



Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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THE MANUFACTORY

by Dru Pagliassotti

It was the third grave I'd cracked that night and the third twitcher I'd found inside. The little girl was curled up in a tight ball, thumb in her toothless mouth. Her shaven head was bloody where the wires had been ripped away, and her lips were covered with sores. I crouched over the broken lid, rope and hook in hand, and nearly pissed myself when her eyes snapped open. I couldn't tell if their glitter was light from my lantern or a leftover galvanic charge still dancing through wires too deeply embedded to remove.

Swearing, I wormed my hand through the cracked coffin lid and pressed my fingers under her chin, just to make sure.

No pulse. Just—twitching.

I snatched my hand back, snagging my coat cuff on the broken wood and ripping it.

Only a few hours to dawn, and I'd run out of graves. Discouraged, I climbed out of the hole and started shovelling the dirt back into place.

I didn't have to; I could have walked away and left the factorymen's substitution to horrify the sexton the next morning. But I fancy myself a professional, and anyway it

didn't seem right to leave the little girl's dead face bared to the cold. I tamped down the earth next to the wooden marker that said *Edwin Lafferty* and laid his wilted bouquet back on the grave, even though Lafferty's body was long gone. Then I tossed my sack of tools over the cemetery wall and climbed out.

Almost dawn, and I was empty-handed again.

* * *

Home was a cellar shared with a dozen others. My Bet lay motionless on the cot. Lizzie perched next to her on a broken-cornered crate, her finished piecework in a basket beneath her dangling feet. Her pale young cheeks were pinched with hunger and her eyes bloodshot from squinting at a needle all night, but hope brightened her expression as I pushed aside the ragged curtain. I shook my head and the hope faded. She dropped her gaze back to her dying mother's face.

* * *

In the old days, a resurrection man could make eighteen, twenty guineas off a big one; half a year's wages for a few hours of dirty work. Harvesting the crop meant taking a few risks, but it was easy enough for a steady man who did his research and kept himself sober, and anatomists always needed fresh bodies to dissect. And if we dug up a not-so-fresh body, well, wigmakers and dentists pay well for human hair and teeth.

We'd lived well then, Bet and me, and we'd planned to give our baby girl everything she wanted.

But then the Anatomy Act passed and the demand for bodies plummeted. All of a sudden, medical schools could legally pick and choose from any of the corpses in the prisons and workhouses, and sack'em'up men were left scrounging for a living. Some nights I'd travelled from hospital to hospital, peddling corpses three for one. Those had been hard times.

Then, a year later, that Prussian galvanist discovered *vitae*, and times got even harder.

At first we thought it was a miracle. Newspapers ran headlines promising universal immortality. But, of course, "universal" was an exaggeration. The Living Contract Act makes it legal for any consenting adult to sell his *vitae* to a licensed manufactory, but only the poor are desperate enough to trade their lives for a few guineas in a paltry leather purse.

As for us exhumation men, we figured we'd get rich once corpses became rare and valuable resources again, but we hadn't counted on competing with the factorymen.

The factorymen—thugs with black coats and soulless eyes and pockets crammed with banknotes. While we scabble in the dirt in the middle of the night, the factorymen simply bribe mortuary workers and deacons to look the other way, snatching fresh corpses out of their coffins in broad daylight and stowing

twitchers in their place. The twitchers get buried, the fresh corpses take their place on the manufactories' inventory lists, and nobody finds out that vitae harvesting isn't always... clean.

Except us resurrection men.

It's getting harder and harder to find a grave that hasn't been pillaged by the factorymen first. And twitchers are worthless. I took one to a hospital once, and the night porter recoiled like he'd seen the devil himself. We can't even harvest their parts. The manufactories shave their applicants as a matter of course, and although the regular manufactory dead keep their teeth, twitchers' ivories are always missing. Waste not, want not, the factorymen must figure. Nobody was going to see the manufactories' embarrassments, after all, and some denture makers pay two guineas for a full set of teeth.

Seems like the only ones who die intact anymore are the rich—when they die at all. And the rich keep locks on their tombs and guards at their cemetery gates.

* * *

I leaned over my wife's cot and laid an ear against her chest. Her breath was shallow and rasping. I'd heard the sound before, back when I'd worked in a hospital, before I'd lost my job and taken up exhumation.

She was dying.

Last week, before she'd slipped into unconsciousness, Bet had begged me to sell her to the manufactories and use the money to take care of Lizzie. But I couldn't bring myself to sell the woman I loved. I figured I'd get the money my own way.

I'd failed them both.

Grief squeezed my heart and I knelt, holding her hand and resting my head against the edge of the cot. Tears stung my eyes. Behind me, Lizzie gasped.

"Papa—is she—"

"No! No, sweetheart, not yet."

Lizzie abandoned her crate and knelt next to me. I hugged her, furious at myself for frightening her.

She was so tiny, so delicate; ten years old and already working all day and all night. If I didn't get her out of this cellar soon, I was afraid she'd turn to faster, more lucrative work on the street, like some of the other girls.

"I think we should pray now," I whispered in her hair.

* * *

Some sack'em'up men had started spending their nights at the opium dens and gin houses, where men stumble and fall and aren't the sort likely to be missed. The medical schools had stopped asking questions; a burker didn't even have to roll his kills in the dirt anymore to pass it off as grave goods. But I

wouldn't do it. I'd been raised by God-fearing parents, and I wouldn't risk my immortal soul with murder.

Yet I couldn't help looking around as I trudged to the parish church. It was almost dawn, but the narrow streets teemed with millers and mumpers, gipsies and molls, opium fiends and everyday drunkards.

Any one of them would bring in two or three guineas apiece, burked and delivered to the right night porter.

I shook the thought out of my head, sickened.

Better to sell myself to the manufactories. I hadn't eaten lately, but it didn't show much, not yet. I'd still fetch a good price; maybe even six guineas.

Six guineas would be enough to send Lizzie out to the country. There were still good places there, I'd heard, where the air and the water were clean and a pretty girl could find herself an honest husband. Where people didn't have to sell themselves to the Black Works to make ends meet.

A man is given twenty-four hours to settle his affairs after he signs a Living Contract. I'd seen them, the living dead, guarded by factorymen as they paid off their debts and gave what remained to their sobbing wives and children.

I wondered how many more useless graves I would have to open before I became one of them.

I reached the church and tightened my fist around the coins I'd been saving. They were just enough to buy Bet a parson's blessing and a pauper's funeral. If I'd had any success last night... but all I'd found were twitchers.

The damnable thing was, I knew that as soon as Lizzie and I left the pauper's field, a factoryman would steal Bet's body and bury it in the manufactories' cemeteries under some poor, discarded twitcher's name. She'd end up with a nicer plot than I could give her, but that didn't make it right.

A man should know where his wife is buried.

It was with such heavy thoughts that my eyes fell upon the handbill posted by the church door. The Society for the Abolishment of Vitae Collection was organising a protest march on the Millside manufactory that afternoon, to be led by the assistant curate of the very church before me.

I stared at the bill a moment, then straightened my shoulders and pushed open the door.

It seemed I had more to discuss with the reverend than Bet's burial.

* * *

The Millside Street life manufactory loomed over the neighbourhood, its high brick walls topped with three-pronged iron spikes polished to a razor shine. Its iron gates had closed early; supervisors have little to do when all the workers are

comatose. A discreet sign over the gates stated *Millside Collection Station. Application Hours: 8 a.m. - 3 p.m.* It didn't mention what was collected, or how, or why, or what kind of people might want to apply.

The manufactories aren't supposed to accept applicants as young as the twitcher I'd found last night, but children vanish all the time in the city, and maybe dying in a manufactory is better than dying in a brothel. Lucky for them she'd ended up a twitcher, though. The quiet dead are transported by rail to special industrial cemeteries outside the city, and questions might be asked if too many children showed up on the manufactories' burial pallets.

I sometimes wondered how many other secrets the factorymen hid in those coffins, besides the twitchers.

The Reverend Ian Brant rattled the Millside manufactory's iron gate and shouted. Behind him, our numbers were growing in that mysterious but inexorable process that turns marches into mobs. Finally, a labourer with thick arms and scarred fists lumbered to the front with a crowbar.

"I'll get their attention," he growled. The rest of us fell back as he hoisted the bar over his head and brought it down on the padlock chain—four times, five, and then the links snapped.

We surged into the muddy brick courtyard with shouts and cheers. There wasn't much to see; the manufactory windows

were all boarded up and three closed doors lined the nearest wall. A small sign on one of them said *Applicants Here*.

I imagined I could hear a low, crackling hum emanating from the sinister building's dark walls.

Somebody pried up a brick and threw it at the windows. It hit the planks with a dull thump, then fell back to the ground and broke. A few more bricks flew, but the thud of stone on wood wasn't as satisfying as the clean shatter of glass, and the sport soon wore thin. The afternoon shadows grew longer, clawing their way across the manufactory courtyard, and the crowd's enthusiasm began to fade into uncertainty and discouragement.

My gaze met the Reverend Brant's across the courtyard, and I knew we were thinking the same thing: something had to happen soon, or nerves would break at the first clack of a charley's rattle. For a moment I expected that we'd give up and leave, and I felt disappointment mingled with relief, like a man prevented at the last moment from doing something dangerous and irrevocable.

Then one of the manufactory doors opened.

"Here, what's this, then?" a voice demanded. "Reverend? What the hell are you doing here?"

"Why, hullo, Samuel. Now, listen; it's come down to this," Brant said, stepping forward. The crowd shifted closer around

him. “Whether you let us in or we crack this place ourselves, we’ve come to send the factorymen a message: godly folk won’t put up with this infernal trade any longer. You’ll want to stand back now, Sam, and stay out of our way.”

“C’mon, Reverend, you know I can’t do that,” the watchman whined, standing in the doorway and shuffling his heavy, scuffed boots. “I got me a job here and a family to support.”

I saw what needed doing and stepped forward. The watchman anticipated me and rocked backward as my fist collided with his jaw, letting himself tumble. I pushed open the door and stepped through, crouching next to him.

“You lie still and pretend I knocked you out,” I whispered, patting him on his stubble-covered cheek. Then I dragged him aside while the rest of the mob flowed in, thumping me on the back and calling me a good ‘un as their wary eyes flitted back and forth. I nodded to the reverend and looked around.

It was dark, that was the first thing; darker than a factoryman’s heart. The watchman’s lantern hung on a hook by the door and cast a small circle of light that was just enough to reveal a low-hanging ceiling and a vast darkness beyond. The humming was louder inside; I could feel it all the way down to my bones. It made me nauseous and a little frightened, as

though its relentless vibration sought to dislodge something inside me that I couldn't live without.

"We need light," someone muttered. "It's too bloody dark in here."

I unhooked the lantern and everyone looked at me as I swung it around and searched the room. This was a labourer's entrance; there had to be more lanterns nearby. And there they were, sitting in a row along a low wooden shelf. In moments we had them lit with lucifer matches and makeshift tapers, illuminating the room.

A narrow door stood on our left, leading into what I guessed was the applicants' room. Halls ran to the right and left. Between them was a central square protected by a chest-high brick wall and a cross-hatch of heavy iron bars that ran from the top of the wall to the ceiling.

"It's the collection jars," a woman exclaimed. "Look, that's where they store the vitty."

We crowded forward to peer through the narrow apertures. The heavy, pale ceramic jars stood about as tall as a young child and were set side-by-side on wooden pallets. A black galvanics lighting bolt had been stencilled on the side of each jar, along with the legend "Millside Collection Station" and a cryptic sequence of numbers. Iron rods thrust down from the low ceiling into the top of each container.

We tested the bars, but they were stout and immobile, as was the door in the brick wall. The crowbar slammed against the door handle a few times, to no avail.

“They must keep the applicants upstairs,” I mused, following the pipes with my eyes to the point where they vanished into the ceiling. “Does anyone see a stairwell?”

The mob revitalised. A few threw open the door to the application office and rummaged through the desks and bookcases while others charged down the hallways, their lanterns setting shadows frolicking across the walls like demons.

“Here!” someone bellowed. “The stairs are over here!”

We rushed up the steps in an unruly horde, lanterns high and voices higher. But one by one our voices fell silent as we reached the top, until the last of us stepped off the stairwell into a horrified hush.

The buzzing, shadow-filled chamber housed hundreds of lustreless silver cases lined up in neat rows two feet apart, like metal tombs enclosed inside some electrified technological mausoleum.

Each case stood four feet off the ground, with hinges on one side and a latch on the other and a sliding metal panel set in the top quarter of the lid. Dark metal pipes emerged from the bottoms and ran along the length of the floor, converging in

the centre of the room and plunging through an opening to the collection containers below.

The oppressive vibration of the galvanic process made my skin prickle and my teeth grind together. I pressed a fist against my heart and saw that I wasn't alone. A number of other reformers and curiosity-seekers hugged themselves, too, some with both arms, as though fearing their chests might burst asunder from the numinous pressure.

"There aren't any names," one of the younger men said, looking around with dismay. "Just numbers. Where are the names?"

"Do they all have people inside?" a woman asked, her voice hushed, as if hoping one of us might deny the obvious.

"Of course they do," I replied with grim assurance, for I recognised a coffin when I saw one. I approached the case closest to me: Number 21. The sliding panel was perforated, and small, narrow vents ran along the sides of the box to its midpoint.

I set my lantern on the next case and slid Number 21's perforated panel to one side. It was easier than cracking a hole in the lid with a pickaxe.

If only the incessant *humming* would stop.

The woman's eyes were closed and sunken, and her mouth was covered by a canvas mask from which a wax-coated tube

extended. Her skin was sallow and her eyes moved back and forth under their lids. I caught a glimpse of her head, covered with a short black stubble.

“Dear God,” the Reverend Brant breathed, moving next to me and crossing himself. Others edged up around us. “Is she asleep?”

“Why aren’t there any names?” the young man asked again, sounding anguished.

“Who cares?” I snapped, glaring up at him. “They’re as good as dead, anyway.”

“My mum sold herself to the Works two weeks ago.” The young man’s voice cracked. “How can I find her if there aren’t any *names*?”

Discomfited, I dipped my head closer to the woman’s face. I smelled the sour reek of unwashed flesh and the sewer scent of beshitten fabric, and over both the stronger, acrid odour of laudanum.

“She’s been drugged,” I reported. “Opium. That must be how they keep them quiet.”

“Now, *that* would be worth something,” the man with the crowbar muttered, looking around. “Where do you suppose they keep it?”

Several of the less reform-minded members of the mob joined him in his search, while others spread through the room

and apprehensively reached for the sliding panels on the silver lids.

I leaned over Number 21 and inspected the feeding tube until I figured out how to disengage it from the wires that fastened it to the lid. The latch on the case was a simple hook-and-eye affair, no more than necessary to keep the metal lid from rattling. I flicked it aside and lifted the lid. The vibration grew stronger, shivering me from balls to brainpan.

She was naked, her body wasted by starvation and, I supposed, a loss of vitae. A thin sheet was wrapped around her thighs like a child's nappy, stained and soiled. Her wrists and ankles were held down by large padded leather straps, and I saw a leather pad on the cover of the case, right over her forehead. As I watched, she jerked, one arm slapping against the strap that held it down.

The mirrored panels inside the silver case oscillated with captive energy. Gleaming wires coiled around her limbs like a tangled net, running from circular openings in the bottom of the case to small ceramic funnels resting on the woman's body: on the top of her head, on her forehead, over her throat, over her heart, over her diaphragm, over her womb, and under the fabric covering her thighs. The limp feeding tube dangled obscenely from her mouth against her flattened breasts.

I wondered if Number 21 felt any pain, afloat on opium dreams while her vitae was siphoned away on copper wires.

“I found the drugs!” someone shouted. A moment later metal struck metal. Cries to be careful rose up among the onlookers.

I pressed my hand against my chest again, my fingers clutching my ragged coat collar. My bladder felt full and my back teeth ached. The vibrations from the case were stealing my breath away and seemed eager to take more.

I dragged my hand away from my chest and lifted one of the ceramic funnels. It resisted. I tugged and saw that it covered the ends of wires that had been inserted into the woman’s flesh, surrounded by suppurating lesions. I touched the naked copper and gasped as a galvanic shock ran through me, making my heart stutter and my muscles convulse. Horrified, I wrenched myself away with the primal desperation of a rat whose leg has been caught in a steel gin trap.

Behind me, voices rose in a cheer as the lock on the medicine cabinet broke off. A deep-voiced man began to read labels and pass around bottles. I heard ‘tincture of laudanum’ called out multiple times, to shouts of acclaim. Compound oxygen, iron bitters, and a variety of other elixirs and patent medicines were also received with general approbation. The

factorymen took care of their charges at least as well as any hospital.

Still shaking, I lowered the lid and re-engaged the latch. Then I lifted the feeding tube and hooked it back up to its wire support and slid the panel shut over Number 21's face.

The metal lid vibrated under my hands, and a peculiar emptiness ached inside my chest.

The world had changed; I realised that, now. Inside this dark, buzzing, technological shrine to science, where one person's death meant another's immortality, there was no room left for an old-fashioned resurrection man with old-fashioned values.

The Reverend Brant stood a few rows away from me, his expression bleak, and I wondered if he, too, was considering the obsolescence of his profession. For what did God have to offer a world in which immortality was bought and sold at a manufactory's cold iron gate?

* * *

We took the medicines and the copper wire and the lanterns and anything else that might fetch a few shillings on the second-hand market, and then we cut some of the more pathetic living skeletons out of their metal cases and carried them into the neighbourhood bars and taverns. The Reverend Brant pointed toward their unconscious, bleeding bodies and

harangued the crowd about the unforgivable evil being perpetrated on the poor to benefit the rich. Outrage spread, as outrage does, and eventually it turned into violence.

The body I'd carried out of the Millside manufactory had felt light, almost insubstantial, in my arms. I abandoned it when the rioting started and ducked through the tavern's kitchen, nicking a carving knife on my way out. Several hours later, I had new bodies to carry, bodies that felt much heavier as I loaded them into a barrow from the manufactory courtyard.

"Victims of the riots?" the night porter asked, holding up a lantern and peering at them from the back door of the hospital where I'd once worked and still plied my trade.

"Seemed a waste to let the constables haul 'em off to a pauper's grave," I said piously, "when their misfortune might do some good for science, instead."

The night porter gave a cynical snort and waved me in, asking no more, and after I'd laid the bodies out in the hospital morgue, he counted their worth into my waiting palm. Each coin glinted like an electrical spark, and I felt a surge of satisfaction at having stolen a little life of my own out from under the noses of the rich.

Wasn't but two days later, the morning after I paid the Reverend Brant a corpse's price to bury my Bet in one of those

private, guarded cemeteries, that Lizzie and I stood on the crowded train platform, holding crisp paper tickets out of the city to a place where the air was fresh and the dead lie motionless in their graves. Choking clouds of ash and steam billowed around us, and shrill train whistles pierced the air. With my sack of digging tools bundled up next to me and the carving knife jammed into my boot, I pulled my daughter close and squeezed her shoulder. She looked up at me with a tentative, uncertain smile.

I still don't know what, exactly, those manufactories are collecting inside their damnable ceramic jars. The Reverend Brant believes *vitae* is the human soul, but if that's the case, then a soul is a heavy thing, indeed. As for me, I've been feeling agreeably light of heart ever since I set foot within that dark Millside manufactory.

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Dru Pagliassotti is a horror and fantasy writer and the owner of The Harrow Press. She's written a steampunk fantasy novel, Clockwork Heart (Juno Books, 2008), and her horror

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THE BOOK THIEF

by Jennifer Greylyn

The last thing I remember is opening the book.

You would think I'd remember more than that. The first line. The first word even. But it isn't that kind of book. You don't notice what it says. Only that it pulls you in and takes you away from yourself. Like a dream you can't resist. A dream you can't quite wake up from.

Not long ago, I thought it was a sign from God. It didn't turn out like I expected, though, which just goes to show I don't understand stories.

But this is no way to begin, if you are hearing me. Considering where I am, I should be able to do better. Let me try again.

* * *

I thought I saw my sign in the hands of a dead man.

His name was Vuric and, even though he wasn't recently dead, not by the stink wafting off him, he was recently discovered to be dead. His landlady, Malthea, found him a few hours before I poked my head into the little taproom she kept on the ground floor of the moldering house she owned in Elsabar Street, just south of the Tengral River.

She, a rotund woman with rusty-iron curls barely contained by the bleached kerchief she wore, was wiping down the polished plank on barrels that served as the bar with much more vigor than the task demanded, regularly pausing to glare at a trio of older men sitting at the only occupied table. They, in turn, were determinedly ignoring her, even though it was obvious from the way each of them would pick up his mug, go to drink from it, and then set it down with a hard thud, that they were out of ale and not pleased about it.

I knew right then I'd stepped into the middle of something, and I was just about to step back out when the landlady spotted me. "You there, young sir, you'll help a poor widow, won't you?"

I wasn't so young that I didn't see the shrewdness in her eyes beyond the pleading tone, but I also saw that those eyes were faintly red from weeping, as if she was in genuine distress. I was curious enough to listen to her because I knew I could use the goodwill of someone who rented rooms.

"If I can, good lady," I answered with polite evasion but a charming smile. She invited me in to sit down on a stool at the bar and drew a drink for both of us. Now, I'm sure she saw through my smile but was in so worrisome a situation that she hoped she could use me. Since I meant to use her too, I had no hard feelings.

She told me one of her lodgers had died, an old man called Vuric, and he had no family or friends to see to his burial. “I’d be very grateful to anyone who’d make the arrangements for me,” she explained in a throaty whisper, and I expected her bosom to begin heaving with dramatic sobs at any moment, but I misjudged her. That wasn’t how she meant to lure me in. “I’d be willing to let you have his rooms and their contents, minus the cost of the funeral, of course.”

“Of course,” I murmured back noncommittally. I wanted to see the rooms first, to decide if there was anything in them worth selling, before I agreed to anything.

Malthea nodded, as if she expected that, and led me up two flights of wobbly stairs to the top floor, but not, however, before she shouted a warning at her sullen customers. “Don’t you three even think about refilling your mugs while I’m gone!” The whole trio, I swear, flinched as if she’d read their minds, and I knew right then not to underestimate her.

“So who was this Vuric?” I asked conversationally as we ascended the steps.

She was in front of me, which kept me from seeing her face, but she did hesitate, which made me suspect she wasn’t going to tell me the whole truth. “He was a scholar. Once worked at the University, I think. But I don’t know for sure. He was very private.”

I took that to mean she didn't pry into the lives of her lodgers. I was grateful for that. Had she asked me, I'd have said I was a peddler and it would even have been true, as I always had a few things in my pack to sell. But, like her explanation of Vuric, it wouldn't be the whole truth.

She didn't ask me anything, though, and that gave me a good feeling about her, which likely made me more trusting than I should have been. I was running through possibilities of what she might have left out of Vuric's story—that he was her secret lover, that he was interested in banned books—when we came to the landing. She turned to the only door and took out a key.

Despite the stench of decay that rolled over us, I'm certain that my eyes gleamed when I saw the first room. I shouldn't have been so obvious, but I couldn't help it. It was laid out like a study with worktable and chair, inkwells and pen box, but what drew my eyes were the books. Three shelves of them and a wooden chest that might have held more.

I know how valuable books are. When I was young, my father apprenticed me to a papermaker. He was a butcher by trade, but he said he wanted something better for me. "Something cleaner" were his very words. I don't think he realized how messy a paper mill could be, but I was often out of there, making deliveries to the shops in Stationers' Row. That

was where I was introduced to books, new and old, bound and unbound, and where I learned to read when I paid an apprentice scrivener all my meager allowance for months to teach me.

Outside those shops, I'd never seen so many books as in Vuric's study. They were too expensive for most people to own more than a few. Paper made them less expensive than they'd been a century ago when they were still routinely copied on parchment, but they still cost a lot because they had to be copied by hand. I was looking at years of work.

I went inside without thinking, to take a closer look at the shelves and the chest, but then I noticed the second room beyond the first, a bedroom separated from the study by a wooden partition. There was a bed against the wall and, on the bed, a body clutching a book. And, through the thin clenched fingers, I could just make out the title on the cover. It said *Hope*.

It was such an unexpected title, so apt in its simplicity, that it struck me hard. I was used to long, convoluted titles that told me exactly what was in the books. I carried a few of the most popular in my pack. *A Pilgrim's Guide to the Inns along the Route to Saint Eleos' Shrine. Meditations on the Death and Miracles of Saint Calynn. The Marvelous Tales of a Traveler among the Chain Islands*. But none excited me the way the one

in Vuric's hands did. I think I would have pried it out of his fingers if Malthea hadn't been with me.

Reminded of the landlady, I looked for her and saw she was still hovering in the doorway, as if reluctant to enter. She wasn't pinching her nose so the odor couldn't have been bothering her. In fact, she looked like she was sniffing the air. That puzzled me until I remembered she might have been Vuric's lover, so maybe she was checking to see if there was any lingering scent of her perfume. I hadn't noticed her wearing any, but it was hard to smell anything over the smell of Vuric.

He was certainly nothing to look at now. Wispy white hair did little to cover a narrow skull that was already becoming more pronounced as the rotting sallow skin sank into it. His teeth, yellow and crooked, at least the ones that remained, formed a parody of a smile as the shriveled lips pulled back. I was glad his eyes were closed so I couldn't see what death was doing to them. He seemed too old and decrepit for Malthea, but there was no accounting for some women's tastes.

"What killed him, do you think?" I called back to her. It sounded unfeeling, especially if he *had* been her lover, but I wanted to see my prospective landlady's reaction. There were no signs of violence, so I was pretty sure it had been old age that got him. Still, I needed to reassure myself I wasn't getting

into a situation the Watch might take an interest in. I had good reason not to want to get mixed up with them.

Again there was a slight hesitation before she answered, but what she said sounded plausible enough. “He had a bad heart. He had medicine from the apothecary for it. It could have killed him in his sleep.”

Then, as she went on to explain how she usually left his meals for him on a tray outside his door, how she got worried after a couple of days when he didn’t appear to have eaten anything, and how she failed to rouse him no matter how hard she knocked, all to justify to me why she’d finally opened his door, I let my eyes roam and noticed, on a little stand by the bed, a small, earthenware pot with a picture of a spiky, purple flower painted on it. I recognized the foxglove, which I knew was a treatment for a weak heart. My former master had taken it. I also knew too much foxglove was poisonous. But the pot was more than three-quarters full, which made it unlikely Vuric had swallowed too large a dose.

I was happy to be able to confirm that much of Malthea’s story about the dead man, but, even if I hadn’t, I knew I wanted these rooms. These books. Especially the book in Vuric’s hands. It felt like a sign to me. I’d returned to Senest, the city of my birth, because I had nowhere else to go. I’d been hoping for a

new start and it seemed I'd found one. Maybe the book could even tell me what I should do next.

I walked back out to the landlady, and she broke off her long-winded explanation when she saw my face. She smiled like she knew what I was going to say, but I, feeling expansive, said it anyway. "I think, good lady, I'll be able to help you after all."

* * *

That was how I inherited the dead man's rooms.

Malthea and I haggled all the way down the stairs over the details and, when she finally agreed to let me have the rooms, keep the contents, and not have to pay rent for the first two months in exchange for disposing of Vuric's body, I was sure I'd got the better part of the bargain.

Arranging the funeral was easy. A big city like Senest has a lot of *jaedanals* and it was simple to find a *jaedan*—a *jaedana*, actually, by the name of Sister Alassa, who, thankfully, I'd never met before—who wouldn't ask too many questions. I told her I wanted the death rites said for poor departed Vuric, making sure she knew I wasn't kin and didn't want to attend the service. I could see from her expression she thought that a little odd, but she didn't comment. Probably just relieved someone was paying for Vuric's funeral and the parish didn't have to.

What took a lot more time, a few days in fact, was going through Vuric's book collection. For reasons I didn't understand at the time, I put off looking at the book he'd been holding when he died. I told myself inventorying the rest for what could be sold was more important. I took a few at a time to Stationers' Row and walked into the shops I'd delivered paper to as a boy, but, for all the nervous pounding of my heart, I wasn't recognized. More than ten years had passed and I'd grown from boy to man. Besides, I wore a heavy beard to further obscure my features and the blackness of it and my hair made my hazel eyes look brown.

Overall, I did very well for myself, earning a hefty pouch of coin and, aside from the funeral, I had only a few other expenses. One was replacing Vuric's bed. I might be happy to take over the dead man's rooms, but I wasn't going to sleep on the straw mattress and sheets where he'd died and, more importantly, rotted before Malthea discovered him. Another was buying lye soap, a bucket and linen rags to give the rooms a thorough scrubbing and get the stink out. I could have hired some charwoman to do it, I suppose, but it was a way to make the rooms mine and, anyway, I entertained the idea Vuric might have had a hiding place or two and I wanted to be the one to find them.

Mainly what I found was Vuric had recently cleaned the place himself. There was barely any dust anywhere except in some of the cracks between the floorboards. I did pry loose a floorboard he might have secreted things under, but the space below held only mouse droppings now. I suspected he'd burned whatever he'd been hiding because there was a huge heap of cold ash in the mantled hearth. I stabbed at it with the poker and uncovered the remains of singed papers, two broken bowls, countless candles, and what I'd swear had been a white robe.

It made me wonder if the old man had had some inkling he was about to die and wanted to make sure no one else got their hands on his treasures, such as they were. Old people did get odd fancies sometimes. I gathered everything up and dumped it in Malthea's midden out back. I only regretted the loss of the papers. I was curious what Vuric the scholar had written about.

But I was about to find out. I was pretty sure the book he'd died with was one he'd written himself. It wasn't professionally bound, for one thing, its holes punched rather crudely with an awl and threaded with twine instead of leather thonging. The covers were leather, but they were plain brown, not dyed a more impressive color, and they bore no evidence of tooling or embossing. Instead, the strange title—*Hope*—looked like it had been burned in with the metal nib of a pen heated in the fire.

For all its amateurishness, I'd been anticipating reading the book from the first instant I saw it. Something about it just made my blood tingle. It was the same feeling that'd drawn me back to Senest when, for years, I'd wisely refused to come anywhere near the great city. *Maybe*, I thought in wonder, *this is what it feels like when God talks to you.*

I put off the moment until, three days after I wandered into Malthea's taproom, I got a message from Sister Alassa telling me Vuric had received all the rites and been decently buried. I didn't realize that was what I'd been waiting for, but it was as though I needed to make sure the book was really mine and somehow Vuric wasn't going to come back to snatch it away from me. Irrational, I know, but I've had a lot of disappointment in my life.

That evening, with my landlady's fine supper in my belly and a new fire crackling in the clean hearth, I finally took the book in my hands, settled down in a cushioned box chair in the corner of the bedroom and opened it for the first time.

* * *

I came back to myself with a profound need to piss.

I staggered to my feet and almost collapsed from the throbbing in my head. Suddenly I felt an even more urgent need and, when I hauled the chamberpot out from under the bed, I threw up. There was a wicked burning in my throat along

with a worse dryness in my mouth. I recognized the symptoms all too well. I was very hungover.

There was no room left in the pot for what had originally woken me, so, opening my eyes to the merest slits, I went in search of the privy. At the bottom of the second flight of stairs, I met Malthea, who looked all too cheery for so late at night.

She took one look at me and chuckled heartlessly. “Oh, my boy, anyone would think you and old Vuric had been friends from all the ale you drank last night!”

“Last night?” I croaked, not understanding.

Her chuckle turned into an outright laugh. “Don’t tell me you don’t remember celebrating his life? You paid for the feast. All that food and drink. Made yourself plenty of new friends, let me tell you.” She nodded toward the taproom where the three men I’d seen the first day and several others I didn’t know raised their mugs to me and cheered rather blearily.

“You and that lot were still drinking when I got up this morning,” added Malthea, her tone turning more serious when it came to business. “You owe me for another barrel. But you can pay me later. I can see you have a more pressing errand.”

She grinned when I remembered my aching bladder and ran past her to the privy. My mind was so thick with ale fumes and confusion that I didn’t shade my eyes and the brilliant sunshine struck me like a hail of daggers. I winced and, for the

next few minutes, it was all I could do to take care of my own business and drag myself back up to my rooms.

Once there, I saw more proof of what Malthea had told me. My fire had long since burned out and my bed looked like it hadn't been slept in. The book I'd been so eager to read was lying abandoned on the floor. I must have dropped it when I lurched out of the chair. I picked it up, unable to recall even one word, but just touching it evoked a bizarre feeling, first a soaring exhilaration that made me breathless and then a cold fear that left me numb.

I clung to the numbness for the next day or two. It was easier than trying to work out what had happened. It was the only part of the whole experience that felt real. Nothing else made any sense. I never drank to excess, not since I'd suffered a series of fevers years ago that left me with a low tolerance for it. So why would I now when I most needed my wits about me? And why should I have wasted my money on a funeral feast for Vuric? I didn't even know the man except in death. Maybe I'd read something in his book that made me mourn him. But why, then, couldn't I remember it?

I felt the answers were in the book. Or maybe that was just what I told myself so I'd pick it up again. It called me even more strongly than before. Almost like it was whispering in my head. I'd heard of men who said books talked to them. I'd met a

few in my travels. If I happened to have a copy of a book they wanted, they'd beggar themselves to get it. Literally emptying out their purses on the ground and leaving themselves not enough even for their next meal.

I loved books, but I'd never been that mad. At least not before now. Now I thought I might spend every coin I had to read Vuric's book again. I didn't have to, obviously, since I owned it, but the compulsion to read it again was that strong. I couldn't resist it for long.

* * *

The second time it happened, I woke in my bed and didn't realize anything was wrong until I touched my face.

I went to rub the sleep from my eyes and brushed my hand over my cheek. My smooth cheek. I panicked and sprang for Vuric's mirror of polished steel that I had left hanging on the bedroom wall. I barely noticed the book falling to the floor when I stood up. My reflection was hazy but good enough to tell me that my beard was gone.

My beard was gone. I had to see it a second time to believe it. I had no memory of shaving it off. I wouldn't have. It let me walk the familiar streets of my childhood and feel safe in my anonymity. I *would not* get rid of it. But I couldn't deny the truth before my eyes.

I sank back down, my head in my hands. When I looked up again, I realized I'd lost more than my beard. I'd lost time too. It had been evening again when I settled down with the book and now it was morning again, sun glowing golden around the edges of the oiled parchment covering the window. It was possible I'd just fallen asleep reading, but I still had no memory of what the book said.

I shivered and rolled back into bed. I wanted nothing more than to pull the blankets over my head and hope it was all a some strange fit. I'd had enough of those in my years on the road. I'd hoped, coming back to Senest, I could lay my fears to rest. For a while, it had seemed to work. No one was looking for me. No one talked about me. I'd been forgotten.

I sighed and pulled the blankets up anyway. There was some comfort in just being in my own bed. If you haven't been on the road, you don't know what a pleasure that is. No innkeeper bellowing at you to get up and out with the dawn or, worse, no farmer with a pitchfork angry at finding you in his ditch or under his hedgerow.

I'd almost managed to relax when I smelled the perfume. It clung to the blankets. A cheap floral scent. Violets maybe. I kicked them off, but I could still smell it. I'd had a woman here. Probably a woman I paid. A whore. And I couldn't remember *that?*

There was no one I could ask, not without sounding mad. That was the problem with being anonymous. Within a few days, though, I had to talk to Malthea when I developed itchy sores, down below, that I recognized all too well. It was the start of the redpox.

When I finished cursing God, the angels and all the saints I could think of, I cornered Malthea in the kitchen where she was cooking the midday meal for me and her other lodgers. She'd been cool toward me recently for reasons I didn't understand, but I needed her to recommend a discreet apothecary. I couldn't go back to the one who'd treated me before.

"Got more from that girl than you bargained for, did you?" she commented tartly. "It serves you right, you bringing her in off the street. There are places you can go for that."

I realized then she was offended because I'd sullied her house with the whore's presence. I was quick to apologize, using all my charm. She huffed for a while longer but relented in the end, patting me on my stubbly cheek. "I suppose I can't blame you. You're a handsome fellow without that beard. You shouldn't grow it back."

I tried to think of some way to reply to that which wouldn't sound suspicious, but I didn't need to. My landlady kept right on chattering, now that she'd decided she was speaking to me again. "I'm just not used to having a young man around. All of

my lodgers are older and know my rules. And then there was Vuric—”

She stopped so suddenly that it made me curious. I still hadn't settled the question if the dead man had been her lover. Doing my best to sound nonchalant, I probed, “Not interested in women, was he?”

I meant to needle her the way she had me, but she didn't react. Instead, she pursed her lips, almost in distaste. “He had no time for them. Said he needed to keep himself pure.”

That was an odd remark, just like most of what she said about the dead man, but Vuric wouldn't be the first scholar I'd heard of who saw women as a distraction from his studies. I was about to ask Malthea about the apothecary again when she, seemingly eager to change the subject, brought it up again herself and bustled me off.

The shop was much closer than the *jaedanal* had been and, when I walked through the door, I figured it must have been where Vuric got his heart medicine from because the shelves were lined with wooden boxes and earthenware pots with pictures painted on them that reminded me of the foxglove. The apothecary himself, a wiry man in spectacles, was busy making up pills behind the counter and glanced up when he heard me.

I described my symptoms and he, bobbing his head so much he almost knocked his spectacles off his nose, confirmed it was the redpox. He also confirmed what the previous apothecary had told me when I was warned about never getting re-infected, something I'd been paranoid about for years. The redpox was much harder to treat the second time around and, considering the vile herbal concoctions I'd had to drink the first time to stimulate the high fevers needed to burn the infection out, that was saying something.

I tried to keep my bitter rage to myself. It wasn't the apothecary's fault I'd been stupid enough to take up with a filthy whore. I couldn't believe *I* had actually been that stupid, not when I couldn't even remember the experience that might kill me. That terrified me even more than the redpox, and it reminded me of when I'd wake from the fevers, weak, sweaty and uncertain what day it was. It was the only other time in my life I'd ever had gaps in my memory, which made me wonder if it might somehow be related to what was happening now.

"No, no, no," insisted the apothecary, now shaking his head almost convulsively. "That was the medicine that made you forget. You aren't taking anything now, are you?" He eyed me very solemnly.

I assured him I wasn't so he threw more questions at me. Had I been ill? Had I injured my head? Had I changed my diet

or my habits? I denied everything very emphatically and he quivered with greater and greater concentration. He stopped quite suddenly when a thought flashed across his face. I could tell he wasn't going to voice it, though, too wary maybe, so I scowled at him, quite fierce in my bitterness. "What? Tell me!"

To his credit, he did, although he had to swallow repeatedly to get the words out. "Have you... have you made... an enemy... of a... of a mage?"

I could only stare at him in shock. Talking about magic wasn't illegal, not the same way practicing it was, but it wasn't something you discussed with someone you barely knew. I must have really intimidated him. "No, it's impossible. I just came to the city. I hardly know anyone. I'm staying at the house Malthea keeps—"

I knew I was babbling, saying more than I should, but my careful tongue had deserted me. I was almost grateful when he interrupted me. "Malthea's house? Then maybe Vuric cursed you."

"Vuric?" I blurted in bewilderment. "But he's dead."

"He could have done it before he died," insisted the apothecary, in motion again, trembling now rather than quivering, twisting his hands around each other. "In which case, it'll be much harder to undo. But I know someone—not a mage, mind you—who might be able to help. She works with

angels, not demons, so you can't call her a mage. She might know—"

I cut him off, needing a firm answer. "Vuric was a mage?"

He ducked my gaze, plucking at his spectacles and almost dropping them. "I don't know for sure. That's just what people said. No one ever saw anything. But he always made me uneasy when he came in. I'd swear I could smell brine on him."

Right away, I thought of how Malthea had sniffed the air in Vuric's rooms when she first showed them to me. She knew, just like most people did, that demons stank of seawater because their home, the underworld, was beneath the Chasm Sea far to the east. She must have suspected Vuric was summoning them and wanted to make sure no trace remained in his rooms, no trace I might detect.

I'd thought I was angry before, but it was nothing compared to the dark feelings burning in me now. I could barely be civil to the apothecary. I managed to thank him for his help and pay for a comfrey salve to give me some relief from the sores that'd brought me to him, but I stormed off while he was begging me to start treatment for the redpox before it got any worse. He was too cowed to call me back.

I was glad Malthea wasn't in the taproom when I banged open the door to her house. I didn't trust myself not to throttle her. Her three older lodgers and a couple of other regulars I'd

apparently made friends with the night of Vuric's funeral feast were there. They all started to greet me but shut up as soon as they saw the thunderous look on my face. They'd all known Vuric. They must have known what he was. But none of them had told me. I glared at them until they shrank in their seats, looking like they wanted to disappear.

I stomped up the stairs to my rooms and hesitated outside the door. They felt like Vuric's rooms again. Full of his secrets. It didn't matter that I'd got rid of most of his possessions. The most dangerous one remained. The book he'd held in his dead hands. All my troubles had started with that book.

A more pious man would have turned away then, gone straight to the nearest *jaedanal* and sought the advice of the *jaedan*. After all, demons were involved and *jaedani* were supposed to be the experts in fighting them. But, for all my desire for a sign, I'd never been a pious man. I was used to dealing with my own problems and this was no different.

I went inside and deliberately locked the door behind me. I didn't want to be interrupted. If Malthea came out of the kitchen and her customers started gibbering, she might realize I'd learned the truth about Vuric and decide she should talk to me. I had the feeling she wasn't someone who put off her problems. I'd provided her with a neat solution for how to deal with Vuric, someone she must have feared if she'd never

denounced him to the *jaedani* and couldn't even bear to bury his corpse. But I too could turn into a problem and she wouldn't want to let me fester.

I meant to have my own talk with Malthea, but there was someone else I had to confront first. Who but a man who had no friends or family would pay for his own funeral feast? Who but a man who'd long denied himself any pleasure would take up with the first whore he found? I sat down in the box chair, balanced the book on my knees, opened it the tiniest crack and shouted, "Vuric!"

I could see a narrow strip of words down the page. Foreign words. Nonsense words. They blurred, seeming to change back into the ink they'd been, a deep ink black as night, black as moonless and starless night. I sank into that infinite darkness, as disoriented as if I'd fallen into a deep dream from being wide awake. Cold fear washed over me. I'd experienced this before and was terrified of it happening again. Soaring exhilaration reached for me. Someone else was waiting and eager to be free.

I'd have lost all sense of myself if I hadn't had such a rigid grip on the book. I clung to it, the only thing that felt real, and shouted again, "Vuric, I want to talk to you!"

My fall slowed and then ceased. I could still feel myself grasping the book, but I was hovering too, bodiless, weightless, blind. Then I heard a dry rustling. It could have been the pages

turning. I only knew it was a voice, sardonic and hoarse, when it said, “So you’ve figured it out, have you?”

“Only what you did,” I admitted freely, needing him to know I was sincere, “not how or why. Other people are going to get suspicious though. You don’t act like me.”

“What would you suggest?” the voice asked, sounding bland, but I could feel his tension, vibrating the darkness around us. For all I knew, he *was* the darkness.

“Let’s talk. Get to know each other. Make some kind of bargain.” I was distantly aware of my heart drumming hard. I could feel it in my fingertips. I was furious and frightened, but I was also practical.

In the few days between when I awoke to find my beard gone and when I went to the apothecary, I almost hadn’t been able to keep myself from opening the book again. I knew it was dangerous, but I craved it, needing it like a hungry man needs food. I could only resist it by separating myself from it, fleeing my rooms, roaming the streets or walking along the Tengral River that flowed through southern Senest. I imagined throwing the book in the river, but it would’ve been as impossible as throwing away my hand. It’d become that much a part of me. Coming to terms with Vuric was the only way I was going to find some peace and keep myself safe.

I told him all this, speaking into the darkness, and I know he listened, because I felt his interest. Then he spoke to me, of what he'd done and how and why, slowly at first as if he wasn't used to talking to anyone, then more animatedly as he realized what a captive audience I was. It seemed he did consort with demons. He was quite proud of it. It took him years, decades really, to work out the rituals that would protect him from the demons' malice, and the price was high, forcing him to live like a *chirin*, chaste, abstemious and in perfectly clean surroundings. Demons could have used the smallest degree of taint against him.

The magic, though, put a strain on Vuric's heart. He had realized he was dying. He attempted a final series of rituals, learning how to embed his soul in the words of a book so he could take over the body of whoever read it. The only snag was he could only inhabit another body for so long before he was drawn back to the book.

I was impressed and had no difficulty saying so. He warmed to me and I realized how arrogant he was. I was sure I could use that, but then I heard another sound, much further away, someone tapping on my door.

"That's Malthea," I informed him. "She's come looking for me."

“I’ll take care of her,” the voice said without undue concern, his exhilaration rising again, threatening to overwhelm me like a black wave of oblivion.

“Didn’t you listen to me?” I retorted. “You’ll make her suspicious. I know what she wants to talk to me about. As a sign of your good faith, let me go. You know I’ll come back.”

He couldn’t know that I didn’t believe in signs anymore. The first and only one I thought I’d ever seen had now betrayed me. He only felt that I was telling the truth. He gave his assent and I was propelled upward. The darkness flowed into ink and the ink transformed into words. Once I saw them, I slammed the book closed, threw it down, and strode to the door.

Malthea *was* there, her fist poised to strike again. She squared her shoulders when she saw me and said without hesitation, “So you’ve found out, young sir.”

There was no need to say what I’d found out, and I had no intention of telling her all I’d found out. I noted she was addressing me respectfully again. The casual friendliness between us was gone. I was surprised to realize I missed it. I remembered how red her eyes had been the first day I met her and how I’d felt rather sorry for her, wondering if Vuric had been her lover. I was sure that wasn’t the case now. She’d been crying out of anguish, not grief, not knowing how she was going

to get rid of a man she was afraid of, still afraid of even after his death.

She had good reason to be afraid, I knew all too well, and suddenly I wasn't angry at her anymore. "It's all right, good lady. Everything's going to be fine."

I almost laughed because she blinked at me, astonished, and seeing my landlady at a loss was not something that happened very often. Then she looked cynically dubious and it took me several minutes to convince her I didn't bear a grudge. We parted at last with her promising to make my favorite meal for supper and me promising I wouldn't be late.

If only I could make Vuric trust me so easily. It was going to be hard, but I knew what the first step had to be. I returned to the book and opened it, showing my good faith and reminding myself to tell him about Malthea's peace offering.

* * *

We came to a bargain, Vuric and I, within the darkness of the book.

After that first time, conversing became easier and I could tell him what to expect when he took over my body. I also remembered more from when I was disembodied, floating as if in a dream, and it gave me time to plan.

I waited for Vuric to grow complacent, caught up in the joy of wearing my young body, able to spend days at a time in it as

his control increased. When I did return, it felt less and less like mine, making what I had to do more acceptable.

I visited the apothecary every chance I could, getting more remedies to soothe the emerging symptoms of the redpox but always refusing to begin treatment. I also went back to Stationers' Row, looking for a bookseller I'd met when I was selling Vuric's books who'd told me he was in the market for new books to popularize an invention he'd imported from Grenaire on the continent. I offered to let him have Vuric's book, telling him nothing about it except the intriguing title—*Hope*—but, as I knew it would be from my own experience, it was enough to make him curious. And then, shortly before I opened that book for the last time, I swallowed the contents of Vuric's jar of heart medicine.

I'd seen from the outside how quickly a large dose of foxglove takes effect. I had poured it down my master's throat, the papermaker I was apprenticed to, the night he discovered me stealing from his strongbox. The treatment for the redpox was expensive and I'd run out of my own money. My master didn't know I had it and I was too embarrassed to tell him. He just knew I'd frequently been with fever, unable to do my work, and he wasn't in a forgiving mood, not when he thought I'd already cost him coin by being so inconveniently ill.

Things might have turned out differently if I'd been able to come up with a convincing story. But I just stood there, mute and certainly looking very guilty. He roared and started to beat me, but I hit back and got in a lucky blow. I stunned him and, while he was passed out on the ground, I forced the medicine down his throat.

He died while I watched, so I knew Vuric would too once he was in my body. It would happen too quickly for him to trade places with me. He must have dropped the book because he didn't even try to open it. I'd have sensed that.

As it is, I know time's passed but not how much. It's like my last few bouts of fever. After I killed my master, I took his money, bought the herbal concoctions I needed, fled the city, and didn't stop until I came upon a farmhouse some distance away. I paid the farmer and his wife the rest of the money to look after me while I was sick, fighting off the last of the redpox. That felt much like now, a long dream broken up by moments of lucidity.

I think I'm so aware because someone has opened the book. You have, haven't you? Maybe you're the bookseller, come to collect it like I told you to. Maybe you're Malthea, too curious for your own good, even though I left you a note just to hand the book over to the person who'd arrive asking for it.

It doesn't matter. I'll find out soon enough. Then I'll be smarter than Vuric. He told me the power was in the words, not in the book. The bookseller has a new invention, a printing press he called it. I aim for this book to be the first thing that he prints. The first thing *I* print, once I'm in his body.

Just think what it'll be like. Multiple copies. Cheaply and quickly produced. And I'll be in all of them, ready to have a taste of all the readers' lives once they open the books. It'll be so exciting. I can hardly wait. I almost feel like I should thank old Vuric. I thought he'd stolen my hope. It turns out he just taught me I have to make my own.

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Jennifer Greylyn has been telling stories for as long as she can remember. Her work has appeared in such varied places as Abyss and Apex and Malpractice: Tales of Bedside Terror, and she has stories forthcoming in Neo-opsis as well as the anthologies Evolve, 2012 AD, and Twisted Legends. She writes under a pseudonym to keep her writing life separate

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COVER ART

“Sabicu,” by Myke Amend



Myke Amend likes to mix the dark with the lighthearted, the serene with the chaotic, making pieces that can invoke different and opposing thoughts and feelings. He has been featured and/or interviewed in *Kilter Magazine*, *Dark Roasted Blend*, *IO9*, *Fantasy Art*, *Brass Goggles*, *Elfwood*, *Superpunch*, and many other web magazines and blogs. More of his work can be seen at <http://www.mykeamend.com/>.



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