, kindling a spark that burned with need in her chest.

Caspar's mouth opened. He paused, blinking, brows furrowed, then said, "What?"

Aline turned to him, looking into his eyes. "Am I the greatest treasure of a kingdom?" she asked.

Caspar's swallowed. "Aline, I promise you'd have every comfort —"

Aline's eyes darkened to a deep gold. "Go back to your castle," she said. "I will not be a beast in your menagerie. I will not shackle myself to another, ever again."

Caspar winced, then ran a hand through his hair.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Truly. But I – I would like to see you again."

Aline paused, thinking, then took a breath and smiled as her eyes lightened again. "Who said anything about not visiting?" She winked at Caspar, spreading her wings wide. "Until then, if you need to find me, look up."

Then Aline leapt forward off the cliff and pushed into the night.

Hamma smiled from the window, watching the girl from her visions soar into the sky.

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Some people tell of an island where a guardian with wings of the most brilliant blue and yellow claims wayward souls. Some say a witch enchanted this beast, this monster, who ransacks pirate ships and royal armadas alike, not touching their treasure, but always escaping with other precious cargo – people. Some say that this monstrous guardian seeks ships with lost souls – finding prisoners and freeing them onto her island where they are nourished.

And some say these people nourish the island itself, helping it to grow and thrive. They aid their monster, pillaging and stealing from would-be marauders and thieves. They transform former victims into warriors and reclaim their identities. They are survivors.

Some say she is cursed, but Aline knows she is blessed. She darts through the skies like a vengeful arrow, full of fire and fury. She is the dawning of a new era, forged in pain and ink and shells and steel. Aline flies through the air, her vibrant wings spread behind her, terrorizing, saving, and avenging.

And finally, she is free.

# The Mage

## Helen E. Patterson

### Fiction

Long ago in the Old Country, there lived a wealthy young mage named Quinn, who possessed wondrous powers. He had no need of magic wands or of spells from dusty old grimoires. He needed only to speak, and whatever he spoke would come to be.

Because Quinn was a good, generous man, he almost never spoke these words of power for himself. In fact, he rarely spoke at all. Instead, he made his needs and wishes known by writing notes on little pieces of paper. He had learned early in his youth, after accidentally sending his least favourite teacher into a bramble bush, that it was better for all concerned if he only spoke when absolutely necessary.

So it was that he fell into a comfortable rhythm: Once a year, on the anniversary of his birth, would Quinn speak. The event drew people from miles around. On that day they could lay before him their heart's desires, and generally, Quinn would call those things into being.

If a struggling farmer came to him, he might say, "Your harvest will be plentiful this year," and so it would be.

If a work-worn miner in dire need came to him, he might say, "You shall find a ruby the size of a robin's egg," and for certain, the miner would find one the next day.

But if someone came to him and asked for evil to befall another, Quinn would frown and shake his head. He would refuse and tell the person to go home to reconsider his request and to return the next year with a more civil one. And because Quinn had spoken, it had to happen, and the individual learned his lesson. And so, life continued in a very satisfactory manner for most of the people most of the time.

In the spring of his twenty-third year, after a long, cold, dreary winter, and on a day when the sun appeared particularly bright and the air especially fresh, Quinn decided that an excursion into town would be just the thing to clear his mind and renew his spirits. He had grown tired of his solitary state and often found himself envying the simple, carefree speech of his servants, whose words came easily and had little weight.

But as he walked, he watched the couples about him as they strolled arm in arm, sat on benches enjoying the sun, talked together, or simply smiled at one another, and he realised that he was lonely. He longed for true companionship.

Quinn sighed. It was not as though opportunities to share a woman's company had never presented themselves. His age, face, and wealth all conspired in his favour. But when some lovely young maid would come to him and ask – sometimes in a roundabout way, sometimes not – if he might not like some company of a night or two, he could tell she did not truly want him: She merely sought the spoils of his art. Quinn would not surrender himself in this way, so he spent his nights alone, staring into the fire and wishing he could speak his own heart's desire without feeling like a greedy, selfish lout.

The lonely spring turned to summer, and found Quinn busily preparing for his birthday. Yet even this busyness could not keep his loneliness at bay. It was, therefore, with something like shock and also delight that, while ambling down the main thoroughfare of the village, he became aware of an unknown, lovely young woman in the company of one of the older gentlemen of the village — Mr Bodkin, if Quinn remembered right.

Quinn stood unable to move, as though he had been turned into a tree with deep, grasping roots. Others might not have found the girl remarkable — there was no dearth of pretty girls in the village — but Quinn could almost see a glow about her, warm and pinkish, something the other girls did not have. Intuition whispered that she must also be clever and gentle, and Quinn determined to make her acquaintance, by one means or another.

The next day found Quinn loitering by the doorway of the shop he had seen those two enter. As he waited, he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He paced back and forth, starting at every sound that struck his ear. He felt his chest tighten and held his breath each time the shop door opened.

These were new feelings for him, and he was unsure if he liked them or not. He had just decided that he did not like them one bit when the door to the shop opened, and the gentleman and young woman emerged.

They turned in the opposite direction, not seeing him. Quinn felt beads of sweat spring out on his brow, and his heart began to pound. He had to do something! He began to rummage in his pocket for paper and pencil, but froze. Writing a note would not suffice here, and for a moment he stood there, bereft as he stared after them. Then the young woman stopped. She made a gesture with both hands to Mr. Bodkin, who laughed. Together they turned back toward the shop, and the man saw Quinn standing there, fumbling in his pockets.

“Ah, good day to you, Master Quinn,” he said. “It is good to see you out and about.” He turned to the young woman and made a series of gestures as Quinn began scribbling frantically in the little notebook he carried with him everywhere. He looked at his words, grimaced, then tore the page out.

He scribbled some more, then tore that page out. Gritting his teeth, he tried once again, then showed the page to Mr. Bodkin.

Hello, it said.

The old gentleman looked at the mage and smiled. It was as though he knew what was on Quinn’s mind, and he turned a hand to the young woman. “Allow me to introduce you to my niece, Neve,” he said.

Quinn felt his heart flutter as he heard the words. He showed the paper to the niece, vexed that he had not written something more poetic, or at least longer. Then as she read it, he could have gazed at her fair hair, her pink cheeks, and those rose-coloured lips without being too obvious.

Neve looked at the paper, glanced shyly at the mage, then turned to her uncle.

“I beg your pardon, Master Quinn,” Mr. Bodkin said. “My niece cannot read. Being deaf, she has had only a little schooling. She has come to live with me because her parents have passed on.” He signed to Neve and she nodded. Then she smiled at the mage and dropped him a curtsey, her eyes never leaving his. Quinn bowed, wishing he did not have to straighten because he could feel the blood rushing to his face. He did not think it fitting that he should blush in this moment.

Neve signed to her uncle, then with another smile at the mage, disappeared back into the shop. Mr. Bodkin chuckled.

“Left her broolly behind. Again. She’s a good girl but she’d forget her head if it weren’t attached. Now, was there something you wanted, Master Quinn?”

Quinn yearned with his whole heart to answer that question truthfully. Instead he scribbled:

I only wanted to say ‘hello’.

A moment later Neve reappeared, umbrella tucked under her arm, and the uncle took his leave. Quinn waved his farewell and felt more alone than ever.

But when Neve looked back over her shoulder and gave a small wave, he felt his heart leap in his chest. He watched them until they disappeared around a corner, feeling — not for the first time — that if he were not free to speak his feelings aloud, then his gift was equally a curse.

Over the next several days, Quinn took great pains to find reasons to be where he might cross paths with Neve. This proved more difficult than he imagined, as he learnt that she was kept busy tending to her uncle's house, cooking, cleaning, and washing his clothes. On the rare occasions Quinn did encounter her, always with her uncle, he could think of nothing sufficiently witty to share.

But after a week or more, Quinn realised that even if he did come upon Neve alone by some happy chance, there would be nothing they could say. He could not speak to her and she could not read his notes. Quinn flushed. He had taken to spending his nights writing love poems and heartfelt declarations of his growing affection for Neve. His pockets bulged with them, ready to be shared with her should circumstances ever permit. He considered himself quite an accomplished writer, whose words would have swayed the hardest of hearts, if only she could have read them.

So the summer progressed as summers do and the anniversary of Quinn's birth rapidly approached. Now in the final stages of his preparation, Quinn concocted all manner of therapeutic and medicinal potions designed to soothe and strengthen the throat. This was the one day of the year when the mage knew he would be called upon to speak clearly, compellingly, and at great length. It would not do to have his voice sound like cartwheels on gravel. If Neve chanced to be in attendance, he wanted his voice smooth and warm, like sunlight on brown velvet, like melted chocolate, so pure and perfect the words would glow visibly on his face for her to understand.

When the day finally came, Quinn was ready. His voice carried in fine form. He had been practising for several days, whispering to himself when no one else could hear, muttering carefully crafted sentences designed to induce no change on anyone or anything.

Now, he sat himself down in the huge, green leather chair in his audience room, and nodded to his servants to open the doors.

The day crept along, hour by hour. Most people of the village had learnt to make their requests reasonable, and if possible of benefit to others. Still, this did not prevent the occasional requests for imprudent riches. These the mage always declined, but sometimes he would offer more moderate bequests. This year, the blacksmith that Quinn knew to be carrying a small debt asked for £100, so Quinn gave him £45. The new shopkeeper of a corner store requested the mansion for sale on the hill, and Quinn, laughing, offered a new roof for his cottage instead. And at midafternoon, when the village magistrate requested a bejewelled chain of office, Quinn smiled and gave him a sturdy pocket watch that never needed winding and always kept good time.

As the day drew on, and the line of people at his front door thinned and grew short, Quinn began to despair. Neve had not yet come. Every time he heard footsteps approaching through the foyer, he sat up straighter in his chair, adjusted his robes and put what he imagined was a wise, kindly expression on his face — an expression that turned to forlorn regret when Neve did not appear.

As the sun set, Quinn's shoulders slumped, and he sighed and waved to one of the servants to close the doors. At that final moment, Mr. Bodkin elbowed his way past the servants into the hall with Neve in tow.

Quinn's face broke into a rebelliously delighted smile — one hardly suited to the decorum of the day's event. He didn't care what the uncle was going to ask for; he would grant it wholly, so great was his gratitude at being able to see Neve.

"I beg your pardon, Master Quinn," Mr. Bodkin said as he bowed, "for the lateness of the hour. I had a devil of a time convincing Neve that we should come."

Quinn glanced at Neve, whose face shone with a delicate shade of pink. How lovely she looked, despite that expression of annoyance on her face! Then he realised Mr. Bodkin was still talking.

“Say that again, please,” the mage said, turning a little pink himself.

“My request to you, oh great mage, on this the anniversary of your illustrious birth, is that you bestow the gift of hearing upon my niece, Neve.” As he spoke, he signed so that Neve could follow. She turned an alarming shade of red, and signed vigorously at her uncle. Then she glared at him, arms crossed, with her lips set in an angry line.

Quinn felt a pain deep in his chest, and a stifling lump in his throat. He looked first at Mr. Bodkin, then at Neve. When he returned his gaze to the gentleman, he hoped his tears did not show. He cleared his throat.

“Alas, I cannot,” he said.

The uncle looked confused. Then his face began to turn red and his brows came down in a deep furrow.

“It’s not as though you have to start from scratch,” he said. “She could hear until she was five and a fever stole her hearing away. You need only restore it.”

Quinn looked down. “I cannot.”

“Why not, in the name of all the gods and goddesses? You’ve given other people larger, more magnificent bequests. Surely this is a small thing to fill!”

Quinn stared down at his boots. He felt as though he had aged half a century in only a moment. When he lifted his head, Neve was looking at him with such a compassionate expression that for a moment he thought perhaps she could see into his heart, and his own heart pounded harder. Then she signed something to her uncle.

“No.” Mr. Bodkin shook his head then turned back to Quinn. “We’re not leaving until he tells me why he refuses you.”

“If I could grant your request, I surely would,” Quinn said. “It is not any lack of worthiness on your part or on that of Neve.” He paused for a moment, luxuriating in the feel of her name on his lips.

“For me to give her such a gift, she must ask for it herself, and –”

The uncle brightened. “That’s easily done. I’ll tell her what to say. She can still form words if she takes a little time.”

Quinn held up a hand. “You did not let me finish. Neve must ask for it herself, and be able to hear my words.”

Mr. Bodkin’s shoulders slumped and his head drooped. It was not until Neve poked him that he relayed the mage’s words. Neve nodded and began to turn away, her eyes looking down. Quinn could not tell if they held sadness or relief. Then she turned back, smiled, curtsied, and pulled at her uncle’s arm to leave.

“Wait!” Quinn called, and the uncle found himself unable to move. He looked over his shoulder at the mage.

“There is one gift I can give her. It may not be a welcome one, but I can undertake to teach her to read. That much I can do, if she is willing.”

Mr. Bodkin frowned. “I suppose that’s better than nothing.” He quickly signed to Neve. At first, she looked puzzled, then astonished. Her lips parted slightly and Quinn felt a sweat building at the back of his neck. At last, Neve nodded slowly. She turned to face Quinn and gifted him with a radiant smile that caused the mage’s heart to pound wildly. She made a gesture toward him.

“She says, ‘thank you,’” her uncle muttered.

After they had gone, Quinn sat alone for a long time. At first, he congratulated himself for having come up with this opportunity to spend so much time with Neve. But the more he thought about this, the more uneasy he became. He was not a teacher, and, although he was still a young man, it had been a few years since his school boy days. And he had not been an especially good student even then — once he’d realised his gift’s true nature, school hadn’t seemed all that important anymore. When it came right down to it, Quinn had no idea how he was going to teach Neve anything!

She would not be willing to simply sit there while he gazed at her lovingly — not for long, at any rate. He would have to find some way of holding her interest.

The next day, Quinn and Mr. Bodkin met to make the arrangements. Neve was to come three times a week in the afternoon once her chores were completed. She and Quinn would spend three hours together in his audience room, under the watchful eye of Neve's Great-Aunt Beatrice, and they would return home in time for her to prepare the evening meal. Quinn was displeased about having an audience for his lessons, and the uncle was displeased about them meeting anywhere other than his own front room. As they were equally dissatisfied, they finalised the decision and shook hands.

On the first day, Quinn's inner emotions bubbled inside him like a cauldron. The prospect of seeing Neve and of spending time with her filled him with energy. But the prospect of taking on his role as a teacher made him want to hide. Quinn was not a proud man, but he hated the thought of appearing stupid or clumsy before anyone, let alone someone whose good opinion he craved. As he waited for Neve's arrival, he paced up and down, checked his reflection in the window, and shuffled and reshuffled the papers he had placed on the table.

When Neve and her great-aunt finally arrived, Quinn barely restrained himself from sweeping Neve into his arms and kissing her. His hands shook from the effort, and he feared his smile was too large. Great-Aunt Beatrice settled herself in a chair in the corner with her knitting, propped her feet up on a footstool, and promptly fell asleep. Quinn breathed a sigh of relief, and turned to Neve.

On her own, Neve seemed quite different. With her uncle present, she gave the impression of a passive observer, simply watching because she had nothing better to do. Now that she stood here with Quinn, she looked about her with keen interest, touching nearby objects, lifting them to examine them carefully, running her hands over the carved work on the table and chairs.

Quinn watched her, fascinated, until he realised Neve was staring back and signing something at him. She shrugged with upturned palms, eyebrows raised, seeming to ask, What are you looking at?

Quinn blushed, cleared his throat, and — perhaps a little too quickly — pulled out a chair for Neve. Then he sat down beside her and took a deep breath.

Quinn had decided that the first thing to do must be to teach Neve her letters. He had spent quite a long time carefully making two sets of little cards with the letters of the alphabet printed upon them. One set he now laid out before her, in a fan-like shape. He was quite astonished when Neve tapped his hand, and, with a trace of a smile on her face, pointed to where he had placed M and N in the wrong order. She corrected his error. Then she sat back, arms crossed, chin lifted.

Quinn laughed. Her uncle said she had only had a little schooling, but it seemed she had learned her letters, and still remembered them. Just to be sure, Quinn gathered all the cards and mixed them up. He handed them to Neve. She took them from his hand and looked at him from under her brows — a look that clearly said, This is far too simple. She then proceeded to lay them all out in perfect order. They did this once more but this time Quinn tucked two of the cards into his sleeve. When Neve laid the cards out, she left space for the two missing letters. She then turned to Quinn and held her palm out, wagging her fingers, until he produced the missing cards, which she placed on the table in the waiting spaces. She then sat back, raised her eyebrows a little, and gave Quinn a coy tilt of her head.

Quinn smiled. This was progressing better than he had expected. Then he realised that he had not prepared anything further to teach her this first day, and his smile faltered a little. It would ruin his purpose to let Neve depart too soon. He took up both sets of cards and began to lay some out on the table.

On the table in front of Neve, he laid out her name. In front of himself, he laid out his own. He pointed to the letters in front of her, and pointed at her. She studied them for a long moment, then carefully touched each card in turn. Then she gently brought her hand to her chest.

Neve did this once more, frowning with intense concentration, before she moved to study the cards in front of Quinn. She touched those as she had done her own, then placed her hand on Quinn's chest, nodding as her smile grew. She stole a quick glance at the great-aunt, still dozing in the corner.

Quinn swallowed hard and thought the room suddenly felt very warm. His hand shook a little as he slid a piece of paper in front of Neve, and handed her a pencil. He pointed at the letters, then at the paper. Neve nodded eagerly as she took them. Carefully and fairly legibly, she copied the letters of her name onto the paper. This she did several times, improving and becoming more confident after each attempt. Then she flipped the paper over and, without looking at the cards, proceeded to print her name unaided. Then she printed Quinn's name, looking at his cards to get the letters right. She lifted the paper to admire her work, and her shining eyes met his.

Quinn was almost as pleased as Neve. His student was so quick to learn, but deep down the sight of his name and Neve's written together burned his soul with delicious fire, as though it were some sort of omen.

For the rest of their time together that day, Quinn taught her more words: table, chair, window, paper, pencil, floor, and several others. Neve studied each one with the same care as she had given to their names. Her eyes sparkled and her smile never drooped.

Just before their time that day ended, Neve took Quinn's hand in hers. Gently, she shaped his fingers and taught him a sign for *Neve* and then one for *Quinn*. Once Quinn recovered from the shock and delight of Neve's touch, he was utterly charmed. Again and again, he formed the signs, improving upon them in much the same fashion that Neve had improved her lettering. Now he would have something of Neve with him always.

Far too soon for Quinn's liking, the afternoon came to an end. Neve gathered up her papers into a neat pile. She turned to Quinn and signed something. He smiled uncertainly and shrugged. Neve pursed her lips in thought, then thrust the pile of papers at him. She then gestured for him to pass them back.

When he did so, she repeated the sign she had made before. Then she reached over, picked up the pencil, and gave it to Quinn. He took it and hesitantly copied her sign.

*Thank you?*

Neve's face broke into an immense smile, and she nodded. She stepped forward and hugged Quinn with her free arm. She then roused her great-aunt from her long nap and slipped out the door, waving as she left.

Quinn slumped back into his chair in a blissful daze. He had succeeded in every particular — He had adapted and taught well, Neve had learned quite a bit, and best of all, she gave every indication of returning. The memory of her embrace thrilled him to his core. He sat for long minutes, recalling the touch of her hands, the feel of her arm about him, of her body pressed against his, however briefly. He sighed deeply. If he'd had doubts before, he had none now; he was in love.

The days turned into weeks. Neve progressed rapidly from printing words to sentences to being able to fill whole pages with her even, flowing handwriting. That is not to say that she avoided all the errors anyone might make while learning a new language: Even when she had become quite proficient in her lettering, she still struggled with verb tenses, and her spelling was more often creative than correct.

But while she was learning all this, she was also teaching Quinn to sign. He quickly mastered simple signs like *yes*, *no*, *good*, *bad*, *thank you*, *please*, and *I don't understand*. But Quinn soon realised that while they could easily teach one another individual words and signs, it was quite a different matter to convey the meaning of more elusive ideas.

They spent almost an entire afternoon grappling with 'think'. Quinn had almost given up trying to show Neve the difference between 'I think' and 'I have a headache', and this struggle threatened to engulf them in a yet more difficult 'I am touched in the head' concept as their confusion grew. But after a long afternoon of uselessly waving arms, making faces, and attempting vague mime, Neve's eyes suddenly widened.

She signed, I understand. She wrote I think on her paper, then beneath it wrote the first four letters of Quinn's name. She then paused, furrowed her brow with great exaggeration, tapped her forehead, added the final n, and looked up at Quinn.

*Yes?* she signed.

Quinn smiled and nodded. Neve then grasped the sides of her head, writhed about with a pained expression, then wrote *headache*. Quinn grinned wider and nodded again. To complete her performance, Neve got to her feet, swept all her papers into her arms and flung them into the air. Then she grinned wildly, eyes wide, and wrote *I am quite mad*.

Quinn laughed and applauded.

"Well done," he said. He got to his feet, intending to help Neve pick up the papers which now littered the floor. But before he could stoop over, Neve had flung her arms about him. Quinn could not help it. He returned the embrace, perhaps a little more tightly than he ought, and gazed into her shining face. He hadn't realised before how comfortably they could look into one another's eyes, and he thought about how conveniently close their lips were. The smile had vanished from Neve's lips; he had never seen her look as serious as she did now. He might never have a better opportunity in his entire life to kiss her, and his longing raged against his concern for propriety. Neve was not attempting to remove herself from his arms, and he pulled her in just a little closer.

"That will be quite enough of that, Master Quinn!" The indignant voice of Great-Aunt Beatrice broke in. He turned in alarm, dropping his arms and stumbling back.

The look of surprise and hurt on Neve's face cut him to the quick. But then she followed the direction of his glance and saw her great-aunt approaching, knitting needles clutched like weapons in her hand. Neve quickly signed something that Quinn could not follow. The great-aunt stopped, but she lifted her aged chin and glared at Quinn in a way that made him glad that no one else's words held power like his did.

Neve dropped to the floor and began to pick up the scattered papers, and he knelt to help her, but she waved him off. Once all was in order, Neve signed, I will go now, and made for the door. The great-aunt followed, but not before pausing to shake her knitting needle again at Quinn.

Heart still pounding, Quinn sat back down, moving bits of paper around the table until the sunlight failed. His servant asked if he should bring candles, but Quinn shook his head. He sat there in the dark for a long time, calling himself all manner of uncomplimentary names like 'fool', 'coward', 'oaf', and worse. When he ran out of epithets, he found himself wondering how he would ever manage to convey to Neve the most important, most elusive idea on his mind.

How was he to tell her about 'love'?

On the next day for lessons, Quinn sat in the empty room and watched the clock with growing anxiety. Neve had never been late before. When at last the door to the audience room opened, Quinn sprang to his feet, his eager smile blossoming in an instant. But his smile faded, and his heart began to pound dully when the great-aunt appeared alone. Neve had not come.

He reached for his notebook and began writing. *Where is Neve? Is she all right? Is she coming?*

The woman squinted at the page, then snorted. "Your handwriting is atrocious! And you call yourself a teacher!" she said. "Neve isn't coming today."

*Is she ill? What is the matter?*

"She said she was ill, but who knows what goes on in that empty head of hers. Her uncle gave her a good talking to. Shame on you, Master Quinn! Taking advantage of a poor, innocent simpleton. It's a good thing I was here!"

Quinn nearly dropped his notebook. He wrote frantically. *No!* He underlined it twice. *I would never take liberties with Neve. And she is no simpleton. She's the most intelligent, brightest, loveliest -*

The great-aunt had been watching Quinn as he wrote. She shoved his hands away.

“I suppose you would think so,” she said, “fool young men being what they are. This entire arrangement has been a waste of time, not to mention utterly improper. Neve doesn’t need to learn to read. Is reading going to help her cook, clean, or wash my delicates?” She shook her finger at Quinn. “It’s clear to me that you are not to be trusted! I’ve far better things to do than sit and watch the two of you mess about, so if I have any say in the matter, Neve’ll be spending the rest of her afternoons doing something useful again!” Great-Aunt Beatrice made her way to the door. Just before she closed it behind her, she glared once more at Quinn, shook her head, and gave a snort of disgust.

Quinn opened his mouth to speak the words that would send the great-aunt into the nearest bramble bush. Just in time, he bit down hard on his tongue. He tasted blood, and grimaced. The old woman never knew just how close her escape had been.

Quinn shakily lowered himself into his chair and covered his face with his hands. His stomach twisted and burned at the great-aunt’s words, and he wondered if he should not send some healing potion or another to Neve, to prove his desire to help. But he did not know the nature of her illness. Then he sat bolt upright in the chair. Was she truly ill? The question had barely passed into his mind before Quinn knew the answer. Each thought that came next seemed like knives, boring and twisting into him, inescapable, undeniable. Neve did not wish to come. He had been graceless and clumsy. He had offended and embarrassed her. Likely she would never return and would probably avoid him on the street. He would never even have a chance to apologise, let alone tell her how he felt.

For two days, Quinn was utterly miserable. He did not eat and he could not sleep. He moped and lagged about so badly that his servants began to follow him, wringing their hands. When they inquired for the umpteenth time if there were anything he required, he scribbled on a smudged piece of paper *I need you to leave me alone!*

So, they did.

But on the following day, a lighter footstep announced itself at his door. Quinn lifted his head, haggard but ready to scold whoever dared — and saw Neve. Alone. His jaw dropped.

I am happy to see you, he signed. I thought you would not return.

Neve looked puzzled. She snatched up a piece of paper and started writing.

Aunt Beatrice says she told you I am sick so I do not come here.

Quinn nodded, then signed. Where is she?

Neve smiled. Her pencil hurried over the paper. We talked. I said I would come alone. That, or I forget how to cook, clean, and starch their undergarments.

Quinn laughed. I am so glad you are here, he wrote on his own paper. For a long moment he stared out the window, carefully planning his words from what was still a limited shared vocabulary. I thought you were angry and did not want to come. I am sorry, Neve.

Neve studied his face for a time before she carefully wrote. I was angry. I did not want to come. I am sad you do not

Neve stopped, frowning as her pencil hovered over the paper. She shook her head, sighed, and put the pencil down. She lifted her fingertips to her lips, then gently touched them to Quinn’s.

Quinn thought his heart would burst. He stared wide-eyed at Neve. Fumbling with the pencil, he started writing, sweating under her gaze. He crossed it all out and started again. Then he passed the paper to Neve.

*I wanted to kiss you. I did not know you wanted it. I am so happy to see you again. I am sorry I hurt you. I love you, Neve.*

Neve read the words, frowning slightly as she reached the end. She looked off into the distance, through his window, as though thinking something over. Then she started writing again.

How hurt? You did not hit. I do not understand. I do not know this word love. Please explain?

Quinn wrote, Hurt can be inside, like anger or tears. Love is when two people want to kiss. Many, many times. He glanced up at Neve, then added, When one person gives his heart to another.

Neve looked up from the paper into Quinn's eyes. Then, a massive smile bursting across her face, she signed, and Quinn needed no interpretation. I give you mine. I love you, Quinn.

Neve flung her arms about Quinn's neck and pressed her lips onto his. Quinn wrapped his arms about her and kissed her back with equal passion. Time whirled, went backward, and stood still all at once, but at last he stepped back and took Neve's hands in his.

"I can say anything to you," he said, feeling the thrill of using his voice without fear, "because you can't hear me. But if you'll let me, I'll give you all I have — my lands, my house, my riches. I'll give you all I am, my heart and my soul." Then he paused. What good were these words, thrilling or not, if she couldn't receive them? He looked down. "I wish —"

Neve frowned at him, her eyes watching his.. What is wrong? she signed. Why do you look so sad?

Quinn looked at her, then glanced down again, biting his lip. He wasn't sure he wanted to answer at all.

Neve pulled away and crossed her arms for a moment, waiting. Tell me, she signed.

Quinn turned back to the table and wrote, I am sad because I cannot give you your hearing.

Neve looked at the paper, her lovely lips pressing into a thin line. She lifted her pencil and wrote, carefully shaping firm, dark letters. Then she pushed the paper in front of him.

I do not want you to fix me. I am not broken. I am Neve. Are you broken because you do not know how to sign like me?

Quinn looked at the paper and slowly nodded. The air and lighting in the room seemed to lift and brighten around him. I am so very sorry he signed. I never asked you what you wanted. I am so stupid.

Neve's shoulders bounced as she gave a little laugh, and she shook her head. Not stupid, she wrote. Maybe not — She searched for the word — knowing? Kind, though. And good. And loving.

Quinn breathed out deeply as he took her into his arms again. "I love you so much, Neve. I only wish you could hear me say the words."

Neve felt his breath on her cheek as Quinn spoke. She pushed away a little to sign, What?

With a rueful chuckle, Quinn wrote the words out. Neve smiled, leaned in, and kissed him again.

*I hear you in my heart*, she signed.

Over the rest of the summer and into the autumn, Quinn and Neve continued to meet and learn, though almost as much of their time was devoted to expressions of tender feelings as it was to increasing their relative vocabularies. It did not surprise Quinn in the least that Neve was the better, quicker student in both activities. And it surprised no one in the village when one day Quinn went to see Mr. Bodkin to ask for her hand in marriage. Naturally, the uncle agreed. After all, who would not want a mage as a nephew-in-law?

So when the time came for Quinn to actually propose to Neve, he supposed there would be no surprise there either. He loved Neve and she loved him. There could only be one response to his tender request.

Except that was not her response.

As Neve came in to sit in her accustomed chair that day, Quinn knelt before her. He smiled broadly up at her, eager to see the familiar shine in her eyes. His smile began to falter as he realised that Neve was not smiling at all.

*Neve, you know I love you*, he began, signing now with the fluidity of much practice.

Neve impatiently waved her hands. You spoke to my uncle.

Quinn nodded.

You asked for permission to marry me.

Quinn nodded again and swallowed hard. He did not like the expression on Neve's face and he certainly did not like the way the conversation was going. He felt a droplet of sweat trickle down his spine.

Why did you speak to him first? Neve demanded.

Quinn frowned and reached for his pocket notebook, no longer sure of his signing. It's expected, he wrote. It's the proper thing to do. He's the head of your family.

Neve sighed and rolled her eyes. How do you know I even want to marry you?

Quinn's jaw dropped.

After all, Neve continued, I love my cat, but I have no wish to marry him!

Quinn slowly rose and sat in his chair. What use was kneeling now, since it was clear he was not going to receive the answer he had expected?

Neve smiled at him wistfully and began to sign again, I do not know what to say. Of course, I love you, but what can I do as your wife? Cook? Clean? I do that for my uncle. It is not enough just to warm your bed. And what can you offer me? I want more than just love.

Quinn did not reply right away. He sat in his chair, looking out the window, trying to piece together in his mind what he had done wrong this time. He felt Neve's eyes on his back watching him carefully, and a painful lump grew in his throat.

At last he scribbled onto a paper, What do you want? I can give you anything. At least, I can try.

Neve leant forward and caressed Quinn's cheek. I want a choice, she signed.

All my life I have been told to do this or do that, to come here or go there, but I am not a child any longer. Neve looked down for a moment, but when she looked back into Quinn's eyes, he saw a fire kindled inside. I do not know yet what I want from this life. I might start a deaf school, or write a book to teach signing, or something else. When I decide, I might do anything, be anything. Neve hesitated, and bit her lip. What I will want is for you to not stand in my way.

Quinn felt as though the sun had burst out from behind deep, dark clouds and shone down upon them both. A sense of wonder filled his heart. Never before had he known someone who wanted nothing given to them.

*Of course!* he signed. *Whatever you decide, that is what will be. If I can help, I will — if you wish. Otherwise, I will mind my own business. I swear it.*

Neve's smile seemed to add a second brilliant sun to the room. *Then, yes,* she signed, *I will marry you.* Then, she laughed. When Quinn gave her a quizzical look, she signed, *I only hope you never regret marrying someone you cannot compel to obedience.*

Quinn laughed then too, took her in his arms, and kissed her. That was answer enough.

So it was that on the day of the winter solstice, Quinn and Neve were wed. As they signed their vows before their gathered friends and family, they promised to love one another forever, faithfully and joyfully, and never to speak, write, nor even to sign an angry word — be it to the utmost of their patience. Just before they proceeded to the wedding dinner, it occurred to Quinn that he could ensure that their promise held.

Turning to Neve, he said — and signed — “May we both always be as happy and as much in love with each other as we are today.”

And because he was a great mage with wondrous powers who had only to speak the words to bring his heart's desire into being, they lived, in truth, happily ever after.

# *The Song of the Beautiful Maighdean*

*Fiction*

*Nelly Shulman*

The oar touched the gray water of the lake, and the young man flinched as a dark shadow passed under the stern. The elderly man at the prow smiled.

“It’s just a fish, Bertin,” he said softly. “No need yet for alarm. Maybe none will appear here after all, and we will quickly reach our goal.”

Ahead of them, a castle tower rose on the mountainous island, the thick emerald forest obscuring much of its mossy walls. Bertin shivered, looking at the leaden clouds in the silent sky. Not even the echoes of bird calls sounded. Bertin feared that his Master, sensing his discomfort, was only trying to calm him down.

Calm could not come until they were free of this water, safely sheltered inside the ruins of the castle, but even then, it would be fleeting. This was their destination, but greater tasks lay beyond it in his future.

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Three days ago, in the riverside inn where last they’d shared human company, the Master had warmed his hands by the sitting-room hearth as Bertin had poured over their maps. In the south, the orchards still groaned under their golden festoons of fruit, but here the strong wind howled behind the shutters, and a cold rain pounded the roof.

“We must leave the horses here,” the Master said into the quiet of the room.

Bertin jumped at the sound. He looked down at the rough maps that charted a way through the deep forest across the river. “There seem to be paths suitable for horses, Master,” he said.

Before the Master could reply, the innkeeper, a young, burly fellow, entered the room. He came forward, bowed, and kissed the hem of the Master’s black robe.

“I’ve prepared the best room, sir,” he said. “We have firewood stocked, and I shall bring you some stew here, a hearty brew. Yesterday we slaughtered a ram, and the barley harvest was bountiful.”

“Thank you,” the Master said.

The innkeeper rose to go. Hesitating on the threshold, he turned back to them, his smile fading.

“Please, sir, do not refuse to attend to my son,” he said. “The maighdean, whom I drove away years ago, jinxed the poor child...”

The Master nodded and said, “After we eat, I will see what I and my student can do. He is a capable young man. But we can make no promises.”

Bertin avoided the innkeeper's gaze and blushed furiously.

"Thank you, sir. Thank you," the innkeeper said. He bowed deeply. "I will see to it that your horses receive the best of care during your journey." Bowing again, he closed the oaken door.

Bertin looked to his Master and repeated, "Horses will be useful to us. There's no need to go on foot."

Turning the logs with a poker, the Master sighed heavily. "Beyond lie lands where evil spirits will tear to pieces both horse and rider, my boy. Horses have no protection, but we may. You must be careful in this country." The Master shifted in the chair and looked at Bertin. "But now, did you hear what the innkeeper said?"

Bertin turned scarlet. "I'm not so capable as you -"

The Master raised his hand. "Don't avert your eyes. Listen with your ears. The maighdean seduced this fellow in his youth, but he escaped. He married a worthy girl, but now the creature has cursed their child. Here in the north, this often happens - evil spirits possess this land. If you want to become a Master, listen to me carefully now and do what I say."

After they ate, Bertin carried the bag with their tools and potions into the room the innkeeper showed them. The room smelled evil, and the stench of decay made his stomach queasy.

Holding the boy, her eyes red with tears, the innkeeper's wife said, "Damn the maighdeans! They lure our men with false promises, and then our children suffer their evil eye -"

"Peace," the Master said. He spread a thin blanket on the floor by the fire. "Place the boy here." Bertin handed him a copper burner to wave back and forth over the whimpering baby. Black ulcers on the emaciated little body swarmed with foul-smelling fat worms as the Master muttered words of healing.

The pungent smell of the healing incense filled the room and tickled Bertin's nostrils. His eyes watered and he turned away as the child's mother continued to cry softly. The baby calmed, though the worms and ulcers remained.

On the way to their room afterward the Master sighed. "We have soothed the pain of the wretched child," he said, "but the river worms will devour his flesh. A Maghidean curse does not break at so late a stage."

Bertin and the Master left the inn at dawn in a small, two-man boat gifted to them by the innkeeper. The forests spread untouched above the river banks on the far side. Wielding the oars, Bertin tried not to look further north. They would be there soon enough.

"Here," the Master said after they came around a bend. "Pull in here, and follow me as quietly as you can. I have no idea which new spirits have appeared here since last year. Tie the boat, and cover it. The swamp blocks it, and we must walk to the lake from here."

During that day, they wandered along a path littered with fallen trees. Mud slid underfoot, with nothing to grab to steady themselves but the thorny trees and ubiquitous ivy. The gloomy green maze concealed the darkness of swamp rot. More than once, Bertin almost fell into the quagmire as he followed the Master along old boards overgrown with gray mushrooms.

Carefully treading the boards, the Master said, "I studied in these lands, long ago."

Bertin hesitated and looked around. "Why here?"

The Master flashed a small smile. "Remember what I told you in the South, as you pulled teeth and lanced boils in that market?"

Bertin nodded. "You said I have a true gift. I still don't think I -"

"Here is neither a place nor a time for hesitation, Bertin," the Master said with a frown. "These forests and lakes are deadly. The North accepts only the bold. Therefore, only here can you become a real mage."

Then the Master stopped him. He pointed to mushrooms and picked a few strange-looking herbs.

"Write it down," he ordered. "This one helps the fever, this one stops bleeding, and these treat the loss of the male power."

Bertin pulled out his notebook and jotted down everything the Master said. He noted the colors and patterns and drew rudimentary sketches as the Master looked on, nodding.

"Your sketches are improving," he said. "And your letters show promise. The southern priests will hardly recognize you as their lowly market healer when we return." He smiled. "So it was for me as well."

At dusk, the Master stopped on a lawn overgrown with pale, vining plants. Dropping to his knees, the old man muttered incantations. Crimson blossoms burst open and swayed, and Bertin coughed from the unbearable stench that rose around him.

The Master kindled a fire in a bare portion of the lawn. "The Inflorescences are predatory," he said, nodding toward the blooms. "They accept traveler's offerings in exchange for protection." He pulled out a sharp knife with a bone handle, and lifted the mud-stained hem of his robe. Bertin's eyes widened at the sight of the nearly invisible scar on the Master's lower leg.

"I was once as young as you are now," the Master said. "These plants require a sacrifice only once. Fear not, they are content with a little piece. A small price for assured safety."

Bertin whispered a spell for good luck, then gritted his teeth as the Master carved a long, narrow line down his calf.

"Move your leg to them," the Master said. "Let them taste you and know you as a friend. You'll hardly feel it in the morning."

So the night passed without concerns, save for the strange shadows that hovered just out of sight over the tops of ancient trees. Bertin gasped the first time he saw one and pointed, but the shadow stayed back.

Throwing more wood on the fire, the Master chuckled. "You see? The evil spirits are afraid of this lawn. They'll never be willing to make a sacrifice, and thus they remain an enemy."

Bertin looked down at the sated Inflorescences. They seemed to doze now, drooping their bloody, fetid blossoms across their fattened vines.

In the morning, the shadows had vanished, and Bertin found that he could walk with only the faintest limp. They left the northern edge of the forest an hour or so later, passing near a ruined stone arch overgrown with ivy, and Bertin breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of a familiar, unenchanted plant.

The Master turned to him with an eyebrow lifted. "You think now you may relax?" he said. "Think otherwise. That gate guards the last of what you have always known."

Bertin swallowed. Standing on the lakeshore beside an old rowboat, he stared toward the snow-capped peaks rising sharply from the island forest. The Master pointed to the high castle tower midway up.

"There, and only there, can one become a real mage. You are just starting, Bertin, but it's a fine start. Now take the oars and remember to be careful."

And Bertin had rowed them out into the open water toward their destination.

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He shook off the fear of the fish's shadow now, and resumed rowing, but his hands were shaking. The island with its castle grew nearer, but the soft current pushed against them, and his heart still pounded.

Then a gentle girlish voice swept over the lake water and filled his ears.

"Bertin, Bertin!" the voice called.

Her laughter was precious, as full, echoing, and welcoming as the sounds of bone horns in Bertin's homeland. The priests played them only on the holy days, and Bertin found himself smiling as memories swarmed his mind.

A blonde head appeared above the waves beside his boat. The girl smiled and extended her arms toward him.

"You came!" she sang. "You were thinking about your maighdean, Bertin. I have been waiting for you, my love, my Bertin..."

"Shut your ears!" the Master shouted. "Close your eyes, stop looking at her!"

Bertin barely heard the Master as he stared toward the maighdean. He didn't notice the boat as it rocked with the Master's sudden movements, nor the gash on his hand as the Master tore the oars from him. He felt his heart racing, and his mind wheeled in circles, screaming at him while also rejoicing in that clear, beautiful voice.

The maighdean ran her graceful hands over the side of the boat and looked up at him. Golden sparks shone from eyes of the purest azure, and Bertin's own eyes widened.

"Come to me, Bertin," whispered the girl. "Come to your maighdean -"

"Bertin!" The Master's voice cut powerfully into Bertin's mind, jerking his thoughts from the beautiful voice.

Bertin's hand fell to the curved dagger in his belt. His jaw clenched as he flashed it upward and resolutely cut her delicate white throat. Blood spattered across his cloak, and the maighdean wheezed. She released her hold on the boat, thrashed helplessly for an instant, then stilled and began to float away amidst the foamy waves. The boat rushed toward the island, and Bertin collapsed to its bottom.

He awoke among the island shore's inhospitable granite boulders. He shuddered, coughed, and spat out cold lake water. The Master helped him to stand.

"I had to invoke the silent spell," grumbled the old man. "An advanced one, at that. I've not encountered one so powerful in many years. Still, you have done well. Your hand did not tremble, and you twisted the knife in the right way. You have sealed your fate, Bertin, and will make a good mage."

They dragged their bags to the base of the stone steps, ready to ascend to the imposing castle far above. The Master hefted his bag to his shoulder and began to climb. Ordering himself not to look back, Bertin flared his nostrils and settled his own pack.

"This isn't my last test," he said, feeling a need to assure himself. "I will become strong as a Master."

"Only if you climb, Bertin," his Master called back.

Staring at the old man's strong, hunched back, Bertin nodded, smiled to himself, and with a clenching of his fists strode forward and up the stairs.

## Contributor Bios

### **SHIKHA ALEYA – PUNE, INDIA**

Shikha Aleya, from India, has spent much of their life as a seeker and explorer. Their journey has included writing, film making and working as a development consultant, sometimes sitting under a tent with teachers and children discussing life's possibilities using crayons and paper. Shikha's a roadie who drives through desert, mountain and forest with dog Dusty and some dear and indulgent friends who are up for dhaba chai, highway rides, and the occasional frog in the room. Professional writing includes regular contributions to TARSHI's digital magazine In Plainspeak. And research and writing for journals, papers, TV shows and children's books.

### **JOSHUA BOERS – MICHIGAN, USA**

Joshua Boers lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan. When he isn't writing short stories and screenplays, he can generally be found browsing used bookstores, playing with his cat Mishka, or falling asleep to episodes of Frasier. By day, he is an assistant editor at an independent book publisher.

### **ELIZABETH LIANG – POTOMAC, MARYLAND, USA**

Elizabeth writes during nap time for her three children and loves baking. Both require precision with a sprinkle of luck. When not reading or brainstorming story ideas, Elizabeth writes YA SFF.

### **CLAIRE L. MARSH – GLOUCESTERSHIRE, UK**

Claire writes short stories and poems, mainly in the horror or dark fantasy genres. She lives in the Cotswolds, UK with her husband and Phoenix (don't tell him he's a kitten. He thinks he's a mountain lion). She currently works for an organisation that assists police forces nationally, providing support for evidence-based practice. Her background is in forensic psychology, including over nine years lecturing it at postgraduate level. Psychology often creeps into her stories; it could be how someone reacts to trauma or why people don't intervene if they see violence.

### **MAKENA METZ – LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA, USA**

Makena Metz writes for the page, screen, and stage. She has an MFA in Creative Writing and MA in English from Chapman University. Makena's work has been published with Broken Antler Magazine, Wordgathering, the Literary Hatchet, The Clockhouse Review, For Page and Screen, Havik, The Bitchin' Kitsch, Strange Horizons, Arkana, and many others. Find her work on Coverfly, New Play Exchange, or Chillsubs.

### **HELEN E. PATTERSON – ONTARIO, CANADA**

Helen has been a writer, in some form or another, for most of her life. She has written short stories, plays, song parodies and two novels. And has been published in The Scots Canadian, Commuter Lit and in the Wicked Shadow Press anthology, A Flash of Fangs. She is currently working on a collection of short stories while procrastinating over a third draft of her second novel.

### **NELLY SHULLMAN – ISRAEL**

Nelly Shulman is a writer currently based in Israel. Her work has appeared in Jewish Fiction, Vine Leaves Press Anthology of the Best 2021 Flash Fiction, and in various literary magazines. She is a winner of three writing awards.

## Staff Bios

### **ANNALI CARMEL - CO-FOUNDER & CREATIVE TEAM**

Annali Carmel (she/her) enjoys her life in rural New South Wales, where she listens to a lot of music, does some singing, and welcomes the occasional affection of Aria the cat when she deigns the peasant worthy.

### **SUE COOK - STAFF POET & WRITER**

Sue Cook (she/her) lives in Freeport, Illinois with her husband Randy and two dogs. Her passions include assistance dogs, rescue dogs, music, acting, theater, poetry, and Doctor Who. She's been in both film and theater and is a regular cast member of the podcast Doctor Who's Line is it....Anyway? Sue is an advocate for the use of Service Dogs to assist their disabled handlers to maintain their independence. Quigley's Quest, her first children's book, addresses how a dog becomes a Service Dog.

### **MILENE CORREIA - REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR**

Brazilian multidisciplinary artist. Major in English Language and Literature, taking a specialization course in Teaching of Drama. I write, rewrite, draw and compose and expose because my heart can't fit all these feelings. Leo, Queer, 92.

### **KATIE DANIELS - STAFF WRITER & INTERVIEWER**

Katie Daniels is a lifelong Florida kid, where she still resides with her husband and their pup-child. She loves reading, meeting new people, and seeing new places. If you need anything, just bribe her with a donut.

### **PERRI DODGSON – REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR**

Perri Dodgson was born into an RAF family, which meant travelling extensively and receiving a disjointed education. Her first job was a layout designer for a publishing house, then for twenty years she worked in the care sector, looking after the elderly and mentally ill. Now retired and living in Wellingborough, England, and after joining a writing group, she discovered the joy of writing. She has had features published in magazines and online literary magazines and been 'highly recommended' in a national competition. She also explores interior design and embroidery. Currently she is researching for her book which will be a biography.

### **CYNTHIA ANN LUBLINK - COMMISSIONING EDITOR & CREATIVE TEAM**

Cyndi (she/her) is the mama of two grown children and Oma to eight grandchildren, all of whom she adores. She's a biker chick with a lady's heart and forty tattoos that tell some of her life story. Not just a cancer survivor, she's a life thriver. She also loves painting and finds the process like solving math equations. She has been a writer/poet since the age of nine, her first poem being about God's Hands. She wrote for Christian Biker Magazine for five years.

### **EMILY MACKENZIE - COPY EDITOR**

Emily MacKenzie is a Canadian-born writer who currently teaches Secondary English in Scotland. She studied English and Creative Writing at Carleton University in Ottawa, although her love of writing developed long before that. Emily loves exploring different narrative formats and styles in her own writing, and while she tends to stick with long or short prose fiction, the odd poem slips through from time to time. She can most often be found tackling one of several young adult fantasy stories she intends to publish, both on her tablet, and on the walls with stickies, markers, and poster paper.

### **TANDY MALINAK - HEAD COPY EDITOR & STAFF WRITER**

A Seattleite by birth, Tandy Malinak loves mountains but not rain. So she escaped to Chicago to learn what 'winter', 'summer', and 'real thunderstorm' mean, and she decided she liked them all. Tandy earned a BA in Education specializing in English and now spends her days homeschooling, nannying, and helping to lead her church's kids' ministry. In her free time, she writes fantasy and sci-fi, solves crosswords, and plays Nintendo. She lives with her husband, two dragon-loving kids, and three black cats.

## Staff Bios

### **NANCY MOCK - PROOFREADER**

Nancy was born in Montana, raised in Ohio, and moved to Florida almost 30 years ago. Mother of Rita Mock-Pike and her two siblings. Nancy learned to make computers “dance” in the early 1970s, with her husband’s encouragement, before most people had computers in their homes. She’s had a lot of experience formatting magazines, flyers, etc. throughout her life. As a retiree, her favorite hobbies are still crafting (mostly sewing) and reading.

### **CO-FOUNDING EDITOR-IN-CHIEF & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR/PRODUCER FOR MOCKINGOWL STUDIOS**

Editor-in-Chief of The MockingOwl Roost, Rita Mock-Pike (she/her) is the granddaughter of aviatrix, Jerrie Mock, first woman to pilot an airplane solo around the world. Rita has found inspiration from her grandmother’s life and flight and pursued many of her own dreams in theatre, podcasting, novel writing, and cooking up delicious food from around the world. She now writes on food, travel, pets, faith, and the arts. She’s happily married to Matt, and faithfully serves the very fluffy kitten queen, Lady Stardust.

### **CO-FOUNDING COMMISSIONING EDITOR & CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER FOR THE MOCKINGOWL REALMS**

Soren Porter – He/him, INFJ, 30s-ish I think?, happily forever taken (sorry lads and ladies!). Writing reflections of faith and philosophy. LGBTQIA+ ally and sworn enemy of white supremacy. You might hear Soren ranting against evil policies, sharing ridiculous pop culture, or tossing around some theological thoughts on Tumblr or Twitter.

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