

VOL. 4

MAY 2025

EPIC ECHOES

MAGAZINE

Thrills!
Adventure!

Featuring:

Sam Arlington
Holly Hefner
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Martin Lochman
Steve Lockley
Thomas Nicholson
A. H. Plotts

T. J. Rowley
Jared Stonefield
Gary Ten-Hove
Melanie Tevlin
and Ted Vician

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From the editors...

At first glance, the popular fiction of the kind printed in the 20th-century pulp magazines may appear to be defined by extremes:

The most alien settings, the most outlandish characters and dramas, and forays into the all-but unimaginable future or the depths of the unknown past.

As the stories in this collection go to show, there's truth in that assessment. But great stories in any genre must rely on more than the appeal of novelty and intensity for their value: They must have heart, as well.

That's what you will find in these pages: From crime capers to deals with the devil, and from assassinations to alien invasions, the stories in this volume of *Epic Echoes* have all the drama, intensity, and surprise of any great pulp fiction - with a strong, beating heart behind them.

We have enjoyed reading the many excellent stories penned for this issue, and as always, we're proud to bring you some of the best modern pulp fiction out there!

Cole Burgett and Rachel Boylan

In “Borealista,” Arlington offers a neatly-rounded story that may seem familiar... at first. Combining suspense with a touch of sentiment, this is a compelling and satisfying tale of daring and hope in the dangerous borderlands.

Borealista

by Sam Arlington

Sam Arlington, a recovering public servant whose body of work has appeared primarily in classified publications, lives in the eastern United States and comes from a short line of semi-accomplished authors.

Anna knelt motionless in the high brush twenty yards off the rutted access road for several minutes after the K-9 unit had passed. This part of the border was remote enough that a vehicle patrol only came through every few hours, but they occasionally dismounted for foot patrols and smoke breaks. She was taking no chances. The feds down here didn't play by the same rules. It was no place for anyone to be caught out in the middle of the night, let alone a young female carrying a stack of phony green cards. She rose slowly and surveyed the area, tucked a stray wisp of raven-black hair into her dark green wool cap and checked her watch. Ten minutes to pickup.

She hiked briskly, eyes scouring every ridge and shadow of the low mountain landscape, toward the rock outcropping where the grizzled old fixer had told her to meet her fares. She

shook her head, recalling their last encounter. She could really do without that condescending ass and the boneheaded security tips he spewed every time she saw him, as if she hadn't done a hundred-plus runs before. He knew very well that she always memorized the pickup point on the topo map and navigated by landmarks to avoid compromising the route if caught. That she used one-time dead drops for document handoffs and never stored her contacts' information. That she used a new burner phone to set up every run and destroyed it before heading out. That the cops could turn her apartment inside out and wouldn't find a thing that showed she worked with anyone but herself. He knew all of it, or he would never have worked with her to begin with.

“Listen, buddy boy,” she had snarled at the man, who was old enough to be her father, when he’d last started in with one of his “You know what you should do...” bits of wisdom, “I’d rather rot, mute, in a shitty concrete cell than risk the chances of a single family to come north and have a shot at a decent life. I’ve. Got it. Covered.”

She felt nothing more viscerally. Her own family had risked everything to bring her north when she was eleven. That trip had changed her life forever. Still etched into her mind was the steely yet kind face of the nameless young woman who had led her across all those years ago, then vanished forever into the creeping dawn. Since that night, she never once imagined doing anything else with her life, nor doing it with anything less than the singular dedication she had seen in her guide. She even wore

the same green wool cap in her memory.

Across a small clearing Ana spotted the distinctive ridge of the outcropping and slowed, listening for motion. Nothing. She approached silently, following the edge of the tree line, and stopped ten yards short. The glittering pink strap of a child's backpack stuck out from behind the rocks. Ana frowned. The fares had probably been without a minder for around a half hour. The guide that led them here would have left by then to avoid their crossing paths and being able to identify each other, but they should have left the pickup point cleaner.

“Friendly,” she called, barely breaking a whisper. “Amiga.”

A few moments passed, then a man peered around the edge of the outcropping. He looked to be in his thirties, olive-skinned, slim and clean-cut. A dark-haired girl with a French braid, about the age Ana had been when she crossed, peeked out below the man’s face a few seconds later. Ana approached and unshouldered her pack. “Coyote?” the man asked warily.

“Guide,” she corrected, firmly but gently. “Coyotes are predators.” She handed them water bottles from her bag. They never brought enough water. And these two weren’t dressed for the cool autumn night. The sight of the girl triggered a wave of nostalgia as Ana recalled her own frigid, exhausting journey through the mountains. “Put those in your packs when they’re empty,” she said coolly, looking over the man’s shoulder for the two other adults she was expecting.

“Sorry,” he nodded, half-raising his hands in deference. He

turned and nodded toward the tall brush behind him. A woman who looked strikingly like him cautiously emerged, followed by a second man, around forty, with a short, silver-flecked auburn beard and glasses. Ana handed them waters. They looked at her like they were expecting someone else. She was used to it. Her youth and gender worked to her advantage moving around the border towns north of the line. The police didn't usually give a second look to someone of her physical profile—tall and lean with regal, angular features, fair skin, green eyes—but it also led to run-ins with crusty old timers like the fixer and more than a few skeptical looks from fares who had entrusted their lives to the guides.

“We need to ditch that,” Ana said, pointing at the rainbow striped backpack. “Too bright.” The girl looked at the younger man, tears welling in her eyes. He nodded. Ana opened her half empty matte canvas pack. “Never mind. Put it in here.” She crouched down and winked at the girl, holding out the bag. The girl beamed and stuffed her pack in. “Don’t want to mark our trail,” Ana said, tapping her temple with one finger. The girl nodded sternly.

Ana retrieved the small bundle of freshly printed permanent resident cards from her pack and handed them out, matching the photos to their respective owners. “Memorize these,” she said. “It’s not an open book test if you’re stopped.”

“Is this my new name?” the girl asked the younger man, holding up the card expectantly. He leaned over to read the print

on the face and nodded. She clutched the card to her chest. “I love it.”

“What if they scan them?” the bearded man asked, inspecting the bar code on the reverse.

“Taken care of. The digital immigration records will match.”

“How?” The woman sounded unsure.

“Doesn’t matter,” Ana turned and reshoulder her bag. “Let’s go. We need to cross before dawn.”

She started down the slope toward the tree line and the group fell in behind her. A stiff breeze kicked up and rustled the tops of the scraggly pines. She paused and turned around. There was no wind in the forecast. She knelt in front of the girl, took off the wool cap, and placed it on her head without a word. The girl reached up and squeezed Ana’s hand in thanks.

“Okay,” Ana said hoarsely, hustling back to the head of the column before anyone could see the shine in her eyes.

They had hardly walked half a mile into the valley when over the whispering of the treetops Ana heard a low, faint buzzing sound, undulating like a swarm of bees in the distance. The girl looked up first. The adults stopped and scanned the clear night sky.

“Drone,” Ana confirmed. She watched the stars momentarily blink out one by one as the silhouette of a quadcopter passed in front of them a few hundred feet up, almost directly overhead.

“Those are line of sight. They can’t be more than a mile or two away in this terrain. Hopefully still back at the road.”

No sooner had she said it than the baying of tracking hounds echoed over the ridge they had just crested. Less than a mile, it sounded like.

“Shit, we’re made,” she said, realizing the group was upwind of where she had last seen the K-9 patrol and that the unexpected breeze was now carrying their scent directly toward the dogs. They would pick up the group’s fresh track as soon as they reached the outcropping, which wouldn’t be long. “It’s about a mile to the border,” she said, quickly shifting her pack around to her front. “We’ll be running.” The adults stood mute, faces ashen. Ana looked at the terrified girl. “On me, kid,” she said, crouching down so the girl could climb on, piggyback style. “Hold on tight and try not to choke me.” The girl hopped on, locked her legs around Ana’s waist and used one hand to grip the other wrist in front of her chest.

“Ready?” she asked sternly, more a command than a question. They nodded uncertainly.

“Are you sure you can—” The woman, motioning toward the girl, stopped herself when she saw the look on Ana’s face.

“I run these mountains every day. Don’t worry about me, just keep up. Let’s move.”

Ana bounded down the hill in the impossibly long, graceful strides of a trail runner, the girl clinging to her desperately. She

glanced back to make sure the others were still following. The woman and the younger man weren't far behind. The bearded man brought up the rear, twenty yards back. She'd carry them all if she had to. She had read their profile and knew what was waiting for them if they were caught. They'd had run-ins with plainclothes police, received alarming letters from child services, and seen government-affiliated thugs lingering around the girl's school since the younger man, a journalist, had published an investigative series on high-level political corruption. They had bought tickets to Europe, where the journalist and his sister held citizenship, but got a tip from one of his government sources that they were to be arrested at the airport. It wasn't so surprising, then, that they were doing fairly well matching Ana's pace.

After what seemed like an eternity, the buzzing unrelenting overhead, Ana stopped at a sudden clearing in the trees and crouched to let the girl slide off. She stepped forward cautiously and looked left, then right, along the tree line as the group caught up and stared over her shoulders.

"Where's the wall?" The bearded man wheezed, hands on his knees, peering out into the twenty-foot-wide, ruler-straight gash in the trees that stretched into the darkness and marked the international boundary. A small stone obelisk with an official demarcation plaque stood a few dozen yards to the left. "There's not even a fence."

"They haven't gotten out this far yet," Ana answered. "Now once you cross that line, you're in a different world. A different

life, forever.” She realized as she spoke, the drone still buzzing overhead, that she could have spared the standard speech under the circumstances.

The younger man looked behind them as the hounds’ baying, slightly more distant than before, crept closer. “There’s no choice now,” he said. “We lose our daughter and who knows what else if we go back.”

“That’s not happening,” the bearded man huffed, standing to his full height and placing his hand on the girl’s shoulder. She looked up and clutched his fingers tightly.

Ana gave the clearing one last scan. “All right, then.” She glanced around at the faces of her fares, stopping on the girl and raising one eyebrow. “Run.”

They sprinted across the clearing, Ana letting the girl lead ever so slightly as she excitedly dragged the bearded man along by his fingers. It only took a few seconds to reach the opposite tree line. The group slowed to a trot and turned to look back once they were a safe distance into the shadows. The hounds’ baying grew louder and the sterile white beams of two flashlights danced in the trees across the border. The buzzing of the drone had ceased.

“We’re not clear yet,” Ana cautioned. “It’s three miles to the road and volunteers sometimes patrol the in-between spaces on this side. We don’t want to meet them.”

Ana led the group through the trees for nearly two silent

hours, stopping only for a five-minute rest to hydrate as the terrain steepened. The eastern sky to their right was beginning to fade from inky black to a hazy blue-gray, slowly washing out the stars. The adults noticed and quickened their pace without having to be told.

The younger man rounded a hill just ahead of the rest of the group and froze in his tracks. A battered old two-tone brown Suburban sat idling in the gravel turn-out of a two-lane blacktop road. He looked back and held up a hand in warning to the others. Ana strode past him without slowing, pulling a black neck gaiter up over her nose and mouth and raising the hood of her fleece jacket. “That’s us. Come on.”

They rode in silence as the antique Chevy rumbled along the winding blacktop, Ana in the front passenger seat and the rest of the group huddled together, exhausted, on the plush rear bench. Ana had been paired with this driver, a heavyset middle-aged man, on a few previous runs. He wore a thick red-and-black checked flannel and an earflap hat. A surgical mask obscured most of his face. The same getup as each time she had seen him. They had never exchanged a single word in the hours they had spent in the truck together. If questioned, Ana could say, truthfully, that she’d hitched a ride with a total stranger.

The truck turned off the main road onto an overgrown, heavily washboarded dirt track. They bumped along the teeth-rattling path for about a mile to a clearing in the trees. There, a small,

shabby cabin came into view, its windows warmly lit, white smoke swirling lazily from the chimney into the now-calm pre-dawn air. Two weathered Adirondack chairs adorned the sparse, wide-plank front porch. The driver stopped at the foot of a make-shift gravel drive and put the truck in park, his eyes fixed on the track ahead. Ana got out and opened the rear door, motioning for the group to exit. The woman was last out; Ana closed the door behind her and tapped the roof of the truck twice to signal all clear. The driver swung around in the clearing and drove off the way they had come. The engine faded to a distant, reverberant hum, then silence.

The cabin door opened and a woman's soft silhouette appeared against the amber glow of the interior. She raised a hand in greeting, fingers splayed. Ana nodded to the group and they followed her toward the open door.

"I'm Abby," the woman said in a breathy, ethereal voice, looking past Ana to the weary travelers as they climbed the steps to the porch. She wore a heavy cable knit sweater over a long floral skirt, her gray-streaked dishwater blonde hair tied up in a messy bun. Her finely lined face and sparkling blue eyes exuded a natural, ageless grace. She smiled at the girl and clasped her hands in front of her chest. "Hi, welcome," she beamed, opening her arms. The girl intuitively sensed her kindness and hugged Abby as if she'd known her all her life.

Abby was one of the few members of the facilitation network that Ana had any regular face-to-face contact with besides

the fixer, and she looked forward to their fleeting visits. She couldn't help but marvel each time they met that Abby looked exactly as she had when she first embraced Ana more than a decade earlier on the very same porch. She cupped Ana's face in her hands as the two followed the family inside.

"Anyone want tea?" Abby asked, putting a kettle on the black iron stove that heated the cabin's main room. She lifted the lid from a large stone pot that billowed steam and filled the air with the aroma of a hearty lentil soup. Both men and the woman blinked and nodded absently, still acclimating to the reality of their new surroundings.

Abby reached into a duffel hanging from a hook near the stove and pulled out a thick manila envelope, open on one end. She placed the envelope in the bearded man's hands without making eye contact. He and the younger man glanced at each other, disbelief on their faces. It was evident that he didn't need to, but he peeked into the envelope and looked up at Abby. Ana caught a glimpse of bundled cash. A lot of cash. Abby walked back to the stove, grinning. "We were just holding onto it to make sure you'd follow through," she said, peering into the pot and stirring the contents with a huge silver ladle. "It's exchanged for local."

Before they could respond, she turned to the group with a mischievous expression on her face. "So, you folks all legal?" She put finger quotes around the last word. The girl proudly held up her glossy new residency card. The others grinned and nodded. "Good." She pulled mugs and bowls from a shelf and set them on

the folding table in the center of the room, motioning for everyone to sit. Ana knew what came next. She'd heard it a hundred times. She folded her arms and leaned against the wall.

"Well, it's not much, but help yourselves to what's here," Abby said, smiling warmly. "Welcome to the Southgate Reception Center." She held her arms out and gestured around the tiny cabin in mock grandiosity. "And welcome to Canada."

Ana smiled and slipped silently out the door. She only ever stayed long enough to watch the fares' faces when Abby said that last part. She glanced through the window without stopping as the group burst into tears and hugged each other. All but the girl. Through the cloudy glass, still wearing Ana's green wool cap, Aurora watched her guide disappear back into the forest as the first golden needles of the boreal dawn pierced the towering evergreens.

What's the line between a scheme and a scam, between empowerment and enthrallment, between friendship and a business opportunity? Those are the questions Hefner's eminently readable story raises, and as for the answers, well... see for yourself!

Soul Proprietorship

by Holly Hefner

Holly Hefner is an Atlanta-based writer and mom of two. By day, she is an advertising strategist.

“I don’t think I understand,” Odessa said. She shifted her weight and uncrossed her legs beneath the table in Jennifer Barkley-Smith’s kitchen. The table was new, the surface still glossy under the four rattan placemats. Odessa toyed with one of the rough edges of the placemat, rubbing her finger against the bristles. There were a lot of new things in Jennifer’s home. “Explain it to me again.”

Jennifer sighed as though the fate of the world depended on her helping her dearest and oldest friend. She brought over a steaming teapot from the counter and placed it on a crocheted granny square in use as a trivet.

“It’s simple math, Odie. Everyone’s got one, and the population isn’t slowing down,” Jennifer said. She picked up and tilted the teapot. It was one of the ceramic ones with a built-in bas-

ket for tea. A cloud of lavender-scented steam assaulted Odessa's nose as the honey-colored water spilled from the spout into the dainty china cup Jennifer had set out.

Odessa held back a sneeze.

Jennifer continued, "Look at you, five months pregnant! Don't you want to put away a little something for that sweet baby?"

"It sounds a little like a," Odessa paused before whispering conspiratorially, "pyramid scheme."

"Oh, definitely not!" Jennifer said. She smiled and set the teapot down so she could throw her hands up in practiced alarm. "Look, I see those same Facebook messages from all the girls we graduated with. We are not selling overpriced leggings or oils that promise miracle weight loss. We are buying—that's the difference. Money flows down, not up."

Odessa frowned. She lifted her mug to her lips to hide the skepticism on her face. Thirty-one, unemployed, pregnant: if this company was as low-risk as Jennifer promised, maybe it wasn't such a bad idea. Hadn't she entertained the thought of selling those overpriced leggings? It was only pride and ego that gave her pause. Right?

Jennifer was not unintelligent. She was downright smart, ranked fourth in their high school graduating class, twelve spots higher than Odessa. Until last year, Jennifer had been doing well as the regional manager for a children's furniture chain. But she

left that job, seemingly out of the blue, to become a stay-at-home mom full-time. And good for her, too—not six months later, the chain went bankrupt. The weekend news said employees were still fighting to get their last few paychecks while the executive board enjoyed their generous separation bonuses. That's what Jennifer said, anyway. She felt it in her gut, and you should always trust your gut.

Jennifer beamed at Odessa, waiting.

“But you can’t buy a soul, not really,” Odessa said. The idea sounded preposterous—a gag in a children’s show.

“Can’t you?” Jennifer shrugged. She smirked, as if she knew something Odessa didn’t, and took a sip of her own tea. Her lips left a bright pink stain on the ring of the cup. Her lipstick matched her blouse, and her blouse looked expensive. Jennifer looked impeccable. Odessa felt a little shabby next to her, and she didn’t even have kids yet to run her ragged. “It’s just an itty bit of paper—and as long as the two parties agree to the terms, well, there you go.”

“I don’t think I understand the terms, Jen,” Odessa replied. She set her cup down and it chirped against the saucer. Both Odessa and Jennifer winced at the sound.

“Think of it like money,” Jennifer said. She traced a rectangle on the table. “Money is just a promise—it’s not based on gold or silver. It’s not real. Buying souls is just like buying the value of money with money.”

“But where does the money come from?” Odessa asked.

“I told you: Up top—it’s like a reverse pyramid, if you think about it.” Jennifer leaned back in her chair, holding her cup in both hands. “I buy them from you, and then my contact buys them from me, up and up the chain.”

“Aren’t you worried they’ll run out of money?”

“They haven’t yet,” Jennifer said. She put her palm on Odessa’s forearm and smiled. Even the laugh lines at the corner of her eyes looked perfectly at home on her face. Oh, how Odessa wanted that serene confidence.

Outside, Jennifer’s girls were playing on the swing set, singing loud songs about robots as they kicked their legs to gain speed. Inside her belly, Odessa’s fetus fluttered like a tiny bird. She shifted her weight again, removing one hand from her teacup so she could rub her abdomen. Jennifer pretended she didn’t notice, but she smiled as she followed Odessa’s gaze out the picture widow.

It was a really nice swing set—one with two swings and a castle turret with a lookout and twisting slide. The wood was newly stained. It did look expensive. “I have some videos about the founder. She started this as a way to stop predatory get-rich schemes and get power back into the hands of women like you and me.”

“Videos? Jen—” Odessa raised an eyebrow. When Jennifer first invited her for lunch a month ago, Odessa was a little sus-

picious. Their correspondence had slowed in the decade since graduating high school, and when neither one of them attended their ten-year-reunion, the friendship seemed to have come to a natural close. Sure, they saw each other's posts on social media, and gave one another the occasional "like," but when was the last time they had really talked?

That lunch invitation—one that came when many of Odessa's college friends had started to drop her from invites to happy hours—was welcome. In the few weeks since, it really felt like they had been able to pick up where they left off. Even more, Jennifer could offer advice on parenting and pregnancy and all the things Odessa had to look forward to. Jennifer just seemed so lonely, and Odessa was lonely. She hated herself for thinking that, maybe, all the visits had been a lead-up to this moment at Jennifer's kitchen table.

"Not like that—" Jennifer said. "It's really not like that at all. They're just little mission and founding purpose reels. You'll see."

Jennifer set her cup down and pulled out a tablet from her purse on the ground. Odessa hadn't noticed it was there. Jennifer swiped away a photo of her two daughters and opened up YouTube, where she conveniently had saved an unlisted video.

Odessa grimaced as a blonde, bespectacled white woman leaned forward from behind a mahogany desk. She wore a dark, sleeveless dress, and her eyes and the corners of her mouth crinkled with laugh lines. She seemed proud of her wrinkles, even as her hair didn't show a spot of gray. The woman spoke directly to

the viewer, to Odessa, as she introduced herself.

“My name is Caterina DeMartine,” she said. “And I welcome you. I see you. I believe in you. Ten years ago, I founded Sole Proprietorship as an organization designed to redistribute wealth and empower women—and men—like you to be able to make choices and fulfill your destiny. I—”

“I don’t need to see the video, Jen,” Odessa said, tapping the button to pause Ms. DeMartine. The woman’s voice bothered her. It was too polished, too neutral, too normal. And in it, it took on the same tone Jennifer had greeted her with less than forty minutes earlier.

But for the first time that afternoon, Jennifer’s face faltered. Silently, she closed the lid on the tablet and slid it toward the center of the table. She exhaled. Odessa felt a twinge of guilt at the spot where her throat met her stomach.

“You signed up for this program or whatever it is,” Odessa said. “Let’s say I agreed—there isn’t a starting fee or anything, is there?”

“Of course not, Odie.” Jennifer’s soft smile returned. “It’s not a pyramid scheme. This is women empowering women.”

“No investment at all?”

Her cheeks turned pink, the thin film of makeup unable to hide the warm blush. Odessa wasn’t sure if it was actual embarrassment or part of the show. “A little investment—just, well, to really get started, you sell your own soul first, but you can earn

it back, and then you're making mint. I bought mine back in 90 days. Day 91, I was a new woman."

"Couldn't I just buy other people' souls?" Odessa asked.

"It's part of the empowerment," Jennifer explained. "They did research all about it and found out that women who were working to earn back their souls made ten times as many purchases and were able to make more take-home profit—more money—for themselves. So, to sign up, you sell your soul, and then earn it back on a percentage of your buys. In addition to the commission you make, of course." The strange confidence on Jennifer's face made Odessa's gut churn. "You start making money, real money, right away."

"Souls aren't real, but this woman buys them, and then people work harder to buy them back, even though they aren't real?"

"I think it's that subconscious, just-in-case motivation," Jennifer said. "I don't believe in the afterlife, but I would be lying if I told you I didn't feel a bit of pride when I made that last Diamond Sale and earned back my soul. I felt like I was on top of the world."

"How do you find people?" Odessa asked. Outside, the girls' game had changed. They had hopped off their swings and were now running in circles around the structure. Odessa wasn't sure who was "it," but neither were the girls. Their happy screams penetrated the wide window.

"Oh, you know, chef and makeup parties are great," Jennifer said absently. She chuckled. "I started accepting all the invites

from our old classmates. They love me, now. Said most people are so rude, if they respond at all.”

“Do you, like, poach their bakeware sales?” Odessa asked. She imagined Jennifer covertly discouraging the purchase of an overpriced pizza stone as faceless women played a cooking-themed icebreaker in the background.

“I make their bakeware sales,” Jennifer said. She enunciated each word and punctuated the sentence with the palms of her hands pressed outward like a Catholic reciting the Apostle’s Creed. Odessa blinked and Jennifer put down her hands before continuing. “I help out a friend here and there, buy a box or two of their stock, and we get to talking. Soon enough, I know what’s troubling her and how I can help.”

“Is that what you did to me, Jen? Found out what was troubling me?” Jennifer flinched. Odessa didn’t mean for her question to sound so accusatory but—well, didn’t she?

“Of course not, Odie,” Jennifer said. “I don’t invite those girls to start buying—I just give them a little money in exchange for something they don’t even need. A little money to get themselves back on their feet. I want to give you so much more.”

“That’s right,” Odessa said, nodding. She watched the two little girls outside as Jennifer slid a pen and single-page contract into the space between them. Odessa was smart, too, and if Jen could earn back her soul in 90 days, surely Odessa could as well. She imagined her fetus grown into a precocious little girl, swinging on an expensive play set, safe and happy. Picking up the pen,

she added, “It’s all about empowerment.”

Odessa sat on a bench at the perimeter of the playground, rocking a stroller gently with her foot as she watched the older children play. Sunglasses obscured the bags under her eyes, and her ponytail was a little lopsided, but she was pleased. She radiated.

Another mother sat beside her. She wasn’t wearing expensive sunglasses to hide her eyes, and she still wore maternity clothing despite the 18-month-old that tottered away toward the sand pit.

“It’s all worth it, right?” the mother said. She probably meant it as an earnest, gentle complaint about parenting, but the words came out as a plea. Odessa responded with a smile and put her hand on the woman’s shoulder.

“It is.”

Jen was wrong. Once you were in, you never really earned your soul back. But it was just a tiny thing—you hardly noticed it missing.

It doesn't get more classic than La Bella's punchy, tense, evocative story of one ordinary family's encounter with something utterly unknown. This weird tale crackles with electricity - and a little bit of humor - from beginning to end.

The Electric Blue

by Paul W. La Bella

Paul W. La Bella is a father, husband, and budding author who spends his days drawing maps, and his nights writing stories. He lives in New York with his wife and three children.

Gordon sat reading his book as the last bit of light stretched across the sky. The yellowing pages smelled the way old books should smell, musty and pleasant, and the words flowed seamlessly from the page.

Zll, the Martian Emperor who had been discussing relations with Admiral Halsey, was described as childlike in size yet old in appearance. The author decided not to divulge any more information on him or his earthling counterpart, so Gordon was permitted to come up with his own interpretation.

He pictured Zll as an old, balding creature, short and frail. His head was shaped like a cone and he had a ridged forehead. His face was welcoming, and he had a long gray mustache set upon thin lips. He moved with grace around his chambers and

his voice was soft, barely reaching above a whisper. Admiral Halsey, in Gordon's mind, had the look of a World War II fighter pilot from an episode of *The Twilight Zone*; a sharp, angular face with a haircut to match, blue eyes, and the unexpected intellect of a college quarterback studying physics. Admiral Halsey always carried a blast phaser around on his belt, just in case he ran into any "shifty Martian folk."

The name of this novel was *The Emperor of Mars*, and the Martians in the book had evolved beyond the need for physical strength. Their race was one of intellect, one of reason. This, Zll had told Halsey, was the spot where every intelligent creature would eventually settle on the evolutionary scale. It was a story of wonder and promise. The author painted a picture of rugged Martian landscapes and delicate, strong-willed beings living on its red sands.

Gordon sat in his recliner, trying to get the light from the lamp on the table next to him to shine just right on the pages. Emma was laid out on the couch, flipping through a glossy magazine, conversely trying to *avoid* excess light. Their living room was sunken down a step from the rest of the first floor, which was a selling point for Gordon when they first looked at the house. Emma hadn't liked it. She was convinced that the twins would fall down and get hurt once they started walking (which of course Sally eventually did, and Emma was more than happy to tell Gordon "I told you so").

The house was quiet except for the dishwasher rumbling

away in the kitchen, and the girls were in bed. The wind outside had finally settled down, and Gordon was glad because that meant he didn't have to take the cushions in from out back. He could sit in peace and finish his book.

He was enjoying the novel, but Gordon's mind kept wandering. He found himself focusing on the author's simplistic notions of space travel. Not that he was any rocket scientist, of course, but he knew that Admiral Halsey should've worn a space-suit while taking his first steps on the red sands of Mars. He could laugh at things like that, or how it only took an overnight trip in a rocket made of "Incredible space-age aluminum!" But it also made him sad to think how excited the post-war generation was, how close they thought they were to traveling across space.

There was a noise from the upstairs hallway.

"What are your children doing up there?" Emma said.

"Why is it that they're *my* children when they do something wrong, but your babies when they say please and thank you?"

Emma dropped the magazine.

"Cause they got their bad behavior from your side of the family," she said, and stuck out her tongue and scrunched her nose up. Gordon laughed and set his book down on the table.

"I'll go inspect," he said.

He got up and went to the staircase and called up in mock accusation.

"I certainly hope that I don't hear two little girls running

around up there,” he said, “I’d sure hate to keep them inside from trick-or-treating tomorrow.”

There was abrupt silence, then the shuffle of little footsteps, shushes, and the creaking of bed springs. Gordon waited another few seconds to see if Jane and Sally would get back out of bed, but they didn’t. Gordon was grateful; he was too tired to trudge all the way up there. If he had to he would’ve half heartedly wagged his finger at them, and then gone to bed himself. But he didn’t want to, he was too enthralled with his book.

He sat back in the recliner with a groan.

“What were they doing?” Emma asked.

“Dunno, I didn’t go up,” he said.

He picked up the book and started reading, but as soon as he did he heard the magazine fall back onto Emma’s chest.

“How’s your book?”

“Good,” he said, not looking up.

“What’s it about?”

“You’ll think it’s silly, and maybe it is. It’s an old sci-fi novel.”

“I like sci-fi.”

Gordon turned from the yellowing pages, perplexed at Emma’s sudden interest in the book he had been reading for the last three days. The magazine was lying on her otherwise bare breasts, and one hand covered the trimmed layer of hair between her legs.

He tried to speak, but the words caught in his throat.

“I’m glad that after all these years I can still render you speechless,” Emma said. “Why don’t you come sit next to me?”

He pushed down on the leg rest and the recliner made a mechanical clicking sound, metal latches clasping into metal catches. His hands rode up on the arms of the chair, readying for lift off.

There was a flash of light from upstairs, and Gordon saw it out of the corner of his eye. It was bright and blue, like the color of lightning, and there was a noise, but instead of cracking thunder there was an electrical hiss that followed. It lasted less than a second, then the light was gone, as was the hiss.

Gordon tried to look at the staircase, but couldn’t turn his head. He thought he strained a muscle somehow. He went to stand, but found that he couldn’t move his arms or legs either. It was as if the joints were frozen solid. His heart began to throb in his chest. *Oh shit, oh god, I’m paralyzed, I can’t move. Emma! Emma! Help me, I did something to my neck, I don’t know how just HELP ME!*

The words never left his mouth. He was frozen solid. After a moment’s experimentation, he found that he could move his eyes. He looked at Emma. She was still laying on the couch, naked except for the shiny pages of *Vogue* covering her breasts and the hand over her crotch. She was lying perfectly still, but her eyes were dancing around the room like hummingbirds fighting over a particularly sweet flower.

Is it something in the air? Is there a gas leak? Carbon monoxide? Is total paralysis a symptom of carbon monoxide poisoning? These thoughts seemed to whirl around in his head like a crazy merry-go-round, but instead of painted ponies and calliope music, there was only panic and the steady throbbing of his heart.

Emma's eyes settled onto his. They sat in silence for a long time, only capable of looking at one another. Gordon tried to blink, tried widening his eyes, and found that he could do neither. He wondered if Emma was performing the same experiments and coming to the same conclusions. She stared at him with a monotone expression, half-lidded eyes, frozen with the sultry gaze from her attempted seduction.

It was impossible for Gordon to know how long they sat like that. It could've been an hour, ten minutes, or five seconds. Time felt as though it had been stretched and lengthened, like a thick plastic bag that you can't seem to tear open no matter how hard you tug at the seams.

He found that if he slowed his breathing down he wouldn't feel like he was suffocating. It was a nearly impossible task considering he was hyperventilating. He sucked in air as if through a straw with the diameter of a roofing nail. As he and Emma stared helplessly at one another, as he struggled to keep his breath, he realized that he *was* still breathing, which meant that he was moving his chest. He looked down at the magazine on Emma's breasts and saw that it, too, was moving up and down. Whatever

was happening to them, it didn't seem to affect anything other than the movement in their extremities. He didn't find as much comfort in that as he would have liked.

After a while Emma started looking from Gordon to the staircase. Over and over, her eyes went from Gordon, to the stairs. Gordon, to the stairs.

Sally and Jane, he thought. Through everything, he had somehow forgotten about his daughters. He waited, listening for one of them to get out of bed. For the first time in five years, Gordon found himself *praying* that one of them would.

There was a noise from upstairs, the shatter of glass and the creaking of wood. A hollow thud, then—

Emma's eyes stopped dead on Gordon's. They both heard it. It was similar to the hiss he had heard during that first flash of light, but closer to a hum. It was lower, constant, unchanging, it sounded electrical, like the hum of an old stereo receiver with a bad ground wire. Emma looked back to the stairs. Gordon strained his eyes and saw blue light coming from the second floor. It flooded the staircase hall with its bright sheen, and he looked back at Emma. She was staring at him, and although her face was still frozen with that seductive mien, he could see the fear in her eyes.

More footsteps from above. Multiple pairs of what sounded like heavy work boots were treading across the wooden floors. *People are in the house, people are upstairs with our children.*

Gordon was helpless; every fiber of his being strained and stretched and pushed and tried to get him out of the chair, to move his arms and legs, to thaw him from this frozen prison so he could help his family.

The stairs groaned under heavy boots.

Emma's gaze fell onto Gordon's. He was helpless to get to his girls, helpless to go to his wife, to comfort her, tell her it was alright, to drain the fear that welled in her eyes like poison bath water. He thought of how often he had reached over and tickled her foot as they sat and watched TV, or how she would casually stretch out her hand and grab his. All he could now do was look at her.

They were almost at the bottom of the stairs, their heavy boots sounded like they were smashing through the treads with each lumbrous step. Gordon could hear that they were nearly at the bottom. Their steps grew louder, less muffled behind layers of drywall and wood. Emma's eyes darted back and forth between the stairs and Gordon.

He looked towards the entry into the living room, but all he could see were two shapes. Then the smell hit him. It was unlike anything he'd ever smelled before, like freon mixed with rotting leaves mixed with cinnamon. He looked back at Emma. Her eyes had stopped fluttering. Instead they slowly followed the two shapes as they stepped onto the carpeted landing at the bottom of the stairs.

He moved his eyes back to the two intruders, who were still

only blurred objects in his periphery. They stood at the top of the single step that led into the sunken living room. The smell was stronger now, but Gordon hardly noticed it anymore. He was more concerned with the sounds coming out of their mouths. Guttural vocalizations, wet and blocky. They stepped into the room.

They were at least seven feet tall with gray, scaly skin and pointed ears. Their eyes were huge black orbs that sat under a protruding brow. They grunted at each other. Their skin shimmered in the blue light from the hall and seemed to ooze like slugs. More guttural sounds as they moved around, seemingly unaware or unconcerned with Gordon and Emma.

His heart was like a bass drum being pounded on by two frenzied pedals. He thought that soon it would hop right out of his chest and start dancing around on the floor singing “Hot for Teacher.” Lines of sweat fell down his face and into his open eyes. It stung, and he tried wiping it away and forgot that he couldn’t. He looked over at Emma and watched tears fall silently down her cheeks.

The two creatures seemed to be arguing. They stood straight, and their chests were pumped out. They waved scaly claws with three thick fingers like sausages over their heads. Each held something in its hands, but Gordon couldn’t make out what it was. The voices were low and wet and sent waves of an almost nostalgic fear throughout his body, as if he had heard these voices before. Or perhaps an ancestor long ago had heard them, like his

cells had a stored memory that told him to run, to *get the hell out!*

They continued to argue, waving those devices over their heads, and he thought about *The Emperor of Mars*. He pictured Admiral Halsey's phaser cannon that he carried everywhere he went, hooked to his belt like a police officer's pistol. Halsey carried it with him for protection, but tossed it aside after he befriended Zll. Gordon didn't think these two—*things*—would be as trusting. He looked over at Emma, hoping to distract her before they turned them to ash, but her eyes were fixed, frozen on the two beings.

Gordon looked back at the two creatures in his living room, huge and brutish and sluggish and mean, guttural and slimy and terrifying. *How wrong they had it*, he thought. *That great generation who dreamed of exploring the galaxy, of befriending an unknown race of beings like ourselves, of surpassing our barbaric instincts for war that seem to live in the heart of the human race. This was what intelligent beings evolved into. Only the brutish survive. Only the mean prosper.*

The two creatures suddenly stopped arguing and looked at Gordon, pulling out of conversation as if he had spoken these thoughts out loud. They walked towards him, waving the devices back and forth like security guards outside of a concert hall. Gordon waited for the explosion, the beams of light that would turn them to dust, but it never came. The devices only whirred and hummed and hissed and beeped. The creatures looked at each

other, then back at the devices. They spoke again, then walked up the single step out of the living room, and up the staircase leading to the second floor.

Gordon strained his eyes to see, and in his periphery he saw the electric blue light (and the hum that accompanied it) disappear. He looked at Emma, then back at the stairs, then back to Emma. He heard screaming coming from the second floor.

This time he found that he *could* move. He bolted from the chair and raced for the stairs. He made it three steps before an agonizing pain rang up his body. It felt like a thousand volts of electricity being pumped into every cell. He fell to the floor and screamed. Emma came up behind him, made it a little closer to the stairs, then fell to the floor herself. They were curled up into helpless balls, screaming in unison, joining the agonized chorus with Jane and Sally as the pain mutilated their nerves. Gordon didn't know if this was some sort of aftereffect, something akin to pins and needles after sitting on the toilet for too long, and he didn't care. He had never felt pain like this before, and only in the base of his subconscious did his concern for his family override the instinctual need to survive.

And then it stopped. It didn't fade away, it simply stopped, like a switch had been turned off.

Gordon lay motionless, panting, scared that if he moved the pain would return. Emma grabbed his leg and he recoiled. Her voice was weak, barely there, but he heard the whisper.

“The girls,” she said.

They got up, holding onto each other for support, and hobbled over to the staircase. Emma took the first step, but Gordon held her back.

“Here,” he said, and handed her a sweater that was hung up by the door, “Cover up, you harlot.” The pain lingered like a bad house guest, and the words came hard. She looked down and realized that she was still naked and managed a weak laugh.

“Mommy!”

It invigorated them, and in the tormented screams of their children, Gordon and Emma found the strength to reach the second floor.

Their bedroom door was open, and what Gordon saw froze him all over again. Sally and Jane were floating above their beds, their hair standing on edge the way it would with an electrically charged balloon. Gordon looked over and saw the two scaly beings, their weapons aimed at the girls, and a humming blue light radiating from the tips.

Emma screamed. Gordon held her back. One of the creatures turned, saw them, and disregarded their presence.

“No!” Emma escaped Gordon’s grasp and collided with the closer of the two. She bounced off like a ping pong ball thrown against a brick wall. Brilliant white light flashed around the creature’s scales, and an electrical *whum* sound filled the room. Emma landed on her back, stunned.

Gordon followed her lead, lifting a ceramic butterfly lamp

off of Sally's dresser and flinging it at the creature's. It shattered on one of their backs and produced that same flash of light, that same electrical sound.

Now the girls were drifting away from their beds and towards the open window. The creatures aimed their devices expertly and managed to slip both girls through the opened lower portion. Gordon screamed, bolted forward, and knocked the device out of the closer one's hand. It looked over at him, then smashed its meaty paw into the side of Gordon's head.

When he woke up, the girls were gone. Emma was still unconscious on the floor by Sally's bed. His head felt like it was on fire. Dried blood painted one side of his face. He crawled over and shook Emma.

She screamed, clutching, writhing, calling their names. Gordon grabbed her, held her tight, told her it was okay, everything was going to be all right. He looked around the room as her wet, ragged breath dampened his shoulder.

“You okay?” Gordon said.

Emma looked at him and shook her head.

“Was that a dream?” she said.

“I don't know. I don't think so.”

Emma and Gordon eventually fell asleep. They held each other's hands while the sounds of the night droned on. Like dominoes that fall one after another, thousands of people around the world heard the voices of the gray creatures. Darkness was re-

placed with bright blue lights, silence with the electrical hum. People froze in place, dogs stood with one leg cocked in the air while the scaly creatures waved their wands around them.

The reconnaissance teams were gathering data, collecting specimens to test their weapons on. Each one came to the same conclusion. One of the commanders, after receiving thousands of the same types of reports, phoned it into his captain's ship at the edge of the solar system. In a low, guttural voice, he told his superior that these beings posed no threat. The invasion could proceed.

With so little space to work, flash fiction has to pack a punch in order to be memorable. Leonard’s “Gumballs” does just that, with strong first-person narration and unusually resonant imagery that ties the whole brief story together.

Gumballs

by Devin James Leonard

A native of upstate New York, Devin James Leonard prefers the countryside over cities, and animals over humans. When he isn't writing or devouring books, he likes to make crop circles in random cornfields to entice the Men in Black. His published stories can be found on Instagram @devinjamesleonard.

Stealth was the name of the game, and from the looks of the cabin, it was about to be a challenging endeavor. The stacked log framework was so uneven that it resembled a brush pile more than a home, the left side drooping like a stroke victim's face, and I nearly lost my balance going up the plank steps, ruining my silent approach.

The front door was open, and I don't mean it was unlocked—it was open. The place was so warped it likely couldn't shut.

Stepping into the house felt as if I had left gravity behind and floated into another dimension, the grade of the floor as steep as the mountain it was on.

I heard cabinets opening and shutting in the kitchen. I decided I'd better wait for the target to come to me, or else I might fall over or float away if I tried to scale any farther.

The target scurried into the room where I was standing and froze when he saw me raise the pistol. He was an overweight man with a pocked, red face and hairy chest, a beer-bellied buffoon wearing nothing but tighty-whities and a sweat-stained tank top. Clutched to his chest with both hands was a large transparent glass jar, the contents inside it round and multi-colored.

I squeezed the trigger, and the silencer went *Bleep!* The bullet shattered the jar and struck him in the chest, and he dropped to his knees and fell back. The broken jar tinkled to the floor in a thousand pieces, and the contents of the said jar fell with it.

Gumballs, of all things.

The target lay in place, and the glass stayed put, too. But the gumballs, they rolled along the floor, hundreds of them, picking up speed with the sinking slope.

This place was a goddamn pinball machine, a planet with its own gravitational pull.

I swam over to the target and checked for a pulse. Didn't find it. That was good. I looked around for my spent cartridge. Didn't find that either. Not good. The .45 caliber shell should have been at my feet, at least near them. For all I could fathom, the damn thing got sucked out of a window by a cosmic vortex.

I wouldn't have been the slightest bit surprised if it had.

There it was, down the hill amongst the cluster of gumballs stacked against the wall like pool balls lined up in a return chute. The target's blood flowed across the floor, moving as quickly as water rolling off an oily surface.

I braced myself as I traversed the steep decline, arms outstretched to maintain balance, and almost face-planted into the wall when I crouched to the floor.

Man, I wanted out of this carnival ride. I was sick to my stomach.

I plucked the little brass casing off the floor, snatched a handful of candies, got dizzy when I stood, and hiked my ass out of the nauseating labyrinth, returning to level ground, and threw up at once.

First and only time I ever puked after an execution, but at least I had the gum to wipe the taste from my mouth.

We love Lochman's clever story about one less-than-successful writer's unexpected chance to make his dreams come true... for a price. Driven by sharp irony and wit, it's a tale of otherworldly influence that makes for a thoroughly enjoyable read.

The Best a Demon Can Do

by Martin Lochman

Martin Lochman is a Czech science fiction and speculative fiction author, currently living and working as a University librarian in Malta. His flash fiction and short stories appeared (or are forthcoming) in a variety of venues, including New Myths, Kzine, Theme of Absence, XB-1 (Czech SFFH magazine), and others. His debut collection All Quiet in the Milky Way: Ray M. Holler's Adventures, Vol. 1 was published in 2023. You can find him at martinlochmanauthor.wordpress.com, on Facebook, or on X (@Martin-Lochman).

The demon was about a meter tall, a little chubby, and wore an overly tight-fitting three-piece suit, complete with a pocket watch and a bowler hat. To say that he wasn't at all what I had expected after a two-hour ritual involving a fresh sacrifice (animal, but still gross), open fire (definitely a hazard in a sixth-floor apartment), and more than a fair share of loud singing, reciting, and otherwise strenuously exercising my vocal cords would be an understatement.

"I am Bobrazel, the Infernal Lord and the Granter of Wishes," he said in a voice that perfectly suited his less-than-impres-

sive appearance.

I shook my head.

“Nah. You look more like Bob. Just Bob.”

He frowned, clearly not expecting my reaction.

“Hey, that’s just uncalled for,” he said, a hint of hurt underscoring his words. He cleared his throat, adjusted his crimson red tie even though it absolutely didn’t need adjusting, and then continued: “How can I help you today?”

“Well, as you are surely aware, I am a writer,” I said, trying to shake off the bad mood. It was late, the damn ritual had been draining both mentally and physically, and the smell of the two hundred candles plus the disposable charcoal grill pushed me dangerously close to nausea.

“I spent two decades of my life writing stories and novels, but even though I did everything I could to market them, it’s like nobody even knows they exist. That *I* exist. Dammit, do you know how many people showed up the last time I organized a book launch at the library? Three—and two of them were my parents!”

I took a deep breath and continued: “I was wondering if you could help me with that.”

Bob nodded thoughtfully.

“So it is fame you seek,” he said, steepling his short fingers together. At that precise moment, he reminded me of Buddha—if Buddha lost a few pounds, grew horns, and raided the children’s

section at Men's Wearhouse.

“In a nutshell. I want people to read my work and talk about it. I want a following of loyal fans who can’t wait for what I write next, who stand in lines at bookstores and conventions just to get a signed, limited-edition copy of my book. I want to be discussed on TV, have my face plastered all over the tabloids, and yes, I want Hollywood to make a movie based on...”

My voice trailed off as I noticed an uncomfortable expression settle on his round face.

“What is it?”

“Umm... you want the J. K. Rowling experience.”

The slight rise in the intonation at the end of the sentence almost made it sound like a question.

“I wouldn’t use those exact words, but yeah. I’ll have what she’s having.”

He scratched the top of his head between the horns. Caressed his charcoal-black goatee. Sucked in a breath through his surprisingly white teeth.

“What?” I said, my annoyance making a comeback.

“I am afraid I won’t be able to give you that,” he said quietly, avoiding my gaze.

“Why not? Isn’t making wishes come true in exchange for a soul the crux of your entire business model?”

“I mean, yes, that’s the general idea,” he admitted. “But

what you are asking for requires the allocation of a tremendous amount of resources. I would need to reroute the inter-dimensional power and alter the quantum states of the negative photons, and that is simply—”

“Bullshit!”

“Pardon me?”

I narrowed my eyes.

“I write science fiction for a liv... as a hobby,” I said. “I am more than familiar with technobabble, and Bob, you are currently babbling.”

For an otherworldly being, his nonverbal cues were far too human.

“I am sorry, that was unprofessional,” he said and paused as if fishing for the right words to say what he didn’t want to say next. “The truth is that I am not in a position to grant a wish of such... *magnitude*.”

“What do you mean you’re not...” I started, and just then, it clicked—the outward appearance, the attire, the attitude. “You’re not the main guy! You’re just some low-level sales assistant. The bargain-bin version of the real wish-granting-soul-taking demon.”

“Hey!” he said, a pained look overtaking his features. For a moment, it seemed that he was going to continue, but he remained silent.

“Well, don’t take this the wrong way, but I’d like to speak to

the manager,” I said and crossed my arms.

He shifted his weight from foot to foot and mumbled something unintelligible under his breath.

“What was that?” I asked.

He sighed, then: “I said I wasn’t authorized to summon my superiors—”

“You gotta be kidding me!”

“—for you.”

I blinked.

“Hold on a second. What do you mean you can’t summon them for me?”

He finally looked at me, an apologetic glint in his eyes.

“It’s not you specifically. It’s all the people with your soul type.”

“Soul type?” I repeated, bewildered. “A soul is a soul.”

“Not quite,” he shook his head. “There are a total of seventeen different types. Some are rare and more *valuable*, whereas others are very common. Unfortunately, yours is quite—”

“—common,” I finished for him. “And a common soul equals a limited wish.”

He nodded. Feeling deflated, I walked over to a sofa and collapsed into its soft embrace.

“How come I’ve never heard of it? I mean, the biggest religions in the world are all based on the idea that a soul is this

unique, precious element.”

“We don’t exactly advertise it,” he shrugged. “It would be bad for business.”

As much as I hated to admit it, he had a point. So many people wouldn’t even bother with the summoning ritual if they knew there was only so much they could get. I know I wouldn’t have.

“Fair enough. But now that I know, what’s to stop me from calling this off?”

“Nothing,” he admitted. “However, at this stage, most people go through with the sale anyway. They feel like they would have wasted their time and effort otherwise.”

“That’s...”

“Devious?” he cracked a small smile. Somehow, he was looking considerably more confident now. He might have even grown an inch or two since he had first appeared.

I shifted on the sofa to find a more comfortable position, its old frame groaning under my weight.

“Okay, let’s assume I want to make a deal.”

“Let’s assume that,” he echoed, his voice steady.

“How much would my soul get me?”

He caressed his goatee again, though the gesture looked drastically different this time. There was certainty to it, smugness even.

“Are your writings available to buy on the Internet?”

“Yes, in a bunch of places. Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo... you know, the go-tos for literally every aspiring indie author.”

“Excellent,” he said cheerfully. He started pacing within the small circle made out of candles, careful not to knock over the grill or step on the carcass of the lab rat that involuntarily volunteered itself for the penultimate step of the summoning process.

“I can give you sales. A couple hundred thousand of them, spread over the weeks, months, and years to come. I know the royalties in self-publishing suck, so this would earn you some good income. And who knows, maybe it would even land you a deal with a traditional publisher.

On top of that, I can also give you legions of loyal fans. They will follow you on social media, create fan pages, talk and argue about your work, and blow up your email with praise and questions. But you will never meet a single one of them face-to-face.”

I frowned.

“I am not interested in some dumb bots repeating one of five predetermined phrases.”

He raised his hands, palms toward me.

“I am not talking about computer algorithms or *artificial intelligence*,” he pronounced the last two words with disgust. “I am talking about real, unique individuals—or as real and unique as anybody else on the Internet.”

“That doesn’t make it any clearer.”

He stopped pacing and licked his lips. Did that annoying sucking-the-air-in-through-his-teeth thing again. Twice.

“Fine. What the heaven!” he said finally. “I assume you are familiar with the concept of Hell?”

“Yup. If you are naughty enough, you’ll go there after you die to suffer for all eternity.”

“More or less,” he said and gave me a meaningful look.

“And...?” I stared back at him, dumbfounded, before it hit me. “No!”

He nodded.

“You’d be surprised how agreeable the *residents* are after a few centuries. And let’s just say I have a sizeable sample at my disposal.”

So many questions blossomed in my head, but somehow, the one I articulated was: “You have Internet down there?”

“Technically speaking, it isn’t down as much as next door—kinda like a neighboring dimension—but yes, we do,” he said, adding: “We like to go with the times, you know.”

I considered the pocket watch and the bowler hat but ultimately decided not to point out the blatant contradiction. After all, maybe he was one of those types who preferred the fashion of bygone eras.

“So what’s it going to be?” he asked, a barely detectable hint of urgency, or perhaps insistence in his voice. “Shall we give you the readers you deserve, or do you prefer to continue pushing the

boulder?”

I bit down on my lower lip. My mind was a hive of buzzing thoughts, clashing and competing for primacy. On the one hand, Bob’s offer, much like the devil incarnate himself, was *objectively* underwhelming, and accepting it just because it was the best I could get felt like I was compromising my goals and dreams. Like I was settling for the clouds when I could reach for the stars, even though I clearly couldn’t.

On the other hand, if I were to reject it and send the miniature infernal salesman back to Hell, what would my future hold? More cycles of excitement as I came up with my stories, hopeful anticipation as I published them, and bitter disappointment when they barely sold, no matter how many newsletters I sent, or Facebook groups I joined, or leaflets I handed out on the street (yes, my desperation was indeed bottomless)? How many of these could I still handle before they took the joy out of writing altogether?

As I sat there wrestling with the pros and cons of bringing this unequivocally insane undertaking to its even more insane, yet fruitful conclusion, Bob quietly observed me. I could tell he wanted to say more to sway my decision, pressure me the way the truly insistent marketers do, but he didn’t, which made me think that perhaps I had been too harsh on him in the beginning.

“Say I accept the deal,” I said hesitantly after what must have been a few minutes. “You won’t drop a meteorite on my head tomorrow or next week, just so you can collect the soul early,

right?”

He grimaced as if he had just bit into a lemon.

“We aren’t Djinns—those *assholes* really ruin our reputation. We offer an honest deal; no loopholes or hidden conditions,” he said, puffing up his chest. “You sign the contract, and you can enjoy your wish until you pass away from natural causes.”

He tilted his head to the side and added: “Or unnatural—but in any case, we won’t have anything to do with it.”

I nodded.

So what will it be? A voice in my head echoed Bob’s question, as the warring parties engaged in a final battle. Uncertainty in life and certainty in death, or the other way around?

“Screw it,” I said finally. “I’m in.”

Bob’s eyes went wide. He looked like he was going to start dancing, but he clearly remembered the part about professional appearances.

“Excellent,” he uttered exuberantly. “That’s fantastic.”

He reached into the inner pocket of his suit and produced a tablet that physically shouldn’t fit inside. As he switched it on, it elicited an unidentifiable soft sound, somewhere between a sob and hysterical laughter. He typed in an unnecessarily long password—twice, since he made a mistake on the first try—then handed the device to me.

For a legal document signing over your soul, the contract was surprisingly short: a preamble, four rather concise,

easy-to-understand paragraphs specifying the rights and responsibilities of both parties, a date, and two boxes for signatures. Human lawyers could definitely learn a thing or two from their infernal counterparts.

“Just sign here,” he indicated one of the boxes.

“With my finger?”

He looked at me like I was mentally deficient.

“What I mean is—aren’t these usually signed with blood?”

“Blood quickly decays. PDF is eternal,” he said. “Like I said: we go with the times.”

I shrugged and moved my finger across the screen. The resulting signature didn’t even remotely resemble my surname, but Bob didn’t seem to mind. He followed my example, then tapped a few buttons, and shoved the tablet back into his pocket.

“Excellent,” he said again and smoothed his suit jacket with the palms of his hands. “You will have a copy of the contract in your email momentarily.”

“Wait, that’s it?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Huh,” I paused. “Feels kinda...”

“Anticlimactic?”

“Yeah.”

“I get that a lot. People usually expect some sort of special effects—smoke, flames, fireworks. I blame the popular culture.”

“So when will the deal start taking effect?”

“It already has,” he pointed at my laptop on the living room table.

I jumped up from the sofa and reached the laptop in a few quick strides. It felt like it took forever to boot up, though, admittedly, that was most likely just the impatience I didn’t want to admit skewing my perception. I opened the sales report page and let out a surprised gasp.

Where it had been stubbornly showing a big fat zero for the past few months, there was now a triple-digit number. I blinked, then refreshed the page, half expecting it to be an error, but the number only grew.

“Wow,” I said, turning around to face the little demon.

If Pride had a name, it would be Bobrazel. He grinned and tipped his hat to me.

“Pleasure doing business,” he said smugly. “I will be seeing you when your day comes.”

Just then, a thought that had been quietly slumbering in the depths of my consciousness popped into the light.

“One last question. When I die and you take my soul, will I be forced to become an eternally devoted fan of some other unsuccessful author?”

He cocked his head. Several seconds passed before he replied: “Would *that* be such a bad thing?”

I hesitated. Independent authors supported each other

through reviews, advice, shout-outs on social media. If they did so in life, it only made sense that they would continue after their demise.

“I guess not,” I said.

He smirked and was gone, as abruptly as he had materialized less than an hour ago. A faint smell of sulfur hung in the air in his wake.

I turned back to the laptop, opened up a blank document, and with a renewed vigor started typing away.

The guilt that hangs over an undiscovered crime is a powerful motivation that Lockley plays with adeptly in “The Body in the Woods,” drawing you into a dark, suspenseful ride before bringing it home with a surprising twist.

The Body in the Woods

by Steve Lockley

Steve Lockley is responsible for around a hundred short stories, including contributions to a couple of Doctor Who anthologies, and more than twenty novels, though not all have appeared under his own name. His work as both writer and editor has been shortlisted for several British Fantasy Awards, and he has served as a judge for the prestigious World Fantasy Awards. He lives in Swansea, Wales.

Nick Twomey wasn’t sure why he had picked up a copy of the local newspaper, on this day of all days. He hadn’t even noticed the significance of the date, but when he turned to page five, he broke into a sweat, his heart thumping in his chest. He was sure he must have let out a gasp, but when he looked around at his fellow passengers, no one seemed to be paying him the slightest attention. The bus was full of people lost in their own world, just as he was in his.

It had been two years since the disappearance of Cally Matthews. Two years, and still no sign of her. The police had long since ended any active investigation, consigning her to the status

of yet another missing person, but now the newspaper had issued a new appeal. But Nick knew that it would not result in her being found, at least not alive. His heart was still beating too fast when he closed the paper and fished his phone from his pocket. He took a breath before he entered Cally's name into the search box.

For a moment he was sure that the woman next to him was watching what he was doing, and he tilted the screen to make it harder for her to see, hoping he was not being too obvious in his actions. It seemed to take forever, but it had probably taken no more than a few seconds for the results to show that the most recent entry took him to the online presence of the same newspaper which displayed advert after advert, but revealed no more than the article he had already seen. There was nothing new, nothing for him to be worried about.

“Are you all right, dear?” the woman beside him asked. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Sorry,” he said, startled. “I’m fine, thank you.” He hadn’t wanted to talk to her; he didn’t want to talk to anyone. He thrust his newspaper into the messenger bag he used for work, stuffed his phone back into his pocket, and hurriedly got to his feet.

“My stop,” he said as if he needed to justify his actions and pressed the button to alert the driver. It wasn’t his stop, he still had another mile to go, but he could not have stayed on the bus any longer. As he stood on the pavement, and the bus pulled away into the flow of traffic, he was sure he saw the face of the young woman from the newspaper looking back at him from a window

near the rear. He blinked and realized that it was not her, but then it never could have been.

He hurried home, head down, not wanting to make eye contact with anyone. If he looked at them, they would know that something was wrong, and they might ask questions. Questions he didn't want to answer.

Once back inside his flat he closed the door firmly behind him, sliding the chain into place. It was only then that he started to feel safe, but even before he took off his coat, he turned on the television, flicking through the news channels, just in case. But he needn't have worried. There was nothing at all about Cally, and it was with a sense of relief that a few minutes later he sat at his kitchen table with a cup of tea and laid the newspaper out in front of him, finally able to read the article without fear of being watched by prying eyes. Still, he had to take a deep breath before turning to page five, praying that there was nothing in the piece to suggest that any new evidence or lead had come to light.

But there was something wrong.

There was nothing on page five about her. Confused, he thought he must have been mistaken about the page number, but when he flicked backwards and forwards, he still couldn't find it. He then turned to the first page and worked his way systematically through the newspaper, page after page, but there was no mention of Cally, no sign of the picture that had looked out at him accusingly when he had been sitting on the bus. Frantically he repeated the exercise, his brain unable to make sense of it,

checking the page numbers to make sure that one had not somehow slipped out when he had thrust it back into his bag. He knew that was impossible, but it did not stop him from checking.

There was nothing.

That night he slept fitfully. How could he have been so mistaken? He knew what he had seen in the newspaper, and yet there was nothing there now. He tried searching the internet on his phone, but there was nothing, not even the report he had seen on the local paper's webpage. There was nothing about her at all. But how was that possible? Somehow it had all been erased.

But she was still in his dreams, in those short snatches of sleep he was able to find. At times she was laughing and smiling, but at others she was taunting him, saying horrible things that he did not want to hear. He had always thought she was his friend, but he had been proved wrong.

The last dream left him bathed in sweat. Her limp body had been lying in a shallow hole in the ground in the middle of a stand of trees that seemed familiar, moonlight barely penetrated through the canopy above but still giving enough light. Her face was at peace, the anger, the bitterness and bile that turned her face ugly all gone, but when he shovelled earth to cover her features, her eyes suddenly sprang wide. Her mouth opened to scream, but she was quickly silenced as it filled with dirt, choking her until she fell into a final silence

His heart racing as he woke, he lay motionless, unable to move as the early light started to change the color of the sky.

He remained there for at least an hour, and although his eyes felt heavy again, he desperately tried not to go back to sleep. He couldn't bear to see her face like that again, and he knew that she would be waiting for him.

Eventually, he dragged himself out of bed and started to get ready for work before he realized that it was Saturday. The thought of having a day to fill while she was on his mind filled him with dread, and he could find no way of shaking the feeling off. If he just sat in the flat, he knew that would just brood over his dreams. He would alternate between checking his phone and the television, hoping yet dreading that he would find something. He needed to prove that her body had not been discovered. But how could he do that when he couldn't be sure where she had been buried? Everything from that night had become such a blur, but he knew he had killed her, even though she had still been alive when he had buried her.

The thought of trying to find the place where he had buried her flitted across his mind, but no matter how hard he tried, he could not be sure where it had been. He remembered the way the trees had opened into a clearing, and how easy it had been to put the earth back into the hole after her; he could even recall the loamy smell. But he could not for the life of him remember the location. How was that possible?

All he could hope was that he had not left any evidence on her body. The police couldn't suspect him; they hadn't even questioned him when she had gone missing. There was nothing

to connect them as far as they knew, or surely they would have called him into the police station and questioned him for hours. But no one had so much as spoken to him, even though he used to see her almost every day. And yet there was always the chance that they could knock on his door at any moment if they had found some piece of information that linked him to her.

He didn't leave his flat that day, or the next, though that wasn't unusual. He rarely went anywhere on a Sunday. There had been a time when he would go to the church a couple of streets away and sit at the back, joining in with the hymns, but not taking communion. He was only watching, not really part, and yet it still made him feel like he belonged to something. But that had all stopped when some of the women started giving him looks and talking in whispers. He knew they were talking about him, and eventually he decided that he wasn't welcome. Instead, he stayed at home and watched Songs of Praise, joining in when he knew the hymns, safe in the knowledge that there was no one watching.

When Monday came around, he couldn't bring himself to go into work, and so he rang to tell them he was feeling unwell, relieved when his call went straight through to the answerphone service. He left his message and rang off before anyone could pick up. They might try to call him later, but he doubted it. They wouldn't really care if he was there or not. He even doubted that anyone would even miss him if he had been the one buried in the middle of a wood.

But the dreams got worse. Night after night, he was tor-

mented by the sight of her face, bloody and beaten, features swollen from where he had hit her with the spade, making sure that she would not rise from her woodland grave. He could not believe he had forgotten that. While it reassured him that she was not still walking around, it didn't mean that her body had not been found. It didn't mean the police wouldn't be knocking on his door at any moment.

By Wednesday he knew that he couldn't stay inside his flat, ignoring phone calls and not answering when people rang the bell. Usually, no one rang him, no one visited the flat, and yet his phone seemed to be ringing with ever greater frequency, and the street doorbell had been rung several times that day already, and it was still not yet midday. Eventually, someone managed to get let inside the building and was banging on his door.

“Mr. Twomey?” a man's voice called from the other side.
“Could you open the door please?”

He didn't answer. If he pretended he wasn't there, they would go away eventually.

“Are you all right in there, Mr. Twomey? This is the police.
Could you open the door please?”

“Nonononono,” Twomey whispered. He couldn't let them in. He couldn't let them find him. The moment he had been dreading had arrived, and he still ahnd no idea what he was going to say to them.

“We need to make sure you're all right in there, Mr. Twomey.”

Then there was silence for a moment, and he thought for a moment that they had given up, but then he heard whispered voices, this time a man and a woman, but he could not make out what they were saying. He held his breath as he tried to move a fraction closer to the door, but then the woman spoke a little louder.

“Can you here me, Nick? It’s Cally... I just want to make sure you’re alright.”

Cally? But that was impossible. She was dead; she was in that hole ion the ground in the middle of the forest. Why would anyone do this to him? He clasped his hands over his ears, not wanting to hear the voices anymore, but then there was a splintering and the door of his flat swung open.

Nononono. He huddled down, making himself as small as he could as a man in uniform approached him, keeping the woman back as if she needed to be kept out of harm’s way. But why would the policeman think he neded to do that that? He wouldn’t hurt anyone, he told himself, but he knew that wasn’t true. He had killed Cally, after all, and yet she was standing just a few feet away, but why was she wearing a nurse’s uniform?

She pushed past the policeman despite his protestations and crouched down next to Twomey who had his arms wrapped around his legs, hugging himself into a ball.

“Have you been taking your medication, Nick? I was worried because you didn’t come back for your appointment.”

“Why are you here?” he asked. “You’re not real. You can’t be.” The woman placed one hand on his arm. He flinched at first, but then he saw that she was real; she was still alive. But how?

“Why’s that, Nick? Why don’t you think I’m real?”

The tears started to come, and he did not even try to stop them. He’d been holding them back for so long. Was this really Cally? Was it possible that he hadn’t killed her? He didn’t know if the tears were of relief that she was still alive or the release of the fear that had built up inside him.

“I think you should come back with me, don’t you?” she said. “We’ve still got your room ready for you.”

“Are you sure that’s wise?” the policeman said.

“He’s not a threat to anyone,” Cally said. “My colleague is downstairs in the ambulance. I’m sure we can handle it from here, but do you think you could get the door secured? I’d hate for burglars to come in while Nick’s away.”

“I’ll make a call,” he said, but he didn’t look particularly happy about it.

“How about we get you downstairs then, Nick? Let’s get you safe, shall we?”

Nick nodded. “I thought I’d hurt you,” he said.

“Well as you can see, I’m fine,” Cally said and helped him to his feet.

There was so much he didn’t understand, so much that didn’t make any sense. He had no idea how he could have been so

convinced he had killed her, but he was sure that she was going to make things all right. She always made things right.

A sordid urban apartment block offers an strongly evocative setting for Nicholson's crime drama, a compelling tale that pits a cunning, self-absorbed landlord against his desperate and even more conniving tenant in a subtle battle of wits.

The Perfect Tenant

by Thomas Nicholson

Thomas Nicholson is a UX designer from the UK who has spent time living in Spain, Colombia, and Vietnam. His short stories have appeared in anthologies and magazines around the world, including publications from Madhouse Books, Sonder Lit, and Scare Street. He has previously been short-listed for both the ITT Tallaght Short Story Prize and the Crossing The Tees Literary Festival Short Story Competition.

Jeremy turned the wheel too hard, and the horn blaring behind him let him know he'd met yet another idiot. If they had to brake then they should have left more room, shouldn't they? Every minute wasted was another few quid lost in both petrol and time. By all rights, he should be asking for reimbursement once he arrived. He wouldn't, though. No need to spend any longer there than he had to.

If this were any other tenant, he would have flat out refused to come. If the woman on Tanner Road had called once again to remind him of his "legal requirements" to fix the radiators, he wouldn't even have picked up the phone. This guy wasn't like that. He never argued over rent increases. Never called to ask

Jeremy to deal with all the little issues he could have fixed himself. No. This guy was grateful for what he got. He understood the system. Things were hard for everyone these days, and his punctual payments meant one less thing for Jeremy to worry about. There would be no angry red letters from the bank this month.

The car slowed as he turned off the main road, into the estate at the edge of the city. Part of an up-and-coming area, yet to experience the increase in value Jeremy's other properties had seen. He wasn't sure why. It looked fine to him. There was access to a dumping ground less than five minutes away. A friendly pack of dogs roaming by the bins did their bit to keep everyone safe. There were probably lots of local mechanics, too, judging by how many vehicles in the car park were up on blocks.

“Oh for...” muttered Jeremy.

One of the few cars with its wheels still attached was parked in his spot. Well, not technically his spot, but the spot he thought of as his. The spot he'd parked in when he first came to view the place. It was right underneath his apartment, so it might as well be his.

The interloping car faced away from him. The shaggy hair of a pair of heads were visible, sitting perfectly still in the front seats. When he honked, they turned to look at him. Jeremy mouthed the words “*That's my spot*,” drawing a square in the air and pointing to himself as he did so. The rear window darkened the image too much to make out the men's faces clearly, but there was no mistaking the silhouette of a hand appearing between the

headrests, the middle finger extended towards the sunroof

Jeremy fumed, huffing so hard through his nose his ears hurt. Ridiculous behavior. These sorts of people were the exact reason he hated this part of the work. Maybe they were what was keeping the valuations so low. Terrible neighbors: the one thing you couldn't negotiate. He drove on, hands clenched around the steering wheel, until he found a spot far from the main entrance to the stairwell that led up to the vibrant ecosystem of apartments above.

His nose wrinkled as he skirted the canine family hanging out by the bins. The smell probably wasn't there all the time. In winter, the snow probably made the bins look delightful, like tiny snowmen for the children to decorate. He eased around a sofa left at the bottom of the stairwell, making a note to amend the online listing for his other flat in the block. "*Community meeting point adjacent. Comfortable atmosphere with ample seating available.*" That should attract some interest, for once.

Flecks of paint floated around him as he grabbed the plastic knocker and tapped three times on the door. There was no answer. Jeremy tutted. If the tenant had got him to come all the way here only to go out when he arrived, there would be consequences. He knocked again, louder. This time, he heard shuffling from inside, like someone dragging a chair across carpet. A voice spoke from what sounded like just the other side of the door.

"What?" the voice asked.

Jeremy's teeth felt like they might break, he was gritting

them so hard.

“What do you mean ‘what’?”

“Who is it?”

Jeremy didn’t need this. He could turn around and leave. Except, those letters from the bank weren’t stopping. Plus, he couldn’t deny he was curious about this mysterious trouble-free tenant. If he could get inside, he might find some clue as to the man’s job. He could get an estimate on how much he earned and how much spare cash he might have that would be better served in the pockets of someone with some financial sense.

“It’s Mr. Grisham. Is that Mr. LeRoux?”

The voice did not answer. Jeremy wondered if the man might be hard of hearing. The recipient of some sort of disability benefit. That would be just perfect. You didn’t want that sort on your property. You never knew what expensive demands they might make.

He was about to raise his voice and repeat himself when he heard the voice again.

“Prove it.”

“Excuse me?”

“Prove you’re Mr. Grisham. Do you have a driver’s licence or a passport or something?”

“A pass—” Jeremy seethed. “Listen here. This is my property and I can enter whenever I damn well please. Now either unlock this door and let me in or I’ll have the bailiffs round to

throw you out on your ear.”

There was another pause. Shorter this time. Then the lock clicked and the door opened. A skinny man in a T-shirt and jeans stood on the other side. Half a foot shorter than Jeremy, which instantly gave him a sense of superiority entirely separate from every other reason he had to feel superior to his tenant. Mr. LeRoux ushered him inside, relocking the door as soon as Jeremy was over the threshold.

The dresser drawers Jeremy had ordered to sit at the end of the bed had been moved. They now stood at an angle behind the door, so he had to slide sideways to enter the main room, a combination bedroom-cum-kitchen that allowed its occupant all the flexibility and convenience that modern life demanded. The curtains were closed, and there was a stale smell about the place that suggested they hadn’t been opened in some time. Styrofoam boxes and empty plastic cups filled the sink, overflowing onto the nearby bed.

Jeremy was beginning to regret his choice to come at all when he saw what sat on the single-person dining table nestled between the mattress and the window. Stacked next to an empty sports holdall were several dozen rows of beautiful, purple banknotes.

“Please,” said LeRoux, clearing a space on the bed where the styrofoam had begun to encroach. “Sit down.”

“I’ll stand, thanks.”

“Right. Sure. Of course. Of course.”

LeRoux peeled back the corner of the curtain, letting light spill on to the stacks and illuminating the Queen’s face like she was twenty years old again.

“What, err, what did you want me to help you with?” asked Jeremy.

LeRoux did not answer. Jeremy managed to tear his eyes off the money long enough to find him nibbling at his thumbnail while he stared out at the car park below. If ever there was a posterboy for the sort of person who got paid entirely in cash, this was it.

“Oi,” said Jeremy. “I’m talking to you.”

LeRoux jumped and looked back at him. “What?”

“I don’t know if you’re aware, but some of us are busy people. I have several meetings this afternoon, so if you could please let me know what it is you want, that would be very helpful.”

LeRoux shook his head, as if clearing away a cobweb. “Right. Sorry, sorry.” He let the curtain fall and collapsed onto the newly empty patch of bed. “I wanted to ask you something.”

“No time like the present.”

“You own this place, right?”

“You’d better hope so.”

“So you know all about the estate? The ins and outs, I mean?”

“Of course,” lied Jeremy. In truth, the only parts he knew well were the two units he’d bought, and even then his knowledge came mostly from the pictures the agent had put up online.

“Right,” said LeRoux, and his shoulders seemed to relax. “So I wanted to know, is there any other way out of this place without going down the main stairwell?”

Jeremy looked around the flat, careful not to touch any of the surfaces. He took in the sink, the bed, the window, and the door to the bathroom without moving his head.

“If you wanted a second entrance point, then you should have mentioned on your application.”

LeRoux swallowed. “I thought, maybe there might be a fire escape or something?”

Jeremy folded his arms. “I mean, technically, yes, I suppose there should be. But do you know how much those things cost to install? I’m not made of money.”

On the final word, he felt his eye drawn to the table. Thankfully, LeRoux’s attention was back on the front door. The tenant had folded in on himself, tucking his knees and retreating further into the mess of bed covers and empty takeaway containers. Jeremy wondered whether he even knew the money was out in the open like that. Anyone could have smashed through the window and taken it. LeRoux was lucky he’d come instead.

“You know,” said Jeremy, eyeing the damp patch on the wall where the pipe in the adjoining kitchen must have leaked again.

“I do happen to own the flat next door, too. It’s a larger square footage than this place so would cost a bit more, but it does come with its own rear window. As long as that sofa stays downstairs, you could probably jump down and be at the pub within five minutes.”

From outside they heard what sounded like a car backfiring. LeRoux twitched.

“It’s right next door?”

Jeremy tapped on the wall with a fingertip, stopping before his hand went straight through the thin sheet of wallpaper.

“It would be rather convenient. You wouldn’t need to hire movers.”

“How much?”

“Well, there’s the deposit to think of. Plus the fee for ending the lease on this place early. And admin fees.”

“Okay.”

The stacks glistened, dozens of faces smiling up at Jeremy. Tiny friends looking for a new home.

“And, unfortunately, there is a bit of interest elsewhere, so if you really want it, I’d suggest you get the money together today.”

LeRoux rolled off the bed away from him, onto the side with the bag. He picked up one of the stacks and began thumbing through it.

“Is this enough?” he asked.

Jeremy felt the weight as LeRoux placed it in his hand. It was lighter than he'd expected, but then it was only paper. He glanced at the others sitting on the table.

"That might cover the deposit," he said, sucking in air through his teeth. "But the rest..."

LeRoux rolled back, tossed the rest of the stacks into the holdall, then pushed the whole thing into Jeremy's arms.

"How about now?"

Jeremy hefted the holdall over his shoulder. It certainly felt heavier. Heavy enough to keep the bank at bay, with enough left over for a new set of tires at a decent mechanic far away from here.

"This should just about cover it. Mates rates, you understand. I wouldn't do this for anyone."

He turned to go, then hesitated. He really did need a new laptop. Something to help keep track of his finances and stop these sorts of accounting issues from happening again. And he could do with a day out at the races to calm himself down after all this uproar.

"You know, I've just remembered. Next door has some really poor insulation in the walls. I'd hate for you to be cold come winter."

LeRoux's nail was back up to his mouth. There came a sickening crunch as he bit straight through.

"I have some more in my car."

Jeremy checked his watch. “I can wait if you hurry.”

LeRoux’s eyes went wide. “No! Sorry, I can’t. But, please, there’s plenty in there. It’s the red Ford parked on the street. You can’t miss it.”

He shuffled through his pockets and held out a small, silver car key. Jeremy looked at it in disgust.

“You want me to go rifling through your car?”

“I don’t have anything else here. Please.”

Jeremy huffed loudly, then tucked the key in a side pocket of the holdall. “I’ll have to charge extra for the legwork.”

“That’s fine. Just, please, be quick.”

The shoulder carrying the holdall was starting to ache where the strap dug in. Jeremy rubbed at it. “It’s hot out. I’ll need a hat.”

LeRoux frowned for a second. Then something seemed to ignite in his brain. He looked at Jeremy as if weighing him up. His hand dove into the bedcovers, coming out with a dark blue baseball cap. Jeremy wiped it on his trouser leg before placing it gingerly on his head.

“The sun’s really out today,” said LeRoux. “You should keep your head down.”

“Thanks. I’d never have thought of that myself”

The lock clicked behind Jeremy, leaving him alone in the stairwell. From behind the door, he heard more shuffling, fol-

lowed by running footsteps. He ignored them. He was never going to have to see the strange, thin man and his revolting living space again. He would send someone else to drop the keys off. No chance he was coming back in person.

The two men that had parked in his spot were still there when he exited the building. They followed his path as he wandered off towards the car with LeRoux's money inside. Feeling emboldened by his success, Jeremy threw back his shoulders as he passed, the holdall jingling merrily. He slowly raised his middle finger at the windscreen, refusing to look at the men, but smiling to himself as he did so. He was a successful businessman. He was untouchable. Let them have the spot. It was all they had in their miserable little lives.

A bang from the flat above made Jeremy crane his neck up. He couldn't quite see what had caused it, but he knew the sound. He'd heard something similar often enough in his other properties, the sound of a beam snapping, or a boiler on its last legs. Well, that would be the deposit money gone. He should have warned LeRoux not to knock too hard on the wall, but really that wasn't his fault. Some people only learned the hard way. The man was an adult. He should learn some responsibility.

Jeremy didn't notice the two men behind him until a sharp pain erupted in his side. He looked down to see the handle sticking out from below his ribs, quivering like the woman on Tanner Road with no heating. A red stain bloomed around it, and he wondered what he could have leaned against in LeRoux's hovel

to ruin his best shirt. From far away, he heard a pair of voices echoing around him.

“Ah shit. It’s not him,” said one.

“Quick,” said the other. “Get up the stairs. He can’t have gone far.”

Then the voices were gone, and the pavement had somehow risen up to Jeremy’s eyeline. How impolite. He looked around, managing to find the stairwell and the corner of the sofa sticking out behind it. As he watched, the sofa moved. Stick-like limbs emerged from the ragged cushions, then stood up at an odd angle, like the man they belonged to didn’t know how to walk properly.

LeRoux jogged towards him, crouching down so that he too was aligned with the pavement.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Really. I’m so sorry.”

A weight lifted from Jeremy’s chest. The holdall, floating up and into LeRoux’s arms. Jeremy tried to cry out. That was his bag! His money! He’d earned it. How dare this tenant just come and take it from him. After all he’d done for him. This simply would not stand. As soon as the world righted itself, Jeremy would fix this. LeRoux better not be expecting a discount for going to the car himself.

The pain in Jeremy’s side was getting worse now. Hotter. Wetter. If he had to go private to get it taken care of then LeRoux could expect quite the bill. In fact, every single one of his proper-

ties would need their rent raised. If he could just get to his phone. If he could just get his lungs to fill and call out for help. If the world would just stay still for one minute.

Monster stories are a cornerstone of any pulp fiction collection, and this story, a quick-moving tale of a desperate being who's not quite human, is a perfect example of the type: Fun, suspenseful, and with a touch of darkness.

It Takes Blood and Guts to Work Here

by A. H. Plotts

A.H. Plotts (she, her, ella) writes dark fiction and has made a short film or two. Her short story, “Cats Just Don’t Care” will be available this summer. Her horror-comedy short “The Pet Sitter” begins filming in June 2025. Find her on social media (@ahplotts, @ahplottsthecoast), and at www.ahplottsthecoast.com.

Strange things happen in this hospital late at night. There's no security at this end of the basement, and it gets a little creepy. The lights in the long hallway leading from the elevator are motion-activated. Unless someone or something moves around out there, it stays as dark as a moonless night.

The lights are bright in my office, at least, where I sit, night after night, going on twenty years. I freak myself out thinking about the stories. Like what happened last week. It was the damnedest thing, and I've been around a while. I've seen a lot of strange stuff.

I'm no scaredy cat. I'm a stubborn old woman, and I take my job seriously. But that one night? When I looked up from my e-reader? I almost keeled over right here at my desk. There he was, sitting in the chair across from me, where no one had been sitting a minute before.

I peed a little. Jumped straight up from my chair.

“Whoa. Mister,” I blurted out, after landing back down. “Who, the heck, are you and how—”

I hadn't heard him come in. The lights in the basement beyond the office were dark. As dark as the black coffee in my “Employee of the Month” mug.

He rolled up from a hunched position. His piercing eyes stared right through me.

“Where did I come from and how did I get here? Sorry if I startled you.”

“Um, yeah. That you did.” I wheeled my chair back from the desk, about an arm's length away. I'd seen his type before. They like scaring people by showing up unannounced.

He gave me the willies.

His thin shoulders shrugged up then down. “A side effect of the lifestyle, I guess. Moving around stealthily.”

I shifted quickly into work mode.

“I take it you're a client?”

“Um, yes, my dear lady. I'll take whatever you've got avail-

able this fine evening.”

“Do you have a name?” I wasn’t giving this guy an inch more.

“Yes. Here’s my card.”

He laid the laminated card on the desk with great care, as if it were a precious artifact. I picked it up, read it, compared him and the photo. Same dark hair. Same black, piercing eyes. I checked the ears. That’s what they teach you in training. The ears in their human form never change. His ears matched the ones in the photo.

I’ve never trusted digital data, so I pulled the large ledger from my desk. If someone’s name isn’t in my book, then they don’t exist in my world.

I couldn’t find his name in my book.

“Um, we seem to have a problem.” I rifled more pages. Listed in alphabetical order, every name had a member number next to it. No *Rogers, Smith Michael J.* was listed anywhere. Not for tonight, not for any previous night, nor for future visits.

He craned his neck. I pulled the ledger closer to me. It’s important to protect the anonymity of everyone who uses our services. Just think of what would happen if Mr. and Mrs. Human Being found out their hairdresser wasn’t who they thought they were? What if it was their mail carrier or a cop on the street?

“Try Smith, instead of Rogers. It’s often listed that way,” he said, sitting back in his chair.

I looked again at the card he'd given me. There were many Smiths, Rogers, and Michaels in my book. None of them matched the membership number on his card.

The hair on the back of my neck bristled.

A slew of station attendants had been slaughtered and worse just for doing their jobs. But the co-op has rules that need to be followed.

"Look," I said, slamming my book closed. "I know you're probably desperate. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here so close to sunrise." The clock on my desk showed 4:20 a.m. Sunrise was at 6:10 a.m. Beads of sweat hung tentatively to the guy's creased forehead. His coloring had changed, from a healthy pink to a mousy gray. I swallowed, knowing he would keep showing more of his true nature until he got what he'd come for.

His name and number weren't in my book, and the book was the law.

"I can see you're agitated," I said. For the first time in twenty years, I was tempted to break into the emergency supply. To pull the small hammer out of its clip and shatter the glass case that hung on the wall. If I'd done that, I might as well have kissed my job goodbye.

He licked his cracked lips with a blue tongue that was preternaturally long.

"Just give me what I want, and I'll go. You won't see me ever again," he croaked.

A light burst on inside my brain.

“Wait. Are you not from this region?” If he weren’t assigned to this way station, his name would never show up. “Are you just passing through? Or visiting someone?”

He didn’t answer. His glassy eyes held a faraway look.

I waited a moment. Then a chill ran through me with an abhorrent thought attached.

“Were you hunting?” I mouthed, silently. He read my lips, then his eyes darted up. At the camera behind me that was recording our conversation. I held one finger to my lips. Pulled open the top drawer of my desk. Flipped the switch that turned off the camera.

“Now we can talk more freely.”

His gaze grew wild. His features were unfamiliar. Not from any pack or flurry that I knew. Vamp? Wolf? Maybe some kind of hybrid? No matter how hard I stared I couldn’t make out what he was. He was a stranger, and he was turning.

“I don’t want any trouble,” I said, standing up, staring him down. “I’ve worked this desk for too many years. Since these way stations were first set up. Before hospitals signed co-op agreements. I don’t know what you are, but I can guess you’ve got no other place to go.”

Mr. Rogers/Smith/Michael wiped a shaky hand across his pallid, sweaty face and swallowed. “I just need something to hold me over. To get me right while I figure out the rest.”

I shook my head, scoffing. “You sorry S-O-B.”

“You can’t tell me I’m your first unexpected guest! Have some decency! Have a heart!” The guy was frantic, shook both hands held out to me in prayer. I placed my hands on the desk and studied his morphing features. His dark eyes had sunk into his skull. His ears had elongated. His lips strained in a rictus grin showing all his pointed teeth.

My heart went out to him and his unfortunate situation.

“All right. Here’s what we’re going to do.”

I fished around inside the top drawer of my desk. Pulled out a weathered membership card. Stuck it under the red light of the card reader. The loud *beep* echoed against the sanitized walls. The man-creature leaped out of its seat and skulked, whimpering, into a far corner of the room.

The door to the vault slid open behind me. I beckoned to the creature in the corner, and it stood, looming over me as if it had grown several feet. Its scraggly head scraped the popcorn ceiling. Bits of white curd clung to its matted fur.

I slipped the membership card back into the drawer. Wanly smiled at the beast before me.

“I don’t know what you are,” I said, “but it’s obvious you need my help.” I motioned for the beast to go into the open vault first. The door closed behind us, and the red light went on.

The putrid odor of decaying viscera and tainted blood hit my nasal passages. I greedily breathed it in. My mouth watered

uncontrollably.

“You came to the right place,” I said. The man-beast loped ahead to the first blue vat overflowing with blood and organs. I joined along, keeping to my human form. “I don’t just work here. I’m a client, too.”

Most stories with a dystopian bent focus on the systems and structures of their fictional worlds; Rowley's choice to zoom in on the growing humanity of his characters instead makes for a uniquely strong and beautiful narrative.

Tomorrow Will Take Care

by TJ Rowley

TJ Rowley is a speculative fiction author and contributor of forthcoming pieces in The Ten Foot Crow and Heartlines Spec with a Master's degree in English literature. Rowley's dystopian novel Persistence of Vision was published by Dixi Books (London, UK) in 2023.

I don't know why One-point-Five took care of a cat. Each morning, as I listened to the cat drop down on the floorboards above my bedsit, fifteen minutes before its owner's footsteps began, I tried understanding the risk. The landlady evicted for lesser rule violations; just last week, Two-point-Five was evicted for forgetting to lock the tenement's front door at night.

I only knew of the others living in the tenement by their footsteps. Unit Two wore work boots, probably steel toes by their *thumps* above my basement bedsit. Unit One crept in late—often, when I was awake from one of my coughing fits. Three wore sneakers, even in the winter. Five had a kid who thundered across the room every morning.

I never saw any of them. Any what if I did? My cough would

soon take care of me.

When I came back from my shift, One-point-Five's stuff was piled in a corner of the dirt patch in front of the tenement. The pile was wide as I am tall, and came up to my chest. The dirt patch out front had probably been a garden once, but now all it had were skeletal stubs of young trees.

I looked over my shoulder, then scanned the windows of the tenement. The tenement was two storeys of concrete poured onto two storeys of much older brick. Once I was satisfied that nobody was watching, I hurried to the pile. Finding a broken chair leg, I set it aside as a club in case anyone came sniffing by. Though it was getting cold, and my cough would soon start, I prowled the pile for salvage. The repossessioners had already picked over One-point-Five's belongings for canned food, alcohol, pills, knives, things that could be sold. From the pile, I created a bundle from a patchwork bedsheet and filled it with the cutlery that might be worth something for the metal, the cleaners and solvents, the fabrics that could be repurposed. Frames emptied of their photographs would make kindling for my stove. The photos flitted to the ground like dead leaves.

I left the chair One-point-Five had visibly died in.

Then I heard it: the soft mewing of a cat from underneath the pile. I stooped to see from where in the pile the cat was hiding. By then the light was low. When I shifted some pieces of the pile, more as a curiosity, a meek growl came from underneath.

To hell with it. My fingers were raw from the cold, and I

wasn't going to risk infection from a bite. I went inside and didn't think further of the cat; tomorrow would take care of it. The next day's shift was long, and my back ached from moving the ex-clients from their beds to open them up for the new batch. These were No-Hopers, just watching their last, monotonous days pass, but who feared being alone when it happened. Some asked for my hand as the solution entered their veins; I never did.

Once folks entered the care home, they never left, and nor did I, not really; even as I trudged home, my mind was trapped by the image of the emptiness setting into my clients' eyes. Working at the final care home was my only option after I finished school. At the time, I declined an offer to join the army because I didn't want to see people die.

But as I took the steps up the stoop of the tenement building, my mental cocoon was pierced by lonely mewing from beneath the pile. Though my cough was worsening in the cold, I paused a moment to chirrup at the cat, who mewed in reply. I was not sure why, but I went back down the steps and spied an upside-down plastic bowl at the outer edge of the pile. Unthinkingly, I upturned the bowl before heading inside and locking the front door.

Leaving the bowl to collect rain for the cat was a hopeless gesture, I knew, yet the thought of the cat peeking out its head to drink stayed with me all night.

Despite my cough, which lodged in my throat like ice and kept out all warmth, I hurried up the basement stairs the next

morning to check the water bowl. To my dismay, the collected water was foamy – it must have been another sulphur shower during the night.

The cat didn't have a chance. It didn't even have a name. Best not to name it, for the same reason one does not name cattle: it is easier not to get attached to tomorrow. Each day of mine brought a new complement of bedridden clients lining hallways so cramped they made my bedsit look spacious. If we didn't treat the big things well, then it didn't make sense to spend time on the small. Yet I couldn't leave the water bowl polluted, and at the risk of being late for my shift, I cleaned out the bowl in my sink and left some treated water from my two-gallon drum. It felt like there was a point of light underneath that pile, smothered by the refuse, but awaiting discovery.

On my shift, I told one of the clients about the cat. The sound of my voice caught me by surprise, as usually I said nothing to the clients beyond my name and to ask them their final wishes. But that morning, I told the lady with thin white hair that I had a cat. This immediately softened her face, and she recounted that she had a barn cat as a child that could only be convinced to sleep inside their house during winter, where he slept on a stool beside the fireplace with the view of the birds out the window. A peace settled over the lady after she told me, like she was already there, beside that fireplace, kneeling by that stool.

I began to worry that the pile would attract rats, and I didn't need rats joining the roaches in my basement bedsit. But I wasn't

going to get myself cut on broken glass or an uncovered nail trying to move the pile, and the landlady wasn't going to fly in to move One-point-Five wreckage, was she? So that evening, I took the water bowl away.

Tomorrow would take of the cat.

The basement stairs the next day were labored and painful. The cold had sunk an icy needle between the vertebrae of my lower back. I stopped inside the front door, miserable to see the falling grey sleet. More than any other morning, I didn't want to go outside. I didn't want to see the pile, see what I had done.

But when I shuffled to the pile, there was a new bowl beside it, filled with clear water. I whipped my glance to the windows overlooking the dirt patch, seeing no one. But someone was taking care of the cat. Despite listening for footsteps that night, I couldn't identify the culprit.

The cat couldn't survive on just water. The next morning, I saved a crust of bread and eagerly left a bowl of thumb-nail-sized pieces. I hurried back from my shift to find the crusts eaten. When I returned with more crust pieces the next morning, I found a food bowl containing the remaining bones of a fish. The water bowl had been refreshed. Though I would be late for my shift, I puttered about the pile until I heard a tiny mew from underneath the pile. It felt like a *good morning* and permission to leave. When my manager dressed me down in his office for being late, I didn't mention that my cough made the walk slow. In truth, I wasn't thinking about defending myself; I was thinking about

the water bowl, picturing the cat drinking from it. I didn't even know what the cat looked like; I imagined him as toffee brown with gold flecks, and felt nostalgic for something I never had.

Over the next days, I found someone had laid a cat bed beside the pile. I scoured my room until I found a length of string, which I hung tantalizingly on a curtain rail over the biggest entrance to the pile. The cat met my chirrups with his own. Then someone left out a wooden box. Then another food bowl. And then a cardboard sign staked into the pile that read STIG'S DUMP. *Stig*. The cat finally had a name.

There was a snowstorm the next evening. The grew snow was a foot deep by the time I lugged myself home. My cheeks were windbitten and my back had given out, but I didn't want to stop. I had to see Stig.

The pile of One-point-Five's belongings stuck out of the snow. I kicked a path through the snow and flapped away the layer from the top of the pile. I chirruped for Stig. Nothing mewed back. I told myself that Stig ran off while I was away. But I stayed on the bottom step of the staircase into the tenement, chirruping hopefully to the darkening cold.

Heavy work boots came up to me on the staircase. It was Two; he was the only one who wore those boots in the building. I brushed the snow from the jacket and tried thinking of a lie for why I was freezing myself on the step, but Two just sat beside me.

We waited.

Then Four came and jiggled the string at the pile's entrance. "Swore I heard something," she said. I'd never heard her speak before.

I blew on my fingers to keep them warm. "I'll stay and listen," I heard myself say, surprised I had said it, even more surprised that she believed me.

Four returned an hour later with mugs of hot chicory. Five and her kid came out and squashed the cleanest bits of snow into a round body, shaped four paws, then pinched two ears into a domed head. "Friend for Stig," said the kid.

We all stayed out late, not saying much. Each hoped to hear a shuffling below the pile or see a hint of a paw or tail. It had been dark for some time when Two stood and patted me on shoulder. I sighed, and everyone went inside. But though it was against the rules, I propped the front door of the tenement open, just in case. Let the rats come.

Sounds outside my basement window woke me the next morning. It was the fastest I took the stairs, though my hips felt frozen from sitting on the staircase the night before. And there, outside, was everyone: Two in his work boots, Five and her kid. A man with a silver beard who had to be Six. They were dismantling the pile. Two carefully handed pieces of the top layer to Five, careful not to disturb the structure. Through methodical disassembly, we picked off the lengths of wood, curtain rail, the rotted chair, the sopping books, a china doll with a smashed face, an apron, yellow gloves, a lone boot with the sole hanging off, a

snow shovel worn to half a scoop.

And underneath, curled in a metal garden pail, was a sandy-colored cat with a clipped left ear, whose weary green eyes watched the strange hands come closer and closer. He shrank back into the pail. Four chirruped, Six made baby sounds, Five brought down a saucer of tinned fish, which her kid nudged closer, closer. Stig extended his neck out the pail and hungrily lapped at the saucer, and we gathered together, watching his little darting tongue.

I coughed harshly. “So that’s you, huh?” said Four. “The hacking coughs at night?”

“That loud, huh?” The sound of my own voice surprised me again.

We all exchanged names. Then the kid asked One-point-Five’s name. It was Wendy, said Two. Wendy now existed only in the image I reconstructed from her pile: a plastic Christmas wreath, the heavy clay pot with a dead shrub inside, an umbrella pocked with holes, a pair of skis, a walking frame missing a wheel, a pair of men’s dress shoes that were probably in perfect condition when she died. This was all that connected Wendy to the world. That, and Stig, who, having finished the dish, ventured a paw out the pail, then another.

Five’s kid offered his little hand, which Stig sniffed. Then Stig nudged his head into the kid’s open hand, and it felt like a sunburst piercing the winter. A laugh shook my insides and dispersed the lump in my throat like shaking the snow from boots.

Stig brought everyone together for ear scratches and belly rubs.

“Who’s going to take care of him?” said Five’s kid. Five rubbed him on the head.

“I guess we will,” I heard myself say. Until that moment, I hadn’t known there was a we at all.

I stayed out until late and was the last to head inside. As I retired for the night, I noticed the front door was propped open by a shoe, which I left in place. Inside, everyone had left their doors ajar, for when Stig was ready.

Mythology and inventive fantasy meet in Stonefield's brief but effective story of one person's battle with fate, regret, and the past. It's a battle that plays out dramatically and grippingly, despite its inevitable conclusion.

The Rings of Moirai

by **Jared Stonefield**

Jared Stonefield is a non-profit worker living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where there are unfortunately less dragons than he is accustomed to. He is currently querying literary representation for his debut novel, and you can follow his writing journey on Instagram at @jstonefieldwrites.

Atalanta of Lineage Zass had lived through one hundred and two solar-cycles, and she had many regrets.

She sailed to where the Rings slipped into the sea. All around Atalanta, the endless shallow waters were stained lilac and pink from a dying sunset, but the planetary Rings above her head were alive with light and power. Solar fires burned the curving fields of stone and ice, and they sparkled in a spectrum of gold, white, and blue. In the myths of the Vinx, the first colonists on the planet Moirai, the Rings were said to be a bridge between the ordinary and the supernatural. Though she'd scoffed at those legends once, Atalanta smiled grimly to herself now—there had been truth to them, after all.

Even though she'd lived longer than a century, Atalanta had

the sharp eyes of a woman eighty years younger and strength twice that of her sons. For three days and nights she'd speared the reefs below and pushed her gondola over the silent doldrums. She'd followed the downward path of the Rings, and what had started as a gray speck against her horizon had now become a gnarled, sprawling tree growing out of the shallows.

Atalanta stabbed her pole down and stopped the gondola before it reached the outermost branches. White petals, fallen from the temporal blooms that covered the tree, floated languidly on the water.

“Days are deep and life is vast.”

Atalanta's eyes darted between the labyrinthine branches.

“All is yet and all is past.”

Behind the pale petals, three men sat on low-hanging boughs that twisted out from the tree's trunk. All of them were beautiful, and shared the same copper-brown skin and ice-blue eyes. They each wore flowing white tunics, and although there was no wind in the doldrums, their clothes billowed around them like curtains caught in a storm.

“All is now from first to last.”

The old woman lifted her chin, and her gaze narrowed.

“The Fates,” Atalanta rasped. The men shared amused looks. One of them even chuckled.

“That name has not been spoken since the days of planet Earth,” he said. “Millions of years ago.”

“We are variants of the Fates,” said another.

“An echo of them,” added the last. “Rebounding between the stars.”

Atalanta studied the brothers, surprised to find that she could easily distinguish between them. She’d spent so long poring over the Holy Holograms and the Asteroid Murals that she could tell the oldest of the three—the man to her right, with the shortest hair and shortest beard—was Future. Present sat on the branch in front of her gondola, his eyes glinting mischievously, and Past sat on Atalanta’s left. Past was clearly the youngest, with jet-black hair that fell in waves down to his shoulders. Of the three Fates, he was the only one not smiling. He just stared at Atalanta with a somber, heavy look that sent shivers trickling down her spine.

“Why have you come?” Present asked.

“Have you come for me?” Future asked, his voice like a low rumble of thunder over the sea. His lips curled into a knowing smile. “Most come for me, wanting to know how they will die or how they should live.”

Atalanta didn’t answer. Instead, she stooped down and pulled up a heavy bow from the bottom of her gondola.

In the long-lost days of her youth, Atalanta had fashioned the bow out of debris from a ruined Dyson Sphere. She’d heated the iron of the weapon and curved it into shape herself. It had only been used twice since its creation, but now, with an arrow

she plucked from a satin bundle by her feet, Atalanta was ready to wield the bow one last time.

She notched the arrow and pointed its quantum tip at Past.

“Kill the past,” Atalanta whispered to herself, voice trembling as the metal of the bow creaked. “Change what was.”

Past slid off his low-hanging branch. His boots barely made a sound as they sunk into the shallows.

For decades, Atalanta had been losing herself to regret. She’d left ruins of people and planets in her wake, and she was haunted by the lives she’d taken and the life she’d given up. Nothing, not even brandies distilled at the edge of the universe, could drown out the echoing screams. Her guilt had only grown with each passing day, and the days had turned into years that poisoned her peace. Atalanta knew that nothing, not even the Fates, could stop her final days from coming, but this was her only chance to chisel away her history carved in stone.

Past started to step towards her. Atalanta adjusted her aim, and the charged proton core in the arrow’s shaft glimmered a threatening blue.

She’d taken so many lives. *What was one more now?*

But the way he looked at her—stolen stars below, he knew *everything*. He’d seen everything, from the things she’d done to the things others had done to her. It made her hate him.

“Atalanta—”

She let the arrow fly.

It whistled through Past's chest, and scarlet blossomed on his white robes. The young man toppled and swayed for a moment, lips parted in soundless pain, but the rest of the world stood still and breathless. Moments like centuries passed before he finally fell backwards and his body hit the water.

White petals floated languidly on the shallows under the tree.

Past sat on his branch. Present and Future turned to him and nodded solemnly, and Past's hand drifted down to his chest. His tunic was white again, but his skin remembered the warmth of his own blood trickling down it.

Atalanta's arrow had fulfilled its purpose, and then some. The arrow had gone right through Past, and it hadn't stopped flying—it flew until it pierced yesterday, and then yesteryear, and then every decade long-lived and hard-won kept in Past's shadow. Atalanta's arrow killed history itself. Timelines dropped dead, and a lethal blow was dealt to the lives of everyone who had ever lived.

Proud and clever as she was, she never could have known that she'd sent the shaft flying back into her own long life. Past had tried to tell Atalanta, in the seconds before she loosed the arrow...

When Past had fallen, all that had ever happened fell with him. In murdering him, Atalanta had murdered her journey to

find the Fates—and so there Past sat, unhurt from an assassination that had just occurred and yet never happened.

The Lord of Paradoxes sighed and turned to the place where the gondola had been, moments ago and never before. The reflection of the Rings glistened in the water.

Ten-Hove takes you along for an action-filled ride with his modern-day swashbuckler Dale Rathbun, and it's exactly what it promises to be: An experience. And before it's over, even Rathbun may find one or two things he wasn't prepared for.

The Dale Rathbun Experience

by Gary Ten-Hove

Gary Ten-Hove is a former reporter, editor, and technical writer. He lives in Calgary, Canada.

He was the man The Man hated. He robbed the banks and jewelry stores of the rich and posted videos of his exploits on YouTube for the poor. His signoff was a big old finger for the law dogs chasing him and their own tails. He was Number One on the Most Wanted List. He was Dale Rathbun, subversive and celebrated.

He was also sitting in an Excellente next to his girl Bev. She thought she was sitting next to Don Austin, a trust fund wastrel she was trying out on a road trip before deciding to keep him.

She also thought he bought her girl-next-door act, as though her shaved temples, flame tattoos and nose piercings were just affectations. She was trying to be Mrs. Trust Fund Wastrel.

Dale was charmed. She would be the Bonny for his Clyde.

Ah, the Excellente. A bit down-market for Don Austin, But

right for Bev, no-money woman of the people. That was good, because Don's money was as phony as he was, all but \$3,733 Dale stole yesterday.

So "Don" was slumming, sitting on a red leatherette stool at the counter, drinking coffee from a sturdy white mug and eating bacon and eggs and pancakes, the humid air filled with the buzz of conversation and the clink of cutlery.

No tablecloths at the Excellente, but there were TVs and—what was this?

Dale pointed with one manicured finger. "Look. It's that fellow what's his name. The Robin Hood one."

Bev looked up, still talking about parasailing and climbing at some hot spring resort, to see a bank robbery. Dale's bank robbery from yesterday. Bev was getting her thick red mane shortened by an eighth of an inch that morning and that gave him just enough time to withdraw some funds.

The silent tube jump-cut to a split screen, one feed sourced from a security camera, the other from Dale's own pinhole camera he'd posted afterward. The security camera was black and white and high-def: nice.

Out the gun, down the crowd, jump the counter, fill the bag, run outside. It ate less than two minutes of airtime. A flawless execution of the Dale Rathbun Experience. He made it look easy.

The screens didn't show Dale charming a teller. He always

picked a plain one when he could—they responded better. Pretty ones just didn’t appreciate his smiles and compliments and general magical Daleness.

God, he looked great.

Dale looked around and Bev was already excising a square millimeter of her pancake. She ate it without syrup or butter.

“So, Medicine Springs,” she said. “Let’s get out of that car. You ever parasailed?”

What? Her response jolted him. The Dale Rathbun Experience rated better applause than this indifference.

“I love this guy,” he said. “Who robs banks and posts videos about it?”

Bev smiled at him. His heart melted. Again.

“You’ve got some kind of man-crush on this Dave guy.”

Ouch. “He’s a fantasy figure,” Dale explained. The Don persona had a liberal arts degree, so a little education had to come out.

Actually, Dale had scanned some Wikipedia articles about philosophy, psychology and history during long insomnia nights. What he knew now was probably as much as the graduates remembered after a few years anyway.

Bev looked blank. “You lost me.”

Dale seized the chance to lecture. “See, guys believe they’re rebels, they’re Dillinger, Robin Hood, faster and stronger and smarter and braver than anyone, and sticking it to the Man.”

“Everybody’s above average,” she said.

“It’s a fantasy.” For all but him. “So everybody wants to rob the bank, everybody wants to jump over the counter and scoop up the money, then run away and brag about it.”

Bev pointed her fork at a typical well-fed Excellente customer, handing his Visa to a girl at the cash register. She looked like she belonged in junior high.

“He couldn’t jump over the curb,” Bev said. “And he thinks he’s Dillinger?”

“In his heart, he’s every hero and lover from every movie,” Dale said. “He probably thinks he could fight a grizzly.”

A lot of guys actually thought that. Not Dale. He’d fought a raccoon once he’d surprised in a dumpster, shortly after he’d broken up with high school. The raccoon won. He still had the scars.

“You too?” Bev asked him. “You want to be Dillinger?”

Oh, the temptation. “We could be Bonny and Clyde, roaming the nation, pulling jobs, wildcats in a nation of fat cats.”

Bev stabbed a bite of egg at him. “You are an indoor cat. You’re a five-star room service cat. You really want to be an alley cat, eating out of the garbage?”

That cut to the quick. Stores and restaurants throw out some amazing stuff. Homeless teens know this. So do raccoons. But neither brags about it.

“I guess it’s not your fantasy,” Dale said.

Bev smiled. “I’m living my fantasy.”

Dale sighed happily and drank coffee. “And if I did crimes like this Dale whosit?”

“Don’t ever change, Don. You’re perfect the way you are.”

Dale preened.

“And if you were some loose cannon like that, I’d get off the ship before you sank it.”

Well. Dale kept quiet and Bev returned to her breakfast as the restaurant buzzed around them.

A dilemma. Bev thought she was a straight citizen. Dale wasn’t and he bet she wasn’t, either.

So he could leave her or stay with her. If he left her, the time to go was now. Just pop out to the men’s and never come back. There were lots of women, and he could replace her in the next town.

Lots of women, but only one Bev.

If he stuck with her, did he tell her or not? He could set her up in a house and lie about travelling a lot.

No. She was too smart for that.

Or he could tell her and not tell her. Hint that he was bent and leave her to carefully not know more.

But that wouldn’t work for him. Damn, but didn’t this Bonny and Clyde thing sound good. They could live large for years before they aged out of the criminal life, years of adrenaline and passion and motion and joy. A Dionysian danger-blast with no past and no future, only a long dynamic present. Donny and Bev.

Later, sure, years from now they could settle down, go straight. Bev would fuss in the kitchen and he'd mow the lawn and they'd live on fantasy and memory. Dale was fuzzy about what domestic bliss looked like.

Or maybe they'd go forever.

He looked at Bev, who was chattering above the restaurant noise about the hot spring. A week in a cabin.

“You think Rathbun could ever do that?” he asked her.

“Who?”

“Find a girl like you and just settle down.”

“If she were a girl like me, she'd write to him in prison. That one's looking for Lorelei Lee.”

Dale had never heard of this Lori chick, but he got the idea. Did Bev have an inner Lori? Some wild woman yearning to get away?

Too right she did. Good girl Bev was as phony as high-culture Don.

The plan formed in his head. He'd show her the life and dare her to walk away.

This wasn't going to be bank robbery the Dale Rathbun way. This would have a real audience of one.

“Let's hit the bank before we go,” he said.

“You're into the hot spring?” She sounded surprised and pleased.

Two weeks in some resort sounded motionless and stupid, but they weren't going.

"Let's just get to the bank by ten."

There was more to the Dale Rathbun method than the lucky audience saw on the net. He spent hours driving by banks, rolling past stores, walking through malls, sitting on benches and noting police patrols, busy periods and cash deliveries. He'd already done the work here, so no need to bore Bev.

An armored truck refilled cash machines on a regular schedule. It would trundle along, dispensing bricks of money for bank machines: thousands for the stores and malls and tens of thousands for the machines in the banks. He'd followed it twice.

Naturally, there were all kinds of guards with guns and so it wasn't really a Dale Rathbun kind of job. But there was a way...

Dale paid the junior high student at the till. She had a wedding ring. Was Dale getting old? Naw: she just looked young.

They walked back to the hotel. Dale grabbed his bag, a nice hardshell, very right for Don Austin.

Bev liked to nest. She had a half-dozen bags and had to empty all of them at every opportunity. Packing again took longer than a church service and was just as sacred. He'd offered to help, but only she could do it right.

He left her to it and popped down to the front desk and checked out, then headed to the garage.

The still new-smelling hatch of their Escalade held a duffel

bag, olive drab, scuffed and greasy. Inside were other canvas bags, mostly holding car junk: wax, rags, first aid kit, air compressor, even a wind-up radio.

And in one of them, a shotgun, pistol, tear gas canister and gas mask, and some license plates.

He paused as he contemplated the tools of his trade. Was this wise?

Well, no. Nothing Dale did was wise. Clever, sure, even ingenious. But as stupid as base jumping, and even more fun.

He switched plates, stuck his stuff in his gym bag and pulled around front where the taxis were supposed to go, a little down from the dark red awning over the entrance.

He leaned on the hood, enjoying the mild fall air and sunshine and watched the cars go by, listening to traffic reports on his phone.

It wouldn't do to be early, so no rush. Ten minutes later, he was starting to get anxious about his schedule. Ten minutes after that, and he knew he'd never catch up with the armored car at the best spot, the bank.

The doorman came over. "Sir? Is there are problem?"

"She's packing," Dale said.

The doorman had heard this before. He nodded and returned to his red carpet.

Minutes crept by and shadows of the spindly trees swept across the sidewalk. Dale wanted to go inside and see what the

problem was. But he didn't want to leave the car, so full of interesting toys and gadgets, either.

Finally, just as Dale was ready to say screw it, and the doorman was about to come over and tell him to move it, out came Bev with one of those carts piled with luggage. She was holding a coffee from the restaurant.

“Sorry!” she said. “You were supposed to help with the luggage. I had to call for a luggage thingie.”

She looked great. They could work on her timing. He fired the bags, seven now, into the bag, then had to fetch back out one that she wanted in the car.

Dale flipped to see who drove. Bev, of course.

“Hah! In you go, Donny. We'll be there by three.”

“Go to 2411 Brower, would you? There's a building I want to look at.” Don was in real estate. Dale had the cash delivery schedule in his head.

She poked at her phone and took off. They passed the armored truck on the way. Perfect.

The target was a convenience store on the corner of two busy roads. It had four red-and-white gas pumps and a dozen parking spaces in a 100x100 lot.

“Park there,” Dale said. “Nose out.”

“Hey?” She didn't like micromanaging.

He pointed to the armored truck waiting at the light. “He'll come in here and then backing and filling will be a pain for you.”

“Gosh, you’re smart.”

She parked and a moment later, the truck rolled in.

Don grabbed his gym bag. “I’ll only be a few minutes.” He kissed her and entered the store.

There were only two cameras, one for the pumps and one for the till. He wasn’t going near either, so he didn’t fuss about them.

The store was the usual thing, aisles lined with crap for people and their cars, with coolers along the walls. The bank machine was in the back, next to the short corridor leading to the washrooms, right next to a case full of juice bottles.

Dale took his time looking at the juice, and, because he couldn’t help it, looking the place over. Brown water stains on the white suspended ceiling tiles. Tsk. Some of the patterned gray floor tiles had lifted, too. Maybe not such a great investment for Don.

The armored guards were in no more hurry than Bev. In a moment, the clerk was going to come over and ask him to buy or move.

The door opened. A slender, tough-looking man in a grey uniform with a black pistol held it and a fat woman, also in grey, also armed, walked through carrying a green metal cash box, like a small toolbox, with a big seal like a cable tie run through the fastener.

Dale’s heart sped up. It always did, just before.

In the box were stacks of twenties, probably seven or eight hundred of them, weighing less than two pounds, maybe three with the box. Fifteen grand, probably.

If he'd been able to hit the truck when they were refilling the machines at the bank, he'd have been able to steal five times as much. Bank ATMs just held more than these little retail ones.

No time for regrets.

Showtime. Every eye in the store was on the guards and money. Dale crouched, opened the gym bag and slipped on the gas mask. It smelled like rubber, and the left lens was smeared a little. Breathing became an effort. He donned his glasses with the pinhole camera and started recording.

Dale took out his tear gas grenade, pulled the pin, counted to two, and tossed it overhand.

The damn thing bounced off a pile of bright orange detergent boxes and landed in the display of magazines. Nobody noticed but the slender guard.

No matter. Billows of thick white smoke hissed out. The grenade was loud. The tear gas seemed to fill the place immediately. The video quality was going to suck.

Everyone's eyes slammed shut, tears started, their noses gushed amazing amounts of snot and their skin burned from the acidic fumes.

They must have felt on fire. Dale did—his hands were exposed. No matter. He could see.

He could see flames starting up on the magazine rack. That grenade must have been hot.

He heard metal hit the floor. The fat guard had dropped the box. Where where where where? The place filled with white and black smoke and the fire alarm shrilled.

Dale dropped, frantic, hands sweeping. It was clearer on the floor, but not much.

Water hit him like a shower. A cold, nasty, dirty shower. The sprinkler system had let go.

There! Under the chocolate display. Dale grabbed the box and dropped it in his gym bag.

Which way to the egress? Not the front. He recognized the bottom of the juice dispenser. Keep that on his left, and straight forward, trip over a mop and bucket and there—the emergency exit, red light completely invisible.

Dale pushed it open and fell into cool, clean air.

Slam door. Mask off and into the bag. Sprint around the red brick store, past the dumpsters and up to the Escalade.

Bev was standing, staring in shock at the scene out front, guards and clerks and customers puking on the sidewalk and asphalt around the big white armored truck. Sirens sounded, coming closer. Lots of them.

“Don! Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine.” He yanked open a rear door and fired the gym bag in.

She went to hug him but her hands flew to her face. “Oh, god, you stink.”

“Let’s go.”

“Is there a fire?”

The moment of truth. “I robbed it. Get in the car.”

She froze. “You—”

“Get in the car. I’ll explain, but get in the car now.”

“Don, you—”

“It’s Dale Rathbun, and I robbed this place, and you’re in it up to your highlights, so get in the car.”

Bev deflated. “Of course. Too good to be true.” She took the car key out of her pocket and showed it to him.

He snatched at it and missed. “Give it,” he said. “This is your life, Bev. You were born for this.”

She tossed it onto the roof of the store.

“Bev!”

“It’s been my whole life, Dale. I ain’t gonna do this no more.”

“Bev!”

Sirens sounded, coming closer.

“It’s Angie. I was lying. I won’t write to you in prison. Best you run now, boy.” She crossed her arms and sat on the hood.

Dale sprinted for a car at the gas pump and later, at his trial, everybody got a big laugh out of him trying to start it and then driving into a police car.

She never wrote as he did his time the Dale Rathbun way.
She even married one of the cops who arrested him. Ouch.

You just can't tell about some people.

Re-imagined fairy tales are a modern-day staple of popular fiction, and for good reason. Tevlin's enjoyable twist on Red Riding Hood is a prime example, giving the old story an edge and some action that makes for a quick, compelling read.

The Better to Burn You With

by **Melanie Tevlin**

Melanie Tevlin is an electrician's apprentice in St. Louis. Her first short story was just selected by Graveside Press, the Tiny Terrors line.

It didn't look anything like Nan, thought Red. It wasn't even trying.

Still, she tried to hide her horror when it opened the door. “Nan!” she cried, holding out the tupperware. “Happy Birthday!”

It paused, looking over Red. When it decided she posed no threat, it tried to smile. It bared its teeth in a poor imitation, chitinous skin stretching over its face. It was molded to look like Nan, but Red could see the black seams where its new exoskeleton hadn't quite come together.

It blinked. “Dear,” it said, “how nice to see you.” It sounded like Nan from a tinny radio, interrupted by clicks and hisses.

They smiled at each other, and neither of them meant it.

“Please come in,” said the Nan-thing. Red followed it into the house. It was wearing one of Nan's church dresses over a pair

of sweatpants. Snow boots covered its feet.

“Look,” said Red, holding up the tupperware. “I made you a cake.”

It stopped, looking at the cake pan. Red could see its nostrils flare, sniffing. These things loved sugar, almost as much as they loved people. Red wondered if sugar offered some sort of nutrition, or if it was just a tasty snack. She wondered the same thing about people.

Nothing in Nan’s house seemed out of the ordinary, except the smell. This meant it had started building a nest, probably in Nan’s basement.

“Nan, can I make us some tea?” asked Red. “You know how much I love your tea.”

“Yes, dear,” said Nan-thing. It was holding the cake pan in two scrawny hands, sniffing. It salivated, yellow-green fluid peeking from the corner of its lips.

Red started water to boil and set two plates at the table. She chatted, trying to put the thing at ease, but not engaging with it too much. Too many questions, too much conversation, and it would falter. If it faltered, it would get afraid. And that’s when it would attack. The whole thing reminded Red of the westerns she used to watch with Grandpa, when he was still alive. Two gun-slingers, each with their twitching finger an inch away from the trigger, waiting for the clock to strike.

Red wanted to be the first one to shoot. She poured the

boiling water over the tea bags, then brought the cups to the table. “Do you want your medicine in the tea, Grandma?”

“Medicine?” it clicked. It blinked its yellowing eyes. It had already started on the cake, holding two fistfuls of vanilla crumbs. Pink icing circled its mouth.

They weren’t very smart, thought Red. Smart enough to put a dent in the population, but not smart enough to destroy it. The few remaining were cowardly and frail. Like this one.

“Silly Nan,” said Red. “Mom said you might forget again.”

“Yes, my dear,” it said, sucking icing off its fingers. “In the tea.”

Red pulled a small brown bottle from her pocket. She poured thick syrup into one mug, stirring. She did this at the table. Best not to seem secretive, or it might refuse to drink.

The Nan-thing looked suspicious. “Best you have some too, my dear,” it said. It placed its hands on the table. The nails were too long and too dark. So were its teeth.

Red nodded, expecting this. She poured the syrup into her tea as well, trying not to let the fear show on her face. It was going to hurt. If she had to hold it in her mouth, it was going to burn. If she held it too long, she might even lose a tooth. If she swallowed it, she had less than a minute to throw it up. Digesting it was not an option. But for Nan, her real Nan, she would do anything.

Red smiled. “Happy Birthday, Nan.” She raised her mug to her lips.

The Nan-thing did the same, watching her. Red could see herself reflected in the amber membranes stretched over its black pupils.

The tea's odor burned her nostrils. She took a sip, and made a happy little hum. Behind her lips, she felt the liquid bubble and sting.

When Red smiled, the Nan-thing drained its mug in one gulp, letting off a gaseous sound when it was finished. Something between a burp and a hiccup.

Satisfied, Red spat the noxious liquid out, coughing. The creature watched, and looked at its empty cup, then back to Red. Red smiled again, this time nastily.

"Great party," she said.

The thing leapt. Red fell back, her heart racing. She had forgotten the speed and strength of these things when they stopped hiding. It flew onto the table, hissing, knocking the dishes onto the floor with a spectacular crash. Its face, its *real* face, tore through the fake skin like paper. Sharp yellow teeth protruded from its mouth. With an ear-splitting screech, it opened its jaws and leaned forward. Red felt the heat of its breath, gagged at the sour stench.

"My, my," she said. "What big teeth you have."

The thing opened its mouth even wider, and Red braced herself for the feeling of stalactites puncturing her skin.

But the Nan-thing froze.

I've got you, thought Red. You nasty, smelly, grandma-stealing piece of shit.

She could hear the tick of the kitchen clock. Then, the Nan-thing reared back, its hands clawing at its throat. It wheezed and choked and grasped at the air. As Red watched, clouds of steam burst from its nostrils, then its mouth, and eventually through the small holes appearing in its thorax. Black bile splattered on the floor.

What a horrible way to go, thought Red. She almost felt sorry for it. Even as it crumbled, and the fake skin melted away to the horrible black exoskeleton underneath, its spindly claws reached out for her, until there was nothing but a pile of keratin bones on the kitchen floor.

The cabinet under the sink opened, and the real Nan peeked her head out. “It is over?” she asked.

Red nodded.

Nan crawled out, covered in bruises and filth, but otherwise unharmed. Red ran into her arms, burying her face in her shoulder. She was still not quite as tall as her grandmother. Nan gripped her tightly, burying her nose in Red’s hair.

“My dear, brave Red,” she whispered. She lifted Red’s face gently, inspecting her. “Your poor mouth. What was it?”

“Sodium hydroxide.” Red spat in the sink, thick globs of drool laced with red. “Good old reliable Drano.”

Nan looked around her kitchen at the shattered teacups,

the wasted cake. “This one was bigger than the last one,” she said. “There will be others.”

Red bent down to pick up a ceramic shard. She turned the piece over in her hand, watching how the sharp edge glinted in the faint kitchen lamp. “When they come, We’ll be ready for them.”

The dark, tense, and ominous mood that settles over this riff on Greek history and mythology effectively foreshadows its dramatic ending, and Vician's engaging plot and strong imagery make its otherworldly setting come alive.

After Thermopylae

by Ted Vician

Ted Vician is a full-time engineer and aspiring speculative fiction writer. Originally from the Chicago area, he is now mostly in Orlando.

King Leonidas ached all over, but especially his neck. The battles had been fierce and had strained his body to its limits. His arms were covered in cuts and bruises where his shield had been strapped to it. He saw his guards and advisors scattered near him, still asleep. He stood and kicked the closest one. “Wake up! The Persians will not find us sleeping.” The man did not stir.

Leonidas picked up his spear and dented shield. His helmet and sword were nowhere to be found. He looked up and around. Dark, stony peaks surrounded them and met a low grey sky. Only a narrow pass led towards the vermillion glow of a low sun. He did not know if it was rising or setting. The wind screamed between the peaks, then quieted to a whisper, the last breath from a dying man.

He thumped another man with the butt of his spear. “Up and to arms, Spartans!” he shouted. None of them moved.

The oracle had been wrong. She had told him that a Spartan king would die to hold the Persians back. Yet Leonidas of Sparta was alive, standing among the bodies of hundreds of his men and allies. An ignominious fate for a Spartan, to live instead of dying with his kin and friends. He envied even the dead Persians, who had at least met their ends as soldiers, pierced by Spartan spears.

I can never return to Sparta. People will think me a coward for surviving, he thought, realizing he could not stay on this bloody battlefield either. *I must find the Persian army and make the oracle's words true, by dying to stop the horde before it ravages Sparta and the rest of Greece.* Leonidas started walking towards the gap between the mountains.

He staggered for a moment, as if his body was remembering how to walk. Then his strides became sure, and he walked to the pass between two mountains. *They look like giants, standing watch. See how that one grips a stone in his hand?*

He shook his head. *Am I a fool or a child, imagining shapes in rocks?* He continued climbing, scrambling up the steep slope towards the gap that his warriors had held against the Persian army, as numerous as ants from a hill. They could not be far; an army that size moved slowly and left plenty of tracks. Leonidas would find them and kill Xerxes himself, or die in the attempt.

He heard a terrible scream far above. Wheeling in the sky was a great golden eagle. *Is it the vengeance of Zeus, seeking Pro-*

metheus? Yet, Leonidas' own forebear, Heracles, had killed Zeus' eagle and freed Prometheus centuries before. The eagle circled again, then dipped its wings. It turned towards Leonidas and dove. Its fierce cry froze him, like a field mouse before a hawk. At the last moment, he lifted his shield and ducked. Talons like daggers scored his shield and nearly pulled it off his arm. Leonidas was buffeted by the wind from the great bird's wings as it rose back into the sky.

It circled as it rose, turning its head to watch him. He hefted his spear in his right hand and raised his shield with his left. He crouched slightly, covering most of his body with the shield.

Like one of Zeus' thunderbolts, it plunged from the sky. This time, Leonidas thrust his spear upwards with the strength of his whole body, uncoiling in one motion from legs to spear hand, piercing it before its talons could reach his shield. Its great weight and speed shattered the spear, but the coppery point remained embedded in its chest. It cried in pain and flapped its powerful wings to rise back into the air. As it struggled away, Leonidas saw the red drops of blood falling to the ground. He was sure it would not fly for long.

The spear was torn from his grasp when he struck the eagle. The broken pieces of the haft lay on the ground in front of him. He still had his shield, so he would face this dark land unarmed but not unprotected. With a last glance at the retreating eagle, he resumed his march and his search for signs of the Persian army's passing.

As he crested the gap between the mountains, before him lay an open land, golden-red in the sun that stood on the edge of the horizon. A narrow, rocky trail led down from the mountain into the trees below and then to the valley, he hoped. He started down the steep trail. As it leveled slightly, he heard a rattle and crash from above. He moved quickly to the side and held his shield above his head. Small rocks clanged from the shield as larger ones rolled down the path to a stop well below. *My giant friend wishes me ill after all.* Leonidas picked his way slowly down the slope, keeping an eye above.

From the pass above, the forest looked green, but as Leonidas entered, he saw the trees were charred by fire. The scent of smoke filled his nose with every breath. Only a thin green canopy at the tops of the trees dappled the gray sky. As he entered the shadowy darkness, he saw movement on the edge of his vision. Was that a slender arm visible on the edge of a nearby trunk, a woman's arm? No, just a branch with a few twigs at the end. But there it was again, a lithe form disappearing behind another blackened tree. "I mean you no harm, Lady of the Wood. Are you mortal or one of Artemis' wood-nymphs?"

He followed her, climbing over rotting fallen logs; their broken limbs crushed under their own weight. *No dryad would stay here. She would return to her mistress and beg for revenge on whoever did this to her grove.*

The ash stuck to his skin as he sweated and clambered over and through the ruined forest. He tried to brush the gray grime

from his skin but only smeared it. *This foul forest colors me like the rest of this empty horrible land.* He looked up and saw her only a few paces ahead. “Wait, fair one, please. I need your help.” She stopped and looked back at him. Her leaf-green eyes were the only light as she stood in the dark shadows cast by the burnt trees.

“Lady, where are we? Who has done this terrible thing to your wood? If it were the Persians, point me where they went, and I shall avenge you along with my city and my soldiers.”

She did not answer. Leonidas reached for her as gently as he could. “I offer you my strength, such as it is, to right this wrong.”

As he touched her hand, she shrieked and burst into a cloud of smoke and ash. His hand was resting on an oak’s charred trunk. A broken branch lay on the ground. There was no sign of her now, just the edge of the forest, farthest from the mountains.

Emerging from the trees, Leonidas looked out at the valley and the horizon beyond. “Helios drives his chariot slowly today. I have walked far, yet the sun stays. If Dienekes were still alive, he would beg the Persian archers to return to shade us again,” said Leonidas to himself. He laughed at his old friend’s jest in the face of danger and missed such companionship.

In the distance, he saw a walled city he did not recognize. The walls were bloody red. In the center, rose a tower taller than any temple Leonidas had seen, like a mountain but too sharply peaked. It was a narrow spire of angular black granite, rooted by bridges of bronze to the lower towers that surrounded it. Near the

top, a large window shone white, lit from within brightly enough to outshine the crimson sun. It was many stadia away. Leonidas walked towards the city, looking for a gate to enter. The lord of this city could be an ally against Xerxes, or at least aid Leonidas in his quest.

Though it had appeared far away, Leonidas arrived in little time. As he approached, he saw the wall was ivory white. It had been dyed red by the low sun. *Gods! The wall is covered in bones!* He circled until he found a wooden door, held together with bronze straps and nails. Not a grand main gate, just a door large enough for a person to enter. Hardly fit for a visiting king, but what was Leonidas king of, now? His army was gone, yet he lived. He knocked and the door opened silently. No soldier stood watch behind it.

As he entered, he realized the wall was not covered in bones; it was made of them. Millions of bones, stacked to form this necropolis, a macabre city of the dead. He looked behind him. He had taken only a few steps, but the gate was a red dot, letting in a little light from the sun. Then it closed, and the cave of bones plunged into darkness.

A chittering, clattering noise came from all around. Leonidas put his right hand on the wall to steady himself and began walking down the hall, not sure if he was heading back to the door he had entered, or farther into the city. The wall seemed to grasp at him, reaching for the cuts on his hands and arms. “Blood,” chattered the tongueless mouths, “give us your blood.”

They had tasted him and wanted more.

Bony hands grasped his right hand, pulling him into the wall. “Blood! Blood and bones to build the walls!” cried the empty skulls. Leonidas pulled back with all his strength, but he was losing. Dozens of undead arms were dragging him in.

He swung his round bronze shield with his left arm, using its edge to chop into the wall, crushing the bony hands that held onto his right hand and forearm. Splintered bones fell to the floor. He swung the shield again. Each blow loosened the grip on his arm. With a few more heavy blows from his shield, he pulled loose and stumbled free.

He staggered forward and crossed some unseen threshold. The bones gave way to stone walls. A white light blossomed, revealed by a door at the end of the hall. Once again, he looked back. The bones were gone. The hall was smooth grey stone in each direction, one way leading into darkness and the other to the light from the open door. Leonidas walked towards the light and entered a large white room. In the center was a large fire that cast orange light on the shadowed dark furniture, shadows cast by a brighter light across the room.

By a large window on the opposite side of the room stood a man. Tall, white, and blond, beyond handsome, beautiful like Eros, radiant like Apollo. As the fire flickered, the shadows moved and he changed. He shaded brown, black, then red, and returned to blond as he emerged from the drapes around the balcony. Dust motes floated from the drapes as they moved, sparkling in the

bright light. Leonidas thought he heard soft voices cry out as each mote disappeared in a wisp of smoke as the light struck it.

“Your land and your polis are strange to me, king,” said Leonidas. “I am weary, having fought the Persians to save Sparta and Greece. My army is gone. I am all who remain. Please aid me to find whatever remains of the Persian army, that I may stop them before they reach Sparta.”

“King Leonidas, mighty warrior and general, welcome. Our city is unfamiliar to you because you have never been here before, but your army has watered our fields and sent us many residents.”

“Lord Hades?” Leonidas bowed his head. “My apologies, I did not recognize you.”

“Hades, yes, we were him once. It has taken you a long time to get to us. Much will be new to you.

“We must apologize to you, King of Sparta. We have been rude; please, allow us to introduce ourself. We are Lucifer Morningstar, king of the Netherworld. Overseer of Hell. Tonight, you dine at our table.”
