



THE BOOK SMUGGLERS'

HUGO AWARD PACKET

2017

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Boldly Go.

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How to Piss Off A Failed Super-Soldier



JOHN CHU

RAINDROPS SHATTERED AGAINST AITCH

THE way bullets were supposed to but never did. Water splashed with his every step. The bags of rice slumped against his shoulders like freshly dead bodies. Protein bars jostled inside the disintegrating paper bag clutched to his chest. He was not quiet as he jogged home with his groceries. Today's assassin, undoubtedly hiding in the blind alley just ahead, would hear him before he'd hear their heart beat. Because no one had tried to kill him yet today, each time he neared an alley, he simply assumed someone would be there to try. This time, he was right.

A woman, braced against a dumpster, leveled a weapon at Aitch. He made her as a Drip, an agent working for DRP, right away. The government agency was always testing their latest technologies on him. Long, thin, and silver, the weapon emitted an ultrasonic hum when she triggered it.

Aitch dropped the protein bars and pitched his bags of rice into the line of fire. A bright flash and the smell of toasted rice filled the air. He leapt through the cloud of rice ash toward the Drip. His clothes ignited from the sheer speed. Smoke trailed behind him. Smoldering jeans and T-shirt branded his skin. Rice ash swirled away in all directions.

He landed, scattering gravel which flew in a spray that pinged dents into the dumpster. Pain shuddered up his legs. The sudden stop broke his ankles and ripped the ligaments and tendons from his calves and thighs. As he buckled to the ground, he ripped the weapon out of the Drip's hands.

Jay emerged from the dumpster's shadow. He tapped the woman's neck. She collapsed.

Aitch shot her to test the weapon. She disappeared in a quiet puff. Then he shrugged and shot Jay. His younger brother merely glowed for an instant then looked cross at him. It'd been worth a try.

Jay pulled the weapon out of Aitch's grip, crushed it, then tossed it into the dumpster along with any hope Aitch had for escape. The idea that DRP's latest ultimate weapon might distract Jay long enough for Aitch to crawl away and hide until morning seemed silly in retrospect. The symbionts that made Aitch too strong for his own good would have fixed him up by then, though.

"She had no idea you were behind her, did she... No, how could she have." Aitch was calm. He'd always figured that Jay would eventually do to him what DRP couldn't. "A normal younger brother would have just called me."

"And a normal older brother would pick up when I do. It shouldn't have to be a production to keep you in one spot long enough to talk to you."

Rain-soaked, Jay's clothes were plastered to his skin. He had the look and air of an especially broad, muscular chorus boy cast in a Bob Fosse musical. Unlike any dancer though,

Jay had once juggled motorcycles on a dare. Mom had fixed all of Aitch's flaws when she'd engineered Jay. Aitch couldn't look at him without seeing the lean, tall and elegant being he, himself, should have been. The sight of Jay hurt more than his own broken legs.

"I'm ready, brother." Aitch flattened himself against the gravel. The rain struck him like rusty nails. "Just kill me quickly."

"That's not why I'm here." Jay crouched next to Aitch. "Mom's dying—"

"Too bad her favorite child isn't a promising internist who can also do whatever he wants to any living being he touches. Oh wait..."

Jay looked cross again. "I have my limits, brother."

"Kill me now and you can fulfill a dying woman's wish." Aitch mimed a knife stabbing his chest again and again.

"She's never actually wanted you dead." Jay caught Aitch's fist. "And, now, she just wants to say goodbye."

Aitch's legs wrenched back into place. New skin covered his body. Rain now slid harmlessly off him. Aitch stood then nearly doubled over in pain. His hunger pangs were worse than ever. For whatever reason, his symbionts had kicked into overdrive.

"And what I want, of course—" Aitch forced himself back up "—is for her final edicts to rule the rest of my life."

The symbionts in Aitch's head turned even vague suggestions from anyone he loved into unyielding commands. It didn't matter whether they were family or the Drips who'd raised him. His mother had designed those symbionts and infected Aitch herself when he was still an infant. Jay had long ordered Aitch to be himself, but she never had. Aitch had autonomy around Jay. Around her, he was helpless.

"No, what you want is no more broken bones, no more torn muscles when you exert yourself. Mom and I have worked out

how to make your symbionts give you a body that even you won't be strong enough to break. No more Drips hunting you down. Why would they bother?"

Although Aitch thought he was already no more a danger to society than anyone else, DRP obviously thought differently. If he were ordinary, though, too weak to break his own body like Jay said, even DRP would see that he was no danger to anyone. They wouldn't bother testing their latest technologies on him because he'd be too easy to kill. Grudgingly, he had to admit Jay was right again. Jay was never wrong about anything.

"So I have to visit Mom to get—"

"Oh, no. I made that fix to your symbionts while I fixed your legs." Jay's face settled into its customary smile. "They'll have reworked your body by the time we reach Maryland."

"Why am I going to Maryland?"

"We're visiting a DRP archive on the way to Mom's hospital. I need you to cover me while I liberate Mom's research."

"But I destroyed it all." As a child, Aitch had made sure DRP could never create anyone like him again. By then, though, Mom had already engineered Jay. Not only had Mom gotten Jay right, she'd kept infecting him a secret. Not even Aitch realized at first.

"No, you destroyed millions of dollars of equipment that officially never existed. The government then buried all record of their failed super-soldier research project, including Mom's notes. For now, what you need is food." He patted Aitch's back. "Come on, I have clothes in the car and a diner is just a short jog away. My treat. We need to talk about what the symbionts are doing to your head. Mom and I think we have a fix for that, too."

Aitch sighed. He'd drive spikes through his eyes if that would fix the symbionts that messed with his brain.

Water puddled under Aitch's and Jay's trench coats hanging from the coat rack screwed to the side of their booth. The waitress set Aitch's fifth and sixth hot turkey sandwiches in front of him. The empty plates for sandwiches one through four sat piled at the edge of the table. Rather than clearing them away, she stood in the thrall of Jay's charm.

Jay made everyone feel the world existed just for them. He was either an asshole or the sweetest person this side of sainthood. Aitch had long since given up figuring out which. Jay ate his French fries and chatted with the waitress about her kids, the awful weather, working the night shift, and the Red Sox.

Aitch attacked his sandwiches with knife and fork. His stomach still hurt as if he hadn't eaten at all. Jay's shirt had him hunch-shouldered and the pants constricted his thighs. Maybe they'd fit better once the now re-engineered symbionts in his body slimmed him down.

"So how's your boyfriend?"

It took Aitch a moment to realize Jay was speaking to him. The waitress had gone.

"Simon is not my boyfriend." Aitch kept his head down, staring at his mashed potatoes.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Jay sounded so damn sincere. "When did you break up?"

"We were never together. He was my *climbing* partner."

"I always thought that was a euphemism—"

"It's not a euphemism. At least once a week, we climbed together then ate afterwards."

"No, that doesn't sound like dating at all."

"He goes through boyfriends like I go through assassins. We climbed together for years."

"I'm noting a lot of past tense here."

“That would be because he doesn’t want to climb with me any more.” The knife bent in his hand. Gravy and mashed potato skidded across the table. “Damn.”

“You want to talk about it?”

“No.” Aitch straightened out the knife as best as he could. His grip was still too strong. The symbionts were apparently taking their time normalizing him. “What does this have to do with fixing what the symbionts do to my head?”

“They get in the way of your relationships, not to mention any attempt to heal your mind.” Jay grabbed napkins from the dispenser on the table and started sopping the mess onto an empty plate. “You make decisions that would be perfectly rational if you were trying to escape a POW camp.”

Aitch met Jay’s gaze. “I’m not a super-genius like you, but I’m not stupid. Drips really are trying to kill me.”

“Stand down, brother.” Jay held his hands before him. “One, yes, Drips really are trying to kill you. Two, more often than not, you interpret whatever happens as personal attacks. Three, you score off the charts on all the standardized tests. When was the last time you forgot anything?”

“I don’t remember.” Aitch noted Jay hadn’t said anything about their relative intelligence.

Jay went stone-faced for a moment before he burst into a laugh, “Hey, you made a funny that isn’t grim. Simon’s good for you.”

“I wasn’t trying to be funny.” Aitch retreated back into his sandwiches.

“How did you two even meet?” Jay always made his gaze felt even when Aitch was actively avoiding it. “I can’t even get you to pick up the phone.”

Aitch ordered the words in his head. It wouldn’t kill him to tell Jay how he’d met Simon, especially if it’d help fix the symbionts messing with his mind. Slowly, the words spilled out of him.

The day I met Simon, I was studying routes on my favorite rock face. It's in the middle of New Hampshire. No one else climbs it. That's why it's my favorite. Climbers always tromped by, their gear clanging in their backpacks. This once, the clanging stopped right behind me.

"That wall's blank, you know. I've been climbing here for years. No one's found a climbable route yet." I didn't recognize the high, resonant voice. "My partner flaked out on me. I have his shoes and harness. He's a hefty guy too. There's a great route just down the trail."

I free solo. My hiking boots had a little rubber on the sole. A bag of chalk sat strapped around my waist. I've never needed any other gear.

"Wall's not blank." I didn't turn around right away. People going all wide-eyed the first time they see me got old even before I'd escaped from DRP. "You just need a little balance and finesse."

He walked up behind me. Fortunately, he was still clanging with each step. I managed to face him without also pounding him into the dirt.

"You don't climb, do you?" He gestured at my torso. "All that upper body muscle is impressive as hell but works against you on the rock."

Simon's built to climb. Shorts hugged his strong thighs. Hard, diamond shaped calves grew out of his boots. His T-shirt hung from his lanky body. I come up to about his neck. Callouses covered his long, thin fingers. His sweet, grizzled face held such a warm smile, I almost didn't find his words insulting. Almost.

"So you think he's hot." Jay nibbled on a French fry.

Aitch dropped his knife and fork. "Look, do you want to learn how we met or not?"

"It's strength to weight ratio that counts." I stripped him of his backpack. "I'll set up a top rope for you. Give you some beta if you want the help."

I climbed the rock face—

"A blank wall while wearing hiking boots? You showed off." Jay's smile was so radiant that it was probably cancer-causing. His palm slapped the table. The cups, dishes and the napkin dispenser all rattled. "Good for you."

"No, I didn't. I'd have picked a hard route if I wanted to show off."

"Brother..." Jay's voice rose as if what he was really saying was "Don't make me hurt you."

"Fine." Aitch rolled his eyes. "I wanted to impress him. Happy?"

Simon looked a little strange when I returned his backpack. His jaw worked soundlessly as his gaze darted between me and the top rope I'd set up.

He held his hand out. "Simon." The name fumbled from his mouth as if it were the only word he knew and he was trying it out for the first time.

"Aitch." I shook his hand as gently as I could. "Come on, let's get you up the wall."

“And did you get him up the wall?” Jay waved for the waitress.

She materialized before him with a jug of coffee. No one else in the diner got such prompt service. Aitch rolled his eyes at the smiles they traded.

“No.” Aitch pushed a plate scraped clean of mashed potato and gravy away from him. He started on the next.

“And, no, I don’t think he’s hot in a T-shirt and shorts. For one thing, he’s far better looking in a tux—”

Aitch stopped, suddenly aware that he wasn’t actually helping his case. Fear gripped his chest. He braced for what he knew was coming.

“When did you see him wear a tux? And how does he look?” Jay, supported by his elbows on the table, leaned towards Aitch. He seemed so damn affable that Aitch wanted to slug him to next Tuesday. “Come clean. Inquiring minds want to know.”

Finishing the sandwich in front of him bought him some time. Jay’s gaze was insistent, though. Aitch, glum, pushed the now empty plate away.

Simon’s a dramatic tenor. He has a voice like a trumpet. It rings for days. Vocally, he’s just right for Samson. A tuxedo does wonders for his body. It makes his shoulders span the stage and presents the illusion of thick arms and a chest as broad as his back. No one attending the concert looked at anyone else on stage.

“So you do think he’s hot.” Jay stacked the dishes then pushed them to the edge of the table.

“Brother, are you trying to make me hate you?”

Aitch didn’t wake up until his shoulder pounded into the blacktop. The car door rebounded then slammed shut. Tires squealed as Jay’s car skidded past him. For a moment, he’d

been a kid trapped in a cage again and some Drip was about to discipline him. In reality, he'd been sleeping in Jay's car on the drive down to Maryland. When Jay had tried to wake him up, he bolted out of the car. That, in his panic, he'd actually opened the door first was a minor miracle. He picked himself up then waited for his pounding heart to slow back down. Jay's car swung around. It was probably Aitch's imagination but the car seemed to creep up to him like a hunter approaching a skittish fawn.

Trees hid the building and parking lot from the street. The first light of dawn filled in the gray between the parking lot's light poles. The building looked like any low, unassuming office. Aitch suspected that most of the building really was office space and the actual archive was below ground.

The car stopped. The engine cut out. The parking lot was silent until Jay emerged.

"I'm glad I didn't wake you up earlier." Jay's face betrayed a concern so sincere that Aitch boiled with fury. Given Aitch's history with enclosed spaces, Jay should have known better. "Are you ok?"

"Next time you want to wake me up, do whatever it is normal people do instead." Aitch brushed off his shirt. "Just because you can do anything you want to anyone you touch doesn't mean you know what to do."

"Drips should arrive any moment." Jay started onto the sidewalk. "Just buy me enough time to find Mom's work."

"I don't know that I can."

Jay turned around. He rolled his eyes. "You're the strongest person on the planet. You've trained in all things combat since you were, what, three?"

Aitch's brow furrowed. Jay was never wrong, so Aitch had to be missing something. "I'm not even the strongest person in this parking lot."

The ground rumbled. Metal glinted among the trees. Nothing living then, or else Jay would have noticed them first. The most important rule when fighting Jay: Don't be organic.

"Robots. Clever." Jay grabbed Aitch by the shoulders. "Look, we don't have time to work through your self-esteem issues. Despite what you think, when you outlift me—like you always do—it's not because I'm holding back. Whatever you do will be more than good enough. See you in ten!"

With that, Jay dashed into the building. A dozen metal hulks emerged from the trees. Their bladed upper limbs spun, shredding branches out of their way. Their articulated legs stretched and shrank, keeping their bodies in perfect balance as they climbed onto the blacktop.

The hulks launched hundred of needles at Aitch. Tiny sonic booms cracked the air.

Aitch jumped out of sheer reflex. The needles whooshed below him. His legs held when he landed. The old him would have shattered his legs when he collapsed onto the pavement. The new him should never have been able to jump that high in the first place. Instead, he was as strong as ever, only now his body could withstand that strength. Aitch groaned.

The odds then weren't even remotely close. Those hulks never stood a chance.

Metallic limbs and twisted frames littered the pavement. Jay's car stuck out as the only carcass that wasn't dented, crushed or smashed in. Aitch's clothes had burned off in the scuffle. The flames had hurt like hell but hadn't damaged him. He stood naked and dismayed surveying the wreckage when Jay emerged from the building.

"Wow." Jay's eyebrows rode high on his head. "You even kept them away from my car."

"Did you find Mom's research?"

"I've committed it all to memory."

"Good." Aitch decked Jay. "That's for lying to me."

Jay disappeared in a plume of dust. Unexpected chunks of sidewalk showered Aitch. He sped away, maneuvering past twisted limbs and dodging falling chunks of concrete and dirt. Pain lingered in his fist and arm. That was appropriate, Aitch decided. Both brothers deserved some pain, Jay for lying and Aitch for trusting him.

The dust settled to reveal the parking lot's new canyon. Aitch gaped at it. No one was entering or leaving the building without a climb or a running jump. Jay climbed out, slightly shaken but none too worse for wear.

"When in my entire life, pray tell, have I ever lied to you?" Jay rolled his shoulders then brushed dust off his sleeves.

"You said you'd make me normal." Aitch picked up then tossed a metallic limb. It crashed on the other side of the parking lot. "This is not even in the same universe as normal."

"Brother, when did I say that? And why would I say that? Even if I knew how, doing that would literally kill you. I said—"

"You said, and I quote, 'Mom and I have worked out how to make your symbionts give you a body that even you—'" Aitch's stomach dropped. "Oh. How was I supposed to know you wanted the convoluted interpretation? The English language isn't meant to be a pretzel. You can hit me back if—"

Aitch never saw the punch. One instant, he was speaking, and the next, he lay in a divot created when he crashed through the blacktop. Before, if anyone could have hit him this hard, he'd have died. Now, he only wished he had. Still, Jay should have been able to at least knock him out.

"You can punch more efficiently than that. I know it." Aitch tried to get up then decided his symbionts needed more time. "Brother, give me a second, then hit me again. This time, I'll pay attention to your technique."

"No. No more hand-to-hand combat lessons." Jay held his palms out to ward Aitch off. "You teaching me to fight hurt bad enough before I fixed your symbionts."

Jay went to his car. He grabbed the rear bumper then gestured Aitch over to the front.

“Brother, how does making me tougher stop Drips from hunting me down?” Aitch obliged and they repositioned the car for an easier escape. “If anything, I’m a bigger threat now.”

“Too big a threat. I mean, they’re pretty much content to leave me alone. Besides, you’re only a danger when you feel threatened.” Jay unlocked the car doors. “Did you want to kill me after I punched you?”

“That doesn’t mean anything.” Aitch sat in the passenger seat. “There are only two men in the world who could punch me, not that the other one has, and I’d still think they didn’t mean—”

“Two?” Jay started up the car. “And the other one doesn’t want to climb with you any more?”

“Shut up and drive.” Aitch closed, not slammed, the car door. “If I have to visit Mom, at least you could make it quick.”

So I was in Simon’s bedroom a few nights ago—

“Woohoo!” Jay slapped Aitch’s back. Pride was smeared across Jay’s face.

“Get your mind out of the gutter.” Aitch calibrated the force his fist slammed with against Jay’s shoulder. Jay crashed against the driver side door, but didn’t break through. “He’s not interested in me.”

—looking for my trench coat among the pile of jackets on his bed.

Simon seemed pleased with the bootleg of the Detroit out-of-town of Pleasures and Palaces I gave him. I’d eaten a piece of birthday cake. My duty acquitted, everyone would be happier if I left now before something stupid happened.

“Simon got you to go to both a concert and a party? There doesn’t seem to be anything he can’t make you do.” The smile faded from Jay’s face. That Aitch’s symbionts turned Simon’s words into unyielding commands was no joke. “Oh, I see. Does he know?”

“I didn’t know until I tried to beat up his boyfriend and couldn’t. Simon told me to stop and I let the boyfriend hit my head with his bottle of beer. Until then, everything Simon suggested was something I wanted to do anyway or so I thought.”

“Brother, why were you—”

The boyfriend started it. Simon keeps dating these pretty boys who don’t have the intelligence of a blueberry muffin. If he ever dated anyone who could go toe-to-toe with him intellectually, he might actually sustain a relationship for longer than the half-life of some transuranic element.

Anyway, I bolted. Being in the same room as someone I obey unconditionally has never gone well for me. I was in the middle of New Hampshire before I calmed down.

A team of Drips shot supersonic micro-darts at me from the trees. They all wore sleek power armor no thicker than a sweatshirt. No clunky power source. It stood up to its own augmented strength, and protected the wearer. Much more practical than being me.

After some trial and error, mostly error, I wedged their armor then ran away. Paralyzing them cost me cracked ribs, mashed hands, a broken arm and more wounds than I cared to count. If there’s any justice, those Drips are still trapped inside their futuristic suits, baked to death in the sun.

When I stopped running, my favorite rock face loomed before me in the moonlight. I collapsed and curled into

a ball. Hunger cramps hurt worse than my broken fingers and ribs. I writhed on the ground trying to get a protein bar out of a pocket and into my mouth. Dirt rubbed against—

“Obviously, you found enough food to heal yourself because otherwise you’d be dead. What does this have to do with Simon?”

Simon showed up with three roast chickens, corn bread, and an ultimatum. He’d expected me to cover hundreds of miles over a few hours on foot. That made him either an idiot or a Drip. Simon’s no idiot. I heard him before I saw him. Damn him and his loud, operatically trained voice.

“Aitch, sit down and be still.” Since it was Simon saying those words, my body sat down then refused to move. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

He emerged from the dark. His hand gripped large styrofoam containers. He crouched next to me. I glared.

“Sorry.” He started clearing dirt off my face. “By now, you’ve worked out the score. Can’t take the chance you’ll run away or refuse to eat.”

He looked at my broken hands then began feeding me meat torn from the carcass. By the second roast chicken, my fingers had straightened and my wounds were healing. I fed myself the third roast chicken. When I ate the bones too, Simon offered me the first two skeletons. After that and the cornbread, I was the fit obedient soldier again.

Simon rubbed his eyes. He stifled a yawn. “Aitch, at ease. The following order is irrevocable: Be yourself.”

His gaze bore the slightest glint of fear. In commanding me to be myself, he'd willingly given up all control over me. If I wanted to crush his chest, the symbionts in my head wouldn't stop me. Of course, saving my life didn't exactly make me hate him. Honestly, even now, if he wanted me to kill myself, I don't know that I wouldn't try just to make him happy.

"How did you bind me to you?" Ignorance, especially my own, makes me edgy. "Pheromones? PsyOps? And, after all that, why free me? You've gone through a lot of trouble for nothing."

"Whoa. One at a time." Simon held his hands up as though he could hold me off. "No one bound anybody to anyone. You're so uptight, I had no idea how you felt about me until last night, or else I would have freed you earlier."

"So it's a coincidence, then, that you're a Drip?"

"A what? Oh. Cute." Apparently, no one had ever called Simon a Drip before. "The day we met, I was supposed to drop you off the side of the mountain, dump boulders on you then infect you with flesh eating bacteria while you were unconscious. Obviously, I bailed. A good climbing partner is too hard to find and if you were going to survive anyway, you were much more likely to keep climbing with me if I didn't try to kill you."

I stared at him. How did it happen that it felt paranoid to accuse a Drip of wanting to kill me?

"So it's your job to climb with me?"

In retrospect, I was misinterpreting exactly like you say I do, brother. Figures. You're never wrong about anything.

"No. Believe it or not, I deal with you on my own personal time." Simon crossed his arms over his chest. He drew himself to his full height then glared down at me. "Look, if I were you, I wouldn't get serious with anyone either. I get that, but Aitch, if you can't stop scaring away everyone who shows the slightest interest in me, I can't keep climbing with you."

For a moment, I couldn't breathe. For the next few, I didn't want to. Nothing any other Drip had ever done to me hurt more.

Anyway, he must have seen it on my face. His hand landed awkwardly on my shoulder then shot back as if I were electrified.

"I'm sorry, Aitch." He checked his watch. "Look, the Washington Chorus is doing the Bach St. John Passion this Saturday and their Evangelist is out sick. They asked me to sub in. I'll miss my flight if I don't go soon."

"I don't suppose you want me to drive you to Logan."

"You drive?"

"I'm qualified to operate practically any vehicle ever designed."

"Yes, I know. That's not what I meant and you know it."

"Simon always asks me to drop him off then car sit while he's out of town. Airport parking is expensive."

"You still want to?" He peered over the styrofoam containers that he now braced against his chest. "I can drive myself. There's time to drop you off before I go to Logan."

"It's ok." I started down the trail to his car. "I don't mind driving."

"Excuse me? You hate driving." Jay practically choked on his words. "And he let you?"

"Why not? Unlike you, he can't sense my cortisol level. Besides, I don't crush steering wheels from the stress any more." Aitch took a deep breath then forced himself to relax. "As it was, I had to wake him up when we reached Logan."

"You learned a valuable life lesson suitable for framing that night."

Aitch slouched in his seat. It groaned in protest. "I learned he doesn't want me in his life any more."

"Brother, he drove several hundred miles out of his way, saved your life then offered to drive you home. These are not the acts of a man who doesn't want you in his life. Love, loyalty and obedience are all messed up in your head so I'll be blunt: Not everyone who has earned your trust does so to screw you over. Life is better if when you're literally starving to death and a friend feeds you roast chicken, you thank him."

Aitch sat back up. His hands let go of the seat cushions.

"Brother, I've missed talking to you."

"Pick up the next time I call or, hell, call me for once." Jay gave Aitch a dope slap. "Better yet, visit. I have a job waiting for me at Mass General."

Mom's hospital room didn't look a thing like what Aitch expected. A curtained bed sat in the middle. A TV craned from the ceiling, as did a turret aimed at the doorway. Surely, it was supposed to have fired as he opened the door. Two large windows dominated the far wall. A pane of glass from one window rested against the other window. A rope dangled outside the window missing its pane. Crouched down, Simon dropped wrecked bits of electronics in a bag that hung off his

climbing harness. In addition, he wore a tux complete with black cummerbund and bow tie. The stripe running down his pants glinted under the florescent light.

Simon froze for a fraction of second after Aitch opened the door. He gave Aitch a low wolf whistle. "Wow. You clean up nice."

Jay had insisted Aitch into a suit after they'd left the archive. It fit his oddly shaped body too well for comfort. Aitch was used to clothes that cramped his shoulders and fell off his waist.

"You too, Simon. You do all your jobs in a tux?"

"I had to sing the John Passion." Simon showed Aitch his palms. "As it is, if you'd shown up any earlier, I wouldn't have disabled the turret in time. Before you ask, the original Evangelist is fine now. Just some carefully timed vocal cord swelling."

"I don't get it. Wouldn't it have been easier to tell me not to come here?" Aitch swept the curtain aside. The bed was empty and cold. "You'll excuse me if leave. I'll see you—No, I guess I won't any more."

Aitch turned to leave. Jay would catch up at any moment. Aitch had dove out of the hatchback as it'd passed the hospital entrance, leaving Jay to go park the car. No sense in both of them walking into a death trap.

"Aitch, you thought climbing with you was part of my job. Do you seriously think if I'd warned you, you'd have believed me?"

Aitch stopped. Time to stop misinterpreting Simon. At first, Aitch's words lodged in his throat. He tore them out. "Maybe if I can stop me from scaring myself away, I won't scare anyone else away from you either."

The door stood mere steps away. He stared at it, too angry to turn around and face Simon.

“Your timing stinks. Look, we can’t stay in this room. How about we talk this out when we go climbing in a few days?” The zipper on Simon’s bag screeched shut. “I’ll help you find your Mom. She’s probably in this hospital somewhere.”

After one footfall, an ultrasonic hum pierced the room. Time dilated. The walls vibrated, blurring slightly to Aitch but probably not to Simon. Drips had apparently also weaponized the walls.

He had time to either escape or cover Simon with his body. Aitch didn’t need to think. Rather than running out of the room, he ran towards Simon.

Perversely, the fluorescent light overhead dimmed as the walls glowed. By the time he reached Simon, the Drip had thrown himself out the window. Maybe he should have escaped, instead.

The ultrasonic hum rose in pitch until it past the range of even Aitch’s hearing. Light from the walls slammed into him. Everything in the room evaporated, except him. His skin turned red and blistered. Fire scorched through his lungs. The remaining window blew out. Glass cascaded away with a crash. Electricity crackled from stray live wires above him.

Without a Simon to run into, momentum pushed Aitch through the window. After that attack, he didn’t want to crash straight down. His symbionts needed time to fix him. He leapt. His body stretched out. The air whistled in his ears as he rose. A sparse field of cars rushed beneath him.

Simon swung back towards the building on his rope. He’d grabbed it as he’d flown out the window. DRP training in action, by definition, was impressive.

Aitch’s awe lasted for barely a second. Any Drip should have let Aitch pass. Simon, instead, tried to catch Aitch. Unfortunately, his speed and hand-eye coordination were just good enough. He scuttled up the rope and his arm wrapped around Aitch as they intersected. At least he had enough sense

to let go of the rope before Aitch's momentum could rip his arm off. No one who wanted to kill Aitch would do anything this well-meaning but stupid. They hurtled through the air past one parking lot to the next.

Simon secured his grip around Aitch. His hands smeared blood across Aitch's back. His face pressed up against Aitch's.

"You ran towards the window rather than out the door. Is that the move of a tactical genius?"

"I wasn't running towards the window. I was trying to cover you."

"Oh." Simon's brow furrowed. "That's the sweetest but dumbest thing anyone has ever tried to do for me."

"I don't think you get to talk, rope boy." Aitch resisted the temptation to push Simon off his body. "Now, shut up and let me figure out how I get you down alive."

"You mean 'us', right? Because I've memorized your dossier, and I hate to break this to you, but you cannot fly."

They fell into a hospital parking lot. Aitch skipped against the blacktop, bouncing back into the air again and again. All he could do for Simon was be his shock absorber. He pushed back every time they slammed into the ground. Even though every hit tried to shake Aitch into pieces, Simon flew up and down in smooth, lazy curves.

Eventually, they skidded between two rows of cars. If Aitch were his old self or ordinary, the skidding would have broken skin. Slick blood and shock might have eventually numbed the pain or, more likely, killed him. Instead, the parking lot kept digging into him until he finally stopped moving.

Jay ran towards them. Aitch would have strangled the relief off his brother's face, but that would have required moving. He felt for Simon's pulse and found it. Aitch let go of a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. As long as he'd kept Simon alive, Jay could take care of Simon's injuries.

“Hm, that’s more damage you should be expected to sink and live. There’s probably a dossier I’m now supposed to update.” Simon looked at Jay but his hand reached for Aitch’s. “Say, you wouldn’t happen to have a brother who’s a lot like you but a little more muscular, a lot more neurotic, and interested in men?”

“You know, there are so many things I could say right now.” Jay looked down at Simon lying on top of Aitch. “However, if I said any of them, my brother would send me into orbit.”

If there was anything worse than being trapped in a car with Jay, it was being trapped in the backseat with Simon while Jay was driving. A tall, broad-shouldered man, even a lean one, was not meant for the backseat of a hatchback. Still, Simon looked surprisingly comfortable, or maybe just resigned, imitating an origami balloon. Jay had offered him a ride home, and, to Aitch’s surprise, he accepted. Who wouldn’t forsake a flight for a seven hour trip in a car too cramped for him? Intellectually, Aitch knew why Simon was here, even if he didn’t quite understand it.

Simon would have been more comfortable in the front passenger seat but he had put Jay’s now half-empty roller bag there instead. Aitch had changed clothes three times in the past twenty-four hours. The T-shirt and shorts he wore now made him feel like a bag of sludge. Or maybe sheer proximity to Simon and Jay was enough to make him feel that way. Some invisible force pinned him against the window even as gravity tried to slide him into Simon.

“Sorry about your mom.” Simon leaned forward, trying to meet Aitch’s gaze. “I had no idea.”

The Drips had cremated Mom’s body a few days ago. Jay had thought she’d last for another few weeks and his surprise that she hadn’t seemed genuine. He was never wrong about matters of life and death.

“It’s ok, Simon.” Aitch stared out the window. Headlights beamed behind them. “I’ll burn a paper replica of her lab as an offering. She’ll never notice she’s dead. Maybe she’ll infect my ancestors, too.”

When Grandfather died, Mom burned a paper airplane so that Grandfather could cross the Pacific and visit. Aitch was twelve and that had made as little sense as everything else had in his life to date, or since.

“Without Mom, working out how to repair the symbionts in your head will take longer, brother, but I’ll do it.” Somewhere on I-95, an orchestra followed them underscoring Jay’s words with lush strings and clarion trumpets. Or maybe Jay’s voice had that effect all by itself. “You have my word. Then we can start healing your mind.”

“Sure, whatever.” Aitch shrugged. “Maybe now that I’m harder to kill, the Drips will lay off.”

“Simon, your chemistry’s just gone wacky.” Concern filled Jay’s voice. “What’s worrying you?”

Simon’s jaw went slack. Nothing could prepare anyone for prolonged exposure to Jay.

“Welcome to my world.” Aitch patted Simon’s thigh. “Once he calibrates himself to you, he might as well be a walking polygraph.”

“Hey, I’m way more accurate and versatile.”

Simon sighed. He paced his words deliberately. “Your day job, freelance software development, can’t possibly hold your interest. None of us want to know what might happen if you ever get... bored.”

“Are you still a Drip, Simon?” Aitch folded his arms across his chest.

“Sure. Singing doesn’t pay that well and DRP doesn’t actually mind that I’m spending time with you.”

Aitch leveled his best glare of disapproval. “How am I supposed to trust either one of you?”

“Brother, yes, we’ve both done suspicious things, but has either of us ever betrayed you?”

Aitch’s memories pierced him like perfect but mismatched crystals. Each one had a beginning, middle, and end. Taken together, though, they made no sense. When he was a kid, Drips he couldn’t help but obey would order him to break his own arm then they’d hug him as they timed how long he took to heal. When their lies had finally worn away his love, the Drips who restrained him and experimented on him also rewarded him with scallion pancakes and beef noodle soup flavored with anise.

“The question isn’t ‘has.’” Dread grew in the pit of Aitch’s stomach. The whine of the engine and the crunch of the tires on the road didn’t reassure him one bit. “The question is ‘will.’”

Neither of them had screwed him over, yet. Trust meant giving them the chance to, then hoping they wouldn’t. What kind of idiot would do that? Life was too short.

His gaze flicked up. If he pushed off hard enough with his legs, they’d break through the floor and puncture the gas tank or something. Maybe if, instead, he threw his weight against—

Jay shouted “Brother,” just before Simon touched Aitch’s arm and said, “Aitch, are you ok?”

Aitch’s hands had balled into fists again. His heart was pounding so hard that he was short of breath. Simon eased Aitch’s hands open.

He was doing it again, he realized. Damn. Intellectually, he got that to take everything they’d done to help him as evidence of their eventual betrayal was perverse. Given that he’d almost bolted again, it was kind of amazing that they trusted him.

Time to try something else. Aitch took a deep breath. Far from mastering his fear, he settled for recognizing that it’d never go away.

“Brother, I don’t live too far from Mass General. You could stay with me—I mean, if you want—until, you know...”

“That would be great.” Jay’s radiant smile bounced off the rear view into Aitch’s eyes. “Thanks.”

Little by little, Aitch gave into gravity. He leaned into Simon as Simon leaned into him. As the sky grew dark and car’s whine seemed to dull into a purr, Aitch let his eyes close and his head fall against Simon’s chest.

END

Ninefox Gambit



THEA JAMES

FORTRESS OF SCATTERED
NEEDLES, Analysis

PRIORITY: High

Captain Kel Cheris of the hexarchate is no ordinary Kel captain. For one, her mathematical modeling and computational skills are extraordinary—so extraordinary, that she was earmarked for the erudite Nirai instead of the Kel infantry. Instead of choosing the Nirai path, however, Cheris chooses the

life of a Kel soldier. When Cheris uses unconventional formations and calculations in combat against the heretic threat of calendrical rot, she survives the onslaught but suffers a huge blow to her career (the Kel do not like nonconformity). But Cheris's unconventional techniques also have the side effect of drawing the attention of two Shuos leaders—leaders who might be able to use Cheris as a very important pawn, in a very long game.

Cheris is offered a chance at redemption: she is assigned to retake the Fortress of Scattered Needles from the heretics and is given the ultimate weapon to aid her mission. The “ultimate weapon” is actually the ghostly consciousness of a brilliant tactician named Shuos Jedao—a Shuos commander so brilliant, he has never lost a battle. The problem, however, is that Jedao is quite insane; the reason his consciousness is carefully imprisoned and held by Shuos command is because Jedao's greatest triumph was

followed by his rapid massacre of not only the enemy army, but also the annihilation of all of his own men.

And now, Cheris must tether Jedao's consciousness to her own, anchor his ethereal presence to her shadow, allowing him into her mind so that only she may hear him and use his advice to win an impossible war. If Cheris is successful, it will mean a future for the hexarchate and all that she and her fellow citizens hold dear—though it may cost Charis her sanity. But as she proceeds with her desperate gambit to retake the Fortress of Scattered Needles, Cheris slowly discovers that the hexarchate is not at all what she thought it was, and Jedao's madness, his secret, isn't as simple as it has been made out to be.

Ambitious. Confusing. Enthralling. *Brilliant*. These are the words I will use to describe Yoon Ha Lee's utterly immersive, utterly memorable novel, *Ninefox Gambit*. Prior to picking up this novel (my first acquaintance with

Yoon Ha Lee), I had heard very high praise for Lee's short fiction—still, even with those moderate expectations I had no idea what I was in for with *Ninefox Gambit*.

This novel is incredibly ambitious, and, if I'm being completely honest, confusing as hell. I've tried to describe this book a number of times to others, and well, it's hard. Let me see if I can do this: there is a government—the hexarchate (represented by six different groupings of people, from the suicide hawk Kel to the eponymous nine-tailed fox Shuos), which once was a heptarchate—which controls its people with a sophisticated calendrical system that organizes and in essence *defines* the reality in which its people reside. On the other side of the war, there are the heretics, who attempt to override and destroy the calendrical system of the hexarchate with “rot”—they are able to change and redefine reality through calendrical rot, and are on a quest to tear away the veil of con-

ditioning and control imposed by the Shuos, defying the hexarchate's dictates. Or, at least, that's what I *think* is happening in this particular war.

Knowing, then, what calendrical rot and calendrical heresy are, the next step is to understand how Cheris and her unpredictability play into this system. An infantry captain on the front lines, Cheris is one of the Kel—a grouping of citizens who are very firmly indoctrinated to follow formation instinct, the chain of command, and are not to question or go against direct orders. (It's actually painful for Cheris and almost impossible for her to resist a direct order from a superior—a situation that leads to very uncomfortable and painful interactions when she is elevated to far beyond her rank, and implanted with Shuous Jedao.) For a soldier like Cheris to use instinct and unconventional mathematical formations and tactics to survive a heretic attack, this goes against the very heart of

the calendrical system imposed by the hexarchate. Remember, this is a society that *defines its own reality* through sophisticated equations and mathematics; Cheris's improvisation is tantamount to, well, heresy. But try as the hexarchate might, even with formation instinct and indoctrination, individuality and differences of character always prevail. And this, dear readers, is where Cheris and Jedao's banter and bleeding of consciousness comes in.

It's very tricky to balance character building, page-turning action, and beautiful writing with seriously complex world building, but Lee manages to do just that. And how does he do that? With all of this incredibly high-concept mathematical reality-defining and calendrical warfare going on, *Ninefox Gambit* is in fact an immensely readable book because of its awesome and very human characterization. Cheris is a woman who has very specifically chosen against what society has pre-

dicted for her (to become a Kel instead of a Nirai). She is tactical and adept at higher mathematics, but also young, green, compassionate, and unpredictable. Her foil, Shuos Jedao is an outcast and the great bogeyman of the hexarchate—he is feared by all because of his formidable battle skills, track record for success, and his madness. Together, Cheris and Jedao form an unlikely bond, and then a singular consciousness. Cheris struggles to maintain her privacy and identity when Jedao is pinned to her shadow, and Jedao is respectful as he can be of her space, before preparing Cheris for his true plan. The result is a fascinating take on identity, thought, privacy, and agency. Agency, in particular, is a key thematic point of *Ninefox Gambit*—not just in the very primary sense of Cheris's thoughts and actions being bled into by Jedao, but the very nature of the hexarchate itself and its conditioning and compartmentalizing and

devouring of any other cultures or thought-patterns.

I haven't felt this blown away by a novel's originality since *Ancillary Justice*. And, since I'm being completely honest, *Ninefox Gambit* is actually more inventive, boundary-breaking, and ambitious than *Ancillary Justice*. Allow me to end by putting it this way: if you've been craving to fill the void left by Ann Leckie's Imperial Radch trilogy, if you're hungry for military SF that teems with brilliant characterization, sharp prose, and unconventional vision, look no further.

Ninefox Gambit, Cheris, and Jedao await.

Yours in calendrical heresy,
TJ.

Rating: 10 out of 10.

A Runnysack Moment



N.K. JEMISIN

I OFTEN GET AASKED, “SO what would you do if a Fifth Season happened for real?”

In order to answer that question, I have to tell you a quick story first. As You Know Readers, one of my faaaaaavorite things to do is research stuff that I might want to write about. And I get into it. Ohhhh, do I ever. If you ever venture over to my Tumblr, you’ll find that—among the silly anime/gaming memes and politics—there are a lot of pictures of rocks and geological sites of interest. That’s because researching geology while working on *The Fifth Season* turned me into a lifelong geology nerd. Did you know rocks were awesome? I think rocks are awesome.

This became sort of a double-edged thing with the other topic that I researched deeply for the *Broken Earth*, however, which was prepper communities. I needed to get into the mindset of people who literally believe that civilization is going to end at any given moment. So to that end, I watched some episodes of the TV show *Doomsday Preppers*, I bought a few issues of *Offgrid Recoil Magazine*, and visited some

prepper forums online. Now, I normally would want to visit and get to know any group of people that I'm researching in person, because it's hard to get a sense of what human beings are like from text alone. However, there are enough prepper communities that have some... hmm, some disturbing ideas about People Like Me, let's just say, that I was a little leery of trying to set up anything more up-close and personal. Note that there was a huge surge in prepper communities, businesses, and media interest after the election of President Obama, in response to fears of an imminent race war. So, yeah, that's a thing. Wonder what they're up to now.

Now, I did end up meeting some people who live with the perpetual belief that civilization will end, and who have had rather more actual societal experience of Fifth Season-like events than most preppers. When I went to Hawai'i's Big Island a few years ago, I met both some native Hawai'ians and more recent comers who happily talked to me about what it's like to live on top of an actively erupting hotspot that could turn into an Extinction Level Event at any moment. Their philosophy was markedly different to that of the prepper communities I'd previously studied—much less stress and fear, a greater emphasis on preparing through skills and handed-down wisdom, and a general feeling of hey, if Pele's pissed off, there's really nothing you can do but deal with it in the moment. It's foolish to try and anticipate a goddess, after all.

Personally speaking, the latter philosophy made more sense to me. I saw prepper communities spending ridiculous amounts of money on tools that were only likely to be useful in the rarest of circumstances—and worse, I saw many prepper communities choosing to live in fear. That just didn't seem healthy or productive to me. So while I tried to incorporate a little of both groups' philosophies into the societies of The Broken Earth, in my personal life I decided to try the Hawai'ian way, not the prepper way.

The one exception to this is that I keep a go bag—or a runny sack, if you'd rather call it that. That's not a bad idea for anyone, and it's actually something recommended for New Yorkers (where, if you'll remember, we've had a few city-stopping hurricanes and blackouts and things like that in recent memory). Anyway, I found myself refreshing the bag recently for no particular reason. My flashlight batteries were dead, so I got the bright idea to hop online and replace it with a solar or crank flashlight. I'd seen some really cool examples of those in the prepper magazines.

But when I hopped online to buy the flashlight, I saw a link to mylar emergency blankets. And another link to LifeS-
trows. And another link to...

I only bought the flashlight. But remember my little problem with research addiction? I'm discovering that this is another way that it manifests. I suspect this is how quite a few preppers got started—trying to prepare just a little, which snowballed into preparing a lot. Fear is contagious that way. And the most frightening part of this is that during that almost-shopping-binge, in seconds, I found myself discarding my “just deal with it” philosophy, and instead occupying a huge chunk of my day with worries about the apocalypse.

This isn't healthy. It isn't even useful. To shed my fear, I had to go back and re-read my own book: People die. Old orders pass. New societies are born. I had to remind myself that the world always changes. The best way to prepare for that change is to just live your life, and be ready to change with it as needed.

So here is what I really need to do more of, to prepare for any possible Fifth Seasons in my future. I'm going to speak more to my elders, many of whom have been through more hardship than me, and learn what I can from them. I'm going to improve my personal skill-sets—I've always been the sort of person who will intervene rather than be a bystander du-

ring moments of crisis, but I need to practice deescalation and deflection more. I'm working on getting physically fit again—not because I think I'll need rock-hard abs in the Mad Max future to come, but simply because I used to be a hiker and I hate that I've lost the agility and strength to do that safely. I'm working on that so I can go hiking again.

I'm going to live my life, in other words. And be ready to change as needed.

A Closed and Common Orbit



ANA GRILO

OPTIMISTIC, FEEL-GOOD, ADVENTUROUS AND

FUN: *A Closed and Common Orbit*, Becky Chambers' stand-alone follow-up to *The Long Way to a Small, Angry Planet* is as good, smart and satisfying as its predecessor.

There is a great success story behind these novels too. *The Long Way to a*

Small, Angry Planet started as a self-published book and when word of mouth and excellent reviews started to spread, the book was picked up by UK publisher Hodder & Stoughton. It's probably safe to say that that first novel became a 2015 *sensation* collecting award nominations like it was running out of time, among them the prestigious Arthur C. Clarke Award. It was also longlisted for the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction as well as the Tiptree Award.

I like to think that its success story is indicative of a new direction within SFF: more optimistic, feel good, humane stories that celebrate ordinary people against an extraordinary, futuristic backdrop.

What's so great about this? The optimism of this series does not solely rely on its characters succeeding or simple being/doing good. Its optimism equally appear in the way that very foundation of this universe is composed of a diverse make-up that is

almost intoxicating in its normalisation. Take for instance this short, unremarked sentence right at the beginning of *A Closed and Common Orbit* when one of the main characters, an AI who has a new human body, looks at her new “kit” and describes it (bold mine):

“The kit looked like it had been pulled straight from the “Human” example in an interspecies relations textbook: **brown skin, black hair, brown eyes**. She was thankful that the kit’s manufacturer had seen the wisdom of **blending in**.”

There is no fuss about it: this is simply who humans are.

A genetically modified engineer and an artificial intelligence walk into a bar...

A Closed and Common Orbit picks up right after the final events of *The Long Way to a Small, Angry Planet*, with the once-Lovelace Artificial Intelligence, now reset and memory-less, finding a new

life aboard a new body. Before, Lovelace had eyes everywhere and her task was to care for the health and well-being of the Wayfarer’s crew. Now, renamed Sidra, she finds herself in a new—and illegal—synthetic body, trying to cope with a limited, isolated, and physical existence that simply doesn’t seem enough.

She is helped by Pepper, an engineer who risked everything to get Sidra up and running. Pepper is a genetically modified clone, previously one of the Janes—Jane23—and part of a slave class of junk-fixers, brought up within a factory without any knowledge that there was an outside world. When Jane was ten years old, an accident at the factory led to a scape—and a new life inside a ship found in a junkyard. The ship’s AI Owl becomes Jane’s family.

With chapters alternating between Sidra/now and Jane/before, we follow both characters (as well as Owl, arguably a main character in

this space drama too) as they journey through their lives. It's a story about adapting, surviving, changing—identity is the core and just like its predecessor, *A Closed and Common Orbit* also has many things to say about found families, friendship and love. It also features different alien species, elegant gender fluidity, and a superb plotline that starts with loss and change and ends up with a quest and a *heist*. “Cool” does not even begin to describe it.

Imagine: one person whose life was so limited she didn't even KNOW that there was such a thing as a “sky” or “edible food” (when you consumed liquid food all your life, do you even know how to chew?). Another one whose life was lived inside the confines of a ship and in downloading to a body and given the universe, THAT'S when the limitation starts: for an AI, a universe is not enough, if you don't have connectivity. The questions of what connectivity even is, and what makes a person

human fill the story to the brim. The answers are never straight-forward and following these lovable, interesting characters confronting and interrogating those questions is only a small part of the joy in reading this novel.

If there was such a thing as a Cosy Space Opera sub-genre of Speculative Fiction, Becky Chambers' series would likely be listed alongside the equally excellent *On a Red Station*, *Drifting* by Aliette de Bodard and *Binti* by Nnedi Okorafor.

Rating: 8 out of 10.

The Life and Times of Angel Evans



MEREDITH DEBONNAIRE

*You may forget but
Let me tell you
this: someone in
some future time
will think of us.
—Sappho*

WHEN ANGEL EVANS WAS BORN, five prophets had heart attacks and died. A sixth suffered a stroke, lost all use of his limbs and passed away three weeks later. A seventh and final prophet woke up at the moment of Angel's birth, screamed for ten minutes, babbled something about saviours and the end of the world, and then ran off, changed her name and was never heard from again.

It was an auspicious birth to say the least, and Angel's parents had very high hopes for their only child. Angel herself was, for a long time, completely unaware of these bi-

zarre circumstances. The general wisdom in her world was that one should never tell prophecies to the person they were about, especially birth prophecies, and that prophecies would sort themselves out.

Still, throughout her childhood a lot of people took undue interest in Angel, a fact that the somewhat precocious child always struggled to understand. By the age of eight Angel knew the Nine Words of Banishment, could recite both her Law and her Lore books by heart, and had a skill at summoning Elementals that her tutors referred to as uncanny. She had also barely been allowed beyond the confines of her family's holdings, and was becoming increasingly curious.

Three weeks after her eighth birthday, Angel Evans vanished. Eighteen years later, that entire dimension collapsed in on itself, and for the people living there that was the end. For Angel Evans, it was a good reason to move somewhere else and try to forget.

Two years later, a lanky ginger woman with an unfortunate amount of freckles exits the scuzzy chain pub that she had been cleaning for the last four hours, and lights a cigarette. She inhales deeply, enjoying the grimy taste of tobacco, and exhales in a tired sigh. The smoke dances, twists, and forms into a writhing face.

"Angel Evans."

The voice is sonorous, the kind of growling voice that one expects from a Hammer-Horror werewolf.

"Nope, wrong number."

The redhead takes another drag from the scrofulous fag, apparently unphased by the floating, disembodied face.

"I was assured that this was the correct place."

"Nope. This happens a lot. You must be looking for a different Angel Evans."

A scowl lingers on the ethereal face.

"I don't suppose you know where the other Angel Evans is?"

"Never met her. Never heard of her before you lot started showing up."

"Well it is very important."

The lanky woman shrugs.

"Nothing I can do," she says.

Smoke-face shifts a little, then sighs. "You'd think finding the saviour would be a little easier."

Another shrug from the redhead. The deep-voiced apparition goes quiet, appearing to contemplate its options. The redhead finishes her cigarette and stubs it on the wall. She yanks her jacket a little closer before turning to the floating face.

"I've got to head home now. Nice meeting you."

"Ah, yes. A pleasure."

The woman stomps off into a dingy alley. After a few seconds, the face shivers and dissipates back into normal smoke.

It takes twenty minutes for Angel to walk home, which is long enough for the light drizzle to permeate her hair and drip down her neck. She mutters quietly all the way, strange words that don't quite form and leave traces on the air. She has to kick the door to her flat to force it open, and then wrestles it closed again.

The insides of the flat could be called squalid, if one were feeling generous; it looks as though a furious rhinoceros trampled through it, stopped to order a tremendous amount of takeaway, dumped all its rubbish, and then charged back out. Angel breathes a sigh of relief, and folds into the end of the sofa that's not buried under detritus.

"Another one?"

This voice is sympathetic, musical and a little airy.

"I don't want to talk about it," Angel says, not moving from her place on the sofa. Her eyes are shut, and in the dark the contours of her face are soft.

"They're going to keep coming."

"Yumiko, not now."

A waft of air crosses the room, bringing the scent of rain. Something cool strokes Angel's face, and she resolutely keeps her eyes shut. She knows what she will see if she opens them.

"Have a shower and change. I'll put a film on."

Angel relaxes.

"Thanks," she whispers. When she opens her eyes, no one is there.

After her shower, Angel ventures back into the living room. It seems marginally tidier, and a film has been loaded on a laptop. A steaming mug of noodles perches on the sofa's armrest.

Angel Evans, prodigy, saviour, pub cleaner, flops onto the sofa and starts the film. She stuffs noodles into her mouth, and occasionally laughs at the commentary emanating from the air beside her.

When she was thirteen, Angel fell in love. It was completely unrequited and lasted for a torturous three months. At the time, she had been living with a raggedy travelling magician who actually made most of her money through larceny. Very clever larceny mind you, but larceny.

The object of Angel's affections had been an apprentice magistrate, agendered as all officiates were. The town they were staying in was a small one, but not so small that they couldn't stay for a while. Whenever she wasn't performing magic tricks or aiding her companion with thefts, Angel took to loitering outside the imposing public buildings, waiting to catch a glimpse of her grey apprentice's robe. Whenever she saw it, swishing around the apprentice magistrate's legs, her

throat would heat up and she would blush until her freckles were invisible.

Ne never said a word to her, but ne did smile occasionally—a slow, warm smile that made Angel want to scream. But Angel's unrequited love affair ended horrifically when her travelling companion was caught stealing from the magistrate. Angel left the town as fast as her magic could carry her.

Sometimes, when Angel is half-asleep, she remembers this first love of hers to whom she never spoke and with whom she was never alone. She imagines that, maybe, ne became a full magistrate. She imagines that ne used that position of power for self-preservation. She imagines that ne escaped before everything broke.

Then Angel wakes up, and remembers that no one escaped.

The magic in this world is... well, stubborn is not quite the right word, and neither is contrary. Unpredictable covers it for the most part. Angel always thought of magic as alive, but she had never experienced quite this amount of personality before.

After two months of commands backfiring in her face, Angel sat down, spread out her awareness and sweet-talked the magic. She told it that it was lively, stunning, gorgeous. She said that in all the worlds she had travelled she had never seen magic quite like it; that its architecture was constantly surprising, that she enjoyed its urban wilderness.

Angel had spoken for hours, and by the end of it she could feel this world's bizarre magic purring. Yumiko had found it hilarious.

Since then, Angel Evans has kept in magic's good graces. She's careful to give compliments and praise, to leave offerings in places of power, and when she commands magic she makes it clear that she understands this is a privilege. So far,

it's worked very well. The fact that there simply aren't all that many commanders of magic in this dimension helps; she has a feeling that the world is as fascinated by her as she is by it. Right now, that's not very useful.

Angel looks at her chart, glares. An expired cigarette hangs from her mouth unnoticed. Incidents have been increasing, there's no two ways about it. Since smoke-face, there has been a scuttling, furred fairy; a flotilla of water nymphs who attempted to move into her shower; and a demonic fire storm that possessed her neighbour's bicycle and attempted to offer tribute to "the Saviour of the Multiverse." Angel had to use a Word of Banishment for that one. It left a sour taste in her mouth.

She thumps her head onto the table, and all the sigils on the chart wiggle like excited puppies. A rain-scented zephyr plucks at Angel's hair and wraps around her neck like a scarf. Angel groans and sits up.

"There's no pattern! There has to be one, somewhere, I just can't see it. Ugh, this is like playing Katrok with invisible pieces, or... Hey!"

The redhead stops talking as the chart floats away from the table and rolls itself up. She snatches at the cracked paper.

"Yumiko! I need that."

"You've been working on this for hours, Angel. Go outside, walk around, take a break."

"It's important." The chart continues to drift away from Angel, and the small window in the living room clatters open. Noise filters in from outside.

"You'll only make mistakes if you work on it now." Yumiko's voice is soft. Angel glowers, then sighs in defeat.

"Fine, fine, I'll go outside."

Angel rummages for tobacco and rizzlas, turning out her extensive pockets. A sheath of perfectly hand-rolled cigarettes drifts over from the counter, along with a lighter and the housekeys. Angel plucks them from the air with a smile.

“Thank you,” she says. Air brushes her cheek like a kiss.

“Love you,” the ghost murmurs. Angel strides to the door.

The air is bursting with moisture, not solid enough to be rain and not thin enough to be mist. Angel cuts along the street; a rake of a woman with a halo of cigarette smoke, face obscured by her jacket collar. Yumiko was right; she does feel better. People scurry along or saunter beneath umbrellas. Angel snorts, endlessly amused by the behaviour of others.

She pauses before the door of an empty shop, inhabited by a genderless, muttering person swathed in rags and ripe with alcohol. If Angel looks closely, she can see the swirls and sparkles of light dancing in their head. She sighs, yanks a crumpled fiver from her pocket and shoves it into quaking hands before leaving.

This world hides its prophets in the strangest places, and no one ever pays them any heed. It was one of the hardest adjustments to make upon arriving here. Not that Angel seeks them out; prophets never do too well around her, whatever the world.

A breeze whistles through her fingers and sighs, making Angel snort again. She’s supposed to be taking a break, and here she is moping about prophets. There’s an internet café not far from here, and no work until tomorrow. The grin on her face is almost feral.

At the tender age of 21, Angel Evans was sentenced to seven years of hard labour for the use of prohibited magics. She was using the name Jessamina then, because she was 21

and experimenting. “Jessamina” had sounded alluring and mysterious in a way that “Angel” didn’t. She had no idea that anyone was still looking for her, that she could have said the name “Angel Evans” and the magistrate would have fallen over himself fighting to return her to her family.

As it was, she was left attempting to explain that really, honestly, she had not been trying to raise the dead; it just happened. One moment, totally normal fake séance; next moment, creepily affectionate animated corpses. Corpses who wanted to chat, and drink tea, and cuddle. Clearly, it was someone’s idea of a prank.

The magistrate was not impressed. Ne gazed imperiously down at her, quite possibly bored out of his skull, and told her that ne, quite frankly, did not see the joke. As a result, Angel refused to help get rid of the cuddly corpses and eventually the town became known as “The Town of the Friendly Skulls.”

She spent three years doing tasks so menial and repetitive that, before she managed to escape, Angel invented five more Words of Banishment and began work on a Theory of Transdimensional Travel just to stop herself from losing her mind entirely.

She’s not completely sure if her other spells worked, but the Theory of Transdimensional Travel turned out to be useful.

The only disappointing thing about the internet café is that she’s not allowed to smoke inside. However, she can rent a laptop and use the internet, and the tea isn’t half bad. The first thing Angel does is to discreetly draw a protective circle around the laptop with her finger. There’s a slight whoosh, and then a chat window opens on the screen. Angel smiles, and starts to type.

Angel says:

All good there cranberry?

Yumiko says:

^^

All good.

Angel's wall of fire is holding.

Angel says:

Don't want you getting lost.

On other worlds, they have communication networks built of magic that are purified at regular intervals. They use sails against the sky, or resonant stonework that can be drummed on. They twist their minds together so that they can experience each other directly.

On Yumiko's world, everyone and everything exists simultaneously on two levels, and they built vast information highways on one level so that one could talk and travel on the "up" level without moving on the "down" one. Unsurprisingly, Yumiko likes the internet.

Unfortunately, so do a host of other ghosts and spirits. There's something attractive about its ethereality, and it is more thickly haunted than any battleground. Cyberspace is full of wandering, hungry souls; hence Angel's insistence on protective circles.

Yumiko says:

I'm not an amateur.

Put your headphones in.

The redhead complies, sipping at her now scummy tea. A new window pops up, holding a video of people dancing to blaring music.

Angel says:

And this is...?

Yumiko says:

Just watch it, speckle-face.

Angel does.

When they met, Angel was a mess and Yumiko was hiding from a group of exorcists. Angel was spending every waking moment seeking out substances that would make her stop thinking, stop feeling, or spin out of herself in some way. She was 26 and-a-half, and her world was gone. She was squatting in one of the molten stone conglomerations that people lived in here, struggling to manage the simultaneous level existence that was the norm and trading magical favours for anything she could snort, smoke, inject, inhale, or absorb through her aura.

The exorcists in that world were very efficient, but Yumiko had managed to evade them for six months by repeatedly changing her down-level anchor and staying very quiet on the up-level. It was chance that caused her current anchor, a fetching piece of twisted glass, to wind up in Angel's unsteady hands.

Angel had been so lost in her personal hell that she hadn't even noticed she was being haunted; what was one more ghost when there was a world to mourn? The fact that Yumiko spent her time tidying, providing food and indexing what few books Angel hadn't sold for drugs certainly contributed to the slowness of this revelation.

When a group of officious exorcists turned up to politely inform Angel that she was being haunted, the gaunt young woman had stared at them. At their white shirts and breeches, their bald heads, their clearly male bodies. (Which was wrong, so wrong. Officiates with genders? It made Angel dizzy.) She then informed them that any and all ghosts living here were hers, and only hers, and that they could take their shiny equipment and level-transcending spirit guides and get the hell out of her conglomeration, thank you.

They had been shocked, and a little patronising, as they explained that being haunted was bad for your health; that if she only allowed them to perform their exorcism she would feel much better. Angel had laughed outright, clinging to the smooth stone-wall as hysterics racked her slender body.

Then she went still and stared at them with dark eyes, and slowly expanded onto the up-level. She unfolded, and kept unfolding. Here, the exorcists were glowing white orbs, steady and purposeful. Angel was rickety, all sharp edges and feathers in a mixture of soft grey and red. The further she unfolded, the larger she became, until what the exorcists saw resembled a cross between a bird and a building; shimmering and shadowy.

“Go away,” Angel said.

The exorcists bowed and fled, and Angel collapsed back down. She sat on the warm stone floor, hugging her knees. A carved mug full of rainwater had drifted over to her, and Angel took it and drained it, her throat dry.

“So,” Angel asked, “What’s your name?”

“Yumiko.” The voice was a mellifluent whisper, coming from everywhere at once.

“Nice to meet you.” Angel had said. Yumiko made no reply, but the mug had refilled itself and several heat-stones rolled across the ground to surround her.

Angel cried for the first time since everything broke.

Angel Evans wakes up in someone else's bedroom. It smells of nag champa, fabric softener and sex. Pressed up against her front is the unmistakable heat of another body, moving slightly as the other person breathes. Cold air plays against her back.

For a few moments Angel just lies there, her lanky limbs heavy and tangled, her eyes shut. Yumiko is in the room; Angel can sense her. She is also resting, worn out from being so present last night.

Last night... Angel recalls desperate kisses and precise fingers, heated flesh and rutting hips. One voice, an alive one, had grunted and muttered and fallen into incoherence as Angel bit at skin. Another voice, heard only by her, had continuously murmured suggestions and endearments and filthy compliments while icy gasps of air drifted across her flushed flesh.

She supposes that this is one of those things that she should feel guilty about; bringing a ghost into someone's bed. Angel instead relishes the lazy warmth subsuming her, the comfort of her body spreading to her mind.

It can't last; there's work today and pubs don't clean themselves. Angel slithers expertly from the bed, her temporary lover undisturbed. She gathers up clothes and jewellery, dressing in the false twilight created by curtains before tiptoeing from the flat.

Once outside, she rolls a cigarette and strides home.

Someone has done a shit in the middle of the floor in the men's toilets. Angel Evans pinches her nose, and her face tightens. The pub has been open for two hours, and she wonders if any of the managers have even been in here, or if they just purposefully leave these things up to her. She slaps an "out of order" sign on the door, and goes in search of a more

heavy duty sterilisation solution while listing in her mind all of the reasons why chain businesses are evil.

It's going to be a long day.

Being an escaped magical prodigy on the run was, in some ways, easy. Angel was fiercely intelligent, had travelled for most of her life, and had enough self-interest and talent to back herself up. Unfortunately, those qualities that were keeping her alive were also quite memorable; every so often someone would have enough smarts to realise that the name she had given them was false, and that she did awfully resemble that escapee that everyone was talking about...

However being on the run beat solitary confinement with no contest, and Angel just kept running. She was 25 then, with a mien of carefree abandon that could melt into merciless iron efficiency at the first sign of trouble and a weathered body that proved attractive to a wide variety of peoples. Life was good.

Except that it wasn't. Something was wrong, and Angel could smell it. Magic. Magic that smelt like rot. It was everywhere, insidious and perceived only by those for whom magic came second to breathing.

She was curious, and more than a little worried. However, Angel Evans was never still long enough to investigate; if she wasn't selling remedies for arthritis and finrot, then she was mucking out stables, hitching rides on dragonboats, or flirting with dangerous people and selling her services as an elemental mediator and negotiator.

Now, Angel rarely thinks about that period of her life. When she does, a small, pained part of her wishes that she had paid more attention to all those warnings.

Today is a bad day. Yumiko calls them black fog days, and Angel finds the name fitting. Nothing in particular set

it off; Angel just woke up filled with a gasping desire to be anywhere except inside her own body. The desire drives everything else from her, and Angel clings to ratty sheets and tries not to scream.

She has given in before; there are drugs in this world, leaves to smoke, pills to swallow, powder to inhale. If she wanted, Angel could catapult her soul out of her body to walk among the stars or sink into the ground. She could slash her wrists and drip out of herself. She thinks that maybe if she did that, all the noise in her head would stop and the people would stop screaming and begging and it would finally, finally be quiet and she could rest.

Angel does none of those things. She grips her bedding like a lifeline and breathes in deep, controlled intervals. She buries her face into her pillow and shouts, and thinks of nothing.

Silent as only a ghost can be, Yumiko locks the door of the flat and hides the keys. Angel feels cool air settle around her like a cocoon. She does not move from the bed and her sharp shoulders shake like loose razorwire in a gale.

In Angel's world, Dwarf cities somewhat resembled icebergs. This was because only 10% of them ever breached the surface. It was a noisy enough 10%; between the growls and clicks of the language, the sounds that made up a countenance and the low-level hum of echolocation, any group of Dwarfs could rival a thunder of Dragons for volume.

To the outsider, Dwarf society appeared a) strictly striated and b) baffling. Gender roles were particularly confusing. The accepted theory was that there were men (he, his, him), women (she, her/s, her), klead (ta, ta, ta'en) and grafs (ku, kuot, kasht). Broadly speaking, men seemed to build, women to gather and prepare raw material, klead trade, and

grafs perform magic. No outsiders have ever tried to explain Dwarf families.

For their part, Dwarfs could not understand why other species insisted on attaching gender to an individual rather than a station or job. If one works magic, one is graf. If one works the mines, one is female. It is, they claimed, exceedingly simple. Officiates, at least, were able to grasp this concept. However with all these peculiarities it is unsurprising that there have been multifarious misunderstandings over the centuries, accompanied by varying levels of weaponry.

Aged fourteen, Angel Evans had successfully moved into a Dwarf city, learned the language (which was 50% infra-sound) and become graf. After six months, ku was more comfortable being a graf than being a woman. There was a great deal that Angel cherished about kuot time with the Dwarfs; ku learned types of magic that no-one with sight would have dreamed of, was encouraged (as a graf) to take as many lovers as ku liked, and made a firm friend in Gud.

Gud was a stout three foot ten with skin the colour of burnished earth. His laugh roared like a furnace and he brewed exceptionally good beer, a fact that Angel told him often.

"I'm serious!" Ku insisted, cheeks flushed. "This is the best beer that I've ever had the pleasure of drinking. It's like... It's like if you melted gold and made it into a drink, it would be this drink. Stop laughing. Hey, stop laughing!"

Angel slapped Gud on the shoulder, and he swatted back easily, his wide chest rocked by chuckles.

"Your head is in the bellows tonight, my friend. Best beware, or your thoughts will be blown out across the flame."

"Yes, and without a bellows you would be out of a job, my friend."

"A serious matter. I would have to become a graf like you, and spend all my days speaking with earth spirits."

“You couldn’t handle being graf,” Angel said, mock sniffy. Gud rumble-grinned, and continued with his teasing.

“You’re right. The multiple carnal entanglements would do me in.”

Angel nodded seriously, clicking kuot tongue in agreement before drawing on the vast wisdom of kuot fourteen years.

“You don’t have the delicacy to negotiate the social side of being graf,” ku said.

“That, at least, is true. I prefer my relationships to be straightforward.”

“And with klead.”

“And there is no shame in that,” Gud said. Angel raised kuot finely wrought pewter tankard and clunked it against Gud’s before downing the rest of kuot beer. Light from the forges flickered across their skin.

“Will you never tell me what brought you here?” Gud asked.

“It’s not that much of a story.”

“No, there is a tale there. But keep your secrets: we must all have them.”

“If I told you I’m meant to have a destiny, would you believe me?” Angel ran kuot finger around the lip of kuot tankard as ku asked.

“We all have destinies.” Gud said.

“Yeah.”

Angel lapsed into silence, thoughtful, and Gud refilled their tankards from a gurgling jug. Eventually Angel rumbled loudly; the Dwarf equivalent of a smile.

“This is depressing,” ku said. “Tell me about Hrad. Did you get into ta bed yet?”

“I couldn’t possibly say.”

“Well, that sounds like a challenge to me—drink up!”

“You always attempt this, and it is always you who ends up drunk and singing about gold.” Gud clicked his tongue softly while he spoke, indicating amusement.

“Lies!” Angel declared.

The two friends continued their bantering long into the day. Angel Evans was later found in the crook of a beam, singing softly about the many properties of gold while Gud snored on the floor below. This being a semi-regular occurrence, the other Dwarfs simply pushed Gud out of the way before starting their work.

Angel’s mouth is a grim line as she surveys the chaos outside her flat. She seriously considers lighting up then and there, because it’s vastly unlikely that the landlord will let her stay if he sees any of this. It’s at times like this that Angel Evans wishes she wasn’t opposed to e-cigarettes on principle (smoking barely counts as a vice unless it’s doing some harm, and e-cigarettes have a tendency to make their owners appear like pretentious tosspots). Still, one is at least allowed to vape indoors.

Offerings. Bloody offerings. Hundreds of tiny votivary figures made with love and care and a specific eye to detail. Slender and crystalline and beautiful, they cover the floor outside Angel’s door; a glittering snowdrift of stone women.

The redhead takes a deep breath, her face pinching around her nose. None of these sycophants seem to understand that she just wants to be left alone, that she can’t even begin to pick up the pieces of her life when people keep butting in to tell her how thankful they are. It makes Angel sick.

She steps over the offerings, trampling several, and turns the key in her lock. The lanky woman kicks the stubborn door open, and vanishes into her flat while muttering darkly. She re-emerges with a broom and a binbag.

It takes Angel a quarter of an hour to sweep all of the carvings into the binbag, and she growls out a lonely litany of swearwords and mild curses the whole time. Then she drags the binbag down the dingy stairs, across the road, and dumps it in a skip already half-filled with rubble.

Angel Evans glares tiredly, long arms hugging herself as she stares at the innocuous black bag. She turns slowly, like a dancer in a broken music box, and slinks back home.

Yumiko has already put a film on, something garish and ridiculous. Angel folds herself into the available space on the sofa with a startling resemblance to a clothes-horse contracting. She stares at the battered laptop blankly, awash with anger and fear and loss. There's a sigh of cold air, and it almost feels as though someone is sitting there, pressed up against her. Angel shuts her eyes, and exhales slowly.

"I don't know what to do, cranberry."

"You don't have to do anything."

"They just keep finding me. Everywhere I go. They want me to be some kind of hero and I can't... I'm not... I just... I did the only thing I could do."

"We could move on. You know I don't mind travelling, speckle-face."

"I know... I like it here."

"Really? Here? With the awful job, the backwards magic, the anonymous prophets, the pollution, the electricity, not to mention the prejudice."

Angel snorts, almost grinning as Yumiko teasingly lists the dimension's failings.

"They've got the internet. Also noodles, strip poker, tea... Besides, everything here is so skewed that it doesn't remind me of... It doesn't remind me."

Rain-scented air ruffles Angel's hair affectionately.

"I know sweetheart, I know."

When she was 26 years old, Angel Evans stood on the edge of a precipice greater than any she had ever imagined existed. She stood at what should have been the pulsing heart of her world, the nexus where it touched upon every other world. Nobody had told her what her choices were, and nobody had to; Angel had always been precocious, and she knew exactly what was happening.

Beneath her unfortunate freckles, her face was pale as morning sun. Her hands had not trembled, and she had allowed herself no moment of weakness, no screams against the unfairness of it all. No demands as to why this fell to her. Angel Evans had clenched her fists, and made the only choice that she could make, knowing exactly what it would mean for the billions in her world who got no voice in this. Knowing exactly what it meant for the countless others in the multitudes of worlds beyond.

There are days when she can almost live with that.

“You lose,” Angel said, her whorl-piece becoming visible as she placed it at the centre of the board. Her opponent, a Grem bandit-woman named Kayla, had bared sharp teeth and battered blue eyelids in agitation. The Katrok game had been the centre of attention for just over an hour; seeing as the ownership of the dragonboat that they were on had been gambled on it and they were playing with half the pieces enchanted to be invisible, this was not entirely surprising.

The gang of bandits had Phased onto the boat at a slow point in the mariver, and had taken over quickly and effectively. Angel Evans, who had been stowed away among the cargo, was rudely awakened by a tall Grem wearing clothes that he probably thought were bandit-chic; Angel had thought that they belonged in the private rooms of a rather specialist prostitute, but each to their own.

From there the situation had snowballed, culminating in Angel unpacking her Katrok set (the one that Gud had made her) and formally challenging the leader. Nobody except Angel herself had expected her to win.

“Where in the world did you learnt to play like that?” Demanded Kayla.

“Dwarf caverns. And I think you’ll be leaving now.” Angel’s voice was deceptively light. Kayla stood, the dome of her head gleaming.

“We will honour the terms of the challenge. To the letter.” She snapped.

Angel rumbled; a Dwarf would have recognised a threatening smile, though most of those present probably thought that the rumble came from her stomach.

“I want you off the dragonboat.” Angel said.

Kayla bowed mockingly, and the crew shuffled as the would-be-pirates flung out ropeladders and lowered themselves to the forest floor.

“What’s to stop them just Phasing back on?” One of the crew muttered as they hauled the ropeladders back up.

“I hexed them. They won’t be able to Phase again before sundown. I imagine they’re figuring that out about now.” Angel smirked a little as she spoke.

From below, there was a loud bang followed by a string of cursing. Some of the crew laughed.

“How nasty is that hex?” the second-in-command asked.

“Medium nasty?” Replied Angel. The second-in-command nodded, and turned away to organise the crew.

Angel Evans leaned over the side of the dragonboat and waved brightly as they gathered speed. She thought Kayla yelled something about necromancers and revenge, but Angel was barely listening. Besides, necromancers were common as rats, and more of a nuisance than anything else.

What Angel really wanted, at that moment, was to sleep. Comfortably and without dreams. For some time now her dreams have been filled with bones and shadows and the sensation of falling, her own voice ringing out across them warning her that a terrible choice is approaching, a choice that will reverberate over all the worlds, and that she must prepare herself. Angel would have gone to a prophet for advice, except that she had recently discovered that prophets seem to have an allergic reaction to her. Watching someone go into a full-on seizure after barely touching her aura had rather put her off. Angel shuddered at the memory.

She had no idea how to prepare, nor how to get a clearer warning, and mostly ignored this very obvious portent in the hopes that dream-Angel would, at some point, start providing an itinerary. Besides, surely fate was not so cruel as to place the wellbeing of multiple worlds in the hands of a seventeen-year-old?

Behind Angel, someone cleared their throat. It was the kind of throat-clearing that indicates the person's throat is fine, but they're not entirely sure that the person whose attention they're trying to garner won't just rip them limb-from-limb. Angel snapped out of her reverie and looked toward the throat-clearer, who haltingly began talking.

"We'll be, er, docking soon. Considering, um, considering the circumstances, we've altered the log-book so you're registered as a pre-paid passenger."

"That's nice of you."

Throat-clearer shifted, heavy braids swinging and obscuring a fascinatingly androgynous face.

"Erm, I, that is, the crew were wondering if, um, we could maybe take you for a drink? Once the, uhm, the unloading's done."

Angel Evans smiled slowly, warmth unfurling in her chest.

“You can definitely take me for a drink,” she said.

Angel can tramp for hours; it’s something she does when she needs to clear her head. Right now she is stamping a line along the beach below the city, leaving a trail of smoke in the air as if she were a cantankerous steam engine. Yumiko is at home, rearranging her room and playing some kind of MMORPG that Angel can’t quite get her head around. Being a ghost, so far as Angel can tell, is not actually awful.

She drags on the cigarette, spitefully imagining the tar colonising her lungs, and turns out to face the ocean. Not all the worlds that she’s visited have had oceans; Angel Evans always sticks around longer if they do. She shuts her eyes, and the salt air rakes her face like a blessing. Rills ripple in and are eaten by the next wave.

“What am I going to do?” She wonders out loud. The sea does not reply.

There is a part of Angel that admires the total evil that is corporate franchise. The sheer audacity of openly telling people what they should want over and over again, and then selling it to them at extortionate rates in the full knowledge that of course having the perfect sofa isn’t going to fulfil them because it was an empty desire anyway and that they will keep coming back until they a) run out of money b) die or c) cotton onto the plot, is strangely worthy of a twisted esteem. The closest thing to corporate franchise on Angel’s world were the officiates, but mostly they had just told people that they did not want to go to prison, which was usually true.

And then Angel freezes, midway through mopping the floor, because she just thought of her world and for one glorious moment it didn’t hurt. The redhead blinks, disorientated, as the pain crashes back over her. She feels as if she has

been drowning, and until this moment she had forgotten the existence of air. A fierce grin blooms on her face as she resumes mopping. She keeps grinning as she empties the bins and drags the full bags out back; as she wipes down windows and skirting boards, and hovers the hopeless carpet.

Angel Evans grins all the way home. It's the kind of grin that might be seen on the muzzle of a starving wolf that has just sighted a fat, shambling pig.

Much, much later, Angel hurls herself into the shower while singing an epic ballad about a Dwarf, a whore and a treasure chest. It contains all the jokes that one might expect, and a few that Angel added herself. She continues singing as she wraps herself in a towel and leaps onto the sofa.

The flat is noticeably cleaner—it looks less like the remains of a rhinoceros' takeaway spree and more like a place where an actual human lives, if the human in question had a dog-sized hamster as a pet. Angel grins, practically bouncing on the protesting seat of the sofa. She calls out, singing:

“Cranberry, cranberry, cranberry. Where oh where is my cranberry?”

“Someone's in a good mood.”

“Shiny. Like dust forming on a nebula, or the sparks on the banks of the Nameless Rivers.”

“Anything in particular bring this on?”

“I had a good day.”

Cool air twines through Angel's drying hair and settles on her shoulders.

“We should celebrate.”

“Mmm hmmm. Let's go out, somewhere big. There's that barrow nearby—I bet the ghosts there would be up for a party.”

“You want to party with barrow-wights?”

“Barrow-wights are fantastic partiers. We can leave your anchor here with protections, and I’ll bring whiskey. I want to do something. Stand on a hill and scream. Light fires. Dance.”

“Are you sure it’s a good idea? With the alcohol?”

“The drinks aren’t for me, Yumiko. Come on, let’s rock this place.”

Angel is almost glowing with excitement, her eyes glittering like flames. A good-natured sigh reverberates through the room.

“At least put some clothes on.”

Angel whoops, kissing the air around her before stumbling to her bedroom, the towel left like a discarded skin on the floor.

If anyone asked a young Angel Evans how to do magic, she would not have been able to answer. Likely she would have laughed it off, perhaps performed some flippant piece of illusion before winking as if it was some great secret that maybe she would share if she wanted to. A slightly older Angel Evans of, say, eighteen or so would have smiled mysteriously and invited the questioner to explore magic with her at their leisure. Later on of course, and in a private setting.

The truth was, a person might as well ask Angel Evans how to breathe. Angel studied magic, its lores and symbols and history, not to learn it but to learn how not to do it. Angel could go anywhere, settle herself into the local magic and start moving it about almost immediately: whether it moved in the direction she intended was a separate matter.

What this means, effectively, is that Angel tends to think about magic in an opposing perspective to most magic users. Whereas most of them had had to study years and years in order to build up reserves before they could even perform spells, Angel had cudgelled her mind with esoteric knowl-

edge and secrets because she was the magical equivalent of a volcano resting on a major faultline in tectonic plates that also happened to house a dragon. If she didn't vent, she was liable to explode.

This also means that all of her best parties take place with those who have already passed away, as she is less likely to accidentally kill them with excess magic.

"So," Angel lectures, pouring whiskey across the soil of the largest barrow she can find, "magic is simultaneously an external and an internal force. All worlds are built on it and generate it in some way, but you have to have magic in order to affect it. It's like... It's like being in a room full of cellos, humming, and listening to the strings vibrate."

The barrow-wights are only partly there, nightmarish beings that slice in and out of minds like Viking longships through water. These are mere ghouls, with little purpose and no notion of who Angel Evans is, although they are watching her with something approaching uncertainty. Yumiko is a shimmer on the air, floating in the corona of Angel's copper hair.

"Which basically means that I can do... this."

She upends the whiskey with a flourish and shoves her power into the surrounding leylines and webworks, making the area blaze momentarily in the vision of anyone who can see that kind of thing. The barrow-wights start gaining corporeality at an alarming rate, and Yumiko settles onto the ground beside her; a pleasantly plump and almost solid being.

"Bring on the Party of the Dead."

"Come one, come all to the Mysterious Travelling Mirror Promenade! Meet the incredible winged cockatrice! Converse with our loquacious bear! See your soul reflected in the

eyes of Zer Rathmona, our delicious prophet! Walk the hall of mirrors if you dare... Small donation required for each activity, but, Gentlepersons, surely no more than you can afford for this vivid experience. We have fire-eaters! We have gymnasts! We have Grem dancers and a troupe of fabulous flying Pictsies! This will be the show of a lifetime!"

Tarabbaht was always good at drawing a crowd; dressed in an outrageous selection of feathers and handkerchiefs with a mock-officiate's hat perched atop her thickly curled hair, she was a walking spectacle that outshone their gaudy signs. Angel had lurked behind her, dressed in the full-body coverings typical of the Northern Undina to avoid any awkward recognition; apparently officiates took escaped prisoners far too seriously.

While Tarabbaht strutted and squawked like a phoenix in season, Angel Evans just watched. Her job was to subtly dissuade troublemakers from gaining access to their little show, and to keep an eye out for authorities that might create a fuss. It was easy but grating work; Angel sets up wards whenever they land and maintains them throughout their stay.

The Mysterious Travelling Mirror Promenade was then camped outside a completely unremarkable dragontown; high up and hard to get to, dragontowns were settlements that sprung up along dragonboat routes, and they tended to be bustling places populated by a flinty type that nonetheless liked a good drink and some entertainment. They had floated up in a convoy of featherboats, which were similarly built to dragonboats but significantly cheaper and more likely to explode.

They made good trade all day and well into the night, and it was near morning when Angel walked a final circuit and crawled into the tent that she shared with Tarabbaht and Finbar. Despite her exhaustion she had slept badly, plagued

by dreams that were growing ever stronger. She had woken up to the sound of Finbar relaying gossip in his gentle, deep voice while Tarabbaht tried to decide whether it was worth staying another two nights. It went some way to soothing Angel Evans' frayed nerves.

Finbar was still naked, and Angel remembers that she had stroked her fingers across the belt he wore at all times. He had always claimed that it was cursed; that he had once been a beautiful woman troubled by suitors, and that after refusing a warlock one too many times the man had tricked Finbar into putting on the magical belt which had instantly changed him from woman to man. Finbar had told his family that an epic quest was needed to remove the curse, ran off to join the circus and never looked back.

She had pressed slender fingers to the belt, listening to the magic running through it while Tarabbaht's voice took on a more serious tone behind her.

"...spreading outwards. No-one's sure what it means in the long run, but the dead just don't stay dead there anymore. They're not exactly aggressive, but whatever the conjuration was it should have worn off by now."

"I don't like it. I heard stories from some of the dragonboat crews yesterday and this goes beyond necromancy. I don't think there are any living left in the Town of the Friendly Skulls."

"And the officiates just keep ignoring it."

"They say it'll pass like any other plague. I reckon we should be ready to scramble—the Dwarfs are worried, which worries me."

"One more night here maybe, then let's move up."

Only half-awake, Angel's mind had mixed the conversation with the leftover fragments of her dream, twisting the pieces this way and that as if they were jewels. Something there was screaming at her to put the pieces together and

make sense of them, but the puzzle had remained out of her grasp. She had burrowed backward into Tarabbaht while pulling Finbar closer, making him chuckle.

Angel Evans hadn't known then, she had imagined that whatever storm was coming would simply wash over them. She had slept for another few hours, held between her friends like something precious. And even if she had known that Finbar and Tarabbaht were going to die, she wouldn't have known what to say to them.

The hangover clenches Angel's head like a furious dog, growling whenever she moves. She had woken up alone among the barrows, shivering and drenched in mud. Staggering home had taken an age, and she had propped herself in the shower before rolling around on her previously abandoned towel and retreating to her bed.

Yumiko is somewhere, but she is forebodingly silent. It's not that Angel did anything wrong, exactly; or that's what she is telling herself. She never promised not to summon the Wild Hunt and riddle her way home. It is not as if there was an agreement in place stating that Angel Evans, struggling ex-addict, was going to avoid shadowmancers if one just happened to turn up. And maybe duelling was a little addictive, and maybe it had been a while and Angel wasn't as sharp as usual, but damn it! It wasn't Angel's fault that these things had happened.

Even hungover from magic use, the ginger doesn't exactly believe herself. She whimpers into her pillow, feeling as if the party has left her scooped out and empty, meaning that now there is nothing left to shield her from perpetual guilt. Among the crushing weight of several billion lives abruptly severed, the pain of upsetting Yumiko stings like lemon juice dripped on an open wound.

To say that work is hellish would be an understatement of the greatest kind. Angel wants to scream with every step. Each squirt of her spray bottle, swab of the mop, swipe of the cloth is a painful drag that is achieved only by habit. Yumiko's silence haunts her.

She exits the pub still filled with a muted horror and steps into persistent drizzle. Angel stands for a moment before fumbling with her lighter, swearing when someone intones her name. She lights her roll up, breathing out smoke, and demands:

"Who's asking?"

"Lillian. This is my associate Garth. Ignore anything he says."

"Wa'gwaan?"

Angel Evans narrows her eyes at the strange pair. On the surface, Lillian is a severe and scarred woman in a wheelchair, and Garth is a dark and sensually shambolic man glinting with jewellery. Both burn with latent power. Both remind her of people she knew before.

"Not interested," says Angel as she strides away, nicotine hitting her throat like a scrumptious freight train. Lillian's precise voice stalls her.

"Do you think you're the only one who's ever had to end a world? Or save one?"

"Are you going to tell me you know what I'm going through?" Angel's voice is flat.

"Nah. That would be lies. But mebbe we knows someone as knows someone, feel me?" Says Garth.

"What do you want from me?" Angel asks.

"Let us help you. Let us take you to someone who can help," says Lillian.

Angel Evans exhales. She thinks of prophets, dying as she was born and recoiling from her in life. She thinks of Gud and his beer, his necessarily secret lovers. Of magicians

and officiates and circuses. She thinks of all the time she spent running, and she thinks of Yumiko; quiet and constant, cleaning up after Angel's breakdowns.

"It... It isn't a good time. I was stupid and I've upset my girlfriend," says Angel.

"When is it ever going t'be a good time?"

Garth's voice carries no judgement, which is probably why Angel folds. She turns back and walks to them.

"Fine. But if this is a set up, I will crush you both."

"That seems a little extreme," says Lillian, wheeling smoothly down the alley.

"It's been a trying day," retorts Angel.

"Was't the wights or the shadowmancer duel that got the best of you?" asks Garth.

"I'm going to ignore that," mutters Angel

"Got a spare rollie?" Garth asks

"Seriously?" Snaps Angel

"Garth. Shut up," says Lillian

"Ya love me really," he replies, smiling.

The three of them vanish into enfolding darkness, witnessed only by a wild-eyed tramp.

Angel Evans has been to hidden places before; to circles, orbs, caves that only the lost can find. To standing stones. None of them have ever been this comfortable. It is as if she has walked into someone's kitchen, and the kitchen just happens to be inside a dolmen.

A dark woman wearing a cardigan and green wellies has given Angel a steaming mug of tea, and now sits across a table from her holding a mug of her own. The two of them watch each other, and neither has yet made a move to drink any of the beverage.

"So how does this work then?" Asks Angel.

"Tea before magic," the woman says.

Angel raises her chipped mug and slugs the tea back in one go; the trick is swallowing before it has time to burn. She replaces the mug on the table and cocks an eyebrow.

The cardiganed woman sighs, and sips her tea delicately before wrapping earthy hands around the mug.

“Dear, I can’t help you unless you let me.”

“You haven’t offered anything yet.”

“And I heard you were sharp! Young woman, who do you think has been looking out for you while you’ve been here? Surely you realise that that noisy magic you do garners attention? Now, you say you don’t want to be found, but lately you’ve not put much effort into hiding. We’ve had all kinds trying to break in looking for you dear; who do you think has been keeping them out?”

“I never asked you to do that.”

“No, you didn’t. You don’t ask for a lot do you?”

“What do you want?”

“That’s not the question here. What do you want? Do you want to heal?”

“You talk like I’m wounded.”

“Aren’t you?”

Angel opens her mouth to retort, then shuts it. The headache growls behind her eyes, and she regrets drinking her tea so fast: there is now no escape from the sharp gaze being levelled at her.

“It’s been two years,” Angel whispers.

“And you lived there for twenty-six.”

Angel Evans leans forward and cups her forehead with stained fingers. The other woman sips at her tea.

“I killed an entire world. I killed my world. How am I meant to live with that?”

“Most people don’t.”

“Helpful.”

“Every other world alive is alive because of what you did.”

"But my world is gone."

"Yes dear, it is. And in the scheme of things it was just a world. Do you know how many worlds die every day? How many are born?"

"Fuck you."

"In the scheme of things, you're just a lass. One lass. Existence doesn't care much for any single person once they've fulfilled their purpose."

"Fulfilled their purpose?"

"You had to make a choice."

"It was hardly a choice."

"Everything is a choice. You are one of the most powerful people around, easily strong enough to topple some of those so-called gods. You could have kept your world alive."

"No! I couldn't. The magic, the necromancy, I... It was everywhere, it would have spread everywhere."

"Yes, it would have. And the other worlds would have crumbled away until only one reality was left; yours."

Angel Evans is white as stone, her eyes hard.

"That wasn't a choice."

"It was."

Angel's form trembles, wavers. There's a flash of grey and scarlet. The suggestion of building and bird bleeds through.

"I didn't come here to listen to this shit."

"Oh pipe down, you're as bad as Garth. Always flashing his feathers that boy."

"I've fought. I've travelled. I've ended worlds. What can you possibly teach me?"

"Peace."

Aged eight, Angel Evans ran through a garden full of plants taller than she was. Her shoes were abandoned and there were stains on her fine tunic. Near the wall stood a young oak, vibrant and inviting. She scrambled up it as if

she had done so thousands of times before, although this was the first time.

Outside the wall is a world that looked, to Angel, enormous. In her mind the child shrank down to the size of a raindrop. She hesitated, there at the top of the wall, before scrambling down the outside and into the world. She landed on hands and feet, poised like a cat, then scampered away. Hours passed before she was missed and the panicking began.

Afterwards, Angel stands by the sea thinking. It's uncomfortable. When she looks back at her life, she realises that she has spent most of it running. Angel Evans barely remembers the people who named her. Some days she thinks that her life started when her feet hit the ground outside her family's holding, and that before that she didn't exist. She's moved place to place, job to job, person to person, and whenever anything became tricky she left.

Mostly, she thinks this was fine. Knowing when to run is a valuable trait. She'll always regret not saying goodbye to Gud, not being able to explain that she had not purposefully caused the death of their prophet. Otherwise... Well, she can't change the past, but maybe she can learn. And as far as she can tell, Angel Evans has never stood and fought for something that she wants. She's never built.

She wonders if she can change that.

This is a space that breathes. It looks like a spherical room, apart from the times when it looks like something else entirely. It is utterly striking, and yet almost impossible to describe. There is a sound here, as if something were steadily growing and also dying away. Sometimes it seems as if vast beings are swimming in and out of this place, beings hundreds of times greater than a blue whale.

Angel knows that this space appears differently to everyone. It is so far beyond what most beings can comprehend that they simply see whatever makes sense to them. Angel Evans sees roots, reaching in from all directions and tangling together in a great ball. They are world-roots, connecting all of existence together. Below and between and around them is the mulch of dead matter, and the occasional stark space where one has disappeared.

Angel Evans reaches toward one of these gaps, placing something there, then turns and leaves. A white rose gleams in among the roots.

When she arrives home, the flat is immaculate. Angel hesitates in the doorway before striding in.

“Yumiko?”

There is no reply. Angel sighs, and collapses onto the sofa before speaking to the seemingly empty room.

“I fucked up. I fucked up and I’m sorry. You’re always looking out for me and I just... I take it for granted. I take you for granted and I shouldn’t. I just assume that however badly I mess shit up you’ll be there and that isn’t fair of me.

“I’m so lucky to have you. You’re all I’ve got. Sometimes I’m scared by how much I love you and you... You make me feel not guilty about being happy when everything’s gone.”

“... Angel?”

“I quit the cleaning job. It’s shit. Like, I’m literally picking up other people’s shit and I’m not doing that anymore. There’s a practical mechanics course that I want to apply for—I figure it’d be good to do something with my hands again. I used to be pretty decent with them.”

“What happened, speckle-face?”

“I met someone. And I actually listened. And I’m trying this thing where I’m honest about how I feel and I stop pun-

ishing myself and think about what I actually want to do, not what I did before.”

“How long will that last?”

“Ten minutes?”

Yumiko laughs, and warm air brushes against Angel’s face. The redhead relaxes.

“I was worried about you,” Yumiko murmurs.

“Sorry.”

“I don’t mind you partying with barrow-wights and the Wild Hunt and so on. I just worry that someday you’ll see something shiny and go off without me.”

“Never. I just. No. I can’t begin to imagine living without you.”

“I can’t imagine being dead without you.”

Angel Evans snorts. Yumiko giggles. Angel laughs, and then both are bursting with laughter, loud and raucous. It is some minutes before they calm down. Angel wipes water from her eyes.

“What a pair of saps.”

“Indeed.”

“Come on, let’s look up college applications before I lose my nerve.”

The laptop floats over and flips up. Angel starts typing, and Yumiko settles around her like an invisible hug.

Throughout many worlds, the nexus-spaces slowly became known as Rose-Rooms, though not many could say why.

On a wet, wild day, Angel Evans stamps toward home from her first ever college interview. The damp air is clinging to her hair and her face, dripping along her neck. She stops outside a closed shop, peering into the doorway. She

recognises the person huddled there, can smell their power beneath the reek of alcohol and filth.

The young woman digs in her pocket and shoves some notes toward the person, who squints at her.

"You're not crazy," Angel says firmly, "Don't ever let them tell you that. You've just got vision, and most everyone here is blind."

"I know that." The tramp says, tucking the money away firmly.

Angel laughs, a short bark of surprise, before walking on. The tramp shakes their head, and settles back into their tatty sleeping bag.

When Angel Evans was born, she was beset by a troubling number of prophecies. It was twenty-nine years before she realised that they were now totally meaningless. What she would do next is anyone's guess.

END

Food and Horror



OCTAVIA CADE

I'M A SHORT FICTION WRITER. I like the discipline of it, the concision. I like that it demands things from both readers and writers—that there's no room to spoon-feed, that all the connections are implicit. They're also, I think, more responsive to the world around us. There's not the same expectation of economic return as there is in a novel, so there's more room to experiment, to go for different setting and subjects, different cultures, different contexts. In this short stories are a very experimental form—and often a very aware one.

This awareness is present in food and horror shorts, as it is in the rest of sci-fi and fantasy. Writers know the consumption narrative, know it instinctively because food and horror has been around a long time, in any number of ways—natural and supernatural and textual, and with a history like that it's easy to become referential.

In the first of these columns I talked about Hansel and Gretel, about the gingerbread house in the woods: dangerous temptation, peril spun about with sugar and marzipan, con-

sumption within consumption for what is all this gingerbread for if not to plump up the witch's next meal? Come stuffer the little children, so that the hungry owner of that house can stuff herself. It's a well known story, and a well loved one.

What it is not is a static story. Damien Angelica Waters takes it on in her short "A Lie You Give, And Thus I Take". Hansel doesn't exist in this story, and the Gretel equivalent is a grown woman, the witch an abusive partner who feeds her up on sugar and marshmallow and tiramisu, measuring her hips and frowning, trying to feed up his girlfriend into the image of the house. Because the Gretel figure here is the house, in her way—tied to the domestic sphere with chores and expectation, "scrubbing meringue from the linoleum". Taking to the house with a pastry knife, she believes it to be a reflection of her partner ("I'd know your handwriting anywhere") but it's not just the house he's covering up with fondant. It's the sugar-construction of both woman and home that links them together.

This is a story of linkages.

She thinks she's in a different story sometimes, does this Gretel figure: Cinderella come into the house of gingerbread, but "All the stories are the same" says her feeder, when what he really means is all outcomes are predetermined, including yours. This is consumption of a different kind, a nibbling into shape, a cookie cutter gingerbread woman there to be consumed when she's done with the scrubbing, when she's placated the jealousy of accusations of infidelity. "You were with the dwarves, weren't you?" he says, wanting to eat her up, and even though she wasn't the suspicion was enough for punishment, for little bites of flesh ("...that night, you bite a little too hard, a little too many times, leaving me with a set of oddly-shaped, half-moon bruises").

"I can't remember ever being this hungry before", states the Gretel figure, but what she's really hungry for isn't taffy or

chocolate or raspberry preserves. It isn't even chicken or soup or cubes of beef stock, the objects of her lonely fantasies. It's the ability to break out of stories, to end the ongoing narrative of her consumption. The Gretel who shoved a witch into the stove to save her brother isn't this aware—she's too juvenile for awareness, for the comparisons of other stories and the undercurrents of gender and power. Her power is all on the surface, all adults and ovens. There's little temptation there past the obvious, and certainly sex never comes into it. The witch may have bitten her all to pieces after her brother but the biting wouldn't have been in bed, that's for sure.

But if consumption narratives can be forcibly terminated, sometimes you've just got to see them through to the end. I've talked about Chikodili Emelumadu's "Candy Girl" in this series before—it's one of my absolute favourite short stories ever, so why not—and it has consumption and transformation winding round each other like a double helix. Waters has her Gretel figure putting a stop to her own consumption (to the endless swallowing of sugar, to the consumption of her sexual self) but Muna, the protagonist of "Candy Girl", has to give herself up to consumption in order to force transformation.

Turning into chocolate at the behest of an idiot ex, who tried a love potion and got it wrong, his bastardised adoption of another culture failing under the shallowness of his understanding, Muna visits a wise woman to find out how to break the spell, to turn her from Bounty bar back into flesh. "Turns out he has to eat her," says Ozulu. The sickly slide of flesh into sticky sugar can't be stopped, but matter and energy both are transformative. As the act of eating recycles food into flesh, so Muna, become food, can change her state through that same consumption.

Paul, the dimwitted ex, is delighted. It's what he's always wanted: to eat her up, to have her culture inside him, a way to become the other, to transform himself from Whiteboy into

Igbo. It was why Muna dumped him in the first place, the realisation that she'd become a fetish object to him, wanted not for herself but what she represented. "He wanted to belong and it didn't matter whom he needed to fixate on to get in." Then a spell goes wrong and suddenly there she is, in perfect consumable form, and he can barely contain his glee. He's on her straight off, guzzling down every last part of her and he's got permission to do it, no-one can blame him, it's all so perfect!

When he reaches for my breasts Ginika wallops him but Ozulu puts a hand out to stop her.

"He must eat all of her to keep all of her. You don't want some of her faculties gone, do you?"

Paul smiles the smile of a triumphant child that doesn't realise it is in trouble. He suckles on a breast which stretches high, high, high before breaking off. It wobbles in his mouth, gleaming a dull red.

"Turkish delight!" Paul claps. He attacks the other one with gusto.

Paul, you might have noticed, is a fucking creep. But if modern short stories are good at anything they are good at subversion, and if Waters' Gretel figure takes herself, with deliberation, out of the story then Muna clings onto it, shaping what she cannot stop. Because you are what you eat, and this is something else that Paul doesn't understand, and when Muna is inside him, becoming flesh again, starting from a lump in his treacherous testicle, she can push him out of his own body, take it over as he took hers, and the only trace left of him at the end of this second transformation, of this second consumption, is a fragment of foot than can easily be hidden by a sock.

Waters looked at story and gender, but Emelumadu looks at colonialism and gender, the place and power of ownership.

These are subversive stories, stories of temptation and threat and how to deal with each, but most of all they are stories of transformation. Of the assumption of personal power, of reclaiming what has been stolen.

But because consumption and transformation are so linked with the idea of power the stories of this power can also provide a mirror to subversion, as well as the potential to pull back from it. Alyssa Wong's "Hungry Daughters of Starving Mothers" initially presents consumption in terms of flipped gender assumptions. The Gretel figure is abused and Muna is exploited but Jen only assumes the role of victim in order to procure her own.

On a date with the obnoxious Harvey, whose thoughts "glisten with ancient grudges and carry an entitled, Ivy League stink", Jen sifts through his thoughts and finds them full of violence, of murder and degradation—hers. For Harvey is a killer, another of the horrifying multitude that feels entitled to a woman's body in whatever form he chooses to consume her.

"She's got perfect tits," he thinks, "lil' handfuls just waiting to be squeezed."

"I can't wait to cut her up," he thinks.

"She'll look so good spread out over the floor," he thinks.

"I'm going to take her home and split her all the way from top to bottom. Like a fucking fruit tart," he thinks, drunk on dreams of wallowing in screams and blood.

Jen, all too aware of the entitlement behind the impulse, just smiles sweetly and goes along, all the while thinking "They're never as strong as they think they are". Gretel leaves the story, Muna goes along gracefully until she can use that going along to stage a take-over, but Jen fights from the get go, prowling in a way that Harvey could never dream of or

even appreciate. And why not? This is the golden age of short fiction, after all, with women and minorities and the weight of diversity piling up, and the Harveys of the world (and the Pauls) had better look out.

But he doesn't look out, does Harvey, so sure in the idea of his own consumption that he misses what's coming at him for Jen is as hungry as he is.

I launch myself at him, fingers digging sharp into his body, and bite down hard on his mouth. He tries to shout, but I swallow the sound and shove my tongue inside. There, just behind his teeth, is what I'm looking for: ugly thoughts, viscous as boiled tendon. I suck them howling and fighting into my throat as Harvey's body shudders, little mewling noises escaping from his nose.

The transformation from victim to predator is mirrored in the detail that, after her consumption, Jen briefly takes on the form of her victim. Harvey's abandoned next to a dumpster, naked, in the kind of pose and setting we usually find female victims in, if every crime show I've ever turned into is believed, of course. And this transformation is key to the text.

Wong subverts the typical predator/prey gender dynamic, but by clothing Jen in the appearance and power of her selected victim she also transfers the potential for relevant flaws. It's "you are what you eat" again, and the consumption of power corrupts, turns power relationships on their edges and makes other people victims. Jen, gorged on a killer of young women, finds herself drooling over sweet friendly Aiko, a girl who's so appealing that Jen just wants to eat her.

It makes it hard to build a relationship, but that's what food is, and horror: temptation and the transformation of the flesh, of the connections between flesh. Even if those connections are on a small scale, and domestic.

There's a difference in the scale of transformation, however. Gretel might transform through sugar, through gingerbread, into an independent woman, a killer of witches, but food can also be used for more obvious transformations—and for more subtle ones. Food can turn a body into a monstrous thing, can make of it a monster, can be used to feed monsters, and to breed them. But how far can this go? Can food change a universe?

Yes, if the universe is a single person. If I'm bitten by a vampire and turn into a creature who needs to drink blood to live, then my universe is certainly different. It may even be upturned entirely, if that universe is one where vampires are creatures of fiction only... until I find out the hard way that they're not.

But can objectivity be so undermined? Does food have the power to change a universe for everyone as well as for the individual, as well as for the moment? It does in Kelly Jennings' story "Dream Cakes". Here the consumption of a cake changes worlds. A demoted corporal who has lost his wife (whether to death or divorce) eats for change, but change is not limited to his body—or even his understanding of the universe. Everything changes for him, the universe reshaping around him to a better life, one with wife and daughters and an admittedly unhappy death that is at least better than it could have been.

What's notable about this very short story is what it doesn't say. The horror lies in the cracks, in the unanswered questions. My interpretation of it—an interpretation which could very well be wrong—is that the universal change of the dream cake is universally subjective only. I think that the new decades of his better life are a dream, and one that in real time lasts only very briefly. The Corporal leaves his credit chip behind and Ella, the baker of the dream cake, "knew from experience that for at least an hour, maybe even two, after the change, it would still be functional". She promptly empties the balance into her

own account—after all, the Corporal won't need it where he's going.

Is it euthanasia, is it murder? Either way it comes with pastry, with coconut milk and spices, with sweet smells that speak of a life beyond the station. A temptation, yes, and not so very different than the gingerbread house. "We can live here and be happy," say Hansel and Gretel, not knowing that as soon as they're start to suck on butterscotch that their lives are running out.

Does the Corporal know? I expect so, but still—one shudders to think. "Now your dream is the world," says Ella, but the world can be a circumscribed thing and it's no coincidence that the Captain of the post-dream, the demoted Corporal who was, dies in orbital decay, clutching to a photo of the family he wanted but never had/wanted and got.

(All the stories are the same.)

But it's not enough in horror for food to be (potentially) deadly. It can be dehumanising as well. Often this occurs when the human element of the equation is the prey animal, but it can also be seen in stories where humans are treated the same way as food as treated, while not being food themselves. Obviously this doesn't mean planting them in soil, or hanging from the hooks of a slaughterhouse, but comes from the changing definition of "human" to something more closely resembling "resource".

Look at, for example, Victor Fernando R. Ocampo's story "Blessed are the Hungry". Here, on a generational interstellar voyage where food is limited to mushroom plots and biodegradable plastics, the treatment of the colonists is creepily similar to that of their crops. Genetic diversity is key, and so reproduction is strictly regulated—and strictly encouraged, with each household expected to have a minimum of eight people.

There isn't food enough to support this burgeoning population, however. Rations are cut and cut again, and anyone who protests against this or the reproductive strategy is shoved out an airlock. This leaves a society crammed in the (frequently literal) dark, absolutely disposable and of no more individual account than the mushrooms. "Why can't we keep them all hale and healthy?" asks a priest who's doomed to spacing, "instead of constantly creating, discarding, and replacing?"

Because genetic control is only a part of it. Social control is the real goal, the diminution of human dignity to factory farmed spores remarkable only for their reproductive capacity. Individual elements are to be weeded out in service of the whole. In a sense, the mushrooms are afforded more consideration.

It's the brutal overthrow of this ideology, the social desire to change human status from resource/mushroom analogue to something with a little bit of self-determination and dignity, that's the drive of the story. Because even crammed like fungi into tiny rooms, controlled by food and especially by its absence, the people of the spaceship can see themselves becoming more than they are.

It's a form of knowledge, this power, because transformation comes with comprehension, or at least the experience of different states, of how it feels to move between them. And sometimes that movement, when sparked by consumption, is physical and sometimes it isn't. Sometimes what food brings is understanding. Such is the case in "Mother of Giants" by Kirsty Logan. In times of famine, infants disappear out of cradles, taken by the witch in the woods for her dinner. A little girl wakes sobbing from nightmares, and the local mothers tell their stories quietly, so as not to scare her further. But there are other stories they tell, and these the little girl does hear: The Mother of Giants, and how she takes hungry babies

and fosters them, feeds them until they're fat and happy, saves them from starvation and suffering.

The stories are images of each other (all stories are the same!) and the girl sees one younger brother born, and then another. This youngest child is taken away soon after birth, taken by the witch or rescued by the Mother, and the little girl, believing in the stories, sneaks out into the woods and brings the witch back with her:

When I shut my eyes, she was there. She had filthy matted hair and shining gold eyes and long, sharp fingers like a bird's talons. She rushed towards me and her mouth opened so wide that it split her head open to show her black bloody teeth.

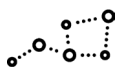
Food is transformative, and I've talked in previous columns about how the lack of food can also usher in transformation (it certainly does in Ocampo's story). But lack of food can also impede transformation: it can fix a body in place and keep it tethered to childhood, to the time before understanding. But then the famine ends and the girl, growing round and full of roast pork, of milk, transforms from child to fertile woman to mother, and it's when she has her own children and the famine comes again that she understands the true relationship between killing witch and kind Mother. The infants born into hunger, to women too starved to lactate, can die slowly of hunger... or they can be taken out into the woods and left in the snow, a quick and painless death that's covered up with stories when stories can give no comfort. *"There was a woman who loved her baby. But love is not food..."*

Love is, however, knowledge—and so is lack. Hunger transforms, and the resulting horror is tinged with practicality and compassion. It doesn't come with easy answers, though—good horror rarely does. It does come with connection.

And that's, I think, one of the things I'm seeing from creepy, contemporary short stories themed around food and

consumption. Their treatment of transformation is aware. It's subversive and diverse. Perhaps most importantly, it doesn't focus on the permanence or the strength of the change; it doesn't draw a hard line between. Instead the primary concern is the similarity between pre- and post-transformative bodies: colonisation before and after chocolate, the mirror-selves of witch and mother, the dual expansion of genetics and ideology, the place of women in stories, and the eating up of dreams.

Where to Start With The X-Men



JAY EDIDIN

MY NAME IS JAY EDIDIN, and I explain the X-Men.

Professionally.¹

Don't laugh: it's a living. Even in the sprawling landscape of superhero comics, the X-Men are notably unwieldy: fifty-three years, thousands of comics, dozens of spinoffs, three animated series, and two cancelled pilots (not to mention the

brand-dubious *Mutant X*). And then there are the movies: once the X-Men's most accessible point of entry, the feature-film franchise now spans sixteen years, eight installments,² and a tangle of branching timelines and contradictory continuity that would do the comics proud.

Last month,³ the eighth chapter of Fox's X-Men franchise hit the theaters to baffle and bewilder a whole new generation of fans;⁴ who will then—Xavier willing and the creek don't rise—find their way back to the still more convoluted world of the comics, where a rival generation of long-term X-Men readers will be waiting to judge the hell out of them for not knowing who Adam X the X-Treme⁵ is.

But *you*, dear reader; *you* will be ready. Because—surprise!—you're about to get a crash course in the ins, outs and retcons of comics' greatest superhero soap opera.

Trust me. I'm an X-Pert.

X-Men hit the stands on September 1, 1963. Written by Stan Lee and drawn by Jack Kirby, *X-Men #1* introduced a team of five yellow-and-black clad teenagers, billed on the cover as “The strangest superheroes of them all!” in a pitched battle with Magneto, the Master of Magnetism.

The Silver-Age *X-Men* lasted 66 issues before lapsing into reprints and then an extended hiatus.⁶ They re-emerged in 1975, with *Giant-Size X-Men #1*, written by Len Wein and drawn by Dave Cockrum, which replaced most of the original all-WASP team with a new, older, international line-up. Cockrum would stay on as series artist, but Wein was shortly replaced by Chris Claremont, who would go on to write the title—and shape the widening X-line—for the next seventeen years. Most of the elements of *X-Men* that have made their way into popular consciousness—including the franchise’s distinctly soap-opera feel—have their roots in Claremont’s

run; and the storylines of four of the films⁷ draw heavily from some of his best-known storylines.

Under Claremont, *X-Men* rapidly grew from a fringe book to Marvel’s best-selling title, branching into a range of spinoff series: *New Mutants*, which introduced a new team of superpowered teens; *X-Factor*, which reunited the original five Silver-Age *X-Men* under a new banner; *Excalibur*, which brought Marvel’s merry mutants across the pond to team up with Marvel UK headliners Captain Britain and Meggan; and *Wolverine*, which featured the *X-Men*’s most popular member in much bloodier solo adventures.

In 1991, Marvel relaunched *X-Men*. Propelled on the cresting wave of the comics-speculator boom, *X-Men #1*, scripted by Chris Claremont and drawn by Jim Lee, still holds the world record for best-selling comic of all time. In 1992, Fox launched the animated series that defined the team to

a generation of kids, mixing Lee's iconic costume designs with varyingly loyal⁸ adaptations of Claremont's classic storylines. In 1994, facing bankruptcy, Marvel sold the X-Men's movie rights—along with several other franchises—to Fox, where they remain to this day.

The X-line foundered through most of the '90s, and didn't really regain its footing until 2000, when Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely took the reins of the flagship title, *New X-Men*; and the first Fox feature film introduced a new generation to the franchise and ushered in the modern era of superhero movies. This is the X-Men—comics and film—in which the modern incarnations of the franchise find their most direct roots.

The X-Men vary a *lot* from incarnation to incarnation, but most iterations share a few common factors:

THE PREMISE: The X-Men are mutants—possessed of a common genetic mutation that gives

them a shocking array of superpowers, which usually⁹ manifest around puberty. Concerned by the widespread persecution of mutants¹⁰ and the rise of evil mutants, Professor Charles Xavier assembles the X-Men, a band of mutants dedicated to fighting to protect a world that—to varying extents—hates and fears them.¹¹

THE MUTANT METAPHOR:

The X-Men are, fundamentally, outsiders. They work in the margins—often at odds with established power, occasionally in uneasy alliance. As such, mutants tend to serve as a varyingly obvious stand-in for actual marginalized populations. The groups for which the X-Men serve as a metaphor have varied to reflect the social and political concerns and consciousness of different eras; and often come at the expense of actual representational diversity in X-media.¹²

THE SOAP OPERA: Despite the tights and fights, X-Men is traditionally a heavily character-driven franchise, with a heavy helping of love triangles, faked deaths, surprise clones, and dramatic retcons.¹³

THE TIMELINES: Sure, everyone in the Marvel Universe time-travels *these days*; but the X-Men did it before it was cool. The X-Men the source of a disproportionate number of split timelines and alternate chronologies,¹⁴ and their continuity is convoluted even on the significantly skewed scale of long-running superhero franchises.¹⁵

Got all that? Good, because it's time to take a look at the core cast! Because there are a *whole lot* of X-Men—like, *hundreds*—I'm going to stick with the ones you're most likely to meet in *X-Men: Apocalypse*:

PROFESSOR X (CHARLES XAVIER):¹⁶ On both page and screen, Professor X is the telepathic founder and mentor of the X-Men. He's ludicrously wealthy, and in most timelines ends up bald and in a wheelchair. Professor X nominally works toward a dream of peaceful human-mutant cooperation but is regularly tripped up by his own hubris and his persistent belief that it's okay to train up teenagers as a paramilitary group.

Currently in the comics: Dead.

MAGNETO (ERIK LEHNSHERR, PLUS A WHOLE LOT OF OTHER ALIASES): Professor X's best frenemy and the X-Men's oldest antagonist (and frequent ally), Magneto is a Holocaust survivor and mutant supremacist. He controls magnetism, which in the Silver Age meant "literally anything we make up, with no actual understanding of how magnets work" and later gained marginally more (and still shaky) resemblance to actual magnetic fields. In *X-Men: Apocalypse*, he at least temporarily works for the eponymous villain.

Currently in the comics: Running a semi-renegade team of X-Men.

CYCLOPS (SCOTT SUMMERS): One of the original five in the comics; part of the 2nd-generation team in the movie Cyclops is the field leader of the X-Men. He's socially awkward but a capable tactician, has an atypically rough relationship with his superpowers—optical energy blasts that he can't control without adaptive technology—and generally comes

in a two-pack with Jean Grey.¹⁷ Director Bryan Singer has described the teenage version of Cyclops who appears in *X-Men: Apocalypse* as both a “rebel” and a “jock,” both of which would differentiate him significantly from his comics counterpart. He’s older than his brother (Havok) in the comics and younger in the movies, an inconsistency that bugs me more than it probably should.¹⁸

Currently in the comics: The original Cyclops is dead, but there’s a time-displaced teen version of him currently running around with three of his four time-displaced classmates and a handful of modern X-teens.

PHOENIX OR MARVEL GIRL OR WHATEVER SHE’S GOING BY THESE DAYS (JEAN GREY): Like Cyclops, Jean Grey is one of the original five in the comics; part of the 2nd-generation team in the movie. Jean is a telepath and telekinetic, always a redhead, occasionally evil, and the hypotenuse of X-Men’s most persistent love triangle. In the comics, she has a complicated and somewhat symbiotic relationship with a cosmic entity called the

Phoenix Force; in *X-Men: The Last Stand*, the Phoenix was re-framed as a suppressed alternate personality. Jean is arguably the most powerful member of the X-Men; suffers from persistent Silver-Age Girl Syndrome;¹⁹ uses codenames only sporadically; and generally comes in a two-pack with Cyclops.

Currently in the comics: The original Jean Grey is dead, but there’s a time-displaced teen version of her currently running around with the primary X-Men team.

BEAST (HANK MCCOY): The only original X-Man in both comics and movies. Started out as a nerdy dude with outstanding acrobatic ability and prehensile toes; turned blue and furry as a result of irresponsible science, which is a running theme with Beast. Smart, personable—more in the comics than the movies—and occasionally obnoxiously self-righteous, Beast is also the X-Man most likely to irrevocably fracture the space-time continuum.

Currently in the comics: The original version of Beast is running around with the qua-

si-mutant Inhumans. There's also a time-displaced teen version of him currently running around with three of his four time-displaced classmates and a handful of modern X-teens. **MYSTIQUE (RAVEN DARK-HOLME):** Blue-skinned shape-shifting femme fatale; Professor X's adopted sister in the movies, Rogue's adopted mom and Nightcrawler's biological mom in the comics. Mystique is usually an antagonist, but she's the kind of sympathetic antagonist who regularly gets her own ongoing series and periodically joins the X-Men.

Currently in the comics: Running with Magneto's X-Men team.

HAVOK (ALEX SUMMERS): Cyclops's younger brother in the comics, older brother in the movies. Havok is one of the few characters who's significantly more interesting in his cinematic incarnation. The comics version of Havok has been largely defined by struggling to get out from under Cyclops's probably very neat shadow and a dissertation in geophysics that has remained unfinished since the mid-1970s; the movie ver-

sion is an ex-con, a Vietnam vet, and one of the original X-Men. Both versions generate energy blasts.

Currently in the comics: Unaccounted for.

JUBILEE (JUBILATION LEE): The sassy poster child for neon early-'90s mall culture, Jubilee rose to stardom largely via the animated series. She generates energy bursts ("fireworks") from her fingertips, and at least visually represents one of the more comics-loyal adaptations of *X-Men: Apocalypse's* new generation of mutant kids.

Currently in the comics: Unaccounted for. Also a vampire with an adopted kid, because, sure, why not?

NIGHTCRAWLER (KURT WAGNER): A blue-skinned (blue-furred in the comics) teleporter. In the comics and the early movies, Nightcrawler is a paradoxical mix of swash-buckling happy-go-lucky circus performer and devout Catholic, including a brief stint as a maybe-priest. His movie parentage remains unconfirmed as of *Days of Future Past*—it may

have been revealed by now in *Apocalypse*—but smart money is on the same parents as he has in the comics—Mystique and a bright red demon-looking dude named Azazel.

Currently in the comics: Hanging out with the main X-Men team.

WOLVERINE (JAMES HOWLETT, JAMES LOGAN, LOGAN, THAT ONE GUY WHO'S FREAKIN' EVERYWHERE): Small, angry Canadian with accelerated healing and a skeleton made out of unbreakable sci-fi metal. Wolverine is basically the main character of six of the seven pre-*Apocalypse* X-Men movies,²¹ and so overhyped in the comics that it took like six miniseries to kill him off, and *there's still a version of him running around*. The movie version is plagued by the lingering repercussions of *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*, a spectacular train-wreck notable for the fact that at no point did anyone bother to inform the writer or director that *wolverines aren't actually wolves*.

Currently in the comics: The original Wolverine is dead. The

character currently using the code name Wolverine is named Laura Kinney; she's a female, teenage, and an exponentially more interesting clone of the original. She's currently headlining her own ongoing series and road-tripping around with four of the teen time-displaced original-five and a handful of other teens. (There's also a grumpy old version of Logan running around with the main X-Men team, but he's from a different timeline, and he doesn't go by Wolverine.)

STORM (ORORO MUNROE): Storm controls weather. In the comics, she was raised as a thief in Cairo and was briefly worshipped as a goddess²⁰ in Kenya before joining the X-Men. How much of that backstory carries over to the movies is unclear: in the first three, she's a singularly two-dimensional incarnation of the character; and in *Apocalypse*, she starts out as a teenager and a villain, although she'll presumably switch sides before the end. Storm can fly, has a sweet Mohawk, and is generally the coolest person in any given room.

Currently in the comics: Running the X-Men.

ANGEL (WARREN WORTHINGTON III): Another one of the original five. Angel made a brief appearance in *X-Men: The Last Stand*; how that version of the character relates to the one in *X-Men: Apocalypse*—who appears to be the same age in a movie that takes place 20 years earlier—is unclear. Like his comics counterpart, the Angel of *Apocalypse* has—again, at least temporarily—thrown his lot in with the Apocalypse, and gotten a sweet set of bladed wings in the bargain.

Currently in the comics: The original version of Angel is an empty shell controlled telepathically by Psylocke. There's also a time-displaced teen version of him with flaming wings currently running around with three of his four time-displaced classmates and a handful of modern X-teens, and dating the current Wolverine.

PSYLOCKE (BETSY BRADDOCK): Psylocke is a telepath and sometimes-telekinetic. She's

also Captain Britain's twin sister, and the embodiment of a lot of really uncomfortable colonialist appropriation and fetishization of Asian women's bodies: in the comics, she's literally an upper-class white British woman swapped into the body of a Japanese assassin named Kwanon.²² Along with Angel, Storm, and Magneto, Psylocke at least temporarily works with Apocalypse in the movie.

Currently in the comics: Running with Magneto's X-Men team, flying Angel like a really creepy drone.

APOCALYPSE (EN SABAH NUR): Apocalypse is—at least allegedly—the first mutant. In the comics, he's given immortality, a sweet space ship, and significantly souped up powers by the Celestials. (In the movie, he's also confirmed to have been a whole lot of major deities.) Apocalypse is super into what he terms “natural selection”—in practice anything but—and generally runs around with a gang of four horsemen—in the case of the film, Magneto, Psylocke, Angel, and Storm.

Currently in the comics: One of those characters who never really dies. He's currently the center of a minor cross-line event.

Confused yet? Great! That means it's time to dive into the comics! X-Men has a *lot* of good jumping-on points, but here are a few of my favorites:

GIANT-SIZE X-MEN #1:

You *can* start back in the Silver Age—it's definitely worth tracking down some of the Neal Adams-drawn issues, if nothing else—but the modern X-Men trace their roots back to 1975. If you want to read through Claremont's run—and hit iconic stories like the Dark Phoenix Saga and Days of Future Past—this is your first stop.

NEW X-MEN VOL. 1 #1:

Grant Morrison's run on the X-Men radically reconfigured both team and school, and brought back a lot of long-term fans who'd drifted away during the messy maelstrom of the '90s. This is really where the modern X-Men start, but if you'd rather skip ahead, there's always...

ASTONISHING X-MEN #1:

Joss Whedon and John Cassady are an incredibly rare phenomenon in the world of superhero comics: long-term fans who manage to keep their run on a title simultaneously steeped in nostalgia and remarkably accessible to new readers. Whedon's X-Men are a more traditional take on the team than Morrison's; and if that's your jam, you'll probably prefer them.

X-MEN: SEASON ONE:

Dennis Hopeless and Jamie McKelvie's modern retelling of a lot of the Silver Age is the entry-level X-book I recommend most frequently. It's technically a stand-alone graphic novel, unconnected to any other X-Men timeline; but you're not going to find a better introduction to the original five X-Men, a better-written Jean Grey, or a better spin on the Silver Age. (If you like this volume, I'd recommend jumping to the current *All-New X-Men* series, likewise written by Hopeless, with a significantly overlapping cast.)

X-MEN: FIRST CLASS: No relation to the movie of the same name, *X-Men: First Class*—like *Season One*—basically exists in

its own discrete timeline; which, again, is largely an updated spin on a lot of Silver Age stories and themes. It's accessible, engaging, and kid-friendly in ways the central lines often aren't.

GOD LOVES, MAN KILLS:

Originally a stand-alone Marvel Graphic Novel. *The* definitive X-Men story (and the basis for *X2: X-Men United*, if that's a selling point for you.)

BONUS RECOMMENDATION: CYCLOPS VOL. 2 #1-5.

Cyclops is my favorite X-Man, and the first arc of his first ongoing—starring the time-displaced teen version who's currently running around the Marvel Universe—is one of the best Cyclops stories, ever.

IF YOU WANT TO DIVE INTO THE CURRENT STUFF:

The entire Marvel Universe largely reset after Secret Wars, which you'd think would result in less continuity-mired and more accessible titles, but has actually resulted in the reverse. *All-New X-Men*—which follows four of the five time-displaced teen versions of the original X-Men and a handful of modern X-kids road-tripping

around the country—and *All-New Wolverine*—which features the solo adventures of Newer Better Wolverine Laura Kinney—are consistently delightful; the rest of the line is hit-and-miss.

NOTES:

1. Yes, seriously.
2. Nine, if you count *Deadpool*.²³
3. Technically *next* month, as I write this. Last month, as you read it. That's the magic of print deadlines!
4. Of course, I haven't seen *Apocalypse* yet—again, I'm writing this from the past. Well, your past. My present. *Anyway*, for all I know, it *could* be really straightforward, and—sorry, I couldn't even finish typing that sentence without cracking up.
5. Adam X is a half-human, half-Shi'ar²⁴ Fred Durst lookalike with the dubious mutant power of making people's blood explode if it was exposed to air. Sporting a backwards baseball cap and a leather jacket covered in blades, Adam X was briefly teased as a potential third Summers Brother;²⁵ and is the distilled incarnation of everything that was either wrong or

right about comics in the mid '90s, depending on how you feel about skateboards and casual use of the term *x-treme*.

6. The Silver Age of Comic Books lasted from roughly 1956-1970. Until the Silver Age, superheroes had been a relatively fringe segment of comics; under the auspices of the new-minted Comics Code Authority, they rapidly rose to dominate the medium.

7. *X2: X-Men United*, *X-Men: The Last Stand*, *The Wolverine*, and *X-Men: Days of Future Past*; respectively drawn from *God Loves, Man Kills*; the Dark Phoenix Saga; *Wolverine* vol. 1; and *Days of Future Past*.

8. And heavily bowdlerized.

9. But not always! See, for instance, Nightcrawler, who was born with blue fur and the ability to teleport; and Havok, whose mutant powers didn't manifest until his early twenties.

10. Of course, in a fictional universe brimming over with people who can fly, punch through trains, or turn invisible, the disproportionate marginalization of one group of super-powered heroes takes a certain degree of suspension of disbelief. (But then, so do people who can fly, punch through trains, or turn invisible.)

11. Said hatred and fear most often take the form of giant pink robots called Sentinels; because, sure, why not?

12. The WASP-y teens facing coded xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and racism in the '60s; the homogeneously hetero cinematic X-Men standing against coded homophobia in the early '00s; and so forth.

13. *Retcon* is short for *retroactive continuity*, which is what happens when a writer decides, "Oh, that established plot point didn't happen *that way*—it happened *this way*."

14. See: *Days of Future Past*, *Age of Apocalypse*, *House of M*, *Forever Yesterday*, *Days of Future Present*, *Yesterday Tomorrow*, *Age of X*, *Earth Askani*, the *Summers Rebellion*, the *other Summers Rebellion*, *Days of Past Future*, *Apocalypse X*, et cetera.²⁶

15. Shameless plug: For a much deeper dive into this mess, listen to Jay and Miles X-Plain the X-Men, a weekly podcast all about the ins, outs, retcons, clones, and continuity of comics' most convoluted superhero soap opera; with visual companions to every episode—along with video reviews of current X-titles, interviews, art, articles, recaps, and more—at xplainthexmen.com!

16. Over the years, the X-Men have been fantasy cast a *lot*. Those fantasy casts generally reflect current entertainment trends, with one consistent exception: the role of Professor X, was almost universally assigned to Patrick Stewart for the dozen years between the debut of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and the first X-Men film.
17. Cyclops is my favorite X-Man, because we're both uptight jerks.
18. Also, they're supposed to be orphans,²⁷ and I guess they have parents in *X-Men: Apocalypse*? Don't mess with the Summers family tree, X-movies. It's confusing enough as-is.
19. Stan Lee's Silver-Age teams tended to feature a single female member, whose personality was never really developed beyond "the girl"; most of those characters have remained chronically underwritten in subsequent incarnations. See also: Sue Storm (Fantastic Four), Janet van Dyne (Avengers).
20. This detail was somewhat retconned away in the *Storm* ongoing series, to the immense relief of pretty much everyone.
21. Kwannon, in Psylocke's original body, later died of the Legacy Virus, a ham-handed stand-in for AIDS.
22. Most notably, *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, in which Fox somehow managed to turn a story about a teenage girl into a story about the same three old men *twice*.
23. I don't, and neither should you.
24. The Shi'ar are aliens with fancy plumage and a sprawling space empire. Aren't you glad you asked?
25. Years later, the actual Third Summers Brother was revealed to be a nondescript guy with the unimpressive codename of Kid Vulcan. After dropping the "Kid" from his name, Vulcan went on to commit patricide, take over the Shi'ar empire in a bloody coup, and die at the hands of a better-established Summers Brother; presumably because no one had taught him to channel his aggression into skateboarding and calling other adults "bro."
26. I made at least three of those up, but at this rate, they'll probably be official by midday tomorrow.
27. Well, they're kind of orphans: Scott and Alex grew up thinking that both of their parents were dead, but it turned out their dad was actually a space pirate, because, comic books.

The Geek Feminist Revolution



ANA GRILO

“I’M A GRIM OPTIMIST.”

The *Geek Feminist Revolution* is SFF writer and award-winning essayist Kameron Hurley’s first collection of essays on writing, feminism and SFF fandom. It collects thirty-six essays—nine of them especially written for the anthology—divided into four sections. *Level Up* includes essays

about improving the craft of writing and the importance of persistence. The *Geek* section covers different SFF media and conversations around them. *Let’s Get Personal* is exactly what it says on the bottle. The last section, *Revolution* is both coverage and interaction with fandom’s most recent dust-ups and a call for revolution, for change. This last section includes the piece that won the author a Hugo Award for Best Related Work in 2014, “We Have Always Fought.”

Dedicated to creators and fans alike, the collection paints a broad impression of the world at large, of SFF fandom in particular and how one feeds into the other. Nothing happens in a vacuum after all and context is essential. This is possibly why Kameron Hurley’s essays are always personal to some extent—even beyond the *Let’s Get Personal* section—and why it’s part and parcel of her essays to mention the personal as a way to offer contextualised parameters

(although sometimes this becomes repetitious which is probably why reading the collection in one sitting is less exciting than it could have been).

Beyond the mix of personal with the societal, there are four foundational ideas that are present in most essays and form the basis from which Kameron Hurley builds her essayist edifice: persistence, hard work, self-awareness and perspective. The first two are all about endurance and not giving up even with odds stacked up against you. The self-awareness and perspective are a great tool to have both as a creator whose work will be read, possibly even ripped to pieces, but also as a white feminist with a few acknowledged privileges.

I was going to start this review by saying how hard it is to be a woman online and then I prevented myself from writing such limited foolishness: it's hard to be a woman. Period. My point though was going to be all about how it's

difficult to be a woman, with a loud voice, expressing strong opinions and often being angry on the Internet. I know. I am one of them. As someone who follows Kameron Hurley closely online, I have been aware of her work, especially her essays, for a while. Whether you agree with the author on every single one of her points or not, it doesn't matter—I personally disagree with many of the points the author makes, often when it comes to what sometimes feels as a too simplistic take on perseverance for example, and how freaking hard that is to pull off in the intersection of privileges or lack of them (but hey, someone is always wrong on the Internet. It could be me). What matters is that the author is not only aware that disagreements will and should happen—and is fully prepared for mea culpa when called out. What matters is the strength of her convictions; the strong, loud voice that is a great source of comfort (“You’re not alone”); and the inspiration to be-

come part of the revolution that is already in the works.

This is an excellent book: as a feminist collection of essays. As a historical view of a particular point in time in SFF fandom. As a personal account of an outspoken writer who will continue to shine.

Rating: 9 out of 10.

Medium



CHARLES PAYSEUR

GET UP. THE VOICE IS familiar but far away, muffled. It takes me a minute to realize that's because I was just knocked back about two hundred feet into a brick wall.

Get up, dammit. This isn't the time for a nap. The voice is male, angry, and loud enough to compete with the buzzing that clogs my senses.

"Just five more minutes, Mom," I say, and manage a weak smile. The air is thick with crushed mortar and dust. Bits of brick litter the ground around me, and the world looks like it's been shattered into a hundred pieces.

Great. They're up there dying and you're back here crack-ing jokes. That gets my attention, and the world pieces itself back together as my vision clears. Not much to go on, though. Tall, brick buildings and cars parked along the side of the street. No one driving. Everything looks empty.

"What happened?" I ask, slowly checking myself over for injuries. Somehow I don't seem hurt, but I wait for a reply.

Bastard knocked you back with that blaster thing of his. Nearly had you, too, but you got up a shield in time and got sent for a ride instead.

“How’d I survive the impact?” I’m not one of the durables, like Ferrous or Trist. They can go toe to toe with alien giants, with villains ‘roiding out on Serum, get punched through a thousand brick walls and keep coming back. Not me. I’ve been knocked out dozens of times, to the point that I’m worried I’ll end up like an NFL linebacker after a few hundred concussions.

Pure dumb luck. Look where you landed. I look around and see a sign: St. Francis Pediatric Hospital. ***You must have reached out on instinct, or else you’re more passive than I thought.***

That’s when I notice the hands. Small, cold hands reaching out from the bricks. They’re bluish in color, like something pulled up from icy water. They cradle me, keep me from falling. Ghosts.

“What happened to the others?” I ask, and Reagan, my old mentor, the one who first taught me how to use my gifts, finally manifests at my shoulder. Dead, of course. Had been that way ever since the same accident that gave me my powers killed him. He had been designing a device to communicate with the dead, and I had been a student at the university crazy enough to give him grant money to build it. One explosion later and we were stuck with each other. Possibly forever.

Still fighting, but it’s moved on from here. Jumpstart must have ‘ported them to the park, got them clear of civilians.

You could say thank you, you know? a voice says from beside me and I look to see a small face peering out from the wall. A small hand is tugging at the elbow of my sleeve. We did just save your life.

I freeze. I know, on some level, that I must have called them here, these ghosts. Dozens from the feel of it. All chil-

dren, all stuck behind in this place where they died. I must have called to them as I was falling. I feel sick, my stomach knotting, threatening to erupt.

We don't have time for this. Just take them and let's get back to the fight. They need you.

Reagan always knows what to say. Everything seems so simple when he talks, when he tells me what to do. They need me. My team, the Protectors. They must still be battling Mayhem. The energy manipulator had never been much of a problem before. Trist had taken him out herself a couple times. But somehow he had created or found or was given a device that greatly magnified his powers, made him a threat we could only take on as a team.

Are you even listening? the child ghost says. Hello? Earth to super-dude.

I reach out my hand and all the ghosts come rushing forward, little girls and boys like a flood that pours into me. I cringe, never able to completely shut them out. The one who had spoken is Molly—she died of bone cancer. She wants to go home, wants to play with her dog, Q, again. She's a fan of *Star Trek*.

Sometime soon would be nice, Reagan says. ***You full?***

I nod. Even with the smaller spirit energies I've recharged and then some, straining my capacity to hold it all. But I'll get a chance to unleash it soon. They don't call me Medium for nothing.

I forget who I am sometimes, who I'm supposed to be. Reagan is always there to pull me back, to ground me, but sometimes I don't think I want to be that person he says I am. Sometimes I think there must be a different way.

Look at you, complaining about being a hero. Millions of people want exactly what you have. Hell, you wanted what you have, before. You'd walk around with those Power Soci-

ety trading cards in your pocket. You went to conventions, watched all the shows. And now you've made it, so what's there to complain about?

I don't know how Reagan knows all that about me, because I never told him, but it must have to do with my powers. I can see ghosts, can absorb them, channel them into anything I can think of. But I think it means that ghosts can see into me as well. At least, Reagan can.

You're goddamn right I can. And that's a good thing, too, because without me you never would have learned to be a hero. I'm the one that knew the science, that knew what you were capable of. Without me you would have ended up a government test subject pumped full of so many drugs you wouldn't know a ghost from a hamburger.

I don't think I'd mind it all as much, only I know the ghosts don't really want to be channeled. They don't want me using them to break down doors, to tie up villains in strands of ectoplasmic energy. They lose themselves in me, in the great wash of other ghosts I've absorbed. I think they might still be in there, all of them, but there's so many I can't hear any singular voice any more. They're just a vague noise I have to ignore in order to do what I do.

And most of the time that's easy enough.

It's more than just "easy enough"—it is vital. You can't be listening to every Tom, Dick, and Harry you suck up. They're fuel, and you save lives, stop villains. You're a hero. Millions look up to you. You're finally what you wanted to be.

It gets hard to deal with real people, living people. Despite being a member of the Protectors, I feel like I don't fit in. Ferrous can turn into a living metal, can punch her way through solid rock, become liquid at will, and is the leader of the team. Trist is some sort of immortal, regenerates almost instantly. Jumpstart can teleport himself and others. Firelight uses his mind to manipulate flames, can even use it to fly. I think there

must be some price they pay for their gifts, some struggle. For me, I just fell into it, just got lucky, and... and now I channel the dead into energy lassos and spectral blasts.

Living the dream.

The park is farther away than I thought, but I'm flying now, channeling the ghosts I picked up at the hospital into propulsion, lift, drive. I'm burning through them, and if I could tune them in, hear them beyond the dull buzzing always in my head, I'd say they were screaming.

Looks like they've taken out half the park, Reagan says, and I nod. The destruction is massive, trees uprooted and tossed at random, some still smoldering with fire. The noise of the battle is audible now, the rushing sound of Firelight's flames, of Jumpstart's 'porting. They're fighting around a jungle gym, Ferrous trying to use a metal slide to wrap around Mayhem, but the villain simply blasts it away.

Give him hell. Reagan sounds happy, and I've stopped wondering so much if that's what I am to the ghosts I absorb, just a hell to endure. I point and unleash a beam of concentrated energy that blasts at Mayhem, knocking him back.

"Good to have you back," Firelight says, circling up to me. I want to think he's relieved, but I can't shake the feeling that the rest of the team is wary of me, almost afraid. Reagan says I don't need to be liked, that I don't need friends, that all I need is him, but sometimes... I push the thoughts away, stay silent as I keep up with the attack and Firelight adds his own touch, circling a pillar of flames around my spectral energy.

Good to be back, Reagan says, but Firelight can't hear him. I concentrate on the strain of channeling the dead into something effective, destructive. Mayhem falls back a step, then there's a sound like a thousand windows shattering and I'm flung, spiraling earthward. It seems to take forever.

I blink. The voices in my head have stopped, except for one. Molly.

Now a good time to talk?

No, I think as loud as I can. I can't. All you are is fuel for my powers, for doing good. That's what Reagan always says.

But Reagan doesn't know everything. He doesn't care about us. Why would he? You'll never channel him.

The words are barbs that stick into my mind, refusing to pull free.

Snap out of it! Reagan is screaming at me and I hadn't noticed. Must have been hit harder than I thought. And I'm still falling, ground so close I can almost taste it.

I channel and throw up a cushion beneath me, turn and do the same for Firelight, who looks senseless from the blast. We land softly, and Molly's voice fades into the din as the breath is knocked from me as I land. Even with my powers it's a hard fall and I feel my teeth jar together and then I'm on the soft grass.

I look over and see Firelight isn't moving, and the others all seem stunned by the blast. Only Mayhem is moving, walking toward Trist's fallen form.

Do something.

I struggle to my feet and gather all the power in me, let it loose in a wall of energy. I'm a sieve, a breach into another realm, and I pour as much as I can into creating a cage around Mayhem. I need to contain him, buy us time. Bonds of energy press down on the bubble of his protective shield. A moment later and I tie it off, then rush to Firelight's side.

He coughs as I roll him onto his back.

"Thanks for the assist," he says between ragged breaths.

We have to act now, Reagan says into my ear. ***We have to do something.***

"Like what?" I hiss the question and hope that Firelight doesn't hear. The others are all getting to their feet, staring at

where Mayhem is wrapped in bands of energy. It won't hold long.

You saw the cemetery on the way in. It's not far. You saw what happened before. You had him on the ropes. If you pull enough power, you can do it, be the hero, save the day.

You can't ignore us forever, you know. I wince as Molly's voice rises again. I don't want to hear her. Mayhem I can face, and worse villains yet, but Molly makes me uncomfortable, afraid.

Get going.

"Jumpstart," I cry out, quieting the voices. The teleporter is in front of me a moment later, dark skin covered in a sheen of sweat and dirt. He's breathing hard, casts a worried glance at Firelight, who is still coughing on the ground. The two are close, and I know he wants to stay, but the entire team is reaching their limits, and we have to push more.

"Can you get me to the cemetery two blocks from here?" He nods, and in a flash of light, a cloud of dark smoke, we're somewhere else. My stomach lurches, like every 'port, but I keep my footing and gaze out at the crowd of ghosts around us.

I forget who I used to be, sometimes, before all of this. Lonely, I think. I remember being lonely, probably a little sad. I remember being in college and wondering what the hell the point was. There was nothing I wanted to do, nothing that was important. I couldn't fail, but that didn't mean I could really win.

Until the accident. I hadn't even known Reagan, hadn't had a class with him or anything. I was just walking through the building, taking a shortcut to my next class, when the wall had exploded, and everything had changed.

That's when you became a hero. Don't forget that. You do good for people.

I had always wanted to be special, to be something. I'd look at the faces of the heroes on the Power Society. Lightning Woman and the Whisper and Power Punch and the Finality. A whole team who I wanted so badly to be, who seemed so like me. All of them had been picked on before getting their powers. All of them had overcome that, had proven themselves as heroes.

Doesn't sound so hard to me, Molly says.

What would you know? Heroes have to bleed, have to fight, have to get up again and again. Reagan is angry, intense.

So? You think you deserve a prize for doing your job? So you fight against some villains. So what. You won't help us. You can help us and you choose not to.

I've never been very good at knowing what to do. That's for Reagan. He tells me where to go and what to do. He's so sure of himself, where I'm so full of doubts. And so I let him keep talking, keep defending the actions I'm not so sure of.

He's already helping. He's stopping villains. It's what heroes do. Anything more you have to do on your own. Take some personal responsibility. It's not his fault you're dead.

No, but it's not our fault either.

I want to run away, to shut them all out of my head. I only wanted to have powers, to fight villains. Why is it so complicated?

"This where you need to be?" Jumpstart asks, looking around. To him it must look empty, not crowded with ghosts. Cemeteries are always full. Wherever the dead are housed, or where they died. I nod.

More than enough. I can almost feel Reagan licking his lips. I normally stay away from cemeteries, because there are so many, so many faces staring at me. Normally I take them

from homes or hospitals. It's like exorcising them, that way, like doing a service, I tell myself.

I walk forward, and the dead must sense what I am, because they move to meet me.

Now hurry up and take as many as you can hold. You need enough power to take out Mayhem for good.

I put my hands in front of me, take a deep breath. I've never tried to take this many. There are over a hundred ghosts in the cemetery, all reaching toward me with cold, blue hands.

Is this what you want? Molly's voice is a whisper in my head. I pause.

Of course this is what you want. What you've always wanted.

Of course this is what I want. It has to be. Reagan can see me, can see inside my head. He must know.

That's right. And I've always looked out for you. Always protected you.

Has he? He might be able to see into you, but you can see into him just as easily. Into any of us. Open your eyes. Stop being such a Bakula about it and see what's in front of you.

What a load of—

But she's right. I can see inside her, can see every memory, every broken promise and spent hope. I can see the way she looked to the stars and saw a future beyond the bed she was confined to. Beyond the chains I've wrapped her in. But I've never looked at Reagan, never really seen him. Why would I, when he always told me everything? When it seemed like he had nothing to hide.

What are you doing? Take them.

I look through him, and his past spreads out in my mind. Every lust, every dark secret. I see him working in the lab, that day at the university. I see the machinery powering up, the machinery he's told everyone is to communicate with the dead, to reunite people with their loved ones. Only...

“You meant for it to happen,” I say. I see him setting the controls, feel his ache for power. Power this would give him. “It was designed to do this, to make someone able to channel the dead into...”

Into batteries. Into powers.

You think you were the only one who wanted a piece of the action? Who wanted a ticket to the big leagues? It should have been me to get those powers. It should have been me to—

I can't look at him. I can't... I turn away, and realize that I'm surrounded, that the ghosts have crept closer still and are all around us, hazy outlines like a thousand burning candles banishing every place I can think to hide. I see them, can't stop the deluge of images, feelings—lifetimes come pouring into me. I stagger under their weight.

Help us, one of the ghosts in front says, an old woman who looks like she died a hundred years ago and never stopped aging.

“How?” I hear myself ask. I clap a hand over my mouth. Not once have I asked that before. The old woman smiles.

You just have to ask. Ask and we'll give you as much as we can. But you'll have to give us something back.

He'll do nothing of the sort. He doesn't need to ask. Get your damn hands away from him. Come on, kid, get in the game. They need you back there. He's trying to gloss over what I've seen, what he's said, but the words don't hit as hard as they might have. I'm stuck. I can't just take these ghosts.

“What do you need from me?” I hear myself asking.

To come back. To listen. We each have our own price, and you'll have to pay them all.

We don't have time for this. Come on, kid. Lives are on the line. Be a hero, dammit.

“And what if what you offer isn't enough?” I ask, and I know how it sounds. I feel sick, but I continue. “What if I need

more?" I'm not sure I can pay all their prices. But I know that I can't keep on taking without trying to give something back.

You won't. You just need to be smarter, need to be better with it. Don't treat your power like it's a well that will never dry up. The old woman's eyes seem to know me. Have they been waiting this long to speak, for me to listen?

"But it's already so hard."

Stop talking to her. Stop it right now. Listen to me. If you don't you'll be sorry. I'll make you pay for ignoring me.

I've never heard Reagan this way, and I look, see a wild hate in his eyes. Was it always there, and I just never noticed?

It should be hard. Power isn't meant to be easy, or free. Not being a villain isn't enough to call yourself a hero. You have to be better. You have to actually help people, and that's always hard.

"Then..."

If you do this I'm never helping you again. I'll ruin you. I'll get back at you somehow. I'll hurt all those that you love, I'll make it so you can't sleep, can't rest. I'll hound you and haunt you. Just take them now and do what I say.

"Can I please have some of your power? I'll come back. I promise. I'll pay what you ask."

The woman nods, and Reagan's outline wavers with rage. And also... fear, like he believes if I'm not listening to his voice I'll take him like I've taken all those he told me to. He flees, his spectral trace a line directly away from me, as fast and as far as he can manage.

He shouldn't have been afraid. After listening to him for so long the last thing I want is him actually inside my head. I let him go, know that I'll probably regret it, that he will probably find a way to hurt me, but there are people who need my help.

I feel alone without him there, without his voice. I feel vulnerable. But the woman steps forward and I see such warmth in her eyes. She reaches forward and I take her hand and I

feel the power flowing into me, so much different than before. And one by one more ghosts come forward until I swear I must be glowing from the energy inside me. Then they stop.

“Will it be enough?” I ask. I want them to tell me yes, to give me the surety that Reagan always did.

They all just look at me.

That’ll be up to you, Molly says in my head. You have to make it count.

I nod.

“You okay, man?” I hear Jumpstart ask, and I turn to face him. He looks unsettled, perhaps afraid. He knows that I can talk to the dead but he couldn’t have heard or seen any of what they said or did to me. All he has are my reactions to go off of. I manage a weak smile.

“Let’s get back.”

If I try hard enough I can forget what I’ve done. I can close my eyes and pretend that I never hurt anyone that didn’t deserve it, that I didn’t use anyone I didn’t have to. That it wasn’t my fault because someone else was supposed to have told me I was doing something wrong.

You’d really blame us for what you did to us? Molly isn’t impressed. For one so young she saw a lot before she died. And she watched a lot of Star Trek.

If you can’t find it within yourself to stand up and tell the truth... she tells me.

I wish there was a way to know what was truth and what wasn’t. I wish there was some way to be sure that I was doing the right thing. Sometimes I just wish that Reagan was back and I didn’t have to do so much, to try so hard.

Hello, it’s supposed to be hard. You’ve had it easy enough, so don’t talk to me about wanting it easy. You think I wanted to die? You think I wanted you to suck me in without a thought?

I wish I could go back and change it all. I wish I could just make it better. Then maybe I wouldn't hear the voices. I can, now, all of them, all the ghosts I channeled. They all need something from me, and I owe so much. I think sometimes the silence would be better.

Refusing to make a decision is still a decision. Standing on the sidelines is still playing the game. What would Picard do?

I have a feeling I'll find out.

Mayhem is breaking free when we return. I can feel the energy flowing through me and it feels about the same as I had before, after the hospital. Whatever I did back in the cemetery, it has given me less power per ghost. But then, I don't feel them in my head like the others I absorbed.

It's what they were willing to give. Molly is loud in my ear. Don't complain about it. You're still the one with the power.

I join Ferrous and Trist and Firelight where they are standing, devising a plan. It's Mayhem's device we need to defeat, but the thing seems to include some sort of force field. Whenever we attack we hit a bubble that repels us. Though I had knocked him back, I hadn't breached the bubble. We could overwhelm it. I could try hitting him again, a sustained blast. It's what Reagan would have suggested. Wear him down with sheer strength. But I can tell I don't have the power for it.

You have to be smarter now. Think.

I ask if Jumpstart can 'port inside the bubble, but he shake his head. Tried and failed. The bubble didn't extend out far enough. Firelight can't cook him, because the force field keeps out heat.

Aren't you listening to a thing I say? Molly asks.

We need a way around the force field. If I could hit his device directly I could take it out. I know it.

"Wait," I say. "Does the force field go all the way around him? Like, into the ground?" They all look at me a moment,

as if surprised I'm still talking. It's probably the most I've said in a month. Normally it's Reagan that does the talking, the planning, even though no one can hear him but me.

The team confers. No one's sure, but we're out of time. There's a shockwave as my spectral restraints tear and snap and Mayhem is free again. Ferrous and Trist rush forward. Jumpstart disappears in a puff of smoke, and Firelight burns his way into the sky. I walk forward.

Figured it out, yet? Molly asks.

I stop a short distance away. Mayhem has his hands full with the rest of the team, but I don't want to be hit again. I kneel, push my hands against the ground, and send out a ribbon of energy down. It's a thought, at least. Mayhem is standing. So the bubble must not penetrate the ground. Which means that maybe...

I feel the ribbon of energy snake up through the soil and coil into the bubble surrounding Mayhem. I smile, and the spectral energy shoots to the device on his chest. With a heave it tears free, pulls back down to the ground, where it breaks. The action stops and I look up to see Mayhem's eyes go wide. Ferrous and Trist both close in around him.

Not bad, redshirt. Molly almost sounds impressed, but she must have figured it out long before I did. I have a lot of work ahead of me.

But I don't think I'll be missing Reagan.

"I'm going to be a lot better than not bad, kid." If I can figure out how.

The team returns, surrounds me, all reaching forward to clap me on the back. It's nearly strange, this moment of purely human contact, but I feel more solid for it. More present.

"That was some trick," Ferrous says, her gaze searching. Perhaps she's already noticed a difference, a change in me. Perhaps she suspects alien parasites or mind control rays or... something. I take a breath. Perhaps she's just glad we've won.

"I had a lot of help," I say, looking around. The team is all smiles, and we set out to do damage control, to set right what we can. And in my mind I thank Molly and every other ghost I've taken, remind myself I'll still have to return to the cemetery when this is done, to settle my debts.

It won't be more than you can pay, Molly says.

I wonder how it will work from now on. But it will. We'll find a way.

These are the voyages of Medium and Ghost Girl. Our mission—

Ghost Girl?

We'll talk.

Learn to Love Your Mary Sue



CARLIE ST. GEORGE

HERE'S WHAT HAPPENED: IN NOVEMBER, Ana and Thea asked if I'd be interested in writing a column here at The Book Smugglers. In a calm, professional manner, I agreed to said column. In a less professional manner, I gleefully danced around my apartment and came up with a plan: every month I would pick one trope commonly found in pop culture and, lovingly, analyze it to death. And the best thing about it was that I already knew what trope I wanted to hit first: Mary Sues, because there's such a weird stigma against them, despite the fact that, like flag burning or the California condor, I rarely actually come across an instance of one in the wild. I thought to myself, "You know, I think I can bring an original perspective to this."

And then *The Force Awakens* came out, Max Landis posted his petulant dismay on Twitter, and it all went to hell.

Writing about the Mary Sue trope now feels a little like saying, "Oh my God, I just found this new show, *Game of*

Thrones, and you guys HAVE to check it out.” But I’m going to do it anyway, because I like the sound of my own internal monologue, and because I want to discuss in detail the problems with defining a Mary Sue. I also want to examine a popular feminist character who I absolutely would qualify as a Mary Sue, and finally propose that, perhaps, Mary Sues aren’t necessarily the death knell to good storytelling that we’ve been taught to believe they are.

As plenty of others have noted, Mary Sue is a problematic term because not only does it have multiple definitions, those definitions are very much open to interpretation. I first heard the term roughly fifteen years ago when, as a bored teenager, I first discovered the joy of fanfiction. At the time, a Mary Sue was defined as an OC, or original character, who was an obvious author-insert. Of course, fanfiction is, almost by definition, wish fulfillment (writing scenes you never got to see, for instance, or shipping characters you’d like to get together), which is actually one of my favorite things about it. Some people talk about wish fulfillment like it’s something you ought to be ashamed of, but really, fanfiction can be this awesome place where people come together with their own desires, theories, and interpretations, and use them to expand a known universe into something even bigger that everyone can engage in. Still, Mary Sue fanfic is generally much less fun to delve into because they read like someone else’s very personal and usually romantic fantasies awkwardly shoved into your favorite fandom. It’s a bit like when your friend goes on and on about a dream they had last night: it’s really interesting to them, but not so much to you.

Eventually, people started accusing characters of being Mary Sues outside fanfiction. Bella Swan of *Twilight* infamy is a very common example, possibly because multiple characters seem to fall instantly in love with her before she’s even finished crossing the school parking lot. From what I remem-

ber (it's been roughly a decade since I read the book and five years since I watched the film adaptation), Bella has virtually no personality traits whatsoever: she seems self-involved, not that anybody in the story calls her on it, and she's very clumsy, an endearing idiosyncrasy dressed up to look like a character flaw.

Another example: Shuya Nanahara from *Battle Royale*. I have long considered Shuya to be the boy version of Bella Swan (thus making him a Gary Stu, but we'll come back to Gary Stus in a little while). I enjoyed the novel (well, as much as you can enjoy something that makes you want to repeatedly weep into your pillow), but four separate girls have crushes on Shuya, despite the fact that there's very little in the book to suggest what could possibly be so enticing about him. It's even worse in the film, where Shuya is considerably whinier and, somehow, even more useless. His survival, though predictable, is unfortunate and depressing.

This is where the definition of Mary Sue starts becoming muddled because the primary problem with Shuya and Bella both is that everyone else in the story treats them like they're very special snowflakes, despite the fact that there's virtually nothing special about them at all. But that's almost the exact opposite of our current understanding of a Mary Sue, which we now generally define as a female character who is ludicrously special, a woman who is unreasonably perfect in every way. And that's a whole other problem, of course, because everybody has wildly different ideas of what constitutes "unreasonably."

Take Rey from *The Force Awakens*, for instance. Obviously, there were those who found it unreasonable that a person could be a mechanic and a pilot and a girl all at the same time, that she could speak more than one language and that she picked up on the Force very quickly. On the other hand, plenty of other people (including myself) did not find any of

that particularly unreasonable, given that no one would cry out, “Poppycock! Preposterous!” if a character were a mechanic and a pilot and a boy all at the same time, not to mention that several characters from the original trilogy speak more than one language, and that previously shown Jedi training has mostly consisted of a) an old guy saying, “Stretch out with your feelings!” and b) jogging around a swamp with a muppet on your back for, like, an afternoon.

It’s obviously true that Rey has a very fast learning curve in *The Force Awakens*; it’s just not true that this is somehow unusual for any chosen one/hero in a fantasy, science fiction, or action film. Maybe if Rey made no mistakes whatsoever, if she didn’t initially struggle flying the Millennium Falcon or if she got the Jedi mind trick right on the first try instead of the second. Maybe if she hadn’t shown considerable fear when faced with the prospect of destiny, if she hadn’t literally run crying in the other direction instead of easily taking her newfound visions in stride and bravely accepting her fate. Rey is extremely competent, yes, but unreasonably perfect? I, personally, can’t find evidence for that.

So let’s talk about a female character who I actually do find unreasonably perfect: Miss Fisher of *Miss Fisher’s Murder Mysteries*.

(Personally, I think it’s a spunky and terribly bold approach, criticizing a wildly beloved feminist character on your very first column, particularly when you know your editors adore that character. But as I’m only mildly spunky and have never once been accused of being bold, this is where I’m going to beg anyone who’s come this far to keep reading instead of turning away.)

Here’s the thing: for the most part, I enjoy *Miss Fisher’s Murder Mysteries*. I’ve watched all three seasons of it on Netflix, and there’s a lot to like: the humor, the fashion, the smoldering chemistry between Phryne and Jack. I love that Phryne

is a sexually liberal woman who often and unapologetically engages in casual sex. I wish the men themselves seemed a little less skeezy and off-putting sometimes, but nevertheless it's great to have a detective show that's both sex positive and led by a woman.

That all being said, allow me to list some of the things that Miss Fisher is not only knowledgeable of but quite proficient at:

1. Multiple types of weaponry (including firearms and dagger throwing)
2. Martial arts (specifically judo)
3. Fluency in multiple languages (Mandarin, French, Russian, etc.)
4. Nursing wounds (which she did in the War)
5. Breaking and entering (including lock-picking, shimmying up and down drain pipes, and climbing over rooftops, all whilst clad in high heels)
6. Stage and radio acting
7. Film directing
8. Singing
9. Magic tricks (specifically escape artistry)
10. Dancing (including tango, fox trot, fan dancing, etc.)
11. Driving (including racing)
12. Piloting planes

Besides all that, Phryne Fisher is intelligent, rich, and extremely progressive for the time period, both with her own sexuality and her tolerance for others. She can basically go undercover as anything, and naturally looks perfect doing it.

She's also possibly some kind of supernatural creature drawn to violent death; this is not canon, of course, but a personal fan theory based on the fact that she basically cannot step outside her own house without tripping over a dead body somewhere.

I don't believe there's anyone out there who would argue that this is a particularly reasonable skill set for any one person to have. Possibly someone might cultivate this many interests, but to be so highly skilled at so many things does seem rather absurd. And I've rolled my eyes at this show more than once, not just because of Phryne's never-ending list of talents, but because it sometimes feels like you know how every single scene is going to play out. Obviously, she's going to get her man and solve the case; that's how detective shows work. But I get irritated at times because Phryne comes out on top in virtually every obstacle, every debate; if she disagrees with someone, then the other person is wrong. If she wants something, she'll have it in her hands by teatime. It gets a little boring, because it really minimizes potential emotional stakes.

Which, I believe, is why I was so delighted when, late in the series, Phryne was revealed to be arachnophobic. I'll admit, this is not so very different from Bella Swan being clumsy: Phryne's fear is primarily used for comedic effect, rather than as a serious character arc or obstacle she has to overcome, so I personally would love to see her face more actual physical and emotional challenges. That being said, Phryne's arachnophobia is frankly the closest we've come to her having any kind of weakness at all, so I was grateful to see it, especially because it allowed other characters to, occasionally, get the upper hand, like when Jack successfully gets Phryne to move off his desk by calmly pulling a spider from his drawer. That kind of thing makes for a more interesting dynamic and, in my opinion, a better show.

So, yes, I definitely think Miss Fisher is a Mary Sue, and I do think Mary Sues can potentially make for less engaging

stories. The problem with that, though, is the gender double standard. As previously mentioned, a boy Mary Sue is generally called a Gary Stu, and presumably they would be every bit as reviled as Mary Sues are. Are they? Not a chance.

For your consideration, here are just a few male characters who could easily qualify as ludicrously skilled and unreasonably perfect: James Bond, Patrick Jane (from *The Mentalist*), Sherlock Holmes (any and all versions), and, of course, Batman.

Oh my God, Batman. I love Batman. I own Batman live action movies, animated movies, comic books, toys, pajama pants, T-shirts, socks, shoes. My cats are named after Batman villains. I play Batman video games, read Batman fanfiction. Batman is probably my favorite superhero of all time, and he is the biggest Mary Sue in the world.

In case you don't believe me:

1. World's greatest detective
2. Speaks a bazillion languages
3. Apparently has mastered 127 styles of martial arts
4. Stupidly strong
5. Stupidly rich
6. Has every gadget you can possibly imagine
7. Can infiltrate any location
8. Always manages to leave without being seen
9. Routinely defeats enemies who are vastly more powerful than him
10. Incredibly intelligent
11. Master tracker

12. Ace pilot

13. Gets the ladies

Of course, there are people who don't like Batman, people who insist that he's a dumb hero or that it's ridiculous to believe he would even stand a chance against somebody like Superman. (And, clearly, those people are heathens.) But what you don't get is the same level of outrage that he exists at all, that he's the worst superhero in the entire DC Universe because he's so unrealistic. No one ever tweets their total contempt when James Bond manages to stylishly and impossibly save the day yet again, and no one whines when Sherlock Holmes can tell what any given person ate for dinner the week before merely by glancing at him for a nanosecond.

And maybe some people are thinking, "No, that's totally different because these guys have character flaws. Sherlock, for instance, is a complete jerk. And Batman, he can never open up to anyone." But I don't think that will fly; after all, for a male hero, not being good with people or emotions is basically just par for the course. In fact, men are often considered less manly if they are in touch with their emotions, if they're wasting time comforting people when they could be out getting the bad guy and saving the day. Comforting people is a sidekick's role, and/or a woman's.

Besides, audiences generally like an arrogant male hero. Sherlock's superiority, for instance, is a big part of the appeal for many people. Arrogance might be a character flaw for a woman, as female heroes generally aren't allowed to be too full of themselves, lest they be considered bitchy, but for a man, well. It's kind of like Bella Swan being clumsy: it's an endearing idiosyncrasy dressed up to look like a character flaw.

The reason people don't hate Gary Stus like they hate Mary Sues is because Gary Stus are everywhere; we're exposed to them so constantly that we're conditioned to accept them as

normal. Sure I know that Batman is a little ridiculous, but he's a superhero, right? I'm not supposed to take it that seriously, it's all in good fun, etc. etc. But a woman who is too perfect does stand out because there are so few of them. We didn't grow up on their stories; we never learned that women can do anything men can do, not really, not by example. Incredibly talented women aren't the norm in storytelling, so when they do appear, they aren't just in good fun anymore. Suddenly, they're a PC agenda being shoved down everyone's throats, a ludicrous fantasy, bad storytelling. Suddenly, a woman is a Mary Sue, when a man would just have been awesome.

Look, all characters are better with fears and flaws. I was excited when Miss Fisher had arachnophobia, and I suspect I would be equally excited if Batman faced a new enemy and developed an unreasonable phobia of his own. (To be fair, in *Batman Begins*, Bruce is afraid of bats, which I always liked as a concept but never felt was a serious obstacle he had to overcome in the film.) Or it doesn't have to be a phobia. Batman could encounter a type of martial arts he just isn't good at, or mistranslate a language he's still learning. It could even be a combination of these things; after all, most people have more than one Achilles heel, not 76 amazing qualities and one small weakness to counterbalance them.

I'd absolutely love to see Batman have more flaws, but I don't expect them from his stories; I don't demand them. And if I don't demand them from him, is it fair of me to demand them from Miss Fisher? And how about Luke Skywalker; if he can destroy the Death Star with the Force after practicing with it one time against a little robot ball, shouldn't the world be ready to accept that Rey can temporarily hold her own against a wounded Sith Lord wannabe?

Maybe we don't need to get rid of Mary Sues. Maybe we actually need more of them, just like we need more women who are flawed and complex but are still totally badass heroes.

We already have characters like that, but not nearly enough, and the ones we do have are often cast aside, marginalized and forgotten. Maybe we need to talk more about those stories, make their heroes more visible, while simultaneously creating new stories to add to the conversation, stories filled with women who aren't a part of somebody's else's tale but are actually telling their own.

And maybe then, when we are everywhere, people will finally learn to accept awesome women as simply normal, rather than holding them to a standard that even the Dark Knight cannot meet.

Gemina



ANA GRILO & THEA JAMES

Ana's Take:

There is a small moment in *Gemina*—involving a lost flower corsage, no less—that is a masterpiece of storytelling that is both a beautiful moment between two people about to fall in love as well as a brilliant foreshadow that eventually turns into an essential piece of a mind-blowing twist. In other words: this novel? It's fucking awesome.

The follow up to last year's excellent (and one of our year-end favourites) *Illuminae*, *Gemina* has a similar formula to its predecessor: a high concept, an epistolary narrative, a book that requires the reader to engage with the pages in different ways, a Moment of Despair, incredible twists. And it all works again because these novels have that thing that will take the formula to the extra level: fantastic characters.

“Die Hard meets Aliens” is the high concept here and I would add the inevitable: in space. Where there is a worm-hole. Featuring characters from different sides of the tracks. With Super High Stakes (even higher than *Illuminae*). It fol-

lows new characters to the series (whilst bringing back everybody who survived *Illuminae*) who are on board the jumpstation Heimdall (where the aforementioned survivors are about to arrive to) as it is invaded by the next stage of the (evil) Bei-Tech assault AND alien predators that want to eat everybody. If that wasn't enough, it is well possible that the wormholes at the centre of the station—the very thing that keeps the space-time continuum together—is malfunctioning. HOW FUN. No, seriously, it is so much fun.

Hanna is a socialite, the station captain's spoiled daughter. Nik is a member of an infamous crime family—which includes his cousin Ella. But no one is who they seem to be to start with: Hanna is a kick-ass, cool-as-fuck fighter and strategist. Nik is the criminal with the heart-of-gold. Oh, these two are lovely and a great counterpoint to one another. When the station is invaded (and the body count starts to rise), they are thrown together along with Ella to become reluctant heroes, the only ones standing between life and doom. And so it goes—put together by documents, blueprints, chat and video transcripts and more, the story follows the trio, with every subsequent event turning things up by a notch.

It's a thrilling, fast-paced, page-turning novel that just like *Illuminae* doesn't forget that at the centre of all it, these are people, young people. The drama of personal responsibility, heroism against odds, self-sacrifice for others and deep trauma is beautifully played up here and the fact that those highly emotional stakes are even possible to be so deeply felt in an epistolary narrative, it is all the more indicative of the writers' skills.

One of my absolutely favourite moments here is exactly where all of those come together in a subdued, understated moment: when Hanna and Nik meet for the first time after everything starts and they have gone through so much, it is not

a kiss that happens first, but tears. And just you wait until you get the meaning of “*Gemina*” and “Just a simple boy”. Chills.

As a reader, this novel hits all the right bottoms for me and is exactly what I want from a reading experience. As a publisher, I wish these novels were mine. I have no idea where Amie Kaufman and Jay Kristoff will take us next in the final volume in the trilogy—how can they make the stakes even higher—but I certainly will be there.

Thea's Take:

HOLY FUCKING SHIT.

I had incredibly high hopes when I started *Gemina*. I also was very nearly certain—almost positively certain—that there was no way Kaufman and Kristoff could pull off a second epistolary novel from new character perspectives and be as good as *Illuminae*. At best, I thought it would be a good, solid outing—but there was no way it could be as mindblowingly awesome as *Illuminae*.

I was wrong.

I was SO wrong.

Gemina is BETTER than *Illuminae*. (That's right. I said it.)

If *Illuminae* was *Hackers* and psychotic AIs and betrayals in space, *Gemina* is fucking *Die Hard* meets *Aliens* meets *Event Horizon*. They are both equally brilliant in different ways. They both have awesome, mind-blowing, emotional twists; they are both deeply character driven novels about young people fighting with all they have to stop the bad guys from getting away with grave injustice. They are both absolutely awesome books—but the action-sci-fi-horror fanatic in me cannot help but love *Gemina* that much more.

This book, in other words, is Thea-crack. (Thea-dust? Pick your drug of choice. *Gemina* is mine.)

Since Ana has done a lot of the ground work, I'll just call out the things in particular that I adored about this book:

Hanna Donnelly. Beautiful, self-aware, rich-little-princess to some, but actually an agile, surprisingly kind, and mind-blowingly intelligent young woman, Hanna is a heroine that I adore. Her character is subversive from the outset: she's the pretty rich girl, the one who has daddy wrapped around her little finger, the one who actively solicits drugs to have a good time and party, who worries about getting the expensive-ass jumpsuit to make her boyfriend's blood boil, and who also enjoys flirting with danger in the form of her bad boy drug dealer, Nik.

If this was a horror movie, Hanna would be death number one, made to pay for her party-going/selfish/popular-pretty-girl ways. But this is no traditional horror movie or YA novel. Hanna turns out to be our heroine—she's not just a pretty face, she is the daughter of the station's military leader and has spent hours, years honing her body and her mind into a tactical and strategic fighting machine. She is freakin' John McClane. She is the rogue cowboy running around, crawling in air vents, hijacking the radio and provoking her very own Hans Gruber (hell, in the character of Kali, she also has her own Karl to contend with). She fights fiercely, she understands the big picture, she weighs all of her options in order to not just survive, but win. She is the heroine of my dreams, in other words. And if Hanna is John McClane, that means that...

Nik Malikov is Ellen Ripley. (Hear me out.) Nik is the boy from the wrong side of the tracks; the son of a powerful member of the House of Knives family, who has already done some time in jail for crimes better left unspoken. He is a drug dealer of the hallucinogenic "dust", derived from some very nasty parasites implanted in unsuspecting cows. He is no stranger to getting his hands dirty, in other words. Nik and

Hanna are from very different worlds and would never end up together had things gone the way they should have gone. But... things go to shit, and Nik and Hanna are thrown into the mix together as allies against a nasty invading armed force that wants to silence and murder the entire station. Here is where the Ripley comparison comes in: you see, Nik both has a special bond with the other, parasitic force that threatens to rip Heimdall station apart. He kinda created them, see, so it's only fitting that he has the big plan to destroy them all. He's also incredibly maternal and protective (when you read through his entire character arc and everything he's gone through for those he loves, you'll see it). I love the role reversal that happens with Nik and Hanna; I love that these two characters find each other after so much blood and death. DAMN, I love the arcs that both characters transcend.

Beyond the characters, most importantly of all, I love the way that *Gemina* unfolds. I love that there is a space station that protects a wormhole that is the focus of this second novel (you know that the wormhole comes into it, right). I love that the story is told through transcripts and interpreted documents and intercepted relays and transcribed analyst notes. Of all of the documents and storytellers, though, my favorite two devices are:

Hanna's journal. Illustrated by Hanna, the journal includes sketches of things that are important to the teenager (from modified designs of her jumpsuit, to hand-drawn illustrations of the people in her life, to tactical diagrams of how to create a bomb out of electricity and sugar). It also includes a bullet hole in one corner that becomes increasingly bloody as the pages go on—this is a story that is told over time, leading to a dramatic, gut-wrenching reality by the novel's final act.

Side-by-side narration. I won't spoil it, but the passages near the book's critical climax involve two characters' actions,

side by side, as narrated by a third character. It is heart-stopping, emotional, raw, and perfect in every way.

I loved everything about this book—its bloody action sequences, its betrayals, its twists and turns. I love the science that comes in during the book's second half and fully comes to light in the book's final act. (The meaning of the title—and as Ana says, the phrase “A Simple Boy”—ARE EVERYTHING.) I love Hanna and Nik and Ella as much as I love Kady and Ezra and Aiden. I cannot wait to see how it all ends for Bei-Tech, for our heroes and heroines, for our survivors.

Do yourself a favor. Buy this book and read it now. It is fucking awesome, and my favorite read of 2016 so far.

Ana: 9—Damn Near Perfection and likely to be a top 10 book of 2016

Thea: 10—Die Hard x Aliens x Event Horizon = WIN WIN WIN WIN WIN.

Maresi



THEA JAMES

Trigger Warning: Abuse and rape; sexual and explicit violence against women and children; victim-blaming.

I am telling the story to make sure the Abbey never forgets. But also so that I can fully grasp what happened. Reading has always helped me to understand the world better. I hope the same applies to writing.

There is an island, in the middle of the ocean, far from the ways and works of men. On this island, there is an abbey—a red abbey—that follows the sacred teachings of the First Mother. Only women are allowed to set foot on the island; all women who make their way to its shores are welcomed, sheltered, and made to feel at home.

Maresi is one of the Red Abbey's novices. A young woman from the mountainous country of Rovas, Maresi has known life within the Abbey's embrace for the past few years, ever since her family sent her away following a cruel winter that claimed the lives of many—including Maresi's younger sister.

At the Abbey, Maresi is happy, though she misses her father and mother. Over the years, she learns the Abbey's secrets—the treasure trove room of knowledge contained in ancient books, the awe-filled magic of the crypt that hides the remains of the Abbey's first seven sisters, the breathtaking beauty of the island at dusk and at dawn.

Most of all, Maresi is a friend and sister to all of her fellow novices—she cares for the younger girls, tells them stories, and watches over them as they make their way from childhood to become full sisters of the order.

When a new girl, Jai, comes to the island, Maresi is there to help the timid novice. Patient and sympathetic, Maresi knows that the quiet, skittish Jai guards a dark and secret past. She is determined, though, to help Jai find her voice. “She does not know how to feel safe... we will have to teach her how.” But Jai's story is one of sadness, of grief, and revenge. And soon, everything on the island will change, when the men who caused Jai to leave her homeland come sailing to the Red Abbey.

Translated for the first time into English from the native Swedish, *Maresi* is a haunting, beautiful dystopian novel, and an inspired breath of fresh air in comparison to many of the YA dystopias that I've read of late. There is no young man who comes sailing to this Red Abbey, no dreamy forbidden romance that blossoms between the eponymous heroine and a conveniently gorgeous teenage boy. There is no bloated, artificially inflated melodrama; no huge wars or epic battles to be fought in an arena, no fancy serums or MacGuffins to detract from the story.

No, *Maresi* does not bother with these devices or tricks. Lushly written in lyrical, sparse prose—thanks in large part to Annie Prime's careful translation, no doubt—*Maresi* is a tale that is familiar, yet utterly self-assured and unique. This is a powerful feminist fable, about a refuge for women that offers power, safety, knowledge, and magic, far apart from the larger

world where women have little power of their own. It's a tale of sisterhood, kindness, and courage—the courage to fight one's destiny, to embrace one's powers and abilities (especially Maresi, as she learns what her true calling is), and to face fear and danger head-on in order to protect the people one loves. In many ways, the imagery of this story is familiar and traditional—the magic of the Abbey is represented in the classic maiden, mother, crone way—but Turtschaninoff's take on this classic neopaganistic trinity is imbued with its own sense of wonder and fantasy. The power of the Red Abbey, of the Mother who watches over the island and guards its secrets, is wondrous, indeed. And each novice's true calling is equally wondrous, if also daunting—especially Maresi's calling.

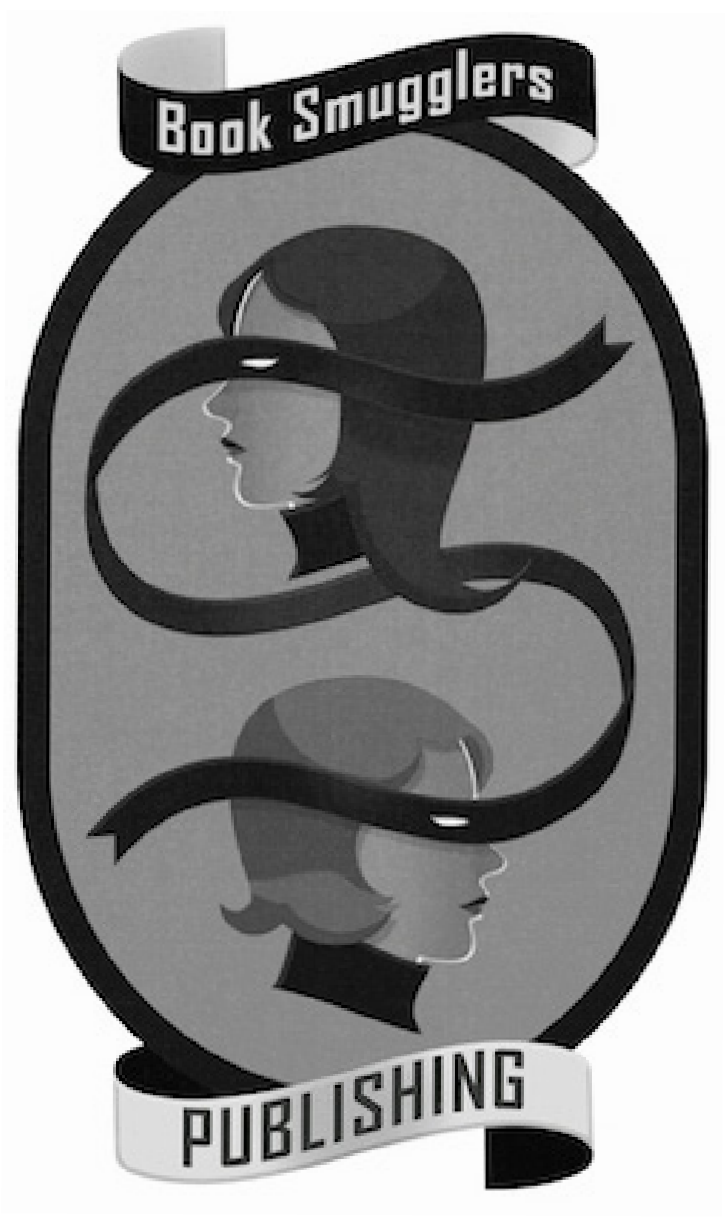
In many ways, *Maresi* reminds me of the writing of Margo Lanagan, but less cruel (and no less impactful); it also reminds me of the stark, strange beauty of Marcus Sedgwick's *Midwinterblood*. This tale contains so many moments of beauty and poignancy, so many beautiful images: The dying of threads one by one with the ink emitted from snails (the blood red from which the Abbey gets its name and earns its fortune). The petals, combs, and braids that contain the magic of wind and storms. The tales of great, giant moon-women who protect the Abbey from the men who would dare besiege it. There is something to be said about the message that Maresi tries to send, and its reasons for examining a world where many women are raped and abused—there are certainly scenes in this novel towards its end that are hard to read. Turtschaninoff handles these issues and grim realities with care and compassion, though; she does not use these scenes for shock value or without careful purpose. The message of the overall book is one of hope, of understanding, and of establishing a safe, protected place for those who otherwise have nowhere to turn.

And as for Maresi, the titled main character, herself? She is a wonder. Eager to learn, ravenous for knowledge, brave

and honest, Maresi is the kind of heroine that will resonate with readers of all ages and genders. She is the teller of this tale, the keeper of knowledge—and she's both brave and self-aware enough to understand what she needs to do.

I loved her, and I loved this book so very dearly. I'm very excited for the next two novels in the Red Abbey chronicles—and I urge you to give Maresi and her words a read.

Rating: 8 – Excellent



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