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## WHERE SHE WENT

by Linden A. Lewis

The morning Ama wasn't in her bed, Rhee strapped on his gun belt and set out along the witch river. The sky hung dark with magic-summoned clouds, promising rain from the direction of the witch's cottage nestled in the heart of the obelisk forest. And for the first time in his long life, Rhee walked towards the towering obelisks, a hundred feet tall and thick as two men, spurs singing in the desert sand, his wide-brimmed hat pulled low over his brow and one hand poised above his revolver.

It wasn't like Ama not to come home for the night. Sure, she was as headstrong as Rhee's wife—God rest her soul—and she could take care of herself. But she was thoughtful enough not to make Rhee worry and had a kindness that had also bloomed in her momma, a foreign flower in the harsh soil of the desert. Rhee hadn't been surprised when Ama's mother, his only daughter, had taken off swearing she was going to more beautiful places than Twopenny Falls, but he had been surprised when she left her baby behind. So Rhee had done the

only decent thing and taken in his granddaughter Ama, who was far more like Rhee than she had any right to be.

Like Rhee, Ama was just another cactus in the sand. She belonged.

He could close his eyes and picture her in the lazy afternoons, running off into the desert with her arms flung wide. She'd watch the sand blow over the plains or the rain clouds roll in from the obelisk forest. She'd scream with the lightning, her voice echoing like thunder in its wake. She'd take her journal and sketch the delicate petals of the fairy dusters and the hard, shiny shells of scorpions with an artistic eye she sure hadn't inherited from Rhee. She could see things he missed in the play of dark and light, in the way the obelisk forest cast claws of shadows over anyone who dared venture close enough.

But at the end of her daily wanderings, Ama always came home and curled up in her bunk beneath her granny's quilt. It wasn't like her to stay out when the howls of the coyotes haunted the sands. It wasn't like her to make Rhee hunt her down.

Rhee swallowed some cold water from the witch river to put out the fire of worry in his gut. Walking was thirsty work for a man in the desert, and he didn't have a horse anymore. His workhorse had died a couple weeks before, and he had yet

to scrape the money together to buy another. Ama had built a cairn of stones on the horse's grave in what she called her garden, but that was little more than sage bushes clumped together. Rhee loved her too much to tell her the garden was mostly weeds.

Rhee's knees and lower back were burning like the midday sands by the time he finished the five mile walk to Tanner's land—a task that took all of the morning. Tanner, the only man who had ever seen the witch with his own two eyes, lived on the edge of the obelisk forest like a fool, his ranch squat against the looming stones. But Rhee kept his eyes off the forest of monsters and on his revolver.

He only had three bullets.

He counted himself lucky to have those three. Most shooters had moved to the newfangled energy pistols with automatic sights and lasers after Mad Tom had found them in what he called a broken metal caravan. Now there was pitiful little ammunition to be bought other than the energy blocks, and a farming man like Rhee didn't have the coin for a new gun. And he sure didn't trust them either. Old Johnny Whitetail had blown his damn hand off with one of those things, and Rhee wasn't about to pinch pennies to buy himself one when he had better things to buy and a good gun of his own.

If he was going to shoot a man, he'd do it full well with his own eyes and his own lead.

The fire trickled from his veins to his back and knees as he walked, his body pinching and wrenching in ways it never had even a couple years ago. But leisure was a daydream. He had no time to rest his weary bones.

Every moment he was away from Ama was a moment she grew closer to the witch.

Tanner's house, a ramshackle flat fallen into disrepair, looked abandoned when Rhee first approached. But he wasn't fool enough to go in half-cocked; he kept his finger on the trigger, his hands as gnarled as tumbleweeds still steady after all these years. Back when everybody was still using revolvers in Twopenny Falls, Rhee shot bottles and targets at the saloon for bet money. It was his cunning eye and steady grip that had first won over the missus.

He widened his stance in front of the battered wooden door. He cupped his hand around his mouth and shouted, "Tanner!" His voice echoed into the obelisks, catching and distorting until he sounded like a dozen different men all demanding the same thing. "Tanner, you come out here right now or I'll blow your damn door down!"

Nothing responded but the familiar whistle of the wind. He pointed the gun towards the door. "I'll count to three,

Tanner!” It was more warning than the man deserved. His rage eclipsed his fear; he let it fuel him.

“One!” he started. “Two!”

The door flew open, and Tanner, dirt-streaked face and tattered clothes, stumbled out with his hands up.

The tightness in Rhee’s chest loosened, and he spat at Tanner’s feet. “Where’s Ama?”

One of Tanner’s hands went to his bald head, rubbing like it was a genie’s lamp he could use to wish for more hair. “Now Rhee—”

“You know me, Tanner.” He leveled the gun at Tanner’s chest. “So don’t test me. Where’s Ama?”

“Keep a cool head about you, Rhee—”

“Tanner—”

“I’ll tell you where she is—just give me a moment.” Tanner stood rubbing, rubbing, rubbing his head. Rhee fought the urge to shoot his hand.

“She in the house?” Rhee kept the gun leveled but took four wide steps until he had crossed the distance between them.

Tanner finally stopped his rubbing and threw his arms out wide. “No, not there...”

Rhee’s heart beat a frantic staccato in his chest. “You’re not filling me with any good feelings towards you, Tanner.”

“You know the rules!”

“I don’t care about the damn rules.”

“But the witch needs her!”

“Damn the witch!”

Tanner flinched, raising his arms as if they’d protect him from a bullet. Spit flecked his lips when he spoke again, his eyes shiny with fear. “I’m sorry, Rhee... Ama was chosen. She’s Lamia’s replacement.”

Rhee’s throat constricted, a lump forming that made it hard to talk. “And like a good little boy, you did what the witch said.”

“I know, I know. But I had to. If we want the rain to come, if we want the river to fill with water, I had to take her.” Tanner’s voice was as soft as the wind, and Rhee knew the truth when he heard it. It didn’t make it any easier to hear. “After your wife and girl, I tried to talk Lamia out of it, but—”

Rhee smashed the butt of the gun against Tanner’s cheek. Tanner dropped into the sand as Rhee let loose a storm of curses that would have set his daughter to blushing.

“You already took her? She’s already there?”

Tanner rolled in agony, sobbing into his hand, fingers speckled red.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry—” Over and over Tanner muttered apologies, dirt sticking to the blood on his cheek.

He *was* sorry. A sorry sack of shit. Rhee cursed again before holstering the gun.

He only had three bullets. And if he was going into the obelisk forest after Ama, he would need every one.

Even if Tanner deserved one in the head.

“Are you gonna go after her? In *there*?” Tanner’s face was swollen, his eye turning black with a bruise. “Lamia doesn’t allow anyone but *me* to enter—”

Rhee clenched his steady, withered hands into fists and steeled his voice so it wouldn’t shake.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah. I’m gonna get Ama back even if I have to kill the witch and damn the rains.”

\* \* \*

The numbness started in his toes. He was well into the afternoon when he realized what it meant—that he couldn’t feel the pain anymore. Dead nerves. Or something worse. Some sort of permanent damage that didn’t heal in a place like Twopenny Falls.

But he didn’t care. He didn’t stop walking. What would his legs matter if he lost Ama?

Nothing.

So he kept his hand on his gun and his eyes peeled for movement.



There was only the sound of the river rushing and his spurs striking stone filled the air. Not a bird singing, not a rabbit rustling, not a coyote hunting.

The witch river widened and dipped, but Rhee stuck close to its bank. Enough tall tales had come about the witch that lived upriver where she summoned the water that helped their town survive.

The witch had taken the last little girl twelve years ago. Ama hadn't been born yet, and his daughter was too old to be of interest to the witch. His soft flower of a girl had wept when she heard the news, while the missus had pressed her hands on her meaty hips and demanded Rhee go and fetch her back from the witch.

"It's not our business," he had said.

What a young fool.

If he had done as his wife asked then, would he be traipsing through the woods over a decade later on aching legs and back?

A hint of music hit him in the dead air, the first human sound he'd caught in this place other than his own breathing. The first sound that proved something existed out here with him.

He licked his lips and stepped closer to the witch river. His hearing had been fading lately, but he knew he wasn't mistaken in this.

There—again—a voice in song.

He opened his mouth to cry out, chose to swallow it instead. A fish's tail flicked out of the river and then disappeared into the dark depths, leaving a shadow as big as he was.

The faint singing started again, louder this time, and while Rhee couldn't make out the words, he felt compelled towards them. Pulled, like the arm of a compass toward true North.

A shadow swam closer, tail flicking above the water before the head rose with it. Slender arms braced against a rock, bare breasts heaved, and long, wet hair trailed after. At its waist, skin turned to shimmering scales and fins. Its dark eyes snapped to Rhee—and then he knew the legends were true.

*Siren.*

She opened her mouth—a wet, pink void filled with rows of needle-thin teeth—but before she could sing, he leveled the gun and fired. It took her in the chest with a hollow thud, and she slipped below the water as the other sirens farther down the river stiffened and turned his direction.

Four left. Four sirens alive, and only two bullets. He clapped his hands over his ears and howled a sound, not quite a

word, as the four darted for him, mouths open in snarls, voices stretching in song. Without moving his hands, he started to sing as well—far louder than even the roar of the river.

“*She shot for the sun,*” Rhee sang, belting out the first song that came to his mind, a lullaby the missus had sung to his daughter when she was little, and then to Ama after his daughter was gone.

Of all the songs, of all the tunes he knew, it was *this* one that he hated the most.

All the sirens slipped beneath the water, but Rhee didn’t think them gone for a moment. “*And the moons. Constellations beyond,*” he sang.

He forced his stiff legs to move, forced his eyes away from the sirens. His hands shook over his ears as he sang. “*Even in her flight, the stars fell at her feet.*”

The sirens swam ahead of him, their mouths open with song. Competing with him for his attention. For control of his body.

Over and over, Rhee sang the lullaby. For an hour? Two? He stumbled along the riverbank, aches echoing from his knees to his pelvis. He did not even stop to take a drink of water, though his lips cracked and voice shook, and he did not turn from the river, afraid to be lost in the forest of indistinct obelisks. The sirens took turns above the surface, waiting for

him to falter. Waiting for his voice to go out. For his hands to drop from his ears.

Waiting to cast their spell on him and devour him with their rows of sharp teeth.

He gasped for air like a drowning man when all four of the sirens sank like stones. Still singing, still clasping, he turned as they fled back downriver, black shadows growing fainter with the roll of the river.

A trick? A trap? But the river flowed spotless, not a siren to be seen.

Rhee pulled his hands from his ears—and found nothing but the stillness.

He collapsed to his knees and dropped his arms to his sides, muscles burning and trembling and twitching. He crawled to the edge of the river and drank deeply, shoving his face, gray beard and all, into the water's edge. Cooling him, refreshing him, the water ran over his aching face and burning hands.

That song—that silly, childhood song that he had never wanted to hear again—had saved him. He could still picture his wife singing to Ama, putting her to bed beneath the homespun quilt. He and his wife had clung to Ama. She was all they had left after their daughter. Ama was their light—until his hard old wife had crawled into bed beside him and whispered goodbye.

“Don’t you mean goodnight?” he had asked.

And she had just smiled and gone to sleep.

Ama had raged and cried at her granny’s funeral even more than when her momma left. The night after, she said she’d never sleep again unless Rhee sang her the song.

“Then I guess you won’t be sleeping,” Rhee had said.

If he could go back... if he could do it all again...

*Ama.* He’d find her and apologize to her. *Ama, I’m so sorry.*

He’d save her.

“Tell me, boy, what you’re doing in our forest.”

Rhee stiffened at the voice, the rasp of a blade on leather. He had not been called a boy in a long time, and had not been so afraid in longer than that.

But the voice did not take control of him, did not force him to turn. Not a siren then, but something no less dangerous if it lived in this forest. Something drawn to him from the noise of his gun, the strength of his singing. Something bad enough to scare the sirens away...

“Face us,” another voice said, similar but still distinct from the first.

He had heard the tales, but they were nothing... nothing when staring them down...

*God, what creatures have you wrought?*

It was a woman, yet not. Clawed feet gripped into the side of the obelisk, puncturing stone. Feathered arms curled to her drooping breasts protectively, each finger tipped with a talon. Her hair was black feathers, and her face ended with the point of a beak.

But her eyes—God—her eyes were startlingly human.

The harpy dropped to the ground like a feather on the wind. Another perched above her, and a third clung to another obelisk. When he did not stand, the first stepped towards him, powerful thighs rippling with coiled muscle.

Had Ama seen such beasts? Had she been afraid?

Had the witch created them?

And a thought worse than all the rest—had they been human once?

He swallowed bile.

Her beak couldn't smile, but her eyes could. "What are *you*, who comes here to our forest?"

They watched him with curiosity, not malice. "I am Rhee, and I am here to find my granddaughter."

The three creatures chirped in something approximate to laughter. "There is only one man allowed to come and go in our forest—and he is not you. But you sand fleas, you desert worms, you do not come in and survive."

Even on his knees, he met the creature's eyes. "Then I will be the first."

The laughter again. The first hunched her back and bent her feathered knees to meet his gaze. "You do not know then, the purpose of my sisters?"

Rhee moved his head, a muscle in his jaw twitching. "No."

"We protect Lamia. We eat men who think they will be the first to do what no one else has done." She leaned towards him. The carrion smell of her breath raked over his cheek. "What do you think of that?"

His stomach dropped. His chest clenched.

They would not let him go after Ama. They would not let him live. He would survive the sirens only to be killed here, closer to the witch's cabin where Tanner had taken his granddaughter. Ama would go on forever believing he had not come for her, that he had not tried to save her—

No. Damn that.

He still had his gun.

Two bullets. Three harpies.

*Ama*, his heart beat. *For Ama*.

His forefinger found the trigger and his thumb cocked the hammer in the fluid movement of his drawing. His eyes never left the harpy's—brown, deep brown like Ama's—as he centered the gun between them.

In the moment before he squeezed, the harpy's eyes widened with an altogether human emotion.

*Fear.*

The gun went off with a blast. Rhee's heart jumped as it did every time he shot, even after all these years. The harpy whirled away, blood splattering in an arc, her face a hole that erased every human aspect. He was standing before her body settled, cocked the gun again as an inhuman cry went up from the other two.

*One bullet left.*

Hissing and screeching. Feathers fluttered as they rushed him. The obelisks cast one into shadow, one into light.

He shot again.

It took one harpy in the fleshy arm, her wing bending as she swerved off-course.

The other hit true, knocking him back in a tangle of claws and feathers. Sharp blades slipped into his shoulder, his chest, his knees—

The river swallowed them.

The claws found the flesh of his inner thigh and clung. He screamed beneath the water tinted pink with his blood, the harpy's face distorted through the bubbles of his breath. He slammed his fist against her beak, but she did not break away.



His side hit a rock, flinging them apart and sending him spinning in the rapids.

*Ama! Ama!* His heartbeat screamed.

The harpy caught on something, feathered arms working and churning, and pulled herself free of the water.

But with no air, to Rhee she was nothing more than a blurry shadow as he scrambled for the surface.

He flailed as his back hit another rock, his head connecting at the temple. Blood filled his eyes.

But the pain slipped away, just beyond his fingertips, as the water dragged him down. The cold filled his lungs, chilled the sore muscles of his back, the ache of his knees, cooled the raw wounds from the harpy, the split in his head.

He couldn't feel a thing.

He couldn't see a thing.

*I'm dying—*

And he knew it. Regret filled him like the river.

*Ama, I'm sorry.*

\* \* \*

Slender fingers brushed through his hair, fingers he hadn't felt since—

“Little flower?”

His voice was salt and stones. Fire burned low in his throat.

The fingers caressed his brow. His body felt distant, foreign. Missing. He cracked his eyes open, sticky, heavy.

The sun silhouetted her, threw her into shadows except for the dark hair—the same dark hair she had given Ama. He squinted and reached for her, but his shoulder ached and the wetness weighed him down.

She hummed her song, the song her momma wove for her, the song Rhee hated.

“You came back for me...”

She tipped his face towards hers with fingers on his chin.

“Teach me the words,” she sang, and his body seized.

It all flooded back.

And even more, stretching back and back, twisting a chain into one link, a lifetime into one moment. Ama crying. His wife dying. His daughter leaving. The desert stretching as far as the eye could see.

Where had she gone?

Not here.

“What words do you want?” Rhee asked. His voice escaped his control, eager to please and ready to sing despite his gruff rasp.

A siren shifted at his side, came into focus. Not his flower at all. Just a creature of pale white and dark eyes. Similar, so similar, just another girl, but a monster—someone’s daughter?

—no, a monster, even if she reminded him of his flower all the same.

“The song you gave us,” she sang. “Teach me the words to that song.”

*Not that*, Rhee fought. *That song isn't yours*. But her command loosened his tongue anyway, muffled his brain with thick cotton.

*“She shot for the sun. And the moons.”* His soul ached, twisting his heart, clenching his stomach, drawing tears to his eyes. *“Constellations beyond.”* He hadn't cried for his wife when she died, hadn't cried for his daughter when she left, hadn't cried for Ama in the woods with the witch, but now—but now—

*“Even in her flight, the stars fell at her feet.”*

He still had control of his body, so he tangled his fingers in her long hair. The siren stiffened at his side.

“I saved you from the river!” she sang. She reared up on her fish tail amidst the sandy riverbank, and Rhee sang the lullaby louder.

*“She shot for the sun.”* He dragged her face towards him, this girl who was still a child herself, this girl who, close up, looked enough like his daughter to twist his wounds open anew. *“And the moons. Constellations beyond.”* She screamed

and sang in response, but his strong hands found her neck and squeezed. *“Even in her flight, the stars fell at her feet.”*

Her words choked off, but still he sang. Her fingers fought against his grip, nails digging ruts into the back of his hands and his wrists. He felt nothing amidst the overwhelming sea of sorrow that took his soul out with the tide.

She looked like his daughter, and he fought to kill her—

Her eyes bulged with moonlight when she went still in his grip. He tasted salt. He heaved her to the side and dropped her on the sand, her white throat colored with galaxies of bruises the shape of his fingers.

He sat and dropped his face into his steady hands.

He wept like he hadn't since he was a boy.

How many miles did he still have to go?

And how would he kill Lamia without bullets? Without a gun?

But the miles to go... he would walk them.

And when he arrived, he would throw himself at the witch's feet and trade himself for Ama.

He would save her at the cost of his own life, and finally rest beside his wife in the death he deserved.

\* \* \*

After a spell, he dragged himself from the riverbank, offering one last glance to the dead siren. He had no doubt the

others would come for him as soon as they discovered her dead, just like he suspected the harpies were still on his trail.

But he couldn't think of that.

So he walked, sliding one foot in front of the other.

Shuffling from obelisk to obelisk, scabbed hands reaching. His head throbbed with what he feared was a fever. His leg and shoulder were torn from the harpy's talons, but he had no way to patch the wounds. They dripped even as the rest of him dried, leaving behind a trail of blood drops like little red petals.

When the obelisks thinned and opened into a copse of real trees, he thought he had gone mad. But there, shaded beneath the real green leaves, sat a little house of metal and stone. The cottage that stories had told him of.

Along the outer wall of the house sat tubes of blue liquid, reaching up and up like flowers planted in a garden. And floating in the middle were curled lumps of flesh the size of children, some with fish tails and some with feathers.

Monsters. Little creatures—but God above, none of them Ama.

The door of the house flew open, and a man rushed out, half his face a blue and black bruise.

“Now, Rhee, I already warned Lamia you were coming for —”

Tanner. How was Tanner *here*?

Rhee stumbled to the man, grabbed his shoulders to steady himself. “Where is she? Where is Ama?”

“Rhee, you’re in a bad way! Sit down, sit down! Let me help you!” Tanner eased Rhee into a chair by the door.

So many questions burned in his throat, yet...

“Tanner.” The voice was honeyed and soft. Tanner stiffened at his name, dipped his head as another emerged from the door.

“Lamia, Rhee is hurt.” Tanner backed away from Rhee as the witch herself came forward.

Rhee had expected a young temptress, flagrant in her sexuality; or perhaps an old crone, withered and bent; but he had not expected this, an average woman with a crooked nose and tanned skin like she’d come off the desert. Neither ugly nor beautiful, just another face he’d see at the general store in town.

“You’re the witch Lamia?”

She knelt in front of him, keen brown eyes assessing his wounds the same way Ama’s eyes focused when she was drawing. “You came across my protectors then.”

“Your monsters,” Rhee spat before thinking, gaze snapping to the tubes of growing creatures. “Where’s my granddaughter?”

Fingers probed the cut above his knee, and Rhee's eyes shot wide at the fire that stabbed up his spine. "Don't—"

"Let me heal you." Lamia pressed something metallic to his leg above the wound, a faintly glowing square that exuded the warmth of a house fire.

"I don't want your damn magic."

Lamia fixed him in place with a glare. It was a look that reminded him of his wife.

He shuddered as the wound on his leg pulled and itched. When Lamia moved her hand and the device away, the wound was closed.

"What sort of magic—"

Lamia shushed him and pressed the box to his shoulder. "The rare kind."

The warmth brushed against him as the skin knitted itself together.

"You came after Ama." It wasn't a question. "I was told my daddy came after me, but I can't be sure. That was probably seventy years ago now. The creatures in the forest are supposed to keep you from coming. Supposed to protect us here in the forest."

"And Tanner?" Rhee spat his name like a poison. "How'd he get here?"

“He is a necessity.” Lamia’s eyes never moved from his. Her voice was calm and assessing. “He brings me supplies for my survival, and I send him with seeds and rations for the town.” The seeds they used to grow their crops. The rations they used to eat.

Rhee pressed his lips flat. He feared speaking would interrupt her and she’d offer him nothing more.

“Once girls wanted to be chosen. Longed to be chosen. But families didn’t want to give up their daughters, even for a better life. They tried to kill us, so we came here to the obelisks to hide. We gave ourselves protectors, to make sure no one would harm us again. Those *monsters* should have been enough to keep you away.” Half of Lamia’s lips worked into a small smile and something Rhee could hardly recognize—something akin to respect. “But not you.”

“No, ma’am. And neither will you.”

Lamia’s smile faded. “I guarantee you that Ama is in a better place, Rhee.”

That he could not abide by. “She can’t be. She’s not with me. She belongs with me. I’m her family, and—” Rhee stuttered to a stop. *And she’s all I have left.* He couldn’t say it.

Rhee’s voice cracked when he spoke again. “Where is she? Ama?”

“Gone.”



“Gone?” He couldn’t look at the tube creatures.

Lamia moved the box from his healed shoulder to his forehead. His scalp began to itch. “I’ve sent her ahead.”

“Where?”

Lamia’s fingers brushed against his woundless forehead. “To the stars.”

Rhee’s eyes fixed past Lamia, past the river, past the obelisks and the trees atop them as his steady hands dug into the arms of the chair. To the stars. To a place no one he knew had ever gone. To a place where people dreamed up monsters like the sirens and harpies and the machines they were made in. To a place where the fates of farms and worlds like his were decided. “Why?”

“She can learn. She can come back and work the land as I do. Give water to the town, and the towns beyond yours that need it. Grow this world into one that can hold a bounty of life, not just a desert.” Lamia dropped her hand to his shoulder and squeezed, a gesture far too comforting for a woman so hard. “She’s smart, Rhee. You know that. And she loves this land just as you do. Just as I do. She’ll want to care for it. She’ll soon protect it as I do.”

Rhee’s hands shook, not steady anymore. “But I couldn’t say goodbye? I couldn’t...”

Lamia's eyes softened. Rhee thought *she* might cry. "She didn't want that. She didn't want so say goodbye. Nothing to weaken her resolve when this world needs her."

"You couldn't..." Rhee swallowed hard. "You couldn't take me instead of her?"

Her lips curved in a smile that didn't reach her eyes. She shone like a flower growing in the desert in that moment, made of stern stuff and yet achingly beautiful. Like his wife. Like his daughter. Like Ama.

"I'm sorry," Lamia said. "So few born on this world understand nature at the level she does, or have the curiosity and capacity to learn more."

"And I'll never... see her again?"

Lamia stilled. One eye watered with unshed tears, and it was this sorrow that kept Rhee in his chair when half of him wanted to hurt her for taking Ama from him. "By the time she returns, all of us will be long dead. It is the curse of traveling through the stars."

"I'll never see her again..."

He looked up at her, this desert woman in the obelisk forest, far away from home. She had the stars in her eyes even if her feet were planted on the sand.

And Ama could grow to be like her.

So he nodded, the storm inside him swallowing, swallowing.

“She left this for you.” And from Tanner’s hands she took a book—small, leatherbound, unobtrusive.

Ama’s sketchbook.

Rhee took it in his battered hands, looked at the cover he had seen a thousand times.

Lamia gestured for Tanner to follow her into the stone and metal cottage. The door closed between them, and Rhee felt they had slipped out of the world even if they had just left his vision.

He thumbed through the book and found Ama’s familiar illustrations. Her cramped, curled handwriting that made notes of her surroundings. Words so complicated and long Rhee didn’t understand them all. It wasn’t a goodbye, but it was a farewell.

He closed the journal.

The obelisk forest was beautiful, when one knew how to look at it.

Rhee rocked in the chair on the front porch, the sound of the river a steady tune, the shade of the trees dappling the bank.

Would Ama be better off in a place that offered learning? A place that would teach her to create the water their planet needed?

Her mother had wanted more than this world, more than this small town. Ama deserved better, too. Better than what an old man could offer her in a desert of scars.

Ama deserved the whole universe.

The storm blew out. The tide rolled in. Rhee's hands steadied.

He hummed Ama's lullaby as the sky in the obelisk forest darkened.

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## THE TRUE AND OTHERWORLDLY ORIGINS OF THE NAME ‘CALAMITY JANE’

by Jordan Kurella

She hunted fairies. It was how she knew this whole thing was a trap. Jane had passed through Hartville, Wyoming about once a month for the past two years, and until today it was a town with chatter wafting out of every storefront, where the saloon reeked of sweat and booze, and so much wagon traffic that it slowed her down. Now the storefronts were silent, the saloon was empty, and the wagon tracks were filling in with dirt.

Six months ago when Jane had sworn off this job for good, she told herself nothing would bring her back to it, but this... this she couldn't ignore. There was no way Earl would've passed this up, either. He would've known, like she knew now, that there was a fairy inside, in this art gallery painted storm-sky blue with the words "*GALLERY OF DREAMS—OPEN NOW*" arching over the black curtain serving as its front door. And it *was* open. Jane could hear someone singing inside.

And whatever it was, it wasn't human.

She had eight cold-iron shells left over from when she'd given this all up, and now seemed the right time to use them. But if things started going south, she had to make sure there was one left for herself. So once there were two loaded in her shotgun, she took a step forward, but before her heel could touch down, a witch stepped through the curtain.

"Ah, Martha Jane, so glad you could come," the witch said as she approached. This had to be the fairy; she had skin too pale for frontier living and a dress and eyes the same midnight blue. There was a chill coming off her, like being near a mountain creek, and when she took Jane's cheeks in her fingers, her touch was February cold. "We've been waiting so long for this, you cannot imagine."

"Got a guess," Jane said. "'Bout six months?"

"Time is so fluid," the witch fairy said. "Come inside, we have a gift for you."

Jane grunted, her grip tightening on her shotgun. "Won't like it."

The witch only smiled, drawing Jane closer. "I can't give away the surprise. Come." She let go of Jane's face and walked to the doorway, holding the curtain open.

If Earl were here, Jane would have been more cautious. But he wasn't, so she shouldered her shotgun, set her jaw, and

marched ahead through the door. There was only one way this was going to get done, and that was *her* way.

\* \* \*

At least she wasn't in Faerie.

There was a dizzying quality to Faerie, where the ideas of up and down were intertwined and everything Jane said felt wrong in her mouth. Nevertheless, it was weird in here. The air felt used, like the whole world had breathed it all up before she arrived. Also, she was alone; the witch was gone.

That witch fairy had to be magical, and if she could disappear or walk through walls, she could probably do other things. One thing Jane'd learned about fairies was that they liked to show off early, which was sometimes a blessing—it let her get a taste of what she was up against. But this witch's kind of magic? Jane was too rusty, too low on materials, and down one partner to go up against a fairy this powerful. If Earl hadn't gone missing six months ago, Jane would've been in better shape.

Oh she'd been looking for him, but he'd vanished, like a typical man.

It would have to just be her, the paintings on the walls, and the grand table set with all the food she could imagine. The smell of the food was sickly-sweet, like perfume layered over filth. She knew not to touch any of it or she'd get pulled into



Faerie with no way out. That was the way fairy food worked. But she was so hungry, and that whole table was mocking her. She had to look at something else.

So she turned to the walls. Each painting was a landscape peppered with people, and although Jane wasn't much for art, looking at it beat staring at all the food she couldn't eat. She found each picture nice enough, feeling like she could live in each one, if she had to. Here was a painting of a forest, there a castle, then down the wall, a mountain range. But all those people in the paintings, they felt off, like they'd been added later by someone else.

It wasn't until she arrived at a painting of a beach with a dancing girl and a cowboy staring out at the water with their hands raised high that she realized it. Maybe it was the shocked expressions on all the people's faces, or the way they looked like they were caught in the middle of something else, or maybe how their clothes were wrong—a dancing girl wouldn't wear her costume to the beach. These were the missing folk from Hartville, trapped inside the art, and now they were on display.

Was *that* the surprise? Not likely. Fairies never did anything without reason, made up with their own fucked-up way of thinking. It might not make any sense to one of these townsfolk, but she and Earl had started to puzzle fairy thinking out and see things the fairy way. This witch wanted something

else from her, or had something for her, and Jane wasn't exactly Christmas-keen to find out what.

"Ah, Martha Jane," said a different voice coming from the back of the room. This witch fairy had a friend. "We're so glad you came. We knew you would love our invitation, so we brought a guest."

Jane whirled around, her shotgun leveled, and she found herself looking not at two fairies but into the dead eyes of her old partner, Earl. The witch and this fairy in the gallery were holding his head up by his light brown hair. They smiled at her until she lowered the barrel of her shotgun, and when she did, they dropped Earl's corpse to the floor.

"We have a proposition for you," the gallery fairy said. She stepped into the light, her hair falling over her bare shoulders, grass-green eyes losing themselves in her pale face. "One we hope you'll keep this time, as your last broken deal didn't work out so well." She nudged Earl's body with her toe. "What do you say, Martha Jane?"

Jane couldn't say anything. Her mind was frozen in shock.

All those days spent on scouting jobs, chasing old leads and older stories for a glimpse of Earl's horse or a whiff of his aftershave. She should've stopped when everything came up cold, but no, she'd only gotten bolder, more brazen in her

searching. And now, here he was, exactly as all her nightmares had played out.

“Good girl, Martha Jane,” the witch said. “Finally willing to work with us.”

“You’ll be pleased with the outcome,” the gallery fairy said. “We’ll free your partner’s soul from our realm and let the town go.”

There was a pause, like they were waiting for Jane to speak. Which meant, by her reckoning, they had another boot left to drop. There was no sense in dragging this out.

“What else d’you want?” she asked.

“You must come with us,” the witch said.

Earl had always been the talker, getting them out of most scrapes with his silver tongue while Jane spent most of her time getting them into scrapes by saying nothing at all. But this wasn’t a good deal, even Jane could see that. There was no way she could let them stay here either, and she couldn’t let them keep Earl’s soul. Yes, she’d found him, finally, and the discovery was ripping so many holes in her she was finding it hard to think or keep her eyes dry. She didn’t want to see him like this, or know he was suffering like he was, all because of her. It was time to change the game.

“I got a better deal,” she said.

“Ah, Martha Jane wishes to counter-offer,” the gallery fairy said.

“Intriguing,” the witch said. “This worked in our favor the last time. That’s how your man died, yes? From you trying to bargain? So please, go ahead, speak. We’re eager to hear what you have to say.”

“He’s not my man,” Jane said.

“Is that your entire bargain?” the gallery fairy asked. “Amusing.”

“No, dammit.” She had to be specific. “Let Earl’s soul go, right now. An’ *then* I’ll go to Faerie, willing-like, but you’re both comin’ with me.”

“Is that all?” the witch asked. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“No,” Jane said. “Fuck the town, I don’t owe them nothing.”

“This is a good deal,” the gallery fairy said.

“It’s better than your previous attempt,” the witch said. “Your man would be proud.”

“I *said*, he’s *not* my man.”

“But you were in love with him from the moment he paid for you,” the gallery fairy said. She slid behind Jane, running her thin fingers down one of Earl’s old jackets. “Your heart

belonged to him, from the moment he said ‘You’re a different kind of girl.’”

“Bullshit.”

“But isn’t it true,” the witch asked, moving closer, “that he didn’t love you back? You cared for him so much, and yet... he nev—”

“Are you agreein’ or not?”

“Oh Earl,” the gallery fairy said in Jane’s voice, “I miss you so much.”

That was it.

Forfeiting contracts was her forte. Jane raised her shotgun to fire.

\* \* \*

There was a door at the back side of the gallery, shut and latched with a wooden bolt on the inside. That would do. As the two fairies closed in, Jane fired at the door, aiming to hit the frame, or at least the wall around it. But her hands were shaking, and she was backing up, trying to avoid the table, there wasn’t much space in here, and she missed, twice.

She’d have to reload.

“Is she shooting her little gun at us?” the witch asked.

“I think she is,” the gallery fairy said.

Jane was fumbling with the second shell when the witch twitched her fingers in front of her, plunging the room into

darkness. It was thick and blue as the midnight sky, and just as suffocating. Jane was suddenly in deep ocean, drowning and gasping for breath. Her hands clutched both shotgun and shell, grabbing onto anything to bring her up and out of this, help her climb up for breath.

No. This was a lie.

She couldn't let herself believe in this. They wanted her to feel she was drowning, to die gasping for air in a simple building like someone who had no idea what they were getting into. But she was Jane Canary, she knew better—it was only darkness, magic darkness, and the gallery was still the gallery, with the table in the middle and the paintings on the windowless walls. This was no night sky, this was no deep ocean. This was Wyoming.

Whatever the witch had done, that kind of power was huge, bigger than anything Jane and Earl had ever gone up against, and there were two fairies in here with that same immense magic. With Earl's soul at stake, her own soul at stake, and the few shells she had left, she was outmatched and had too much to lose. She had to get away, but there was something she had to take care of first.

So she darted right but misjudged her distance and knocked two paintings off the wall. The two fairies whispered. If they were planning, it didn't matter. Jane knew where she

was going and was already feeling her way toward the rear of the building. This place wasn't that big, and since they were still on real, actual ground, it wasn't going to get any bigger. She just had to get there.

"Are you staying little girl? The door is the other way," the gallery fairy said. She was a few paces behind.

"Giving up? Just like you did with him?" the witch said. "Riding away like a coward into the night and leaving him behind to die?" Her voice was coming from everywhere. It surrounded her, echoing off the walls, creeping out from under the table, dangling on webs from the ceiling. It stopped when Jane reached Earl's corpse.

"You cannot save him," the gallery fairy said.

"Only we can do that," the witch said.

"Come with us," they said together. "And we will put him back where he belongs."

"You don't seem innerested in keepin' your word," Jane said. "So how about three play at that game?"

"We did not agree to your deal, foolish girl," the witch said, the words rushing in angry from the walls.

"Violence is not the answer," the gallery fairy said. "Did your man teach you nothing?"

“He *wasn't my man*,” Jane said, and lifted Earl’s body with one arm, feeling along the back wall with her shoulder. “Not ever.”

“So sad for you,” the gallery fairy said. She was too close now, Jane had to move faster. “You did love him so.”

She had to make sure these two never got out of this building again. Cold iron fired into the door frames should do it, then they’d be stuck in here forever. Jane had six shells left for four targets, and she had to hit exactly.

When her shoulder connected with the back door, she stopped and fired a third time. The cold-iron pellets hit the reinforced wood, digging in just enough to serve as an anchor. She only had to do it again on the other side of this door, and then both sides of the front, all the while hoping these two couldn’t figure out what she was up to. So she hefted Earl higher, dragged him a few feet backward until she fired again.

“Give up, Martha Jane,” the gallery fairy said. “Know when you’ve lost.”

Jane’s hands were shaking, she couldn’t reload like this. Not with Earl under one arm in this darkness. She could hear the gallery fairy close behind her, so she pulled Earl in tight and pushed off the back wall, feeling along the floor to avoid the table.



“Little girl believes she can kill us with her tiny shot and simple gun,” the witch said, her voice wrapping around Jane like a cocoon. “You cannot.”

Their taunts mixed her fear with a fury that was welling up inside her, sending her mind racing. The mix, she knew, was poison. This recipe of emotions was what got her into scrapes she couldn't win, and had started the whole situation that ended up getting Earl killed. Anger and fury had given her black eyes, broken fingers, and a dead partner. And now, if she wasn't careful...

No, she needed to clear her head, she needed her full concentration. Her jaw was already aching from her clenched teeth, her arm seizing from Earl's weight. Her mouth had long ago gone dry from fear, now the anger was making her speed up. She had to regain control.

*Damn tortoise won the race, she told herself. Slow the fuck down, Jane.*

There was a chill approaching, coming in slow and sinister like a draft. The witch was getting closer, and Jane's shotgun was empty. She had to reload now, but her hands were wild and slick with sweat. She had no choice. She grabbed two of her four remaining shells and whispered an even older mantra: *two in the hand is worth one good and shot, rack em in, close it up, good as got.*

It was supposed to get her to concentrate and focus, but it wasn't working. She loaded the first shell in a panic; the chill was coming on too fast, her heart was clawing at her ribcage, and her mind was playing tricks on her—she swore she'd just felt Earl move.

The second shell went in just as the witch took Jane by the throat. She was laughing, and then the other fairy was laughing. If Jane didn't know better, she'd've thought it was a pretty sound, like carousel music. But she did know better, this meant bad things were going to happen, really bad things. The witch squeezed her throat and brought Jane so close she could taste the ice coming off her breath. But the witch said nothing, and she wasn't laughing anymore.

Because Jane had just gotten an idea.

Magic wasn't all powerful. It could be outdone by the right tools, if you outsmarted it, and Jane had been paying attention. This witch really liked this thick darkness. It let her do the voice thing, disorient people, and no light could get through. Except, judging by those tiny glimpses of daylight from where her cold-iron pellets had sprayed the back wall, well, Jane had two shots to figure out if she had the right idea.

Feet firm on the ground, Jane closed the break and fired from the hip.

The witch squeezed harder, seething through clenched teeth, “What are you doing? What are you *doing*?”

More light peeked through the front wall. Jane had one shot to see if she was right. One shot to see if she was headed for death and all these heroics were for nothing. The witch tried to turn Jane’s head to meet her eyes, but Jane wouldn’t have it. If she was gonna die today, she’d be damned if she let these fairies get a hold of her soul that easy. No. If they wanted all of her, they were gonna have to work for it.

So she set her arm steady at her side, stiff and solid as a cottonwood tree, and threw all her fear and anger into wrenching back the second hammer. The witch drew Jane in until they were nose to nose, but Jane just grinned into the dark, putting some of her malice there. The rest she saved to throw into her trigger finger to fire the second shell.

The shot hit, sending daylight bridging across the room like signals from a hundred stars.

The witch screamed, scraping her nails down Jane’s throat and then digging them into her own skin while she stood, wailing and illuminated. The gallery fairy flipped the table, sending food flying everywhere—whole chickens knocked the paintings from the walls, pudding spread thick on the floor, and Jane crept through it all, holding Earl close.

“Stop her!” the witch said. “Stop her!”

Jane loaded her last two shells with steady hands and turned, her shotgun aimed at the right side of the door frame, but the gallery fairy was behind her, pulling her back. “You’ll regret this, Martha Jane. You’ll regret this as long as you live.”

“I won’t.” Jane steadied her arm and fired.

The cold-iron pellets hit home. The gallery fairy let go, doubling over on herself as the witch writhed on the floor, becoming part of the debris and darkness. Jane walked three slow steps to the left and took her final shot.

“We will never forget this!” the two fairies called out. “We will plague you for the rest of your days. Your life will be chaos, turmoil, mayhem. You will lose everyone you love. You will never be at peace. We curse you, Martha Jane Canary!”

“I got what I wanted,” Jane said, the shells spent, the curtain drawn back and Earl against her chest. He was closer to her now than she’d ever held him in life, and his cold, heavy body was comfortable in her arms, like it was a natural extension of what she should have done six months ago. Standing like this, she knew they were free to go.

“We will follow you!” they called out. “You are curs—”

When the curtain shut behind her, their voices cut out as if she’d closed a book, ending their story, forever trapped inside by the cold-iron anchors she’d shot into the entranceways.

\* \* \*

The sun was low on the horizon when Earl was finally in the ground, and Jane was tired. She knelt down at his grave with her hat in her hands. There was something she had to see to before she left.

“Hey, Lord,” she said. “I’m tryin’ to give you Earl Hinkman. He was a good man, better’n most. He didn’t deserve what he got.”

She looked up for some kind of confirmation, but she got none. There was only that wide expanse of airless blue to get lost in.

“I’m not good at this talkin’ stuff, so if you could protect him like I’m askin.’ Do me this favor and take good care of him, like I couldn’t. Just keep him safe an’ ask him to wait for me. I’ll probably be joinin’ him soon enough.”

\* \* \*

When Jane rode out, she left everything behind her. The storefronts were silent, the saloon was empty, and the wagon tracks were lost in the dirt.

As for the fairies, it was time for someone else to take up that mantle. Let them be filled with all the danger, wonder, and loss that had occupied her life for two years, Jane was done with it, for good this time. She had a curse to get to, and nobody else could live it like her.

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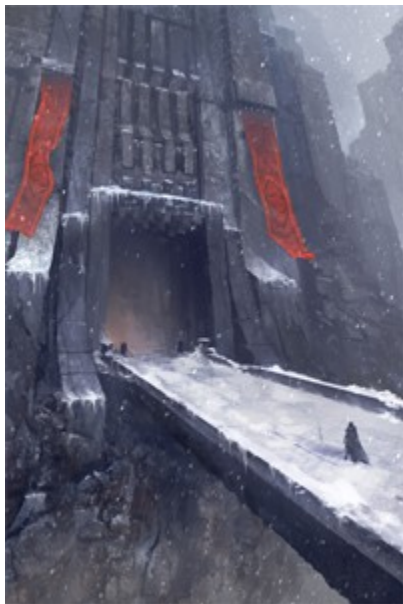
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## COVER ART

“The Sacred Flames,” by Jinxu Du



Jinxu Du is a primarily self taught artist, now enrolled in school to pursue a career in concept art and design for entertainment media. See more work online at [ishutani.deviantart.com](http://ishutani.deviantart.com).

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