

#1 - Fairy Tale Retelling/Mystery

Prologue

Once upon a time, in a land not-so far away, specifically a bedroom decorated with The New Bears on the Block posters and stuffed animals, a boy kissed a teen girl.

“That’s just right.” She curled her fingers around the young man’s neck to pull him closer. Desire and need burned within her pubescent body nearly driving her out of her mind.

The boy shot her a slow smile, the kind that made father’s grab their assault rifles. “Easy, G. We have all night,” he whispered. Moonlight softened the already hard planes of his face; a face born of many nights spent fighting for scraps of food and affection.

The girl stilled, her blue eyes met his jade green ones, eyes filled with something dark and dangerous, something her mother, had she had one, would’ve warned her about. The girl swallowed, hard as if she knew their time together wouldn’t last.

And it didn’t.

Unhappily-soon-after three bears returned home. “Someone’s been sitting in my chair,” the grizzled voice of Judge Papa Bear growled from the kitchen of his expensive Easter Egg Village brownstone.

Upstairs, the boy froze, his gaze changed from lusty to terrified faster than a caffeine-addicted mouse could run up a tab at Wish Upon a Starbucks.

“Someone’s drank all my wine,” Mama Bear’s voice rang out. “And after spending the afternoon with your mother I could use a drink.”

The bedroom door opened and a seven-foot shadow filled the doorway.

With a cry the boy leapt off the bed, grabbed his pants, and ran to the window. He looked over his shoulder at the girl and swallowed a curse.

A breeze from the window, a window that promised many things including freedom, caressed his flesh much like the hands of the girl. “Another time. Another place,” he said as he dove over a lit candle, nearly incinerating his naughty parts in the process, and out the window. Gravel crunched under his boots as he vanished into the night.

The shadowy bearish figure in the doorway flicked on the bedroom light. The girl clutched the blanket to her, her gaze locked on a young cub’s face. They stared at each other, eyes wide, neither making a sound.

Finally, the baby bear broke eye contact. He motioned to the window and the fleeing boy. “He’s awfully nimble.”

She added, “And quick.”

Chapter 1

“My, my, what big...,” my eyes slowly slid from his mouth downward taking in every inch of his bulging physique, finally settling on his very large and furry fingers, “...hands you have you have.”

His lips curled into a lecherous grin as he lifted the chains around his wrists. “The better to...”

“To what? Kill innocent women wearing red hoods?” Pushing from the hard metal chair, I rose to my full five-feet, eight-inch height to stare down at the hairy guy accused of

stalking and murdering a young woman who went missing on her way to her grandmother's house. "We've got your DNA all over her goodies."

He huffed in a harsh breath. I smiled. We had the right guy. Now I just needed to break him.

The best part of the job.

I drew in a breath, ready to pluck the truth from him like a plum from a pie. The interview room door opened halting my interrogation. Captain Jingleheimer Schmidt stuck his head through the doorway. "Detective," he said in a whey-soaked voice. "A word."

I shot the big bad-smelling wolf a glare as I followed the captain out of the institutional grey colored room. He led me across the bullpen filled with villains and cops to his office on the other side of the New Never City police station.

Motioning for me to sit, the captain dropped into his own seat behind a wobbly desk, clasping his fingers in front of him. I sat, crossing my legs and waited. Captain Jingleheimer Schmidt was a man of few words and most those started with the letter F. "Goldie," he began.

My back arched at the use of my given name. Whatever he was about to say wasn't good. In fact the last time the captain had called me Goldie I had ended up losing my back right molar to a delusional fairy. The two dollars and seventy cents left under my pillow was of little consolation. I took a calming breath, waiting for the other old woman in a shoe to drop.

It wasn't long in coming.

"There's been a murder," he said, leaning back in his chair.

“I figured that, sir.” Why else put one of New Never City’s finest on the case?

But the captain wasn’t finished. “This is a bit messy, Detective. The victim is,” he paused to shake his head, “was, the biggest, not to mention the richest man in all five kingdoms.”

Joseph Giantolo, Joey the Giant Mobster as he was better known. I sucked in a breath. Over the past twelve years of my life I’d had numerous interactions Joey, usually while dressed in pink chiffon, me not him, at fancy dinners and other societal events my parents had dragged me to time and again.

Thankfully my high society days were over.

“With this being a freaking election year,” the captain was saying, “we have to wrap this case up and fast. Since you...knew the vic, I’m making you lead.” He leaned forward. The chair under him groaned in distress. “Don’t make me regret it.”

“Yes sir,” I said rising from my own chair.

“Good. Take Rabbit with you,” he said, referring to Peter Rabbit, my occasional partner in solving crimes.

I nodded.

“And Locks,” the captain added when I reached the doorway. I turned to face him, noting the slight tremor in his hand. He clenched his fist as if to cover the telling action. “Try not to shoot anybody. Again. Too damn much paperwork.”

Entry 1.5 - Young Adult Sci-fi

Rhiovannara whirled, the gauzy fabric of her many-layered dress twisting tight and flaring again as she spun reluctantly back toward her nearly immobile partner. Costumes swirled around them in every shade, a riot of silks and satins, feathers and jewels, set to show off the many-hued patterns of rank and wealth that adorned virtually every patch of exposed skin in the grand ballroom. For a moment, she could almost believe it was just a party. Almost.

The old man tottered unsteadily as the dance continued, clutching her hands as much for support as form. His skin was dry and course beneath her sweating palms. One thin arm snaked around her waist to pull her close. He smelled like alcohol and toxic air.

"I appreciate you agreeing to dance with me."

As if she'd had a choice. No one would dare turn down Aldous Rutherford, the man who owned the asteroid belt from which Mars harvested precious minerals and, most importantly since the mines beneath the planet's surface ran dry, water. It was hard to reconcile the frail, old man before her with her knowledge of the most influential person on Mars, but there was no denying the sway he held with her father.

"It's an honor, sir, to dance with so distinguished a guest. My father is lucky to have the support of someone like you."

The old man's lip twitched up. "Indeed. But, lets not discuss politics. It's not often I get to enjoy the company of such a beautiful young woman. You are turning sixteen, correct?"

"In two days." She offered back the practiced smile drilled into her muscle memory.

"And a wedding to follow," Rutherford added. "A busy week."

Wedding? Rhiovannara's perfect composure slipped as her brow puckered, a heavy dread settling in her stomach. "To what wedding are you referring?"

"Why, yours of course."

Rhionavannara had no trouble pulling her hands from his weak grasp. They stood, unmoving, as party-goers swirled around them. Could it be true? What reason did he have to lie? Perhaps he was simply misinformed. Or, maybe she was.

A slow smile spread across Mr. Rutherford's face. "Your father hasn't told you yet?"

"If you'll excuse me, sir." With a curtsy so slight it bordered on rude, she fled the dance floor. Insulting a guest, even one so important as Mr. Rutherford, was of little concern compared to the words ringing in her ears.

Rhiovannara scanned the room. It seemed half of Center was there in support of her father's nomination. A group of ladies waved her over, but she pretended not to notice as she hunted with single-minded determination for the blue silk suit her father had specially commissioned for this occasion. Lucky for her, he wanted to stand out.

There! The luminescent tattoos of her father's accomplishments stood in bright relief against the cappuccino skin Rhiovannara had inherited.

"Father!" She waved as she approached, drawing not only his attention, but that of several others.

"Dearest! Done already?" He gave her an admonishing look, then gestured to his companion, a stately woman with long yellow hair, eyes so dark they seemed almost black, and intricate patterns inked over her arms, neck, and face. "Let me to introduce Mrs. Mercer."

Rhiovannara chafed as years of etiquette training overrode her impatience and forced a smile. "I know you by reputation, of course."

Rangda Mercer owned the air, most of it at least. Eighty percent of the ventilation technology that kept the inhabitants of the Dome breathing belonged to her. With studied grace, Rhiovannara offered her hand to the third wealthiest person on the planet. Her father had certainly attracted some powerful friends.

"Lovely to meet you, Miss McAllister." Mrs. Mercer lightly grasped hands by fingertips alone. "Your father's boasts don't do you justice."

Pleasantries aside, Rhiovannara turned on her father and, unable to speak freely in front of such esteemed company, gripped his forearm to convey her earnestness. "Father, I've heard some unsettling news I hoped you might clarify."

"News?"

"About a wedding..."

The color drained from her father's cheeks, but his smile never wavered. Her heart sank. That was nearly confirmation enough.

He turned that smile on Mrs. Mercer and said, "If you'll excuse us." Then wrapped an arm around Rhiovannara's shoulders and half-led, half-dragged, her toward one of the balconies that opened off the ballroom. A few choice words to those enjoying the fresh air cleared the space. It wouldn't do to have anyone witness a scene of domestic unrest between the future Chairman of Mars and his loyal and supportive daughter.

"Is it true?"

"Sweetie, the situation is-"

"Is. It. True?"

"I was going to tell you."

Rhiovannara ground her teeth. "When?"

"After your birthday. I didn't want to spoil your party."

As if her happiness was even a consideration. More likely, he didn't want her making a scene at the extravaganza he'd turned her birthday into.

"To whom have you promised me?"

"His name is Gien Vallor. He's an assistant to Mr. Rutherford. I intended to introduce you tonight, though not like this."

Rhiovannara clenched her shaking fists and tried not to scream. It wasn't unheard of for wealthy families to arrange marriages for their children, but she never dreamed it would happen to her. Certainly not so soon! And to a lackey! "Why him?"

"It's the price of Mr. Rutherford's support."

"So, you sold me to advance your career." She meant it to be a question, but the answer was never in doubt. Instead she asked the more poignant, "How could you?"

"I didn't have a choice."

"You could have said no!"

"And destroy everything we've worked for?"

"I'll not marry a stranger! Certainly not some lap dog to a man neck deep in Syn."

"The accusations against Mr. Rutherford are just that. He's never been charged."

"We both know that doesn't mean anything."

"Look!" Rhiovannara gasped at her father's vice-like grip as he grabbed her arms. "You'll marry Mr. Vellor, and that's the end of it!"

#2 - Fantasy

Jay dug his heels into his horse's flanks and felt a surge of powerful muscle. As Havoc leapt, the entire arena jumped to its feet as well. When Havoc cleared the dangerous line of pikes and pounded back down onto the racetrack, the crowd gave a deafening roar. With one swift move, Jay and Havoc were now in the lead, and everyone knew what that meant.

Finally, one of his kind could win. A native of Calonade.

Jay ignored the cheers and gritted his teeth. To win, he still had to shake off his one threat — Gilcres. Jay checked over his shoulder and found the Galathian clearing the pikes as well, a length back but closing the gap.

Damn him and his royal privilege, Jay thought angrily. Gilcres had dogged him all three years of military school. No matter how hard Jay worked, that spoiled pig was always holding him back, knocking him down and taking what was his.

On his pale gray thoroughbred, Gilcres looked like every single top student before him: perfectly bred horse, perfectly pressed uniform, perfectly pale skin. And he didn't even need to win. Only copper-skinned Jay and the other natives of Calonade needed a top ranking to get a decent post with decent pay.

Jay swallowed down bitter resentment and pulled hard on his reins. Time to maneuver Havoc around the last and worst obstacle of the race, one that would require all his focus.

Ahead of him loomed a machine bristling with razor sharp weapons. As Jay neared he could hear the grind of metal on metal; smell the steam and oil; begin to see the turning cogs and gears. Spikes shot out and pulled back. Countless blades spun and twisted, scissoring the air.

The device had been nicknamed The Barber. Swinging wide meant playing it safe and losing his lead, but turning close meant a little shave — or worse.

Of course, Jay cut it close.

Drawing his saber, he thundered around the corner and leaned in. Time seemed to slow as he calculated The Barber's rhythms and began to react.

Hard and fast he swung his blade, cutting off the end of a spear about to skewer him. A heartbeat later he was ducking under a set of studded clubs. Then a burst of hot steam and the scream of metal made him kick hard at Havoc's sides. Havoc jumped as low-thrusting swords pierced the air. With another screech the Barber turned, the swords cutting upwards as they chased Jay. He blocked and parried furiously, nearly out of the Barber's reach. Jay breathed a sigh of relief, but too soon. In that split second a blade swung in from behind and sliced Jay's shoulder. The pain took his breath away.

Jay gritted his teeth but did not let go of the reins. As he urged Havoc on he glanced at the line of red welling up on his grey cadet's uniform. The cut underneath was long but shallow -- a close shave, as promised. But he had held his lead.

Jay grinned. The empty track lay smooth and endless before him. Gilcres should be just approaching the turn. Which meant Jay would soon be first at the finish line.

But rather than cheers, a howl of outrage rose from the crowd. The hair on Jay's neck stood straight up. Something wasn't right.

He looked back again, and with surprise saw Gilcres right on his heels. Jay blinked and it dawned on him. Gilcres must have passed The Barber on the inside.

"You cheated!" shouted Jay.

Gilcres just laughed and yelled something back as he passed. The words were lost in the wind, but Jay had heard them a thousand times from those lips. “Dirty native.”

Jay bit back his fury and pressed his body flat against Havoc’s black, glossy neck. Gilcres only had a small lead. Jay wouldn’t, and couldn’t, give up.

“We can still win this,” he whispered into Havoc’s ear.

The ear twitched and Jay held his breath. Then Havoc shook his dark head and snorted, digging deep for a final burst of speed.

Hooves pounding and hearts racing, they flew over the track.

In a few strides Havoc matched the other horse, both a blur of straining muscles. For many long moments, Jay and Gilcres raced neck and neck. Jay’s only thoughts were speed and distance and the need to win. And inch by inch, step by step, Havoc pulled away.

Jay could see the other horse tiring, its muzzle speckled white with froth. It was going to be close, but Havoc could do it. Would do it.

But only yards from the finish line, a glint of steel caught Jay’s eye. His gaze flicked back to Gilcres. Just behind him, Jay saw his rival’s pale face, jaw tight with resolve. And a sword -- the pig was slipping a blade under Jay’s saddle strap!

Jay instinctively lashed out at Gilcres, kicking him hard in the chest, but too late. The sword had cut loose Jay’s saddle. As it slipped away, Havoc stumbled and swung off course.

Right into Gilcres.

For a moment there was chaos. Havoc veered into the other horse, pushing it off the track. Gilcres tried to turn his mount but Havoc was too close. Both horses swerved wildly. Jay was almost unhorsed, but hung on to Havoc’s mane. Gilcres was not so lucky.

The Galathian flew from his horse, rolling to a stop in ground that had been churned into mud. Gilcres was out of the race.

Jay clamped his legs on Havoc's bare back and tried to turn, but it was no use. The rest of the cadets were already racing by.

Jortica, Jay's fellow cadet, crossed the finish line first to the thundering roar of the crowd. Jay watched her trademark scar stretch across the deep brown skin of her cheekbone like a second smile.

Jay had to smile too. A dirty native had won after all.

#3 - Mainstream/Coming of Age

When he's the right one, you'll just know, and you should settle for nothing less. Jean sighed as she mulled over one of her Mama's many old-fashioned rules. She sat at the kitchen table, considering what it meant to be sixteen, stuck somewhere between child and adult, in the place where childhood rules no longer applied and new ones had yet to take hold. She breathed in the stale air, the mentholated ointment mixed with eucalyptus, and could tolerate it not a second longer. Reaching over, Jean opened the window and took in a deep breath, catching a faint hint of the honeysuckle that grew just outside.

Settling back in her chair, Jean opened her favorite extravagance, *The Parisians Monthly*, and turned to the tale of a doe-eyed girl lost on the streets of Paris. Having read the story before, Jean knew an enticing man was to soon follow and the thought made her feel prickly and restless. She turned the page and saw an ad for women's delicate lingerie, which only made the itchiness worse. Jean sat the magazine on the table and cast her eyes out the window considering whether she could sneak outside for a stroll before her Mama woke up.

"Would you read me the news? I can't stand not knowing what's going on in the world," croaked her Mama's feeble voice. Jean quickly shoved the magazine under yesterday's newspaper. Mama was awake and asking for something already. *Maybe I'll get out tomorrow.* Jean held back a sigh. She'd been cooped up for weeks fetching pills, making meals that went unbeaten, missing school. Across the room the slight woman with thinning ashen hair let out a cough and covered her mouth with a threadbare blue handkerchief. Consumption, the doctor called it. Not uncommon in the city, he had said grimly, offering no cure. The days weren't so

bad, but at night the coughing fits would set in, waking people in the apartments up and down the hall. Jean unfolded the day-old newspaper.

“Sure. I’ll read you the headlines and you tell me what you want to hear, okay?” replied Jean, raising her voice to assure she’d be heard.

Jean had read most of the stories aloud the day before, but her Mama didn’t remember so well anymore. Mama was losing weight by the week, all bones and angles and raspy coughs. She had taken to the bed, not quite here and not quite there, but always wanting something, saying ‘Jean, get me the tea. Can I have you read to me? What about some water? Why don’t you help me sit up?’ And so Jean got and read and helped, tenderly wiping away crumbs from her Mama's lips and tasting the tea to make sure it was not too hot.

Jean studied the paper, looking for a headline that might captivate. Police had started breaking up bathtub gin parties, and the papers would often name names and provide all the details, but this week the big news was about the city’s Milk Wars. Local dairies were fighting against big ones and now the high society Consumer League ladies were sneaking around inspecting barns in their silk dresses, declaring that the dirty barns spread typhus.

“‘Dirty Dairies Declared Deadly.’ Or maybe this one, ‘Ale Cures Ailments,’ read Jean. “Oh, now this is a good story. A group of men are trying to get beer declared medicinal. Says it’ll cure the common cold, if they’d only be allowed to have a drink. Why are people so against it? Hard to believe it was important enough to go amending the whole Constitution.”

“Beer as medicine,” said Mama with a wheezy laugh, “what will they come up with next –druggists working as bartenders? Probably get them a lot more business. Men do like their drink. Now, would you get me my pills or maybe a glass of beer so I can be cured?”

“I’ll get you a beer the day I get one too. It’s gotta be something for all the fuss made,” laughed Jean, tossing her fair hair as she flashed an impish grin.

Jean and her best friend, Francie, had giggled about such things as they shared dog-eared pulp magazines, with their stories of rakish men, illicit gin joints and brushes with the law.

“Now, I’ve told you about that. There’s to be no drinkin’. Makes a girl lose her judgment. Men notice such things. Those kind of men don’t need thinking about . . .,” and with that the coughing began. Mama cleared her throat and continued, “You think there are all kinds of opportunities waiting out there, but ladies still carry the burden of consequences. You hear me?”

Jean nodded. She had learned to sit very still during these lectures, which were occurring daily since the last doctor visit. She had trained her face to appear engaged and attentive as her Mama talked on, but let her thoughts sail out the window into the city streets. Someday she’d get out into the world, be a working girl, maybe be somebody. She envisioned herself like the lady on the front of this month’s pulp magazine, wearing a fringed dress that showed her knees, carrying a beaded purse that dripped with money and casting heavily lidded eyes in the direction of a man in a suit.

“Are you even listening?”

“Of course. The burden of consequences,” parroted Jean, giving the newspaper a shake.

“Oh, now, how about some tea,” said Mama with a rasp that ended in a cough.

Jean absently rose from her chair and put the tea kettle on to boil, the newspaper still in hand hand.

“It’ll be just a minute. Listen to this. You’ll like this story,” said Jean, taking a seat on her Mama's bed and tracing a headline with her finger. “There’s a new hotel that opened on Petticoat Lane. Says it has a dining room built like Pompeii and the lobby has green marble shipped all the way from Italy,” Jean sighed.

#4 - Paranormal

Chapter 1

Far western Virtus, Twenty days after harvest moon, 3414

(September 29, 2013 in our universe)

Quintus Laskaris peered through his spyglass at a smoking beast in the distance. White steam poured from the cylindrical metal chimney of the huge, barrel-shaped machine. The wheels beneath gripped two endless strips of metal stretching in parallel lines all the way to the shimmering horizon. The enemy's clever inventors had come up with a way to neutralize the uneven terrain.

If the rumors were true, ten thousand slaves had worked the project, spiking those metal strips to wooden slats every few feet over an incredible distance, beginning in this scrubby desert where Nirvana's frontier settlements encroached upon Virtus's rightful land and traveling west to the distant mountains and then to the sea. Many had frozen to death in the highest passes when the winter blizzards set in, but slaves were replaceable. The job got finished at that terrible price.

Quintus shuddered. The Nirvana nation was renowned for its violence and heartlessness. Worse than his own countrymen or at least just as bad. And they'd soon be coming in force. Several carts waited behind the beast, strung together like beads on a chain. They'd be used to transport goods, weapons, *and soldiers*, faster than a horse and without ever tiring.

Somewhere behind him a twig snapped, jolting him with enough adrenaline to bring a metallic taste to his tongue. He shifted from his prone position to a crouch and whipped a dagger from the sheath at his ankle.

“Steady now.” A heavy-set, bearded soldier stepped from behind one of the scattered boulders Quintus had been using for cover. “We’re on the same side, last I checked.”

Quintus relaxed. He and the lieutenant had a good history. “Maybe we should reconsider our loyalties, Bertramus. We’ll be outmuscled soon.” He handed over his spyglass.

The lieutenant squinted into it and let out a low whistle. “What is it?”

“They call it a locomotive.”

“And you’re here to steal the plans?”

“We’re a little late for that.” Quintus looked his dusty companion up and down then shifted his attention to a small group of soldiers waiting on horseback just beyond the boulders. “Since when do we exiled scouts get reinforcements?”

“That’s not why I’m here,” Bertramus said. “The king sent for you.”

An old wound on Quintus’s thigh throbbed as it always did when the weather changed, or his nerves frayed, or his brother tracked him down. “What could Albus possibly want with me?”

“Come east and find out.” The lieutenant delivered the line with a chuckle in his voice, diminishing any concern the king might be up to worse than his typical random foolishness.

“Leave my post and journey for a week? Just tell me now.”

“He wants to surprise you.” Bertramus crossed his arms. “I’m under strict orders to keep my damned mouth shut.”

“Wonderful.” Quintus looked to the heavens for escape. If only he could fly like a bird to a land so distant, Albus would never find him. Soar to the recent comet so bright in the evening sky he could almost see a smudge of it now, *there*, twenty degrees to the right of the mid-day sun. He pointed.

Bertramus followed his gaze and grunted. “Another day without a cloud. Will rain never come?”

“Let’s not dwell on the weather. Aren’t daytime stars bad omens? This might be the beginning of a story we won’t like.”

The lieutenant clapped him on the shoulder with a heavy hand. “Who can say where a story begins? Are you a scribe or a soldier?”

Sixty-eight years earlier, at a time of only one universe, not two

Hiroshima, August 6, 1945

The angel Gabriella likened Asura Ito to a delicate porcelain doll. Beautiful. Vulnerable. Adored. The twelve-year-old prodigy sat on the opposite bench, across the flagstone path, with hands folded, colorful pins in her hair, the girl’s blue and white kimono interpreting the sky.

While Asura seemed like an ornament stolen from the Japanese garden on the other side of the wall, Gabriella strived to be no more remarkable than a stepping stone. She’d darkened her hair and reshaped her eyes to blend in. She wore a plain kimono. Her hairstyle didn’t sport a single pin—a simple strategy to fool the pilgrims into underestimating her as an ordinary friend, perhaps the girl’s poorer cousin, if they noticed her at all. Otherwise, they might have been unsettled by her timeless eyes. Angels, even those as amazing as she knew herself to be, were most effective when whispering their suggestions from the shadows.

The pilgrims had already started forming a ragged line a few yards away, but Asura didn’t seem ready for them. The girl brushed non-existent wrinkles from her kimono, traced a fingertip across the butterfly tattoo on the underside of her wrist, then moved her hands to her

head and fussed with some loose strands of hair. Nerves, probably. Too many visitors seeking miracles day after day.

“Asura.” Gabriella motioned beyond the pilgrims, farther down the path where stone blocks had been fashioned into a circular entrance in the center of the garden wall. A great eye one might pass through, or a clock, without hands. This gateway framed the fairyland of rocks, shrubs, and blossoming flowers on the other side. Koi darted after insects at the surface of a pond, creating ripples with each thrust. The scent of lilacs wafted in the breeze. “Look into the garden to calm yourself.”

“I did, but the weight of the world’s secrets still crushes my serenity.” Although Asura delivered her odd comment with a tremble in her voice, she managed a half-smile as the first pilgrim approached her.

An old woman came forward, dropped an apple into Asura’s basket, and touched the girl’s hair. The woman moved on in deference to the others.

Gabriella probed Asura’s mind and beheld a wondrous sight, a treasure chest overflowing with impossible information.

#5 - Light Science Fiction

1

Roses Are Red

Violet MacKenna had never seen so many cars in the ditch before. A legion of snowflakes assaulted the surrounding woods of Highway 108 like a squadron of kamikazes. Obscured from view, the looming slopes of the Green Mountains were replaced by a sea of whiteness. Ahead, a trail of tire tracks imprinted in the fresh powder guided Violet down a windy road.

Thirty minutes later, Violet parked her new 2058 Hydra H2O in the Stowe Hospital parking ramp. Stowe Hospital was one of the largest hospitals in northern Vermont. Capable of accommodating 260 patients, the hospital was most known for its groundbreaking technology in neuroscience and cardiology.

Violet scurried down three flights of stairs to an underground walkway on the ground level. At the end of the walkway was an elevator. On a wall next to it was a small black box.

Violet approached it. “Up!” she shouted into the intercom.

The door dinged.

“Fourth floor.”

A red number four appeared in the display frame beside her. As the doors closed, a gangly man slipped in alongside Violet. It was fellow employee Jed Thompson.

Violet didn’t know much about Jed. Besides his faded blue eyes and receding black hair, an obnoxious gap parted his front teeth making him look like a warped version of John Travolta.

Like Violet, Jed had spent the last seven years in the Sophia J. Holland Cardiology Clinic. He mostly kept to himself.

Violet's arms crossed as Jed entered. He turned to her and smiled. "Hey Violet. H-h-how's it going?"

Violet forged a smile. "Hey, I'm okay. How are you?"

Jed stuttered again. "D-doing well."

Violet nodded. "Good."

Violet focused on the numbers in the display frame.

"So, big plans for the weekend?"

A gob of saliva slid down Violet's throat. "Actually, my husband Riley and I are going to stay home with the kids," she replied. "Not much planned."

Jed stared at her with an ear-to-ear grin. "Sounds fun. My friend invited me to join him on a tour of the ESS Galatorius down in Boston. You ever t-toured a space shuttle before?"

The elevator stopped.

Violet pushed her hair to the side. "Can't say I have."

Violet rushed by Jed as he gestured for her to get off ahead of him.

Beyond an extensive lobby smelling of disinfectant and antiquated cologne was a small reception window. An older, heavysset woman with several large moles on her face sat behind it staring at a computer.

Violet set her purse on a ledge jutting out from the reception window. She began rummaging through it.

"Good morning, Marlene. How were the ribs at Buster Browns last night?"

“S-s-s-s-saucy,” Marlene replied. “A bit drier than usual, but I’ve yet to have food from there I refused to eat. Then again, the bacon in that O. B. City Burger was a bit undercooked. Hester McCloud sure knows how to run that place. And that young boy who waits on tables...”

Marlene’s eyebrows rose and her face lit up like a leprechaun glimpsing gold. “Those arms on him. I just wanna grab ahold of them and lick the salty sweat right off—”

“Shhh!” Violet interrupted. “Marlene! There are people in the lobby!”

Violet smiled as she took something out from her purse. “Oh, here it is.”

She handed Marlene a small black ball, slightly larger than a marble. On top of it was a transparent glass circle.

“I’m having a girl’s night this weekend. You should stop by. This forcanter is set to go off at 4 p.m. on Friday. Hopefully I’ll see you then.”

Violet went to the employee locker room and changed into her uniform. Then, after tending to the needs of several patients, she was called down the hallway to room 425.

Someone had pressed the nurse call button.

As Violet approached, a loud scraping noise overlaid a series of shouting voices.

On the floor beside the hospital bed was a middle-aged woman of about fifty. It appeared as if a demon had entered her body. She shook about on the floor helpless and unresponsive, her body violently striking nearby objects. Fellow nurses Landon Mar and Brooke Schmidt were in the process of moving an end table out of the woman’s way.

Violet rushed into the room and placed herself between the woman and the room’s radiator. While Landon protected the woman from the bed, Brooke moved between the woman and a nearby wall. The enclosure worked.

A minute later, the woman's body ceased its erratic shuddering. Adrenaline pulsed through Violet's body.

“Whew. Is that her third one in the past two days? That new medication is obviously not working,” Violet said, trying to catch her breath.

Brooke grabbed a blanket from the bed and placed it on the trembling woman.

“We need to talk to Dr. Mayhew,” said Brooke. “Poor woman can't catch a break. First she survives a near-fatal heart attack. Now this on top of it? Gee whiz, is Siren Geist himself going to bomb the hospital tomorrow or what?”

Violet and Landon chuckled.

Landon glanced at Violet and smiled as Brooke left the room. “Thanks for your assistance Violetta,” he said in an awful mock Italian accent. “I knew I wasn't going to be able to move this stuff away from her in time. They're so unpredictable ya know. I owe you big time.”

Violet smirked. “Just doing my job.”

Landon smiled. “And you do it well.” He paused. A pair of deep blue eyes stared at Violet. “Geesh, I'm just glad I'm working here and not up in Burlington. Did you hear a woman disappeared there yesterday?”

Violet stood up. “No...what happened?”

“Well, from what I understand after last night's news, an elementary school teacher went out for run yesterday morning and never came back.”

Landon's eyebrows rose in wariness. “Sketchy, huh?”

“You sketched out? Think about me! That's precisely why I had ambercates installed on my kids.

#6 - Science Fiction

Chapter 1 - Caught

Trevor Chance gazed at the inner surface of the dome overhead, admiring the lights twinkling in the dark sky. Moonlight shone through the dusty surface to pinprick the shadows cast by crumbling brick buildings around him. He felt at home moving beneath these dark curtains. Here amongst the ruins he could relax a little, forget his differences. Or try at least.

He traced the pattern of the double helix pendant hidden under his shirt, the memories of an absent father running through his head. Somehow it kept him hidden from the gene scanners placed throughout Origen. He noticed a patch of brown skin peeking between sleeve and glove so he tucked the cuff in tighter.

Can't let that be seen.

He felt sweat sliding down the back of his neck to burn between his shoulder blades. Mid-dome might have decent cooling, but the outer sectors baked under the torturous heat. Or froze as each cycle came to a close. Twenty-three cycles and as far as Trevor could tell, it got worse as each passed. The strap on a soot-colored duffle dug into his clavicle as it cut a diagonal line across his body. He rolled his shoulders, the ragged charcoal jumpsuit and black coat feeling heavy tonight. Just once he'd like to walk around without every surface of his skin covered.

The third bell sounded as Trevor waited for customers. It'd been a quiet night. Brent had loaded him up with enough pharma to medicate the entire sector. Many couldn't afford even a small dose. And while Trevor appreciated Brent helping him survive after his father disappeared,

sometimes he wished his friend would let people slide. I'll have to turn some away. The thought pulled the corners of his mouth down.

As the only healthy person in a dome full of the infirm, Trevor disliked selling pharma. He'd rather be giving away cures, not temporary fixes. It'd been the only job he could do and stay under the radar though.

The smell of dust and bones covered everything here. Trevor hated the constant aroma of dry decay, the tickle that made him want to sneeze. The pale makeup on his face itched but Trevor remained still.

He heard light footsteps across the street from him. Someone was coming. Dropping to a crouch, he scanned the darkness from beneath a hood pulled low. Fingertips drummed a rhythm on the cement, his thick leg muscles tense.

A small shadow whistled a soft note. Trevor replied with three low-pitched tones. Across the street, a pale shirtless-and-barefoot boy in fraying blue pants poked his head around the corner of the building. He glanced both ways before jogging across on hurried steps.

"How you doing, Jinx?" Trevor tossed on a warm smile. The boy was too short for nine cycles. He made a mental note to get Jinx more calcium pills.

Jinx's grimy face split in a good-natured grin. "Hey Trev, ain't the Enforcers caught you yet? How do I know you ain't dead? Like a ghost, hauntin' this block?"

Jinx reached out with a teasing hand as if trying to touch him.

Trevor batted the hand down, mirroring the smile with one of his own. "Those bots aren't smart enough to catch me, you know that. What are you doing out here this late? You know your mom doesn't like you running the ruins."

Jinx kicked a bit of rubble with his toe. “Mom needs some more Kanimun.”

“You’re going through it pretty quick, Jinx. Everything okay?” Trevor didn’t try to hide his concern.

Jinx’s head bobbed up and down. “Sure, we’re okay. Mom just needs more. You know how it is.”

Trevor searched the boy’s face. “She’s getting worse. It’s not working as well anymore, huh?”

Jinx’s eyes welled up; the nod came after a long pause.

“Don’t worry.” He slid the strap over his head and dug through the bag. “I got my hands on something better that may help.”

After a few moments, Trevor found the bottle of Phyrix. Although dangerous in large quantities, it might work.

“Now be really careful with this, Jinx. No more than one pill a day. Promise me.” Trevor held up the bottle.

Jinx offered his wristlet for cred transfer but Trevor just shook his head. “No charge for this one,” he said. “Just get your mom back on her feet.”

Without warning bright circles of light flooded the area.

“Desist all activity and present yourself for judgment,” an electronic voice intoned.

Three Hov-Scans floated above, their spherical chrome shells dotted with protruding antennae and blinking red lights. Trevor could hear the metallic stomps of Enforcers marching in from both sides.

“Run, Jinx!” Trevor shoved the bottle in the boy’s hands.

Jinx took two steps into the street as an eight-foot-tall bot crashed through fence in front of him. A mottled green-and-black mass of steel weighing more than a ton, the shadow it cast enveloped the boy. Two more arrived from each side to take up position.

Trevor cursed. He'd hoped the boy could scurry into a hole somewhere but the patrol was larger than usual. He'd used this spot too many times.

He jumped up and slid the duffel behind his back. Launching himself forward, Trevor rushed the blocky robot. Jinx scrambled out of the way as Trevor grabbed a steel-corded arm with both hands.

“Get out of here.”

Trevor put his two hundred pounds into a shove. The tower of gears and armor teetered, the square head rotating to look in his direction. One three-clawed hand grabbed Trevor's arm and stripped him off with little effort. It tossed him across the street to slam into the brick.

Pain in his side and back mirrored the agony dancing through Trevor's head. He pulled himself up on unsteady legs to look for Jinx but the boy was gone. *Good.*

#7 - Historical Fiction

“If anyone suspected us, you would be remitted to an asylum,” the man clutching a handful of flawlessly smooth, round buttocks unhindered by cloth whispered in near ecstasy.

“And you would be ruined,” Bonnie whispered back, biting his earlobe climaxing.

The buzz of eager shoppers searching for the season’s best fashions or simply garments to keep the wearer warm seeped into the lust-filled room. Outside the General Manager’s office door, people combed through racks of the Denver Dry Goods’ latest styles.

Once sufficiently peaked, she climbed off the store manager and stood in her statuesque beauty waiting for him to re-adorn her in a black silk, white lace, belted wrap-dress with a natural waist that flaunted her narrowness.

“I need something luscious for tomorrow,” she said.

“What is tomorrow?” He asked.

“The end of my mourning. The day I set out to realize the distinction and authority I deserve.”

“Where will you begin?”

“With Denver’s most influential women.”

The manager fetched the modernized Louis XIV dress from his personal closet he had imported just for her. She took the boxed dress and ran her fingers over the front of his trousers.

She smiled and then vanished into the crowd of shoppers like the floral fragrance that wound through the store. The manager sighed deeply and closed the door to the office to put himself back together.

Sunday morning, Bonnie Lipshutz walked down Fifteenth Street taking a meandering respite toward Central Presbyterian Church. It was a blue-sky seventy-degree autumn day; the kind that makes staying inside unbearable. The city was quiet, businesses shuttered for the day of rest. The paved streets and sidewalks were freshly cleaned from the night before. Quiet waves of church goers seeking redemption, laborers concluding night shifts, and sinners emerging into the light passed through downtown to their respective destinations. Street car and bike bells, clacking horse hooves and crunching of automobile tires signaled their appearance and disappearance.

Green silk hung like petals from navy blue Louis XIV dress around Bonnie's hips, drooping in homage to fall. A matching green toque, sans emblematic veil, perched atop a psyche knot on the back of her head created the perfect look to be noticed at church: pretty and fashionable without being too flashy. Her was past behind her.

At the ingress of the enormous red stone building, Deacon Theodore Frueauff and Rev. Robert F. Coyle greeted the congregation. They shook hands and welcomed each entrant. Mr. Frueauff smiled largely and shook more enthusiastically with the Church's more prominent citizens, business connections and government officials. The single women, disregarding his impending engagement, maneuvered to greet the desirable marriage prospect, Mr. Frueauff and the Vice President of Denver Gas and Electric.

Bonnie shook the Pastor's hand, and smiled briefly over her shoulder at Mr. Frueauff as she passed. The effect was half wanton Gibson girl, half wide-eyed sweetheart and was not lost on him. Her stunning visage upset the rhythm of his greetings. He forgot himself.

"Mrs. Lipshutz," he called out.

Mr. Frueauff 's pride lay in knowing names and faces, remembering people. That he had not realized the beauty of Mrs. Lipshutz confounded him. On him, however, she was quite studied.

“Deacon,” she nodded in acknowledgement.

She let her gaze linger ever-so-slightly before moving gracefully toward the sanctuary. He stared after her, forgetting for a moment his duty despite the fine black silk gloved hand still held in his own. The woman to whom the hand belonged glared at the beautiful woman distracting Mr. Frueauff .

Frank Perry stood patiently waiting for Bonnie in the vestibule.

“You look lovely,” he said, and kissed her cheek.

Bonnie fought the unconquerable urge to recoil from his touch.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said, smiling lovingly at the plain man, “I got caught up enjoying the morning. It’s such a beautiful day.”

“It is,” he smiled a besotted smile. “Is that a new dress?” He asked.

“Oh, no. Perhaps I just haven’t worn it around you,” Bonnie brushed off imaginary dirt as if it were well worn.

Bonnie walked gracefully to a center pew, Frank in tow. She smiled sweetly across Frank at the two chipper women next to him and their austere friend. The women smiled back awkwardly.

The women surveyed each other, imperceptibly taking each other in and sizing one another up. The three women were younger, though the third held an air of an old maid. Her fashion was a few years behind, but not heavily worn. She was not one to change her wardrobe at

the will and nill of the trends. The middle woman was tall and thin with fine brown hair worked beyond its ability to hold the body and fullness easily created by women with thick curly hair. She was an optimistic, open girl, wide-eyed and charming.

The closest woman caught Bonnie's notice. Her blonde bob framed her baby doe brown eyes and un-pinched rosy cheeks. It was a very avant-garde look. She was not beautiful, but was not without appeal either.

"That is a gorgeous dress," Bonnie said.

She admired the black lace overlay and the royal blue waistband that matched the hem. She had not seen anything like it in Denver or in her French catalogues.

"Thank you. Yours as well," the woman said, likewise examining Bonnie's new dress, unabashedly taking a full look at her pew partner.

Just as the preacher took the podium, a plum of a woman plopped down next to Bonnie. The group scooted to make room for her. It was her regular seat. She chose it for its proximity to the center aisle and distance from the alter – far enough to be seen walking up, without seeming like she was trying to be seen. Bonnie had chosen the pew for her.

#8 - Science Fantasy (time-travel)

Chapter 1

The late Norman Cousins once said, "Life is an adventure in forgiveness." I used to think that way. Rosy thoughts of how blessed I was, how beautiful the world was, and how much I loved my life. And then it all changed in one horrifying moment when a crazy maniac wielding a Smith & Wesson semiautomatic rifle walked into the club where my fiancé, Michael, had gone to meet up with some friends. That was eleven months ago. Since then I've come to realize I had been deluding myself to think I had a blessed life. I was also wrong to believe we live in a beautiful world. It is in fact the complete opposite of beautiful, especially my part of the world, which now consist of a 120 square foot bedroom that remains in a perpetual state of darkness, just like my heart. There will be no adventures in forgiveness in my new world, for I have removed the word forgiveness from my vocabulary.

Each new day is now torture for me and I have to force myself to even get out of bed. And I'll admit, more than a few days I don't even bother. It's too much of a struggle and why bother anyway? The pain will start up the minute I step out of the apartment—a mind-numbing, acute pain that rips through the center of my chest in a spot right above my heart, followed by an intense burning sensation that takes my breath away. The first time I experienced it, I thought I was dying. It was the one and only time I felt joy since Michael's death. But as luck would have it, I didn't die, which I guess proves the old adage that only the good die young. I've had dozens of tests since then, but no doctor can tell me the cause of these pains. The shrinks (notice the plural) tell me they are psychological just because the pain originates in the same spot as where Michael was shot. They, the shrinks, say I haven't processed my grief as I should have ... I'm

holding in too much anger. But what do they know and who are they to tell me how I should grieve? Their fiancé wasn't stolen from them for no good reason, so they couldn't possibly know what I'm going through. And as far as putting aside my anger, how is that supposed to happen when every time I close my eyes I see an image of Michael covered in blood?

Three days ago, September 3rd, was the day we'd chosen for our beautiful fairy-tale wedding. If things had turned out the way they should have, I would be enjoying a romantic two week whirlwind tour of France and Italy as Mrs. Michael Bellwood at this very minute, not lying in bed alone in the dark. I had our lives together all planned out and never for a second did I doubt it would play out any other way other than what I dreamed it to be. The one thing I forgot, though, was that nightmares are also dreams and they have a tendency of sneaking up on you when you least expect them.

All of a sudden, a loud pounding on my door broke the silence of my room. I jumped a good six inches off the bed and the throbbing in my head exploded again.

"Come on, Em, Get up!" Kathy, my BFF and roommate, hollered through the hollow door.

I groaned in response, hugged my stomach, and rolled into a tighter ball.

"Come on ... you've been in there for four days. I know you're hurting, but hiding in that room isn't going to help."

"I'm not hiding. Go away. I'll come out when I feel like it," I yelled back and winced at the gravelly tone of my voice.

For the next minute, silence settled back over me like a warm, familiar blanket, but I should have known it wouldn't last. Kathy wasn't the type to give up that easily. The pounding

started up again door and aggressive enough to shake the picture frames hanging on the wall next to the door.

"I'm not kidding around, Em," Kathy called out, pausing her hammering to make sure I could hear her. "I'll break down this door if I have to or I'll call your mom, but one way or the other, I swear, you are going to come out of that room."

I rolled to my back and muttered a few choice words under my breath. I had no doubt Kathy would hold true to her threat of calling Mom, and if she did, the unpleasant discussion of going into rehab would start up again. That would be disastrous. The mere thought of the screaming (mainly mine) that would accompany that conversation made my head throb even worse. As the battering started up again, I threw the sheet off with a grumble of frustration and sat up. The room spun before my eyes and I put my hand on the mattress to steady myself. I have no doubt that if there had been anything in my stomach, it would have come up.

"Alright, alright!" I screamed to stop the pounding, which was making me feel worse.

"Are you coming out?" Kathy called back.

I knew in my heart Kathy was only trying to help, but I had buried my heart with Michael and all I had left was my brain, which at the moment was urging me to go out and push her off the balcony. I stomped across the room and jerked open the door. Kathy, who had her ear plastered against the door, stumbled forward, then quickly caught herself and reared back, waving her hand in front of her nose.

"Whew! When was the last you showered?"

I rolled my eyes and pushed past her, trying not to weave too much, though my legs felt like gummy worms.

#9 - Historical Fiction

CHAPTER ONE

Southwestern Ohio, 1848

Jonathan instinctively ducked when the doors of the little country meeting house burst inward. Windows rattled as the crash of splintering wood echoed throughout the church. Four rough-looking men cradling long rifles stepped over the debris. Jonathan stared wide-eyed at men the likes of which he'd never seen before. Wild eyebrows, dirt in the creases of their weathered faces—dusty, worn overcoats.

His mother's trembling hand wrapped around Jonathan's small one. When the intruders raised their guns, Jonathan recoiled and his bundle of biscuits fell to the wooden floor. The bearded hunters looked around warily. Muddy boots thumped on loose planks as three of them strode up the center aisle. The stench of hard riding swept along behind them.

The man with the big black hat said, "You two go on up behind that raised platform like I tol' you and start lookin'. That's where some of these churches hide runaways, they dig cellars for 'em." Big Hat turned to the pastor. "I know you're hidin' slaves here, and we mean to find 'em. They're ours, right and proper, so stay out of our way."

The pastor said, "This is a place of worship! You can't just break in here and..."

Big Hat leveled his shotgun at the pastor's stomach, and said through a scarred mouth, "I just did. You Quakers ain't about to do nothin' to stop us anyway. Now back up or get shot."

The pastor retreated, clasping his Bible to his chest, his lips moving soundlessly. Pieces of broken door lay scattered at Big Hat's feet as he nearly filled the doorway. A younger tough stood by the small wooden pulpit, waving his rifle at the congregation and laughing.

Why isn't anyone doing anything? "Father, stop them!" Jonathan implored, as they stood together in front of the worn oak bench. His shrill voice echoed in the still church. His father eyed Big Hat, clenched his jaw, and drew his arm tighter around his eight-year-old son's shaking shoulders. Jonathan's stomach jumped and he spun toward his mother, crying. She stared wordlessly up at her husband as if frozen solid, her Sunday hat framing a pale face.

As the men took over the meeting house, Jonathan flashed back to what his father said slave catchers do with runaways. They drag them away. Sometimes they find who they're looking for, and sometimes they don't, but they always bring Negroes back south. A murmur of shock ran through the congregation. Jonathan thought of the little black boy hiding in the church cellar that he'd met several days ago. He'd given the boy one of his best cats eyes after they'd shot marbles in the frozen dirt outside. Why can they just come and take black people away?

Jonathan stood trembling in the simple, but usually tidy church, and reached down to retrieve his precious bundle. He held it tightly against his chest. Biscuits his mother had made that morning for the runaway family. They were no longer warm against his overalls, but still smelled of fresh honey. The only sound was the congregation's low whispers, as wives and husbands argued in hushed tones. When Tom Gray moved in front of his son and wife, Belinda, Jonathan peered around his father to watch the two intruders who were busily working behind the pulpit.

Big Hat raised his shotgun and pointed it at Tom. "Better stay right there, mister. And the rest of you, don't you move neither. Didn't come here to shoot no white folk, but I will if I have to. Just come to get them runaways. Once we find 'em, we'll be on our way. Then you can keep

on praying to a God who ain't gonna save nobody here today." He fired a round of buckshot into the church's low ceiling. Jonathan ducked behind his father.

A scuffling noise rose from the back of the building as two of the bounty hunters scattered old furniture and tore up loose floorboards. One of them peered into a dark pit below.

"Shine that there lantern down there, Jacob. I see sumthin'. Yessiree, looks like we found ourselves a whole passel of 'em." He thrust his barrel into the pit. "Git on up here right now. Don't make me come down there, 'cause y'all don't want to see me git mad. Now git!"

Four dusty Negroes struggled nervously one by one up a rickety ladder from the makeshift dirt cellar below. Father, mother, young girl and a boy—the one Jonathan brought the biscuits for. They shielded their eyes from the light. Silently sweating. Shaking.

Jonathan stood wide-eyed, shivering next to his mother.

"I got 'em, boss. Don't look like much. Can't see why he'd want 'em back."

Big Hat said, "It don't matter what you think, now does it? It's enough for you to know you're gonna get paid once we get 'em back south. Now let's go."

Big Hat and another slave catcher trained their guns on the congregation. The other two pushed the Negroes outside with their rifle barrels. The mother's mouth quivered as she held her little girl close. Jonathan rushed outside, followed by the rest of the congregation

Big Hat grabbed ropes off his horse and threw them to his henchmen. "Tie the big one's arms behind him, and throw a rope around his neck. Then rope the others to him."

Some of the women were on their knees in the snow, hands clasped in low prayer. Even the birds in the surrounding forest were silent. No one moved as the slave catchers roped the mother, then the two children, to the husband, and pulled them toward their horses.

Someone do something! Jonathan burst out of the crowd screaming. “No! You can’t take them away! They ain’t yours. Let ‘em go!” He clutched the bag of biscuits in his outstretched hand and sprinted toward the little boy.

#10 - Dark Fantasy/Sci Fi

It was 1 AM and the sun was still hanging in the sky. It's light shown not as bright as it does during the day, but it was still noticeable. It was like a copy of a copy of a copy of a sunbeam. Haukur was walking home at that point. He had finished his routine meet up with his friends. These friends he has had forever, if you're from Reykjavik, that's how life is. Everyone knows everyone and the friends you make are the friends you keep.

His black Doc Marten boots, the ones he's had since his teenage years, landed on the pavement with steady thuds as he walked. They were reminiscent of a broken metronome. The white ear buds from his iPhone streamed from a thin white wire that extended from his ears to the pocket of his brand-name dark denim jeans. His rhythm was interrupted by the shrill sound of his phone's ringtone. The sound of his boots hitting the pavement stopped momentarily as he fished his phone out of his pocket. He glanced at the number; a number he didn't recognize but knew was local by the +354 dialing code that preceded it. His initial reaction was to not answer the call but since the code wasn't of Danish or British origin he knew it was most likely not another telemarketer or debt collector. He answered with an unsure "hello?"

"Haukur?" the female voice said on the other line.

"Yes, who is this?" he replied.

"This is Fletta, Lilja's mother."

What could Lilja's mom want from me and how did she get my number? Haukur thought as his mind raced at one hundred thoughts per minute.

"Haukur... Haukur, I have to tell you something. Are you in a safe place?"

"As safe as any other place, what is going on?" Haukur replied with an annoyed tone.

“Haukur, Lilja is dead.”

Several moments, possibly several years, passed. Each moment was the same; the concept of time had lost all significance at that point.

“I don’t understand,” Haukur finally replied.

“Lilja was walking back to her flat after work a couple of hours ago and while crossing Óðinsgata she was hit by a car. He wasn’t paying attention, it was a British man on holiday.”

“Fletta, I need to go. I will call you in the morning.” Haukur ended the call; still in a daze from the news he just received. The world seemed different; the light that once shone like a faded copy of a sunbeam now seemed to glow in a different hue. The world he knew five minutes before had seemed to slow on its axis, weighed down by the loss of Lilja’s life.

Once in bed, Haukur couldn’t turn his mind off. His girlfriend of six years is now dead. Gone. She will never walk through his door again. She will never share his bed with him again. The sting of these ideas was far too much to deal with. Haukur walked to his bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet. He took out a prescription bottle labeled Temazepam. He opened the bottle and took out one pill and was about to put the cap back on the bottle when he took out two more and placed it back in the cabinet beside other bottles marked Sertraline, Bupropion and Alprazolam. His psychiatrist, Dr. Sigurdsson, a well-intentioned physician, if not a little too loose with his prescription pad, prescribes all of these medications. After taking the three pills with a glass of water, Haukur got back into bed and quickly fell into a deep sleep.

#11 - Speculative Fiction

Myron von Lubenstein quivered with excitement as he pulled his latest creation from the sewing machine—a red silk shirt with black leather cuffs and a black leather collar. The piece was flawless. Chic, yet manly. Perfect for impressing his future bride, Penny Airy.

Tomorrow night, Penny would be waiting for him in the Records Room at Rubicund Town Hall. Well, she didn't actually know she'd be waiting for him. She worked there as the Lead Recorder of Potentials, and rumor had it, she'd recently separated from her husband of two hundred fourteen years—Clarence the Asshole.

Myron flattened the shirt against his chest and turned to the student at the workstation behind him. “Hey, Fiona, what do you think? Onyx or crimson buttons?”

Fiona's eyes went wide. She cast a fleeting glance toward the professor's desk and whispered, “Don't talk to me.”

“Altivo is busy grading papers. Just tell me which color you prefer.”

Fiona shook her head and slouched low in her seat.

Myron rolled his eyes and spun back to his station. He should've known better than to ask a classmate's opinion. Nobody in Sewing for the Ages had ever shown any sort of fashion initiative. Nor had they ever varied from the professor's instructions. They hunkered over their clattering machines, night after night, toiling away like factory robots.

Professor Altivo's voice boomed through the classroom. "Bloody hell." Each syllable hit sharp, like nails driven into a coffin. Machines stuttered to a halt, scissors ceased to snip. Even the artists in the pictures on the institutional gray walls seemed to grow more rigid.

The professor strode over to Myron's workstation and let out his usual disapproving sigh.

Myron hated that sigh, almost as much as he hated taking fashion direction from the old vampire. Altivo's personality was as dull as his well-worn fangs and his dead-too-long eyes. His lectures on sixteenth-century wool could put a rabid fruit bat to sleep.

"This is not what I assigned," the professor grouched, shaking a gnarled finger at the shirt. "You were supposed to make an ecru ascot with taupe edging and beige piping."

Myron offered an ingratiating smile, hoping the curmudgeon would cut him a break for once. "I just thought it might be fun to branch out. You know, add some panache."

Altivo laced his hands together and stared at Myron like a weathered statue waiting for pigeons. "Mr. von Lubenstein, I have been teaching this class for five centuries, and never have I run across a student with such boundary issues."

"But, sir, look at these lines." He spread the shirt across the workstation. "Straight seams, tight leather cuffs, a classic billowing in the sleeves... It's the perfect, edgy balance of texture and color."

"It's red. Red is forbidden." The ancient vampire lifted his pointy chin. "The Council does not approve of rebellion, lad. And lately, they don't approve of you." His cold eyes shifted from side to side, and he lowered his tone. "You've been put on Observation."

Myron nearly fell off his stool. “Me? Why? I’m not a criminal!”

Whispers stirred around the room. The bell signaled the end of class, but nobody moved. All eyes remained on Myron, as though he might suddenly burst into felonious flame.

Altivo curled his lips and glared at the frozen students until they scrambled.

“Observation,” Myron said, watching them go. “There has to be a mistake.”

“That’s between you and The Council. I’m extending you this warning only because I’m fond of your parents. Such cordial folks—the most sought-after partners at our Tuesday night pinochle club.” He shook his head. “They don’t deserve this kind of embarrassment.”

Myron suppressed another eye-roll. His parents, while indeed cordial, were beyond overbearing. Myron, listen to your elders. Myron, don’t drive the hovercraft so fast. Myron, quit fiddling with that idiotic sewing machine and study something more useful, like blood conservation or bioengineering.

He knew he should appreciate them more—it was rare when families made the change together. But they just didn’t understand his love of fashion. They didn’t understand him.

“This mess.” Altivo tapped the shirt. “I highly suggest you burn it before dawn.”

*

Myron slid into his lab coat and tied back his hair, positioning the fluffy black curls perfectly between his shoulder blades. Then he propped open the door to the draining room and waited for the Hunters to arrive. He would’ve rather been at home, adding the finishing touches

to the shirt, but he had bills to pay. And the Observation rumor had killed any chance of calling in sick.

Altivo must've gotten it wrong. There were no new cameras, no summonses, and thankfully, no sign of Clarence the Asshole or his thugs.

Clarence, Rubicund's Lieutenant Enforcer, had the authority and means to kill commoners like Myron without receiving so much as a backward glance from his superiors. And he'd always been insanely jealous when it came to Penny. Admirers caught flirting with her had been beaten and hung upside down in the Town Square. Which is why, until now, Myron had never done more than surreptitiously smile at her while pretending to do research for history class. Some days, he actually found a useful fact in the dusty volumes lining the Records Room, but mostly, he just watched Penny work.

And ached all over with love.

He adored the way her lithe fingers sailed over the keyboard. The way her fangs left cute indentations in her lower lip when she concentrated. The way she cocked her head to the side so that her blonde locks framed the youthful tendons on her neck.

Yep, Penny was the one for him. And tomorrow night, he'd dazzle her into forgetting all about Clarence.

An intoxicated female voice echoed in the hall outside the draining room. "Has anyone ever told you your ass is incredible? I mean, seriously. Your buns are, like, hard as rocks."

“Thanks,” the Hunter mumbled on his way through the door. He carried the female over his shoulder. One beefy arm secured her dangling legs.

#12 - Fantasy

Darkness lurked in Anax's soul. Thirst devoured his diminishing conscience and replaced his hate for the carnal act he would soon commit. It was too late to turn back. No matter the risk, no matter the pain left in its wake, his craving demanded payment.

Silence pervaded the oft-visited hiding place. Still, he set the lock on the study door and listened for movement in the hall. He couldn't be caught. One mistake and the seminary would cast him out. If that happened, he would never know what magic resided within himself. He raked his fingers over his forehead and through his hair. To learn magic and become a Xylon priest, an apprentice aspired to complete self-mastery. Feeding his compulsive need bound him with shackles and precluded him from reaching that end.

A thick layer of dust concealed the color of Father's cherrywood desk, which crowded the wall opposite the door and barely left room for a seated person. Father must have set it that way by design. Even if someone managed to squeeze back there, who would think to look for a coldbox beneath the floor?

Anax crept across the room and pulled the chair from behind the desk. He crouched and searched for snares his father might have put in place—a string over a seam, a floorboard in a different direction. Satisfied there was none, he lifted two boards, softly set them aside, and pulled a silver flagon from its compartment.

His forehead tingled with cold sweat, as he rose from the cramped space. To avoid disturbing dust on the desktop, he placed the metal vessel next to his father's golden chalice on a grimy mat that occupied the near corner. Then, he popped the cork and peered down the narrow neck of the container.

His mouth watered in anticipation of the first touch of velvety liquid on his lips. He wrapped his fingers around the handle of the chalice and lifted it—the only clean thing in the room. It sparkled with reflections from the setting sun that breached yellowed curtains on the nearby window. Still, the vessel seemed dirty, tainted by his father’s use.

If Anax could remind himself how much he didn’t want to become like his father, he’d not act on this tormenting impulse. But the truth was, he lusted after blood more than he hated his father. He was like a cat to a rotten fish. He would eat, even if it made him violently ill.

Bile gathered in his throat. It *wasn’t* too late. No one could force him to drink. He was in control of his own actions. Blood had not touched his lips since he had entered the college in Ourania two seasons ago. But feelings of inadequacy and isolation drove him to find comfort in the moment and ignited a voracious desire that muddled his reasoning. His body screamed for him to drink, as if his insides had a mind of their own; and wretched, bony fingers would reach from his stomach and claim their wanton need.

He could fight against the hunger within himself, but there was something more—the damned voices in his head, dim thoughts, someone else’s thoughts, urging him to drink, to feed his lust for blood. It was as if his will wrestled with an outside influence.

Lykalos.

He didn’t believe in the old religion. Not many did, anymore.

Nestor does. The high priest insisted that Lykalos were real, that disembodied spirits influenced mortal beings to do evil.

If only he were right, it would diminish the crushing guilt that weighed on Anax’s soul. But the old religion was “folly.” That’s what Mother had said. “People need an excuse for their

actions, because they are unwilling to cope with the alternative; that the ugliness and chaos in the world is on their own hands.”

Nestor will know what I've done. He reads through my flesh and bone, as if they are glass.

He gritted his teeth. I don't have to—

A voice in his head interrupted. Your mentor is an old fool. Drink. No one will know, and you can quit afterward. Think of how good it will feel—the thrill and intimacy of drinking blood.

As Anax filled with the gloom of knowing his fall down a well-worn path was inevitable, his resolve withered, and he poured blood from the flagon into the chalice. His hands shook, and his breath fled him.

He ducked back under the desk and returned the flagon, taking great care when replacing the planks. They must look as if they had never been touched, so he aligned seams and leaned down to blow dust over his fingerprints.

A knot grew in his chest. Did Father not know his hiding place had been compromised? Had he never discovered the level of a flagon to be lower? It was hard to believe Anax had never been caught all these years. Or had he? What if Father had lured him to the stash, had wanted him to drink, and had wanted him to wade in the same mire? The idea was unconscionable. Anax felt his fingernails digging into his palms and relaxed his grip.

Hurry. They'll be here soon.

He slipped from behind the desk and walked to the window, chalice in hand. In the shadows of the isolated room, he parted stale-smelling curtains. The Eye of God hid just beyond

the horizon. The veil of dusk thickened over the palace garden and a lake. Behind it, a forest screened the Sacred Woods between Cressida and the neighboring city of Ourania to the northeast, the woods that protected Ourania from Skinners.

No. A little more time. If it grew too dark, he wouldn't be able to see.

A couple approached from a garden path on the courtyard's south end—the same couple he had spied on many times before. They wore their hair in horsetails, as though attending a formal event. Like Anax, the man had a look typical of most Pelagian men, except for a widow's peak that extended his hairline past the front of his ears. Black hair and olive skin made him much darker than his companion. She was an exquisite beauty, fair-skinned, delicate features, with pronounced epicanthi—folds of skin on the upper eyelids. Her silky blonde hair hung halfway down her back, and her hairline only reached the points of her ears, which angled up slightly instead of straight back—uniquely attractive.

#13 - Suspense/Action/Romance

Lilly's hands were shaking as she opened the letter

January 6, 2014

My Dearest Lilly,

By the time you receive this letter I will be in hell. I'm sure that is where you wish for me to be. You see, I gave you a packet of cyanide identical to the one that I have kept by my bed for many years. It is my gift to you if you so wish to use it. I assure you that cyanide is more difficult to get than money or weapons. You once said to me that it is not for us to choose when we exit this earth. It is God's choice. And I remember so clearly, our exchange regarding heaven and hell, because at that time, you believed that I could enter the heavens.

Your ability to believe in the good in me was intoxicating. I longed to hear those words and I longed to believe what you said was true but I assure you, this is not the case. I certainly hope that no one who has done the things that I have done will dwell in that space of glory that is reserved for those like you.

I know you have many questions and I feel that I owe it to you, as my best and only friend, to answer them for you.....

October, 2013

Lilly

It was hard *not* to notice her actually. She was impeccably dressed which isn't unusual in a store such as Barney's. She was older; something told me much older than she appeared. She

was a tiny wisp of a lady but definitely a lady. I heard her before I glanced at her but then I found it difficult to not listen and follow.

You might be asking yourself, why was *I* in Barney's. I'm asking myself that so I would suppose that you would be too. A diversion is all I can say; a diversion from the drab and dreary life that had become mine. And, perhaps, a way to torture myself and relive all the awful things my father has always said to me. It's quite simple: I am a failure. So I walk through this beautiful, expensive store on occasion. Sometimes, I play over in my mind what it must be like to be Mrs. RichAsCanbe and be able to take the day to buy whatever my little heart might desire. Other times, I look at price tags and judge those who purchase here. I mean really, who pays \$1200.00 for a pair of cotton capris? I'm not sure if I'm glad it isn't me or if I wish it was me.

So today this diversion is delicious, akin to whip cream and chocolate showing up just when you are craving that exact combo. Mrs. Dear Walter, was speaking to someone and that was what caught my attention at first. I thought that maybe she was addressing me.

"Walter would love this on me. I so miss him. Yes, I know you understand but still, I like to say it, you know? Maybe somehow he can hear me."

I looked at her, trying not to be caught by my stare, she looked right at me, really through me and continued on without so much as a hint in her manner that she knew I was there.

"I'm dreading winter, Elliott. I love the fall weather but I just cannot bear to think of living here through another Chicago winter." She paused as if someone else was speaking to her.

Yes, I suppose I must. I know that we cannot move without a plan." Another pause, I looked around for her companion.

“So could you. I don’t think it’s fair that you dump those kinds of arrangements in my lap. “

Her manner was so charming. She spoke sweetly as she touched her hand to the garments. That is when I noticed the Burberry leash. A tiny perfectly coiffed Yorkshire terrier sat at the other end, his eyes fastened on the face of his master.

“Selling the house is not something I’m going to do. I lived there for over 60 years with my dear Walter and I am not going to sell it and move to Florida. I wish you and Wally would quit suggesting it. Eh, eh, eh...it’s off the table, Elliot.” She said impatiently. “I don’t want to hear another word about it or I will have to skip giving you that tidbit of my supper that you love so much.”

I looked at Elliot. He seemed genuinely full of chagrin. His eyes met mine and looked away as if to say, “Look, I’m just the dog.” I found myself smiling at him.

Her coat was a beautiful camel hair but just a bit too heavy for the weather. It dwarfed her tiny frame. Her nearly white hair was pulled back and held with a scarf that I was sure was silk and Hermes. The blue in it matched her soft eyes.

“Enjoying the conversation?”

I looked back around and found myself looking straight at a clerk. I lowered my eyes, embarrassed.

“She’s so, uh, sweet to watch.” My words stumbled from my mouth.

“The late Mrs. Walter Dibbs. She’s here every Tuesday afternoon. Just wanders around and talks to that damned dog. “His words were drenched in contempt.

My mind was searching through the rolodex stored there. Dibbs, Dibbs,.....

“I know I’ve heard the name but I can’t place....”

“*Harriett Trumble* Dibbs.” He emphasized and slowed his speech.

I was still trying to place the name. He hadn’t lowered his voice at all as he spoke, even when saying her full name. His eyes met mine as his brows rose.

“You don’t recognize the name? Really? You’re not from Chicago, or for that matter, Illinois, are you?”

I shook my head as he continued, still speaking as if we were the only two in the store.

“Most folks, even young folks, know the story of Harriet Trumble Drum Dibbs

Something tickled in my memory. Trumble Drum. Like a bolt the images flashed through my mind and they were not pleasant.

“Awww,” Mr. Store Clerk saw the look of horror, “you *have* heard of her.”

I stumbled on my words. “That’s her, really?”

“The one and only.”

“How is she not in jail, or, uh, a hospital or something?”

#14 - Middle Grade/Historical Fiction

IMAGINE A BRIGHTER DAY

Ludlow, Colorado 1913-1914

“Awaken your minds that you might live another life. Imagine a brighter day and begin to bring it to pass.” United Mine Worker Leader Mother Jones to Striking Coal Mine Workers

Chapter 1

Tabasco Mining Camp, Colorado, June 1913

I knew that I could never smell the sea. Not here in the middle of America, with land spreading out for thousands of miles in every direction. But, I longed to smell the crisp salty wind of Greece that Mama described in her stories. Perhaps today a faraway gale of the sea would bring me an unlikely present. After all, it was my 13th Name Day.

I tucked my skirt up and scrambled into the sturdy branches of the old tree. Deep roots held the tree fast to a small rise above the barren Colorado prairie. The sun had not yet broken over the eastern horizon. The Rocky Mountains that rose to the west stayed well hidden in the darkness. I twisted my face away from the rising sun, my face turned into the breeze. Nothing. Only the thick burnt smell of coal smoke. There were no magical winds like that in Tabasco.

Settling into a cradle of limbs, I watched as light crept across the earth to unveil the coal mining camp my family called home.

“Anastasia Cassandra Christou! Stacia! Crikey, you’re way up there!” I looked down to see the face of my brother, Nikko, peering through the branches. He smiled up at me. “Chronia Pollah, sister! Happy Name Day.”

“Come on down. Mama’s fixing you a special breakfast and Papa’s waiting.”

Almost 14 years old, Nikko looked the way I imagined a young Hercules, handsome, strong and fair, with an easy manner and a wide friendly face. We were born less than a year apart and felt like twins, but we couldn’t have looked more different. I was dark and small, too small, and I had a little face with huge black eyes and sharp angled eyebrows.

It wasn't fair. Nikko looked like one of the Greek Gods, but when I snuck a peak into the mirror at the Community House, I thought I was looking at some old woman. It always took me a moment to realize the ancient crone was me.

I dropped down from the tree in front of my brother. “I’m so mad at you that I could spit,” I said. My words came out with effort. Talking was hard for me and Nikko usually did all the talking for both of us.

Nikko, good-natured, laughed and shook his head. “It’s high time I went into the mine, no matter what you think. My school days are over. On Monday, I start work as a man. “Geez, I’ll be one of the older boys to be working at the mine.”

“But Nikko! I’m scared for you to be underground.” Then I added, with a whisper, “I’ll miss you.”

Nikko smiled again. “You’re the one who likes the air.” He pointed to the dusty ground beneath him. “I like the solid earth. Anyway, I won’t be underground yet, just learning the trade. I’ll work my butt off up in the tipple, shoveling coal.

“ But ...”

“I’ve always wanted to be a miner. Anyway, Papa and Mama need the wages and the baby is sick...”

I glared at my brother.

“Ha! Yikes!” He jumped back a step, then laughed. “I see why people talk about your evil eye!” I stared harder. “Ah, cut it out, Stacia! What kind of work do you want me to do?” he asked. “Become the hero in some Greek story? I could outdo Hercules and do a hundred impossible labors.”

He picked up a stick and stabbed it into the air in mock battle. “I’ll fight minotaur after minotaur in crazy mazes. That’d be a good job. That’d help put food on the table.”

“You shut up, Nikko.” My words stuck inside me like dry bread. I wanted to say the words that could keep Nikko at home. Out of danger. But the right words never came. They got caught up between my brain and my mouth never made it into the air.

Nikko smiled at me. He smiled even when he was annoyed. I clenched my fists and squeezed my eyes shut and turned away from Nikko.

He could never stop talking. “Hah! How about this, I? I jump in some little boat and try to find some fish? Here, fishy, fishy. Here fishy, fishy.” He threw back his head and laughed. “No, you may like the idea of life in old Greece, but it’s a real American life for me in a Colorado, US of A. I’m gonna be a coal miner, like Papa.”

I dropped my head and murmured, “I just want something more... for you.”

We started downhill toward town. The Colorado peaks glowed pink in the early morning light, the vista marred by mine entrances scarring the base of the mountain range. Company houses lined up like tired old soldiers along the dusty street.

We walked the dirt path between a row of coal blacked company houses. Behind the houses were outhouses, reeking with the smell of waste and urine, huddled next to plump rounded bread ovens, some already baking bread for the day ahead. I inhaled the smells of sewage, fresh bread, wood fires, dust, and new day mountain scented cedar, overpowered by the smell of coal. Always the smell of coal.

As we passed the community water pump, Nikko called “Good Morning” to our friends waiting for their turn to fill their pails and haul the day’s water. Our next-door neighbors, Little Antonio and his sister Rosa called, “Chronia Pollah” and “Happy Name Day” to me, speaking both the Greek and English phrases with their Mexican accents. “And Feliz Compleaños, too!” Rosa yelled.

Nikko said, “Hey Stacia, I’ll beat you to the house!” We broke into a run and shot to the far side of the camp. Nikko might look like a god, but I could run like an Olympian. I beat him by a head as we bounded up the unsteady wooden steps of our front porch and burst into our little company house.”

#15 - Historical Fiction/ Magic Realism

The Merchant of Color

The little girl entered the room alone this time, her steps confident, as though this Persian palace was no less familiar to her than the winding gardens outside the window. Ahead of her towered the frescoed wall, its scene crowded with kings, ambassadors, dancing girls with braids to their ankles. It was the opportunity that one man, entrapped in the wall by a magician's paint brush, had prayed for time and again. With a slow, cautious movement, he turned his head until his eyes met hers. She gasped; and he knew. This was the one he had been waiting for. The one who held the same powers he had spent a lifetime hiding.

Do not fear, he said with a whisper that fluttered from unmoved lips. Lips created with pigment made of bugs and bark to draw out the colors of autumn. *I too have heard voices. I too have listened to tales of people whose souls are painted into a wall.* His gaze took in the details of the child. Yes, the spirit of Africa journeyed through her body, merged with Circassian blood that sang a song of mystery. Already her mouth was sumptuous, lips bursting forth like a poppy in bloom, and he knew that someday men would cross deserts beneath silver moonlight for the chance to recite just one poem to her. He spoke again, softening his voice. *Be not afraid. I would never do you harm. I am your—*

The child ran from the room. But she would be back. He had been drawn to this child more than any other who passed through these rooms built for a powerful king. Her spirit was made of fire and there was a spark of mischief in her dragon-jade eyes—that color a gift from an old woman who had always walked through the man's dreams. Yes, she would return. *I am your*

father, he called out. His words, silent to all but her, scurried through the air, searching for the frightened girl.

A face peeked around the corner and the man in the painting spoke again. *My little one, do not run away. Voices on the wind have secrets to tell. Listen closely. Allow me to unveil to you the wondrous things of this world: I have heard the ocean sing. On a blackened night I rested upon the head of a stone god and watched a cave light up with impossible stars.*

He would wait to tell her the story of when he fell to his knees before another wall, that masterpiece painted by the hand of a madman, Michelangelo Buonarroti. From that painting echoed screams of the damned. He had looked up to see the teeth of demons ripping into the flesh of the doomed as they dragged sinners into Hades. Unable to release his eyes from the horror, he had watched a snake coil up the body of a donkey-eared man who had once lived a privileged life in the Vatican until cursed by Michelangelo's hand. Souls darted about the scene like locusts in the wind. Yet, amidst the frenzy there had been angels who lifted spirits toward the golden light of paradise, their celestial songs drowning out the cries of those destined for Hell. Yes, he would speak to her of angels one day.

Relax, my child. Soon the evening's final breath will peek through the window and spill across the floor in a final burst of apricot light. Bathe yourself in that glow while I tell you of men who eat fire and never get burned. Of a pope who decorated his banquet table with a young boy gilded in pure gold. Of a market that sells bugs whose crushed bodies produce a liquid fire that dyes the scarlet robes of cardinals, and a stone that has eaten the color of the sea. I want to tell you my story. I want to tell you yours.

Thus began the tale of a man, his Muslim half named Ameen the Faithful, his Christian half called Sebastiano, Protector from the Plague.

Ameen imagined what he would tell his daughter. He would first go through every door and window of his story, deciding what to share, what to leave out. His memory sailed on the evening's final sigh and he looked down upon his story as if watching from the eyes of a raven. He tasted the sea again. Watched himself awaken, tense and alert, and he recognized that day when he became a nomad on this journey called life:

The young slave, Ameen, had heard the ocean's grief before the sails of an unfamiliar galleon loomed across the horizon, its masts rising like spears that only a tribe of devils would carry. Ameen had witnessed his birth many times, but he knew that this could very well be the day of his death. Memories of his birth swam through his mind again—the battle of a child, struggling to be born, reaching toward life. Satan, not to be cheated, grasping a tiny heel, his fingers burning into the infant's ankle. Out of habit Ameen rubbed the scars that remained from that day, the place where his skin had melted into the folds of his body and turned the color of camel's milk. He glanced at his master, Hasan al Wazzan, and wondered what fate awaited this renowned scholar, this diplomat of the Sultan of Fez, about to be captured by pirates when he and his slave were finally on their way home from Istanbul to Morocco. It was, as the followers of Christ would one day teach Ameen to say, the Year of Our Lord 1518. Of course, Allah reigns supreme, and the Islamic calendar knew better: it was Anno Hijri 924, the year that was to rip both men from their lives in Africa and throw them upon the shores of the Land of Infidels.

#16 - Mainstream

SOLOTRAMP

PART ONE

Journal of Michaela Isabel Able

July 10, 1970 – After Sunrise

Last night he wrapped a rope around me and tied me to the bloodwood. I still have dents in my thighs from the rope. The flash kept flashing, and when he stopped taking pictures, I feared what he would demand next. Wally keeps a book of positions in his nightstand drawer. He showed me a picture of a girl getting a spanking. He says I have to do what he wants to keep him happy or I'll go to hell. He says I belong to him.

After he got done, he pushed the bloodwood under the bed and set the alarm clock to six for me to get up and make his breakfast. I lay beside him trying to go to sleep, but bad memories hurtled through my mind. Describing them will bring them to life again. Not thinking about the past for a long time does not mean I've forgotten.

I stared at the light fixture hanging from the middle of the ceiling, shiny points in the dark. My heart pounded so loud I was afraid he would wake up, but he snored and made clicking sounds in his throat. I imagined the bloodwood flying back to Brazil like a magic carpet. I imagined the girl in Wally's book standing up and swinging her arm back and slapping the man spanking her with all her might. I counted to a thousand, and a decision blazed through my mind: RUN.

I lifted the sheet off and slipped out of bed and tiptoed down the hall to the kitchen. I opened the cupboard to get the Quaker Oats box where I stash money. The coins jangled, and I

listened for Wally. His snore rumbled. In the laundry room, I searched in the dark for the basket of clean clothes I'd brought in from the line before he got home. I still wore the garter belt and stockings and didn't bother to take them off. I pulled my granny dress I found in the basket over my head.

I shot into the living room, snatched my purse off the rosewood end table by the comfy lounge chair where I like to read my library books and shot through the kitchen to the back door, afraid he would hear me if I went out the front. "RUN!" shrieked in my mind. I opened the screen door to the high-pitched choir of the crickets and slid my feet into the sneakers I'd gotten all muddy from watering my garden and left on the back step.

"RUN!" screamed like panic. I unlatched the gate and ran to the street and jumped into the Falcon and threw onto the seat my black vinyl purse with a rat-tail comb, three pens, a pencil, my driver's permit, Chapstick, Kleenex, library card, thirty dollars and eighty-seven cents from the Quaker oats carton -- all wrapped in a wad of clean clothes I grabbed from the basket. Large raindrops hit the windshield as I jammed the key into the ignition.

If I drove north, I would wind up in Wyoming – un-good memories. If I turned south, Pueblo -- un-good memories.

I kept looking in the rearview mirror dreading to see him. Silly because all I could see were glaring headlights. I first thought of going to where I lived with Chaz and Floss before I met Wally and find someone I know, but no doubt this neighborhood is the first place he'll hunt me down. I headed west, trapped in the great outdoors where raindrops fell like enormous tears on the windshield.

Thunder boomed – a flash of lightning right in front of the car -- and bang! I knew where to go: Of course! Into the mountains to Daddy’s cabin.

I drove through the rain past the Tastee Freez where Daddy would buy giant ice cream cones for me and Ty. I sat at a stoplight and the big color TV sign flashed color by color until all colors lit, just like in the olden days. The floodlights by the shopping mall made the raindrops distinct; the wet street gleamed with neon signs shining color into the puddles.

I had a qualm that Daddy might not own the cabin anymore, but where else could I go? Back to Mama and her creepy boyfriend?

The Falcon seemed intuitive about heading to the mountains, and for the first time in forever, I knew how it felt to be making a good decision – going to the place I love.

If I had to sleep in my car, I would.

At first the road ran flat with a ridge of hills to the west, but as I entered the mountains, dark went black and scary – steep and twisty with a drop-off on the side of the road. I drove, determined not to think of anything that would freak me out. I sang, “I Say a Little Prayer” like I do at Wally’s house when he isn’t there because that song always makes me think of Chaz. Never mind Chaz doesn’t believe in prayers, I like to sing him one. I sang “Ain’t No Way” because there is no way I can stay with Wally. I sang “I’m Looking Through You,” and the rain stopped, and I rolled down the window. The tires whirred on the road, and I wished the car radio played something besides static. The night became lighter and cloudy and warm, and I sang “In the Summertime.”

I came upon a tall sign for a gas station I'd never seen before, the first light in miles on the dark road, and I was afraid I might be on the wrong road, but I kept driving and singing and hoping. Then I saw a sign that said Eje -- fifteen miles.

I never told Wally about the cabin, and all of a sudden, being scared vanished.

Strange and beautiful. The sliver of moon came out from behind a cloud showing me the way.

#17 - Adult Speculative Fiction

Chapter One

Her eyes rested just above the waterline as a moth struggled inside her mouth. She blinked, forcing the wings past the tongue, and noted a moment of revulsion that had not been there the day before. The observation swam in the toad's brain more like a memory than a true thought, but curious all the same.

Unperturbed the creature propelled herself into the murky shallows, where she nestled among the reeds and rushes. Eyelids relaxed in mock rest as her body absorbed the warm sunlight trickling through the half-naked trees. She swiped a forelimb across her mouth and contemplated hunting for snails along the mud bank when a second peculiarity gave her pause. Slitted eyes tracked a subtle yet detectable shift in her surroundings. Colors intensified in vivid hues, and not merely by a seasonal trick of the light. A silver fish with pink gills nibbled at an insect. An orange leaf fluttered onto ripples of black water. A dragonfly zipped overhead, a blaze of neon green. Her toad brain latched on to the color green and held it in its cortex as if it were a talisman. Then another unnatural sense came alive as her nostrils filled with the stink of fish slime and putrid muck. How had she not noticed before how vile and cold the black stuff was she squatted in? A muddy chill needled her leathery skin.

The skin. It was time again.

The shudder started involuntarily, the way it always did. Her body writhed in response, impelled by an instinct and urge she couldn't control. The outer layer of skin began to stretch and lift so that it sloughed loose from her feet, back, and belly. Tugging and twisting with her

forelimbs, she pulled at the spent casing, dragging it over the head like a woman removing a nightgown. Then she gathered the skin in her mouth and began to swallow. Yes, she must always remember to do that, though the reason flickered just out of grasp of understanding.

The toad blinked hard, sinking her eyes into her head to force the wad of skin deeper into the gullet, when a queer stirring in the bones halted her mid-swallow. The tongue tingled. Her insides churned and tumbled, then a lacerating sting, claws tearing into flesh, gripped her hunched back. Panic ignited instinct. *Jump! Back to the water before old fox takes another toe with his teeth!* But then the creature's mind, the part that had been wrapped and tucked away like a precious jewel deep within the subconscious, stirred awake. It had her hold steady, even as a fissure opened along her spine and the pain nearly split her in two. That hidden emerald of secret intelligence recognized the pain for the signal of hope that it was, and so the toad endured.

Splayed toes dug into the mud, gripping the earth, as four phalanges morphed into five human-like fingers that stretched and popped, joint-by-joint. A woman's face pressed beneath the speckled skin of nostrils and mouth, forcing them to split and peel away. The metamorphosis accelerated. Shoulders, breasts, and stomach grew. Brown hair, slick with a sort of birth slime, coiled down the woman's back. Reborn, she squatted in the mud and wiggled her fingers, testing, then dared to hold them in the sacred pose, as if cradling the face of Knowledge itself. Warmth engulfed her. Consciousness awoke. The curse was broken.

Elena!

The name flashed in her mind so quick she thought it a phantom whisper. Then memory bloomed full. She was Elena, granddaughter of *Les Anciens*. And she was free.

As her body woke from its torpor she trailed her muddy hands over breasts, ribs, and along her stomach assuring all was normal. But warm flesh turned pond-water cold under her exploring hands. A strangled scream caught in her throat as she dared to look. Giant speckled legs with webbed feet clung on in horrid stubbornness. She kicked and thrashed to shake them off, yet they stayed grotesquely fused to her body.

“What demon spell is this?” she cried. But when panic failed her, she took a breath and reclaimed her wits. Then her clever mind began to work again.

The curse, already weakened over time by the powerful alkaloids secreted through the toad skin, needed one more little jolt to complete the change. Mastering her revulsion, she picked up the shed skin she’d spit out and stuffed it onto the back of her tongue. The toxic residue tasted like rotted reed grass and bitter herbs, but as the sun haloed in her vision and the poison danced in her blood, she gave thanks to the All Knowing for teaching her well the ways of magic. And after one last agonizing moment the transformation was complete.

Long legs, weak but willing, held her when she stood. As her bearings returned, she used the daylight stars to calculate the distance home. Naked, but no longer at the mercy of the sun for warmth, she walked out of the marshland, a hot stone of revenge smoldering inside her.

#18 - Mystery

CHAPTER ONE

The prepaid cell phone feels foreign in my hands. It's the first time I've used it since I bought it last week. A 911 operator answers, asking what my emergency is, and I hesitate.

"Um, I need you to send whoever you normally send when somebody's already dead," I say.

She asks me who died and if I need an ambulance, and the old man's open eyes stare past me from the foot of the stairs where my new neighbor apparently landed with his neck and right leg severely bent in the wrong direction.

"No, I'm sure he's dead," I tell her. "I'm out on Cottonwood Road... Yep, Riverside. No, I don't know the exact address. A parrot's blocking the door and I..."

"Did you say a parrot?" she asks. "As in a bird?"

And I totally get it. It's a weird thing to say, but it's true. I pull back the lace curtains covering the living room window to reveal a gigantic rainbow of feathers with a red head bobbing angrily.

"Yes, there's a parrot on the porch and it looks pretty pissed off. I don't want to go out there."

"Okay, just stay on the line and we'll get your location." She asks my name and before I know it, I'm telling her the truth. My heart sinks but the damage is done. I blunder through a few more of her questions and I contemplate the consequences. I'm not sure how long I could have

pulled off a fake identity anyway, but still, it feels like I've lost some of the control I thought I had back.

"Okay Samantha, the police are on their way. Please stay on the line until they arrive."

"Okay," I say. I stand at the window and try not to cry. For a second my mind takes me back to Denver and I imagine Derek and Graham arguing. I wonder if Derek moved out. I don't know how he could stay there after what I did.

A police cruiser turns down the driveway, spitting dirt into the air, and she ends the call. It's been a tough couple of weeks, but certainly I can handle this. It's nothing compared to finding out Derek had tapped my phone and installed a keystroke tracker on my computer. And poor Graham. If I allow myself to feel guilty I might try to contact him to apologize. But I needed to hurt Derek as much as possible so he'd let me leave. I really liked Graham and I don't want to miss him.

The officer that gets out of the car is younger, maybe late twenties like me. He stops at the base of the porch and gets out his baton.

"Hello, Charlie," he says, his voice carrying through the glass.

The bird blocks the stairs.

"Don't be a bully, Charlie. I'm coming up there, so you better get back. I'm warning you, Chaplin. Get back now."

It runs toward the officer, but he manages to slink past and come into the house. Immediately, his eyes land on the body. And then he sees me.

"I'm Deputy Collins," he says, removing his cap and extending his hand.

I take it. "Samantha," I say.

He sets the cap on a tidy console table and takes a small notepad from his pocket. "What's your last name, Samantha?"

"Westfield," I say, and spell it.

"You're the one who found him? Mind telling me how you know Henry?"

In my mind, I correct him. Knew, past tense. Instead I say, "Actually, I don't. It was the parrot; I saw it outside yesterday, but when it was out again today I thought it might have escaped or something, so I came over. The door was open."

He scribbles.

"He," I say. "Henry," I correct myself now that the dead man has a name, "waved at me from the porch a few days ago." Okay, so it really wasn't a wave so much as a reprimand to slow down my "death machine". I think that's what he yelled at my car, but that doesn't seem important right now.

"You're not from around here," says the Deputy. "Are you staying in town somewhere?"

"No. Not in town. I'm up at the blue cottage, next door."

He shifts his weight. "The Dorchester's place. Nice place. When did you move in?"

"Last Thursday."

"And how long are you staying?"

"I'm not sure. I'm paid up for a few months," I say.

"I see. And your phone number, Miss?"

"Oh..." I remember that the number is in my wallet up the street. "I don't know it. I just got this phone," I say, my heart starting to race. "I have the number up at the house."

"It's okay, old Henry probably fell down the stairs. It looks like a classic accident and I'm surprised it didn't happen earlier. He had a bad hip and lived alone. What do you do for a living, Miss?"

"I'm an Administrative Assistant. Well, I was. I don't know anymore. Sorry, but what happens to him now?" My eyes meet the deformed body again and I quickly look away.

"Do you need to sit down?" he asks.

"No, no. It's just... his eyes are open."

"Ah, I understand," he says. "The coroner will be here soon to take him and we'll contact his family," he says calmly. "There's actually no need for you to stick around here. We have what we need. You can go."

"Oh, okay...but, how?"

"How? What do you mean? Oh, yeah, Charlie. There's no chance you'd help me catch him before you go? He knows me a little, but if you could help me corral him inside, I'd appreciate it. I'm surprised he hasn't taken off. He's still out there, isn't he?" He replaces his cap over his short, brown hair, and opens the door. He waves me over but I stay where I am. That's a big bird, and I don't know a thing about parrots.

#19 - Urban Fantasy

The driveway gravel crunched under my truck's tires, sounding like a troll's breakfast cereal as I turned off the state highway onto my own property at last and trundled up the driveway toward the carport. I slurped up the last of my milkshake and tossed the styrofoam cup behind the passenger seat, where it joined the greasy cardboard fry cups and crumpled paper bags that had contained my last several meals. Not quite a rolling landfill yet, but closer than I liked to admit. One of these days I'd get back in the habit of cooking my own food, but right now I had a deadline to meet if I was going to have enough inventory to turn a profit at the Renaissance Festival next month. I coasted to a stop, set the parking brake, and climbed out of the cab. Yawning, I dragged myself out of the carport and along the breezeway to the largest of the outbuildings - my smithy.

Working as a farrier pays most of the bills, but I like to think of myself as more of a blacksmith than a farrier. My place up in the mountains is sort of a demonstration project, with a wrought iron fence surrounding the main house and outbuildings. Much as I'd love to fence in the entire property with wrought iron, it makes more economic sense to sell all that bar stock to paying customers instead of using it on a vanity project that almost nobody will ever see, so I marked the property boundary with more economical wire fencing and put the fancy work where visitors can get the full effect. I raised the double-wide garage door that formed the main entrance to the smithy and fired up the smaller propane forge. I'd save the coal for when I had a full day to spend tending it. Tonight, I just needed to crank out a few more quick items for the impulse shoppers. The fancy stuff for the patrons and collectors would take more time than I had

in me tonight. I grabbed a couple of railroad spikes to turn into knives and some thinner stock for belt hooks and eating utensils. I'd burn off that milkshake pretty quickly, actually - the upper body workout is one more reason I really like my job. I set the first spike to heat, added a piece of thinner stock to heat up as well, and waited a bit for the laws of thermodynamics to do their thing. Once the thin stock was glowing properly, I grabbed it with a pair of tongs and quickly bent it around the horn of my anvil, adding some decorative twists and hammering the blunt bar end into a spiral. I heated up the other end and used a chisel to cut the glowing metal into a stylized dragon's head, then bent that end into a much tighter hook that would fit over a belt, leaving the curved hook to support a tankard or a pouch.

By this time, the spike was ready. The carbon steel wasn't technically the best material for knife-making, but it was certainly adequate, and it's a classic project that pretty much anyone with a backyard forge tries at some point. Besides - they sell at the Ren Faire, and some days that's what really matters. I decided to make this one into a dagger, even though a single edge would be quicker. I pounded the square into a flatter diamond cross section, stretching the metal out a bit and tapering the point. I nudged my goggles up onto my forehead so that I could examine the dagger more closely.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw something moving fast on a collision course with my head. I turned and ducked, throwing my arms up to block whatever it was. There was a blinding flash, a sizzling sound like a bug zapper on steroids might make, and a howl of pain that was almost as loud as the roaring of the forge as something hit me and ricocheted off of my hammer. I stumbled under the impact, blinking furiously to clear the spots from my eyes in case I needed to defend myself further. I closed the propane valve to be on the safe side, and then debated

briefly whether my odds of being attacked again were greater if I closed the door and trapped whatever it was inside the smithy, or if I left the door open and gave someone outside a chance to lob something else at me. Gripping my three pound hammer a little more tightly, I moved to the wall and hit the button for the garage-door opener, closing the smithy's main door. That done, I scanned the interior to see if I could figure out where the projectile had ended up.

I found it on the other side of the main forge, almost hidden under the coal bin. It was orange, humanoid, and about the size of a premium action figure. The crumpled, scorched remains of what looked like butterfly wings jutted out from its shoulder blades. As I crouched down to take a closer look, it turned its head and stared balefully at me with an enormous set of faceted purple eyes. I rocked back on my heels and wound up sitting on the concrete floor myself. I carefully set the hammer aside as a sudden realization hit me - I'd just clocked a fairy with cold iron. Probably not the best way to introduce oneself - but on the other hand, why would a fairy voluntarily enter a smithy in the first place? We sat and stared at each other for a few more seconds.

“Um, are you okay? Do you speak English?” I asked. The fairy just stared at me. Right - compound eye, no eyelids, no blinking.

“Sprechen Sie Deutch? Parlez-vous Francais? Panemaete pa Russki?” Hey, it was worth a shot. No telling where this guy was originally from.

#20 - Urban Fantasy

Tucked out of sight in a storage closet under the main stairs, Gloria folded and taped the plain brown paper around the bundles of documents she'd managed to find in the last few months. If all went according to plan, these packages would start a firestorm that even Director Weber couldn't cover up.

With the last of the packages sealed and addressed Gloria got up and went to the door. It was at times like this that she wished she'd inherited more from her brownie father than just enough magic to be annoying. She'd happily give up ten years' worth of pay just to know the exact location of every human on this floor.

Somewhere nearby a radio was playing President Kennedy's first press conference, but she didn't hear much of anything else. Gathering her courage, she grabbed her purse, tucked the packages under her arm and eased the door open. The hallway was blessedly clear. Now she just had to get out of the building before anyone stopped her.

No one called out as she passed the other offices. People must be taking advantage of the rare good weather to go out for lunch. Turning into a small alcove near the restrooms she eased open a narrow door and slid out of the hallway on to a cramped landing. Dull light seeping in through small dirty windows provided just enough illumination to see a narrow stairway that ran from the basement to the highest floor. The dust coating every surface proved that no one used the old stairs, not even the janitors.

Gloria slipped off her shoes and quietly made her way down several flights. Better to have dirty stockings than to have someone hear her heels clunking on the treads as she made her way down. On the main floor she slipped her shoes back on and stepped out to join the lunch

time crowds in the grand foyer. The Preternatural Guard, cloaked as the Office of Domestic Research, shared the building with overflow staff from several other federal agencies. It should be child's play to just slip out the busy main entrance with all of the other traffic. Once she was out, she'd make sure that Weber's cronies never found her again.

Her steps faltered a little as she got about halfway across the foyer. Looking like any other Washington bureaucrats complete with dark suit and white shirts, two Guardsmen stood by the entrance casually smoking cigarettes while watching the crowds that came and went from the building. Gloria didn't think they were looking for her, but she couldn't take the risk that they wouldn't demand to open her packages when she tried to leave the building. And she couldn't use her little bit of magic to hide herself as she left the building. That would definitely attract the two men's attention.

She gripped the bundles in her arms tighter. Turning down a side hallway before they could spot her, Gloria made her way to the back of the building. She could always sneak out through the loading dock next to the mail room.

Her stomach took a dive as she got near the dock. More Guardsmen were hanging out there. Both men were talking with the workers waiting to unload the mail truck that was backing in. She didn't want to know why all of the exits to the building were being guarded. There was no way it could good news. Time for a change of plans. She'd have to use the building's mailroom and hope it never got traced back to her.

Calling up all of the magic she inherited from her father, Gloria pulled a simple glamour around herself. To a casual observer she disappeared from sight. A harried secretary skittered down the hall and pushed open the doors to the mailroom. Gloria followed behind her

before the door could slam shut. The woman dropped several envelopes on to the counter and rang the bell. She gave a broad smile when one of the guys sorting mail came over.

“Oh Max! I’m so glad I got here in time. Can you please get these out on this truck? My director is having a fit that these contracts didn’t go out sooner.”

Tuning out the rest of their conversation, Gloria ghosted around the counter and into the back of the room. On the far wall stood several carts full of mail waiting to go to the central mail station. She quickly crossed the room and nestled her precious bundles deeply into the rolling bin that contained the Department of Agriculture’s outgoing mail.

A few seconds later the double doors to the loading dock were pushed open by a cart of arriving mail. The man pushing it released the cart and let it slam into the far wall before grabbing the cart that held her packages. Gloria ghosted behind him as he left the room.

She had to give up following him when warning bells went off in her head when he got close to the loading dock doors. Someone had charged the building wards. If she tried to cross them it would strip her glamour off and reveal her to the Guardsmen standing out there. There was no way she could give an acceptable excuse for trying to sneak out the back of the building. She’d just have to go back to her office, pretend to be sick, and go home early.

Keeping her power wrapped around her, she fell back and stood by a small window and watched while the cart containing her package was wheeled onto the waiting truck. Ignoring the growing pain behind her eyes as she held the cloaking spell, Gloria didn’t move until she saw the truck pull away from the building. The packages were out of her hands and she could only pray that they made it safely to their destinations.

#21 - Urban Fantasy/Young Adult

“Where momma at?” Cleopatra Mouton gathered her gangly limbs up to fit into the small kitchen nook seat. Slumping over the table, she watched her older sister move around the kitchen.

“She’s at her job.” Lily artfully spread peanut butter and jelly onto two slices of white bread and quickly wrapped the sandwiches up and put them in a plastic bag.

Cleopatra dropped her head into her hand and stared out the window as she groaned inwardly about having peanut butter and jelly for lunch again.

New graffiti decorated the brick wall across the alley. The bright orange and angry black made her think of Halloween. A delicate vine with purple flowers traced over the letters as if to highlight the words: “The End be Near”.

“Eat something.” Lily slid a bowl onto the table with a plastic clatter.

Cleopatra grabbed a bag of cereal and dumped some into the bowl. She sloshed milk in, sufficiently drowning the colored rings. Cleopatra gazed at the cereal soaking in milk. She let out a long sigh and picked up her spoon. Lately, she’d been hungry all the time. Her body ached just as often and she felt like all her clothes were stitched up smaller each night by elves. Momma just told her that she was growing like a weed. Lily, her older sister, topped out at five-foot-six, a respectable height to be sure, but Cleopatra was sure that she would tower over her. Little Henry had big feet, but at three years old, it was hard to determine just how big he’d get.

“Cleo, what’s wrong?” Lily sat down and spooned cereal into her mouth like it was a race.

“Nuthin’,” she said and made an effort to eat.

“You like a boy or sumthin’?” Lily winked.

Cleopatra’s nose wrinkled and she stuck out her tongue. “No. Boys are stupid. Damien think he know everything.”

Lily smiled a little. “I bet he does.”

Cleopatra’s eyes dropped to the cereal bowl as she spooned another bite into her mouth.

“Hurry up and eat. You gotta catch the bus in five minutes. I swear you dilly dally like you’re paid to.”

“No one knows what that means,” Cleopatra said around a mouthful.

Henry let out a wail. As Cleopatra turned to see what was wrong with him, a loud zap startled her and sparks flew out of the electric sockets throughout the entire kitchen. She wound her long arms around herself, cringing at each spark that landed on her bare skin. Lily and Henry’s cries were lost in the electric malfunction.

The spewing sparks slowly lost their enthusiasm. Cleopatra slowly pulled her arms away and scanned the kitchen. Burn marks scarred the white apartment walls. Lily and Henry were gone.

“Lily?” she called.

“I’m here.” Lily appeared in the kitchen doorway breathing hard, Henry sniffing in her arms. “You okay?”

Cleopatra took stock of herself. Little, red burn marks rose and puckered her skin. “It stings, but I’m okay.” She stood up and moved toward one of the sockets.

“Get away from that, you git!” Lily scolded. “What if it starts shooting in your face?”

Cleopatra stuck out her tongue, but took a step back watching the socket for any sign that it might go off again. “What do we do?” Catching the sight of smoke drifting into the kitchen from the hallway, she pointed. “Oh, no, look.”

Lily turned and examined the hallway. “Oh crud.”

Cleopatra angled toward Lily and Henry, but just as she started to move, the windows trembled and then exploded. She fell to the floor, the pieces of glass pouring down on her like sharp raindrops.

Henry’s screams followed the tinkle of glass pieces still trickling down.

Buzzing filtered in from outside until Cleopatra couldn’t even hear Henry’s cries. Avoiding the tiny shards of glass, she pushed herself to her feet. The next wave burst in through the windows like a cloud of green and purple locusts. It knocked her over onto the chair littered with glass. The sharp pokes of pain went unnoticed as she flailed her arms around trying to fight her way through mass.

The insects bounced off her, buzzing and biting. She flung her arm around, while the other acted as a shield for her eyes. A bug flew under her protective arm. Cleopatra gasped and jerked backwards.

It was bigger than the largest of dragonflies. The flying twig with gangly limbs charged her face revealing sharp teeth. She scrambled backwards flapping her arms. She slammed backward into a wall with a hard knob sticking out. The front door, she realized. She wrapped her hand around the handle and yanked. It didn’t budge. Turning and fumbling with the lock and chain, she finally managed to get the door open but there was no refuge there.

Large critters were hanging out of light fixtures tearing at the electrical bits. Cleopatra ran down the hall. Tears stung her eyes. Bites and burns covered her body. She stopped at the end of the hallway panting. The bugs were flying out of the open door. A scream came from an apartment further down. A gunshot startled her, making her jump and take another step toward the door.

Lily and Henry would come out any minute. They had to come. They were her family. She didn't want to leave without them.

The light above her head sparked and one of the larger creatures crawled out of the hole as it yanked the crystal ball fixture and dropped it, just barely missing Cleopatra's head. She yelped and stumbled backward.

The bug-eyed creature with a stout body and limbs kept tearing things out of the ceiling and chucking them at her.

She wound down three flights of stairs, avoiding running into other people fleeing their own infested apartments. There were people screaming, throwing things, and gunshots were more prevalent.

Cleopatra kept running.

#22 - Noir Steampunk

Chapter 1: The Dick

Ben

It was always the damned water thieves.

Used to be, I could sit in my office, and wait for a pretty dame to saunter in, worried about her cheating louse of a husband. But ever since the day I collided Sweets McCoy coming out of the hydro-plant on Fifth, and he spilled his stolen goods all over me, that's all that ever came down the line. Don't matter how many times you tell a copper it's their job, they're more than happy to pass on the work to lowly Private Investigators like me, and then take all the credit when the news reporters show up trying to get a scoop.

Worst part of the whole gig was, I never even got the restitution from catching the crooks; if I was lucky, and a hydro-plant owner was feeling especially amiable, I might get a half gallon to cover fuel used in the case. Not that a measly half gallon ever fully covered the steam I needed; but hydro-plant owners weren't keen on giving up a drop more than they had to, unless someone was paying out the nose for it. They didn't even care about getting their fuel back; all they cared about was proving that you couldn't screw over the corporation. After all, screwin' people over was their job.

Not that the hydro-plants didn't have every right to be steamed. Water was their business, and when supply didn't keep up with demand, people got desperate. And when people got desperate, they turned to crime.

My phone rang, the shrill sound startling me from my thoughts. I dropped my feet off the end of my desk and shuffled some papers around, looking for the shrieking device. When I found it, I picked up the receiver off its sculpted copper cradle and barked, “Detective Chase.”

“Ben, we got a new thief in town. Only thing we could get out of the guards was that she was female. And dark.”

“Who is this?” I was in no mood for a prank call. A woman? Really? Women were no more capable of stealing water on their own than man was of walking on the moon.

“Commissioner Jacob Austin of the East Claiborne Port P.D.” He said his own name with the self-importance and derision usually associated with the more well-to-do around town. “You got to find her, Chase. Do you know how the public would react if they found out we were letting a *dame* steal our water?”

In fact, I knew exactly how the public would react; I was none too happy about it either. “Which hydro-plant, Jake?”

“You will call me Commissioner Austin. I am your superior.” I could hear the ire in his voice.

“That’s debatable, Jake. Even if you was, I don’t work for you.”

I heard a small murmur of grumblings and then he continued. “She broke into the new hydro-plant on the outskirts of town, right off route 63. According to the guards, she used her...” he coughed softly, as if he didn’t want to say it, “feminine wiles to get inside.”

That made me laugh. “You personally designed the training program for all hydro-plant guards, didn’t you, Jake? How’d your guys let a girl get the drop on them?”

“I did not train these guys. They were hired privately.” Distain dripped from his voice, and I could picture his lip curling in disgust.

“How much did she get?” I dug a pen and a clean scrap of paper out of the heap on my desk and jotted down a few notes.

“A couple gallons, as far as anyone can tell, and from a salt tap. She carried it out, so it couldn't have been much.”

“I’m still waiting for the magic words, Jake.”

The man sighed loudly over the phone. “Would you look into it?”

I rolled my eyes. “I expect to get paid this time though.”

“You want a paycheck, join the force.”

“You want me to work for you, pay me. Or I'll just let this chicky play you and steal all the water she wants. Have a nice night, Jake.”

I hung up the phone, knowing I'd probably angered him. But I'd been walked all over one too many times by the guy, and I was fed up. A man could only work pro bono for the fuzz so many times before he had to make a stand.

I stared down at the worn wood floor of my office, the letters of my P.I. firm casting shadows on the ground from the hall light before. I'd worked too hard making a name for myself in this business to let any crooked cat get the drop on me. I had a name, a reputation. Used to be, you wanted the best, you called Chase and Austin, P.I.s. Now the only thing darkening my doorstep were those damned letters, looking hollow and pale.

I shook my head and leaned back in my chair, interlocking my fingers behind my head. Desperate times called for desperate measures, with a gallon of usable, fresh water worth more

than its weight in gold, but a dame? I thought I'd seen the worst criminals East Claiborne Port had to offer, but this thief nearly had me blowing a gasket.

Way I figured it, she had to be stupid. Not too many broads would take on the hydro-plants, risking her life for a couple gallons of salt water. I figured it'd be just a day or two before the explosion of a steam engine gave her away and she was locked behind bars where she belonged. Jake could take the credit, and if I was lucky, I'd get a few drops to keep my own car running smooth.

#23 - Young Adult Sci-fi

Rhiovannara whirled, the gauzy fabric of her many-layered dress twisting tight and flaring again as she spun reluctantly back toward her nearly immobile partner. Costumes swirled around them in every shade, a riot of silks and satins, feathers and jewels, set to show off the many-hued patterns of rank and wealth that adorned virtually every patch of exposed skin in the grand ballroom. For a moment, she could almost believe it was just a party. Almost.

The old man tottered unsteadily as the dance continued, clutching her hands as much for support as form. His skin was dry and course beneath her sweating palms. One thin arm snaked around her waist to pull her close. He smelled like alcohol and toxic air.

"I appreciate you agreeing to dance with me."

As if she'd had a choice. No one would dare turn down Aldous Rutherford, the man who owned the asteroid belt from which Mars harvested precious minerals and, most importantly since the mines beneath the planet's surface ran dry, water. It was hard to reconcile the frail, old man before her with her knowledge of the most influential person on Mars, but there was no denying the sway he held with her father.

"It's an honor, sir, to dance with so distinguished a guest. My father is lucky to have the support of someone like you."

The old man's lip twitched up. "Indeed. But, lets not discuss politics. It's not often I get to enjoy the company of such a beautiful young woman. You are turning sixteen, correct?"

"In two days." She offered back the practiced smile drilled into her muscle memory.

"And a wedding to follow," Rutherford added. "A busy week."

Wedding? Rhiovannara's perfect composure slipped as her brow puckered, a heavy dread settling in her stomach. "To what wedding are you referring?"

"Why, yours of course."

Rhionavannara had no trouble pulling her hands from his weak grasp. They stood, unmoving, as party-goers swirled around them. Could it be true? What reason did he have to lie? Perhaps he was simply misinformed. Or, maybe she was.

A slow smile spread across Mr. Rutherford's face. "Your father hasn't told you yet?"

"If you'll excuse me, sir." With a curtsy so slight it bordered on rude, she fled the dance floor. Insulting a guest, even one so important as Mr. Rutherford, was of little concern compared to the words ringing in her ears.

Rhiovannara scanned the room. It seemed half of Center was there in support of her father's nomination. A group of ladies waved her over, but she pretended not to notice as she hunted with single-minded determination for the blue silk suit her father had specially commissioned for this occasion. Lucky for her, he wanted to stand out.

There! The luminescent tattoos of her father's accomplishments stood in bright relief against the cappuccino skin Rhiovannara had inherited.

"Father!" She waved as she approached, drawing not only his attention, but that of several others.

"Dearest! Done already?" He gave her an admonishing look, then gestured to his companion, a stately woman with long yellow hair, eyes so dark they seemed almost black, and intricate patterns inked over her arms, neck, and face. "Let me to introduce Mrs. Mercer."

Rhiovannara chafed as years of etiquette training overrode her impatience and forced a smile. "I know you by reputation, of course."

Rangda Mercer owned the air, most of it at least. Eighty percent of the ventilation technology that kept the inhabitants of the Dome breathing belonged to her. With studied grace, Rhiovannara offered her hand to the third wealthiest person on the planet. Her father had certainly attracted some powerful friends.

"Lovely to meet you, Miss McAllister." Mrs. Mercer lightly grasped hands by fingertips alone. "Your father's boasts don't do you justice."

Pleasantries aside, Rhiovannara turned on her father and, unable to speak freely in front of such esteemed company, gripped his forearm to convey her earnestness. "Father, I've heard some unsettling news I hoped you might clarify."

"News?"

"About a wedding..."

The color drained from her father's cheeks, but his smile never wavered. Her heart sank. That was nearly confirmation enough.

He turned that smile on Mrs. Mercer and said, "If you'll excuse us." Then wrapped an arm around Rhiovannara's shoulders and half-led, half-dragged, her toward one of the balconies that opened off the ballroom. A few choice words to those enjoying the fresh air cleared the space. It wouldn't do to have anyone witness a scene of domestic unrest between the future Chairman of Mars and his loyal and supportive daughter.

"Is it true?"

"Sweetie, the situation is-"

"Is. It. True?"

"I was going to tell you."

Rhiovannara ground her teeth. "When?"

"After your birthday. I didn't want to spoil your party."

As if her happiness was even a consideration. More likely, he didn't want her making a scene at the extravaganza he'd turned her birthday into.

"To whom have you promised me?"

"His name is Gien Vallor. He's an assistant to Mr. Rutherford. I intended to introduce you tonight, though not like this."

Rhiovannara clenched her shaking fists and tried not to scream. It wasn't unheard of for wealthy families to arrange marriages for their children, but she never dreamed it would happen to her. Certainly not so soon! And to a lackey! "Why him?"

"It's the price of Mr. Rutherford's support."

"So, you sold me to advance your career." She meant it to be a question, but the answer was never in doubt. Instead she asked the more poignant, "How could you?"

"I didn't have a choice."

"You could have said no!"

"And destroy everything we've worked for?"

"I'll not marry a stranger! Certainly not some lap dog to a man neck deep in Syn."

"The accusations against Mr. Rutherford are just that. He's never been charged."

"We both know that doesn't mean anything."

"Look!" Rhiovannara gasped at her father's vice-like grip as he grabbed her arms. "You'll marry Mr. Vellor, and that's the end of it!"

#24 - Mainstream

1. Dust to Dust

May 2000

She must be dead to let a fly land on her nose and not flick it away. But what else could she do?

As the mall's resident wooden Indian, Deborah Running Bear shouldn't let even the fringe on her buckskin dress ruffle until the right moment.

Quicker than a blink, she jutted her lower lip and aimed a puff of air at the critter. *Buzz off!*

It startled, landing on her gray-streaked braid. Then it flitted away.

Deborah maintained her rigid stance. Crowds were thin today, probably preferring the balmy spring weather outside. But perhaps she could catch that family down the hall wandering toward her. From her periphery, she'd glimpsed the father, mother, and young boy bolt down sloppy buffalo burgers, the wild scent wafting toward her. They'd lingered by the animatronic cowboy band playing its tinny version of "I Never Promised You a Rose Garden." Then they'd snapped photos of their blond preschooler riding the stuffed bucking bronco.

Finally their chatter moved closer to her stall. The boy pointed. "Hey, a wooden Indian."

His slender mother studied Deborah. "A mannequin. Looks so real. Let's get a picture."

The boy scampered toward Deborah.

She braced her knees.

He tumbled into her, but she held her pose.

The father stepped behind Deborah. The mother snuggled close in and reached out arm's length with her camera to snap a shot. "Smile nicer than this Injun."

Deborah swallowed the insult.

The shutter clicked.

Time to *animate*. Deborah lifted her arms and flicked her head, her braid twirling.

The family screamed and jumped back. "Whaa- . . . she's real." They broke into laughter.

Deborah met their eyes. "As subtle as a breeze, as powerful as bison—that's the Lakota. Know where we came from?"

They shook their heads in unison.

She lowered her tone to create resonance. "From underground. We rose from limestone tunnels at Wind Cave to become the land's caretakers." She spread her fingers and motioned toward the jewelry case next to her. "The Lakota discovered gold in *Pa Sapa*, the Black Hills."

The boy gawked. "Real gold?"

A smile widened Deborah's face, the joy of casting a spell. "Real gold. Crafted into rings, necklaces, watches, and earrings, with designs created here in South Dakota."

The mother focused on a necklace with pink and green leaves draped on a shimmering splash of gold. She gazed up at her husband and batted her thick eyelashes. “Would make a nice memento.”

The man raised his chin and made a macho reach toward his pocket. “Of course, honey. It’ll remind us of this redskin.”

Deborah flinched at the putdown. *Anything for a sale.* “And matching earrings?”

His chin lifted higher. “Why not?”

Deborah reached for tiny boxes with cotton padding and winked at the boy. “You’ll find cool buffalo souvenirs by the mall’s entrance.” She completed the transaction, then grasped the boy’s white hands in her brown ones. “*Wopila tanka.*”

He gaped at their clasped hands. “*Wo-pi-la . . .*”

“Tanka. It means thank you. And may you soar on eagle’s wings.”

“Eagle’s wings,” he whispered.

They moved on, but the boy turned back, his eyes lingering.

Deborah waved. Introducing a slice of her Native American culture was the best part of this job. And what a potential audience with two million tourists rambling through Wall Drug each year on their way to Mount Rushmore.

She stiffened into a statue again. The absurdity of all this didn't escape her. She called others to soar as eagles, but was she rotting away like a dead stump? And noble as she appeared in her Indian costume, was this simply a ruse to hide from her past? *Maybe.*

More tourists drew near. White teenagers, carefree like her friends in high school had been. That was the only time she'd attached herself to whites. They'd talked her into an innocent prank, then split, leaving her lying flat on the ground, illuminated in the lights of a screaming police car. Her knee throbbed with the recollection.

The mall-crawlers moved closer. These looked like the sort of kids who would pull her braid. Maybe she could blend into the background and they'd miss her.

She stared ahead.

They sauntered past, their hands buried in jeans pockets.

Deborah released her breath. They were the last customers out the door. She took a step, loosening her stiff knee.

Her stocky supervisor lumbered by in her cowgirl skirt. One of her boots stubbed Deborah's moccasin. The woman turned back and shook a pink feather duster. "See. Me. Up. Front." Her Dolly Parton hairdo shook with each wave of the duster.

Deborah steadied herself. Something in Johnson's staccato voice didn't sound right. *Now what?* Working the limp out of her gait, she approached the entrance.

Johnson swished the pink duster across the top of a row of merchandise. “These buffalo bobbleheads are selling faster than our nickel coffee. Great idea to put the millennium year on the flank.”

A compliment? Unheard of. Deborah picked up a figurine. Its shaggy head waggled, and she bobbed her head back. “Glad I came up with that.”

Johnson glared. “The big boss doesn’t know who thought it up. Only that they’re in my area. But even with the bobbles, profits are down.”

“But I’ve met *my* sales goals.”

“Doesn’t matter. You gotta move more merchandise . . . if you want to keep your job.”

Deborah’s mouth turned dry. “But my father’s care—”

“Forget talking about the Indian stuff. Come up with a new scheme by the morning. And before you leave today, dust that jackalope.” Johnson pointed high up the wall with her feather duster.

Deborah peered at the mounted jackrabbit with antelope antlers attached to it. Her knee already ached.

“While you’re at it, dust the other animals, too.”

She craned her neck toward the mounted heads of a deer, a bear, and a bison. A separate trip up a twelve-foot ladder for each. “But ladders . . .”

“You gonna do it?”

#25 - Young Adult -- Contemporary (with a Historical Mystery sub-plot)

Chapter 1

Bewildered, Taylor gripped her boarding pass, nearly spilling her Grande Chai all over the check-in counter. First class? That couldn't be right. She never got free upgrades. Her fortune cookie forecasts were always depressing, she rarely picked the winning raffle ticket, and that one time she found a \$50 bill on the subway station floor, it turned out to be counterfeit.

Either this was a hallucination, or the planets were in some kind of weird alignment.

“I think there's been a mistake.” Taylor tightened her hold on the almost-broken handle of her over-packed suitcase. “I can't afford first—”

“No mistake.” The woman behind the counter clicked her fingers across the keyboard, smiling like she was in a toothpaste commercial. “My records show that from Boston to London you'll be in 3A, our premium seating on international flights.”

Which means this essay contest is a really big deal, Taylor thought.

Either that or she'd won a trip funded by the Royal Family themselves. Regardless, Taylor came from a household where thrift store hunting and coupon clipping resembled religious rituals, so if the Young Historians wanted to give her the red carpet treatment, she wasn't about to turn down extra leg space and lemon-scented moist towelettes.

“Oh, you're from Maine,” the check-in lady added as she returned Taylor's identification. “I love Maine. Especially in the summertime.”

“I’m not from Maine.”

The woman waited for her to finish that thought. “Then where are you from, sweetie?”

“Nowhere.” Taylor shrugged and gathered her ID and boarding pass for Flight 1912, stamped with those two magic words: FIRST CLASS.

The woman behind the check-in counter clearly didn’t know how to respond to that, so she just smiled another Vanna White smile. “Have a great flight, Miss Romano.”

You know what? Taylor thought. *For the first time in my life, I just might.*

“What are you reading?” asked the balding man in 3B less than thirty seconds after Taylor sat down.

This was a bad sign. Taylor had never flown alone before, but she’d come up with a strategy for surviving a flight across the Atlantic without hyperventilating. First, she’d get engrossed in a good book before the nerve-wracking hell that was take-off. Then she’d try to fall asleep as quickly as possible. As a last resort, the Dramamine in her carry-on should make her drowsy, but she didn’t want to take one unless she absolutely had to, since that would only add to the jetlag and make her feel like crap for the next three days.

Too bad Taylor suspected her inquisitive seatmate was about to ruin said strategy.

She answered the man’s question without lowering her book. “It’s a Fantasy novel about Camelot, told from Guinevere’s perspective.”

“Ah yes, the legendary queen doomed by her illicit love for Lancelot.”

Now Taylor lowered her book. Her seatmate was sporting the traveling uniform of the middle-aged American dad: faded Levis left over from the 90s, white tennis shoes, and a T-shirt featuring the logo of a local baseball team. He sure didn't look like much of a history buff. Maybe a fan of American Civil War reenactments, but definitely not a medieval romance enthusiast. The only guys Taylor knew who liked King Arthur either worked for a traveling Renaissance festival, or spent their Saturdays LARPing in full-on chainmail.

“Gary Williams.” The man smiled and extended his hand. “Headmaster of St. Stephens Prep near Amherst, Massachusetts. But a long, long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, I used to teach history. Always fun to meet a fellow fan of Arthurian mythology.”

Now his enthusiasm made sense. Taylor had a neighbor who went to St. Stephens, one of the most expensive boarding schools in the country, which also explained why Mr. Williams was flying up here with the big shots. The invisible barrier of her book broken, she planted her dork flag in the sand and flew it with pride. “Taylor Romano. And yes, I'm just a little obsessed with King Arthur, who was a real person, by the way. Not just a myth.”

“Depends on what you mean by ‘myth’.” Mr. Williams smiled like he had a secret. “I happen to believe there's more truth in myths than in most things. So is that what's bringing you to the United Kingdom? Going to brush up on your Grail history in person?”

“Maybe.” Taylor eyed the glowing FASTEN SEAT BELTS sign, which meant take-off was imminent. The plane pulled back from the gate. “I, I’m attending a summer workshop at the University of Oxford. I w-won this essay contest...”

“Are you okay, Miss Romano?”

Okay? Why would I be okay? I’m sitting in a ginormous chunk of metal that’s about to be miraculously suspended in the sky, and everyone is acting like this is completely normal!

Mr. Williams tried to wave down a flight attendant, but she was too busy pouring flutes of pre-takeoff champagne. “My wife hates flying, too. Here, let me order you a stiff drink.”

“Can’t drink.” Taylor gulped in stale airplane air. “Not old enough.”

“Oh. Sorry, I thought you were in college.” The headmaster winked. “The drinking age over international waters is eighteen, you know.”

International waters. Waters, waters, waters...

“A Coke, thanks,” Taylor blurted out as the black ring closing in on her vision made the deathtrap plane disappear. She leaned back into her extra plush seat, took deep breaths, and gripped her armrests for dear life as the 747 picked up speed.

Don’t puke, don’t puke, don’t puke...I need the puke envelope! Where the heck is the puke envelope?

Naturally, her seat pocket was missing its fancy, first-class barf bag. Cold sweat drenched her back and the gigantic Cinna-Bun she’d scarfed down earlier hovered at the back of her throat.

#26 - YA mystery/adventure

Prologue: Sunday, May 25. 12:34 p.m.

“Are you even listening to me?”

“Yes, of course I am. But you’re not making sense right now. You’re upset, and it’s affecting your thinking. You’re seeing what you want to see. Let’s go.”

Ross stood up, the red roofs and green lawns of the campus forming a bright checkerboard a thousand feet below him. He cringed inwardly when he saw the wild look in his son’s eyes.

“Dad, look, it’s clear. This is from—“

“That’s enough! I thought we agreed not to talk about this anymore.”

“You’re not even looking.”

“I know what this is about.”

“No, you don’t!”

“You’ve had this happen before, remember? I know you’re worried, but you can’t let yourself get caught up in that way of thinking again. It’s time to stop.”

He reached out for his son, and the young man exploded. “You don’t know what this is about! This is not about mom! Just listen.”

“I know you want it to be true, but it doesn’t make any sense.”

“Come on, Dad! Why are you ignoring this? What are you afraid of?”

“We are not talking about this anymore. You are acting like a little kid. Now let’s get off this rock.”

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In a small office under one of those red roofs, a slight, middle-aged man took a long draw from his coffee mug and tried to brace himself for what he must do. He picked up his phone and held it before himself but did not dial. He could hear the voice in his head already, the heavy Slavic accent and the unhurried, almost lazy tone that suggested a lifetime of people dutifully waiting for that voice’s owner to finish speaking, never the other way around. Slowly, he dialed. The moments that passed while the phone rang were long.

“You are calling me in the middle of the night. It is the middle of the night here. You know this?”

“Yes. Yes, I’m sorry, but there is a small delay. I won’t be able to keep our appointment for the transfer.”

“There is a problem?”

“Not a problem. Just a delay.”

“The Frenchman?”

“Yes.”

“This need not delay our transaction. The Frenchman is your concern, not ours. You must meet my representative on time.”

“I can’t. I mean, I can! I will. Just not yet.”

“This sounds like a problem.”

“Uh, a small one, perhaps. I will fix the... problem... but it will take some time.”

“I do not understand. You have the device? You have the data? Then there is no problem.”

“I... I can still make the transfer, but it will take some time.”

“I do not like to wait. We will not wait long.”

“You will not need to wait long. I will take care of it.”

“Yes, you will. You will contact me again soon.”

“Very soon.”

**Chapter One: Sunday, May 25. 7:41 a.m.**

“Are you even listening to me?”

Loryn Ackerman blinked and turned to his father, who was driving. Outside, the morning light set the tops of the prairie grass ablaze. “Yes,” he said, hoping to sound indignant. “Of course I am.”

“What was I just saying, then?” his father asked.

Loryn punted. “Something about rope management.”

“That’s right. When you’re bringing up a follower, it’s important to stack the rope so that it won’t go falling down the line where your partner is coming up. Not only can it get in their way, but it can get snagged on a knob or a flake...”

In truth, Loryn hadn’t been listening. He had meant to, but he just drifted off somewhere in the middle of Ross’s lengthy monologue. Loryn felt bad about it; he knew his father only went on this way because he was so excited to teach Loryn everything he knew. It was a little embarrassing, actually, how plainly giddy his father was that Loryn was showing some interest in his longest-standing obsession. Loryn had been rock climbing several times when he was little, since his parents both enjoyed doing it back then, but they had been careful never to pressure him to like it as they did, and his interest had remained mild—until the last year. In fact, it had been a long time since his father had last tried to take Loryn climbing when Loryn himself casually suggested to his dad one Saturday morning that they could go climbing, if he wanted. Ross had looked up from the pile of mail he was shuffling through, and his eyes lit up. “Really?” he said. “I’ll go pack our gear,” and then as he disappeared into the back of the house: “You make some sandwiches!”

That was about a year ago, near the end of Loryn’s junior year. On that first morning, when Loryn tied into a rope again and began ascending rock for the first time since middle school, he was struck at once by how quickly the simple joy of moving over stone flooded back into him. In his memory, climbing had been one of those pure, childish pleasures, like running through sprinklers or hanging from jungle gyms, pleasures with an uncomplicated, nostalgic

glow around them. That Saturday, he noticed how much bigger his body was than his last time, and how he came down from his very first route of the day with his forearms burning from that peculiar form of exertion now unfamiliar to them, but he also came down grinning from ear to ear. This is badass, he remembered.

So with his interest renewed, Loryn began to climb again with his father, who seemed so happy about it he could burst into song. Ross tried unsuccessfully to hide his happiness from his son. Loryn felt both tender and exasperated about his father's attempts to keep cool. Loryn guessed his dad just didn't want to jinx it.

Inside the car, Ross was still talking. Outside the car, Loryn could see the foothills of the Rocky Mountains steadily slipping by

**#27 - Mystery/Thriller**

A naked man teetered on the top floor ledge of the Hollywood Highland Hotel, a faded *grande dame* once favored by the Tinseltown elite in the early days of the film industry. The place was now a seedy shit hole inhabited by desperate locals, and unknowing visitors from abroad attracted by the name. In his late twenties, the man on the ledge looked ready to jump. His slim, well-muscled, silvery-white body reflected colors from nearby buildings and marquis like a human movie screen.

When WLAK-TV photographer Lucy Ruiz and reporter Ray Truckee pulled up in front, the cops hadn't yet arrived. Lucy looked at the man through her telephoto which brought him into close focus. It was 4:00 A.M, raining, and moisture fogged her lens but there could be no mistaking.

“Shit,” she remembered blurting, “it’s Mercer.”

Lucy passed Truckee her camera. Tightening her dark ponytail, she bolted for the hotel, ignoring his call to wait for the cops.

A clot of hotel workers at the end of a long shift slogged through the high-ceilinged foyer. Once exquisite plaster-work was broken and crumbling. Lucy pushed past a security guard and threw herself into an open elevator. With decades of profanity and love notes carved into its scuffed mahogany-paneled surfaces, the car smelled of mold and stale sweat. A discarded condom had been kicked to a corner. She pushed number sixteen, the top floor. The decrepit lift began to groan.

Cautiously, Lucy stepped out into a dim, hallway. The ancient wallpaper was peeling and stained with brownish blotches. Lights flickered. A man who appeared to be a hotel administrator, wearing a black suit a few sizes too big, huddled with another security guard. They were surrounded by a half dozen young men Mercer's age and much, much younger. In various stages of undress, several were hysterical, screaming, blubbing--high and out of control.

The guard, an arthritic, light-skinned black man in at least his mid-seventies, was attempting to calm them down. "Boys, boys, it's gonna be aw'ight, now just chill, y'all," he said in a nasally voice.

Lucy rushed up to the panicked knot. "The guy on the ledge, I know him. I can talk him in," she said, breathless.

"Who are you?" the hotel executive stepped forward. His complexion was heavily pitted and a thin film of sweat shined on his face. One eye brow twitched. "And where the hell are the police?" His inflection offered a poor attempt at sounding British. The brow twitched again. Another few minutes, and Lucy feared he'd be joining in the hysteria.

"I dunno where the cops are but the guy on the ledge, we work together at KLAK. Please, get me to him."

The manager folded his arms across his narrow chest. "I'll wait for the police." He stuck his lower lip out in a petulant attempt at intimidation but looked more like he was going to start bawling. He was all of 5'5" and 130 pounds.

Lucy grabbed him by tie to get his attention. “If you wait, and he jumps, the media, myself included, will be all over you and this sleazy shit-hole. And you can bet that’ll be the last of your little pajama parties. If I talk to him, maybe we can end this here, now.”

“He’s gonna juuuuump!” a shirtless Hispanic man shrieked. He was tall and well-built, fully tattooed and his nipples were pierced with gold spikes. “He won’t listen to anyone, and I’m so close to him. Sooooo cloooooose!” The man fanned himself furiously, his red fingernails flashed. His voice reached a keening wail that was beyond irritating.

All the men began to cry out and whimper.

“Shut the hell up,” Lucy shouted. “Acting like a bunch of idiots is not going to help him.”

She was shocked when the group actually quieted. She let go of the administrator’s tie. He looked about to faint.

“What’s Mercer on?” Lucy demanded.

Their eyes opened wide in a perfectly choreographed but perfectly failed attempt at innocence.

“What-is-he-on?”

“X and coke,” a red-headed man-child said. “And lots of the tiny white ones.” His spindly legs dropped into glittery platform boots a la ABBA 1975.

“Lorazepam. Shit. Okay, get me to him right now, before it’s too late.”

“Gary locked us out,” a sallow-skinned boy said. His voice was still childlike, and his hair hung in angelic ringlets. ABBA boots put his arm around ringlet-boy’s shoulders and comforted him.

“Where’s your swipe card, or master key?” Lucy asked the hotelier. His brass name plate caught the light--Edward Rivera, Assistant Manager. “Mr. Rivera, I need access!”



**#28 - Epic Fantasy**

A voice woke Harric from deep sleep, and he opened his eyes to a dark room, disoriented.

“Who's there?” he whispered. Yet even as he asked, he knew.

The creature had found him.

“We had an agreement,” it rasped, from much too close in the dark.

Harric scrambled back to the far edge of his bed until his shoulder hit hard stone. Grains of musty mortar drizzled down his neck, reminding him where he was: in a postern guard room of the mountain fortress. The garrison had awarded him this private quarters for his role in destroying Sir Bannus's beseiging army the night before, but now it felt less of a privilege and more like a trap; he'd locked and barred the doors, only to learn now that an imp of the Unseen didn't need a door.

Groping for a candle, his eyes scoured the darkness where he'd heard the voice. The only light in the room came from the arrow slip, where a slant of moonlight etched a silver triangle on the floor, but that was enough to reveal the creature as a clot of deeper darkness at the edge of his bed.

The thing retreated a step, talons clicking on the stone floor.

Harric's heart slammed his ribcage. “We do—we have an agreement,” he said, holding his hands out defensively before him. Even to his own ears his voice sounded small and frightened, not at all what the moment required.

Steeling himself, he closed his eyes to look up at the teardrop-shaped hole at the top of his mind—the “occulus” the imp had cut with its talon only days before. Now it hung in his mind like a luminous window, its edges outlined by the glow of the spirit world beyond. Taking a deep breath, he pushed his consciousness up to the window of the occulus and peered out at his narrow cell as it appeared in the unseen world of spirits. In the Unseen, its walls and floor glowed faintly, outlined by the low spiritual essence of moisture and dust, while the wooden doors at either end shone bright with the residue of life.

The imp hunched before him like a grounded bat. Its gaunt, blackened, body was no larger than that of a nine-year-old child—and a starved one at that, with jutting ribs and overlarge head—but the peaks of its membranous wings reached at least as high as a man. Hooked talons adorned crooked fingers and feet, and a hedge of needle-like teeth—seemingly too numerous for its mouth—stretched its face in a permanent grin. Pupilless white eyes fixed on Harric.

“Then you aren’t hiding from your debt?” it said.

“Of course not.” Harric swallowed a tightness in his throat. He carefully avoided glancing past the imp at his sword, which hung useless by the door. “I’m glad you found me.”

“I kept my end of the bargain.”

Harric licked his dry lips. “What did you do with my mother?”

“She is in her grave.”

“Will she stay there this time?”

The hedge of needle teeth widened in what might have been a humorless grin. “Her ghost won’t bother you.”

A flutter of hope in Harric’s chest. He stared, scarcely daring to believe what he’d heard. He repeated the word in his mind.

Gone.

No more hauntings. No more attacks on him or his friends. No more madness and terror. A weight lifted from his spirit—a weight so familiar he’d forgotten it was there.

His heartbeat began to calm.

“Now for your end of the bargain.” The imp stood, knobby limbs crackling. He extended a hooked talon toward Harric’s forehead.

“Wait, Fink. Please.” Harric jumped up to stand on the bed, his back colliding again with the wall.

Fink hissed. Peaked wings extended to the sides as if to catch him if he ran for the door.

“I just mean...I want to talk first.” Harric’s gut squeezed tight, pushing the air from his lungs. His mind galloped. “We can’t talk here. If the others see us, they’d destroy your witchstone and hang me. So...let’s meet me outside. Up on the cliff with a view of the approaches.”

After a moment, Fink furled his wings. “On the cliff, you settle your debt.”

Harric nodded. Relief restored his breath.

“Leave the sword,” said the imp. And he vanished.

**#29 - S&S fantasy**

CHAPTER ONE

Deep in the belly of The Great Massif lay The Blue Maiden, wordless and languishing, unable to understand her plight, even that it was a plight, to know she was a Maiden, a guardian, and captive.

All that came to her was fruitless longing, a tangled, vicious confusion of thoughts that kept her head busy with emptiness. She floated, as her captors willed her to, for they had driven her into a state of listlessness, had packed her away where she had no memories, felt no time, knew no place.

Except light.

At certain seasons, a brightness came from far above where she floated and stayed for part of every day. She knew this light. With it came an opening, a time foretold in myth, a story against which ears had been stoppered. And for a short while, that welcoming light gave breach to the stillness and relief from the relentless drift of the Maiden's existence.

She felt strong at those moments, a strength familiar as a friend. Words rose in her. And voices, many voices, seemed to come from a distance, as if they could wake her and tell her who she was. Every year, the words came closer to her lips and she heard the voices more clearly.

One year, the light brought a question with it. Not a busy, hectoring thought, but a simple thing that broke through the torturous quiet.

*Can I be released?*

Could she exist somewhere else and not continually drown in the dire magic holding her? Had there been something before this? Could she form a memory?

*Light comes sometimes*, she thought. It had come before, in other years, and now it came again. She remembered that much, and her heart soared. But she must have disturbed her keeper, which thrashed wildly and snatched away the light.

Next time the brightness came, she remembered to be still so that it would stay. Each cycle came clearer, the voices calling more familiar, her keeper less restless.

Finally, she knew she had seen light like this as a child. Coming off the water where she'd lived, in a town embraced by mountain and lake. In her father's kingdom.

Could that be so?

As it did now, the light reflected into the deepest corners of every room, bringing hope that those who were ill could recover—that wounds would turn to scars and her father's voice would soften the air again. When the sun was at its strongest, he could rouse himself, however briefly, and delight in his daughter, in seeing her face and knowing her words.

But not every man will heal. Sometimes wounds persist and yield no scars. His smile faded into nothingness, and someone cruel—she would always think it so—shooed her out of the room, never to see him again.

Floating now in a place that felt both honored and defiled, the Maiden clung to the memory of her father's laughter, trying to shake off the lassitude that held her here. In the light, she had hope she would rise up out of this place. But when it dimmed, her heart and her mind

went dark again. And she knew, with the sudden brilliance of light dancing on water, that she might never know the health and wholeness she had wished for her father. She was suspended in dark light. No longer a child, but just as vulnerable.

*Who has done this to me?*

The closing of the day attenuated the light. A familiar prickle stung her arm, and the terrible stillness intruded again.

*O bliss, O horror! Hear my cry!*

But only drowning met her, and the Maiden descended back into the vast peace of her imprisonment.

**#30 - Thriller/Action**

CHAPTER ONE

“You want me sexed-in? For reals?” A sex-in gang initiation. Not supposed to happen to the girlfriend of a shot caller. What the hell was going on?

“It’s the only way,” Carlos Zamora said. “Some of the homies think you’re a chota, a Fibi maybe even, but a cop wouldn’t sex-in, right?”

Crap! Anne’s jaw fell open. She scanned the cramped kitchen for an escape route, then whirled back around. “This is so messed up. What kind of man are you? No woman around here’s done that. And I’m yours, pendejo.”

“Not anymore. You shoulda got jumped-in when I offered.” His thick lips pushed out, motioning to the adjacent living room. “Prove ‘em wrong. Save your life.”

*Save my life? Oh shit!* An eyebrow began to twitch. She rubbed it with one hand and squinted out the back screen door with her other eye. She counted a dozen younger East L.A. crew members chillin’ in the almost dark backyard. *Too many gun packin’ little homies out there for me to bolt.* Her gaze flitted around the kitchen again until she stopped at Zamora. “Why would you approve this?” She shoved his solid chest but it didn’t budge. “I’ll be treated like a puta, like a damn whore! Is that what you want? To be the jefe who watched his homies take turns with his woman. Real man. How will you-

Zamora backhanded her so hard she saw flashes of light before careening off the kitchen counter and smacking her head against a cupboard. She collapsed to her knees and reached out,



catching her fall to the sticky floor. *Oh my God! He's never done that.*

“Shut up!” he yelled. “After twenty years in la pinta, La Eme gave me this crew. I ain’t losing it over you.”

Anne swabbed her split lower lip with her fingers. Her hand streaked with blood. She struggled to her feet like a proud boxer who’d been knocked down. Her mouth throbbed. *Think, damn it!* She spat blood into the kitchen sink while she recalibrated her strategy. “Don’t give into them, Amor. I know I messed up the other night.”

“Damn right you did.” He reached around her, grabbing the almost empty tequila bottle they’d been knocking back before his stunning announcement. He took a deep swig.

The son of a bitch had waited until she was smashed to inform her of the sex-in. “Just jump-me in. Let’s get it over with. But c’mon, Carlos, not a sex-in. Think about what we had.” Anne gestured at her body with her blood stained hand. “You don’t wanna share this.”

His goateed chin glistened from booze. “Too late.” He got in her face, breath thick with tequila. “You disrespected me--Blanca. What does it say when my novia won’t join my crew? And not only that, the homies say you don’t add up.” His narrowing dark eyes pierced hers.

*They ran a new background on me!* A tsunami of adrenaline threatened to overtake Anne’s nerves from within. Her legs nearly buckled.

“I’d rather do this,” he said. “You and me, we had some good times, I admit.” He grabbed her throat with a sudden powerful thrust, lifting her up against the counter. “But if I find out you’ve been lying to me, I’ll cut you to pieces myself and feed you to the dogs alive.”

She wriggled out of his powerful grip, coughing for air while replaying in her mind his ominous warning. They couldn't know the truth of her identity. And yet they were on to her and she couldn't see a way out.

“How many vatos?” she asked, her mind racing.

“Until I say.”

“No--one dude, that's it. I'm not gonna be trained.”

“This ain't no negotiation.”

“Hey, don't let 'em hurt me.”

He nodded but his eyes shifted to the other side of the kitchen where his muscle, Geronimo Romero, was scrutinizing her every move. A drawn semi-automatic pistol at his side confirmed her suspicions. It wasn't out before. The dark skinned original gangster, with a long graying beard that curled into itself, leered at her.

Anne closed her eyes and prayed, seeking forgiveness for what she now understood was about to happen: an involuntary sex-in initiation. Damn, she didn't sign up for this shit.

When she re-opened her eyes, she lunged at Zamora. “Fuck you, Carlos!”

He stepped aside causing her to fall through the screen door. Little homies laughed at her from the darkening yard. *I should charge the little shits, get them to fire on me. That'd be a much more noble way for this to go down.*

Zamora lifted her up by the scruff of her neck and marched her through the kitchen to the

living room door. “Maybe it won’t hurt so bad this way,” he said close to her ear. “You being drunk off your ass and all. At least no one’s gonna wanna kiss that jacked up mouth.” He turned to Geronimo. “I want her inked when it’s over.”

*Inked? Maybe I really can save my life by going through with it.*

Geronimo pushed open the door, held it open. “Here you go, puta.”

Oh my God! Over two dozen hardcore gang bangers packed a room reeking of skunky dope. She stepped back mortified. Latino gangsta music vibrated against the walls. Anne began to shiver as if she were standing naked in a freezer. *I’m so sorry, Dad. I don’t know what else to do!*

She quickly re-weighed her two options. The sex-in initiation meant being sexually assaulted by a street gang, making the other option, death, a close runner-up.

“It’s time, Blanca.” Zamora nudged her forward.

*How much do they really know?* She turned to Zamora for one last plea, but he was hustling out the screen door.

The snap of the clapping screen door sounded like the starting gun at a track meet. The volume in the living room erupted. Homies behaved like drunken fools at a strip party, a party in which she would be degraded as a woman. Anne struggled to take a breath yet terror withheld it.

**#31 - Historical Fantasy**

Venice, 1490

Salvatico smelled danger. The scent encircled him and Eduardo Bellini as they stepped from the gondola to the street and Salvatico tied the boat to a mooring pole. He glanced around before they headed down the street to the printer's workshop Eduardo's father, Alessandro, had recently purchased

"We're being followed," Salvatico said. He spoke Venet, the preferred language of the Republic, but his words were colored with his Hungarian accent.

"How many?" Eduardo asked.

"Just one. Leads with his left foot. Scar on his chin. Looks mean, or at least he's trying to."

"Ever see him before?" Eduardo impressed Salvatico when he didn't turn to look at their pursuer.

"Third time," Salvatico said. "At the fish market two days ago, and near the warehouse last week."

Eduardo shrugged, the curls of his sandy hair just brushing his shoulders. "Could be coincidence. Are you sure he's not just a pickpocket?"

It was possible. Eduardo was dressed in silk dyed blue, the signature color of the Bellini, one of the wealthiest families in Venice. His hands were soft and clean. His shoes looked new. But best of all, his purse was heavy. No respectable thief could allow him to pass without

consideration.

But Salvatico's wasn't convinced. "He walks like a soldier, not a robber. Would you like me to scare him off?" Not the best tactic in a situation like this, but it might reveal their pursuer's true intent.

"I'm surprised you'd ask my permission," Eduardo said, smiling.

"You're the master. I'm just a humble servant of the Bellini."

Eduardo snorted. "My father is the master. And if you're a humble servant, I'm the most beautiful courtesan in Venice."

Salvatico smiled with half his mouth. "Heaven forbid! The city's reputation would be ruined."

"Leave him alone for now. He's done no harm, and this is no place for a fight. Innocent people might get hurt."

Salvatico stopped in front of a shop window to look at a mirror on display. He gathered his long, brown hair to the nap of his neck, then drew a thin leather strap from his belt to tie it back.

"Vanity?" Eduardo smirked. "You must be seeing Novella later."

"Vanity, at the right time and place, is a virtue." When he finished with his hair, Salvatico smoothed the sleeves of his doublet as he watched the man who had been following them in the mirror's reflection. "Vanity in a Hungarian is pointless," Eduardo countered as he turned, his

green eyes looking past Salvatico's shoulder.

Salvatico wasn't sure if it was a compliment or a jab, but now wasn't the time to ask. In the reflection, he saw their pursuer approach another man watching Salvatico's back. Both men were well-armed, not unusual in the city, but an important consideration. The second man wore black, but something in his expression was darker than his clothing. The two men spoke briefly, then separated.

Salvatico stretched his fingers wide, then clenched them into tight fists. He released his grip and shook out his hands, allowing his arms to brush his side sword and cinquedea dagger. It was a ritual he performed without thinking, triggered by a threat. "Now there are two," he said to Eduardo as he stepped away from the window.

"They're probably dogs of the house of Zirondi," Eduardo said with a shrug as they continued walking. "They're just playing games."

The Bellini family had more adversaries than allies. He and Eduardo had fought the ruffians of rival houses before, but it was strange for such men to hide their affiliations. Neither of them wore any kind of insignia of a wealthy family of Venice. "In Bellini territory?" Salvatico asked. "I don't recognize either of them."

"Maybe they're di Paxiti," Eduardo said.

"If they're di Paxiti, God help us. We should have brought more men."

"You don't really believe my father had anything to do with what happened to Girolamo di Paxiti, do you? He may be ambitious, but he isn't a savage."

Salvatico didn't want to believe it, but he had no proof to the contrary. "It doesn't matter if I believe it. It only matters if the di Paxiti do."

Eduardo sniffed. "I'm not worried. They're no match for you."

Salvatico didn't share Eduardo's confidence.

A big man stepped from a doorway just ahead and to the left of them. He stopped to adjust his boot, but didn't look at his foot. Obscene hand gestures would have been more subtle, Salvatico thought. The man's wild red hair stuck out, tossing in the breeze and glinting in the warm June sunlight. When he stood up, he reminded Salvatico of a giant torch. Salvatico pointed to a cart of turnips to the right, away from "Torch." Eduardo walked over to it, and they pretended to peruse the vegetables for a moment.

"They're not wearing di Paxiti colors," Salvatico said to Eduardo, "or anyone's colors for that matter. And now there are three."

"You shouldn't have any trouble with so few," Eduardo said, clapping Salvatico on the back. "I've seen you take on half a dozen when you had a head cold. You made one of them cry, another wet himself, and the rest fled as if you were the entire Hungarian light cavalry."

Salvatico would have laughed if his nerves weren't crackling with anticipation. "Those men were drunk. We should get to the workshop." Salvatico's hands clenched again. If they could make it to the workshop, they could barricade the door and wait for Bellini reinforcements to come looking for them.

The street spilled into a public square, a church *càmpo*. There were several shops here.

Farmer's carts were positioned in a few places, filled with fresh vegetables and fruits from the *teraférma*, the mainland. People on the street conducted their business like bees humming around a flower garden, oblivious to the approaching danger. They crossed the *càmpo* to the workshop and entered. Salvatico bolted the door behind them, then turned to lock the window shutters. But something was wrong. The front room of the shop was empty. The door to the back room was only cracked. Eduardo pushed it open before Salvatico could yell a warning.



**#32 - Fantasy**

Legend Ridge: Chapter 1

He struggled up the last steps of the Frozen Puzzle Box Stair, and out the archway to the upper balcony. He replaced his ice axe in the sheath at his side, noting that it had blood on the blade. He was already forgetting the challenges he'd overcome to get this far. Some effect of the magic of the mountain.

He pulled his overcoat tight as snow swirled off the heights, but still he shivered in a white and blue world. Although the climb up the Stair inside the mountain had seemed endless, across a narrow pass he saw the taller peak of Guanthanymore rising far above, the rocky crags disappearing in ice and clouds. Near the icy balcony railing, a brass spyglass was mounted on a pole. Perhaps this is what he had come for, an answer—or the next part of the puzzle.

“You finally made it.”

Startled by the voice, he spun and almost slipped on the slick footing of the balcony, which was carved of ice. His battered top hat slipped from his head, but he caught it before the wind could fling it off the precipice.

“Whoa, whoa, it's OK. Didn't mean to startle. It's a little disorienting when you first come up and your memories are whipped away like the wind.” A young woman with rosy cheeks stood at the head of a path that wound away from the balcony along the mountainside. She was dressed in a thick coat, a felt hat with ear flaps pulled down tight on her head, and rags wrapped around her legs and hands.

“Did you come up the Stair?” he asked her.

“That’s the only way you get here. Oh my gosh, did you see the wolf?”

An image of a bulky black wolf, circling, menacing, flashed in his mind, along with the sear of raking claws across his back. “Yes . . . I think so.”

“Did it tell you its name? It did, didn’t it? I know it did because its name is the same as your name.”

“I’m not a wolf. How do you know me?”

She laughed, a merry sound that was absorbed by the ice and snow. “I don’t. And I didn’t say you’re a wolf. But your name is the same as the wolf. Somehow.” She shrugged beneath her heavy layers. “What is your name?”

He eyed her another moment, taking in the white ice bear fur of her coat and the long knife strapped to her thigh, but decided she didn’t seem threatening. If she had come up the Stair, though, she must have formidable talents. Or she could be another part of the test. Her face was exposed to the cold, and although her cheeks were mottled red, she didn’t appear to have any permanent frost damage or scarring yet as an elder would, so she probably was no older than he was, not yet twenty.

The balcony railing appeared to be made of ice, carved or formed into delicate filigrees with a narrow flat top at waist height—something far too elegant for the remoteness of this mountainside. The spyglass stood several inches back, poised as if to give the viewer a panoramic of the valley below—except that the valley was hidden under gray clouds and fog.

Above, the dim sun was shrouded behind its own veil, casting a dim luminescence.

“Go ahead, take a look,” the girl said.

He glanced at her, becoming annoyed. Was this some trick?

Wind whipped the end of his red scarf over his shoulder as he approached the spyglass, his hat still tucked under his arm. The spyglass was stiff in its holder, wouldn't turn. After examining it for a moment, he saw that it wasn't designed to look down, but up. He crouched and put his eye to the eyepiece.

At first, he saw nothing. He wiped the lenses with his mittened fingers, clearing a scrim of ice, then leaned in to try again, careful to avoid fouling the glass with his cloudy breath

He looked up at the side of Guanthanymore, near-vertical rock sheeted in ice. With effort, he was able to turn the glass slightly, expand his view to more gray rock and ice.

“Do you see it?”

She'd moved closer, which raised needles of wariness. “I see the mountain. So?”

“But what's on the mountain?”

He stood up, looked back at her. She'd come about halfway onto the balcony. She was still smiling, seeming eager for him to discover whatever was there.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I'm Persimmon. Call me Persi. That's what everyone does.”

“Who’s everyone?”

“You’ll see. What’s your name?”

He scowled. He had been surprised to find her here. Now there were others? The legends of the Frozen Puzzle Box Stair said that if you made it to the top, you would find answers, a solution to the cold and snow that had been crushing the world for decades in endless bitter winter. But no one who had entered the Stair had ever returned, and the assumption was that the challenges of the Stair itself had claimed the seekers’ lives—not that you reached the top and stayed here. If the Stair held answers, why would you not take them back to the frozen world, to the villages and family waiting below?

Well, he’d yet to find any answers. He tried the spyglass again.

Rock and ice, clouds and fog. Nothing he couldn’t have seen from his home below. The glass yielded a bit more under his hands, swiveling to pan higher along the peak. And reveal more dark rock, more ice, patches of snow caught on crags.

And then: Another balcony. It was much like the one he stood on, with a filigreed railing carved out of ice or icy rock. Thick icy buttresses supported it below and held it out over the mountainside. “Huh.”

“You see it?”

**#33 – (genre not given)**

February 1977

Chapter 1

Stormwind

Down the hall, a girl screamed, followed by a crash. I burrowed my head under the pillow in my lightless prison, and prayed to a god I didn't really believe in to end the nightmare. Or maybe I was already dead and this was hell. Of course it was. The United Hell of America, and to the corporations for which it stands...

Another scream sliced the air, rising in pitch until I thought it might shatter glass. I put my fingers in my ears like I had as a kid when the other girls sneered "Alex the Commie" at me. It didn't work any better now than it had then.

I heard a distant door open and a mixture of dread and relief washed through me. They would make her stop. What I detested was how. The guards working the day shift made the "broken ones" just disappear. The night guards didn't care that with our incredible new hearing, it was like we were standing in the room with them as they...

Pow. Pow. Pow. Clink. Clink. Clink.

Threads of adrenaline shot through my belly, and I dug my fingers into the mattress – a sensation akin to clawing sand since I could now feel every thread in the sheet. Helpless to escape my locked room or my enhanced senses, I drummed my feet against the bed and

screamed into its thick padding. I understood what made those other girls go insane. It tempted me, too. Escape...only a bullet away.

The only escape in this hellhole. No more vodka-induced sleep; not even the slight softening of the senses from a single shot. Not because our keepers had issues with alcohol, but because it would no longer make me drunk. I'd hounded one of them about it until he'd brought in a bottle of whiskey to shut me up. I'd drunk an entire fifth in under ten minutes without so much as a buzz. Sheer hell was what I was now facing.

Footsteps approached my room and stopped. I saw the guard's shadow on the frosted, mesh-reinforced glass of the door's window. The clinking of his keys made my teeth hurt and I gagged at the reek of Old Spice drifting in under the door. The taste of the cologne on my tongue made me want to spit.

The door opened. Wincing at the aural assault of shrieking hinges, I hauled myself onto my elbows and squinted at the figure backlit by wicked fluorescents in the hallway.

“What?” I asked.

“Gotta make sure you're still alive.”

“I'm fine.”

He made a mark on the clipboard he held. “Thought you'd wanna know your friend didn't make it.”

The door boomed shut and I let myself fall face first back onto the bed. Patty, my former

roommate, was dead. The sweet black girl with stark white teeth and a scarred chin from where a dog had bitten her when she was little. Useless tears seeped into my pillow. All she'd wanted was a way out.

I flipped onto my back and regretted it. I hated the white pressboard ceiling with its black polka-dot holes. Maybe they were a test too. Everything seemed like a test now. But, at least this one came without impassive men in lab coats subjecting me to an endless litany of questions. "Let's find out how strong you are, shall we?" "What do you hear, see, smell, feel?" "How much sleep are you getting?"

I snorted back a laugh. How much sleep was I getting? They knew. They were watching me around the clock. "Why did you tear the seams out of your bedding, Alex?" "Why did you peel the paint off your headboard, Alex?" Because I'm bored? Curious about my mental health? Why don't I show you?

Of course, I wouldn't. I didn't have to see with my eyes to know what happened if they thought one of us had gone mental. Not everyone broke, though. Sane voices left all the time and didn't come back.

I raised a hand in the curiously bright darkness afforded by my enhanced vision and curled it into a fist, uncurled it, curled it.

Supersoldier.

Those tests hadn't just told the scientists about my capabilities, they'd told me too. I could see in the dark, effortlessly bend thick iron bars and run forever without tiring. Those of us who

survived conversion were amazing. Superhuman. But I'd seen how our eyes shone at night, like the glow of a nocturnal animal. Creepy.

During conversion, I'd thought the physical suffering was the worst torture in existence. Pain that felt like splintered glass ground into every cell in my body. I'd prayed for death in the moments I was coherent enough to do so. Whenever the pain became bearable, a white clad demon arrived to administer another needle full of agony. I'd emerged from the ordeal so thin I was almost skeletal. It'd taken almost a week of voracious eating to regain my body mass.

Now I endured a different kind of torture.

A dull thud and slow shuffling came from the wall on the other side of my bed. I sighed. The girl in the next room paced a lot. Round and round her room, shoulder to the wall, mumbling. Almost everyone seemed to have a roommate, but she didn't. And neither did I. Maybe she'd also discovered that we had to be careful what we talked about. Too much speculation about our future purpose yielded a trip to solitary. I should know – that's what'd happened to me.

But tonight's sounds were different. I shifted on my lumpy mattress and considered sitting up. Then the tapping started. Softly at first, then building in intensity, her hammering on the cinder blocks between us eventually turned into an eerie kind of pound, thud. It sounded like she was throwing herself at the wall. Mortar dust sifting down from the seams made me wonder if she could really break through.



**#34 - Science Fiction**

Litia Delta Two's feeble sun was sinking into the horizon when a group of local tribesmen approached my Habi-tent. The fur-clad figures visible through the latest tear in the brittle fabric made my skin prickle. It wasn't like the Djalayud to venture so far from hut, hearth, and herd with a bone-chilling night setting in.

A biting wind whipped across the snow-choked grassland between us and rattled the ragged edges of the storage room wall. I brushed away the frost crusting the beginnings of my winter beard. I didn't have time for visitors now. The damage to my aging tent would only get worse if I didn't repair it pronto. But my numb fingers squeezed little more than fumes from the already flattened tube of Instabond.

The *last* tube. And it'd be months before I could get another drop-shipment from Retro-Timers' Outfitting and Supply. My muttered curses wafted away in clouds of frozen breath. The best I could do was slather the tent wall with mud, stitch a hide over the hole, and hope it lasted the six months until spring.

Unfortunately, it looked like I'd have to deal with the armed warriors filing up to my door first. I squinted at the silhouettes in the twilight. My pulse quickened as I counted. Seven of them? Damn. Why so many? One guy like me, who kept mostly to himself, couldn't pose that much of a threat. Yet they all wore horn-handled knives as long as my forearm. I scanned the shelves in the storage unit for a stun stick that might still work. This would be no social visit.

"Brother Lie-Noos?" a familiar voice called from outside my tent.

"Khulan?" The tightness in my chest eased. The chief's twenty-something youngest son was no stranger. He occasionally made the trek to the remote hollow where I lived in an effort to teach me to wrestle like a Djalayud. Despite the years of punishment I'd put my body through, I was in pretty good shape for a thirty-six year old hermit. I might never beat a champion like Khulan, but I never lost easily. And the bruises and pulled muscles were worth it to gain a friend in this lonely place. So I couldn't imagine why Khulan had brought a band of armed warriors with him.

I abandoned my useless weapons and squeezed past stacks of empty water tanks and nutritional supplement bins in the freezing back room of my tent. "I'll be right-- "

I arrived in the main living area to find it already reeked of unwashed bodies, rotting animal hides, and the rancid fat used to waterproof boots. My young warrior friend stood stiff as an ancestral carving before the inner flaps of my tent, his fur-clad retinue behind him. A greasy heaviness slid through my gut. The Djalayud usually insisted on an invitation before entering. I didn't know how to interpret this breach of protocol. Hopefully it was due to the late hour, not something I'd done.

With highly flammable Instabond fumes thick in the air, I decided against lighting a fat-burning lamp and flipped on a solar-sink lantern swinging from the a ceiling hook.

My visitors' eyes widened at the glow of recycled sunlight and the strangeness of the thin-walled tent it illuminated. The generous use of bovid furs on the floor and my sleeping pallet fit well with local custom. But the makeshift table strewn with data cards, the card reader-writer, and my roughly drawn map of the time corridor clearly belonged to a more advanced

world. Such analog tech might be archaic in the time I'd come from, yet, with a more warning, I'd have hidden my work away. Eight years after I'd arrived, the Djalayud were still wary of me.

Khulan, however, showed no fear of me or the evidence of my foreign origin. He'd seemed to grasp I came from a world whose sun was barely visible in their night sky and from time thousands of years in the future. Yet our familiarity apparently counted for little today. The stocky Djalayud warrior's dark eyes never met mine, as he waited, jaw tense, for his companions to lower a well-wrapped bundle onto my camp bed. A few black curls poked out of the wrappings.

My heart lurched. Not again.

Big for a child, small for an adult. Apparently someone important. And desperately ill, if the tribesmen sought my aid. No wonder they'd come so late and abandoned the usual niceties.

If only I didn't have to disappoint them.

I held out my empty palms. "Khulan, you know I'd like to help. But I've used up all the medicine I had for this year."

I helped these people whenever I could, but my most recent drop-shipment had arrived short a good three-quarters of my order, thanks to price increases. I couldn't afford more until next spring's relocation stipend came through.

The last pack of medi-printer stock I kept for emergencies could provide a day's treatment at most, not enough to cure me or anyone else of a life-threatening condition. If necessary, I could patch myself up enough to travel up the time corridor for treatment. The poor souls from

this down-time world, however, couldn't gain entry to an advanced civilization even to save their lives. It tore my heart to know I had to refuse Khulan's request and doom this young person to die. But the few resources I had available would help no more than the medicine woman's chants.

Khulan twisted his fur hat in his hands. "I would not ask your help, even to save my only daughter. But Chief Khutula and the medicine woman agreed. We must bring the young female to you."

Khulan gestured to a warrior to pull back the wrappings from the occupant of the bundle. The short dark curls were cut in an asymmetric style. Their owner had a squarish face with an olive complexion and large eyes rimmed with thick lashes. She clearly wasn't Djalayud,

**#35 - Fantasy**

Tai strode the cobbled streets of Riverbottom, arguing with his dead friend.

“I’m just saying we go and check it out. See if there’s anything worth taking down there.”

\_Mmhm\_. Tai imagined Hake with one eyebrow raised, still wearing the resistance’s brown cap and tar sandals. \_Soldiers are crawling all over the docks and you’re going to try to steal something. Next thing you’re in the mines til next summer and my sister’s back on the streets\_.

Tai passed a group of Achuri women with woven baskets of mavenstym, dried purple blossoms fragrant in the noonday sun. “All I’m saying is there has to be a reason the rebels burned that ship. Like maybe it was loaded with yura and it sank before anyone could get to it.”

A great elk grunted against its load of roof beams, hot breath shooting from wide nostrils, and Tai stepped out of the way. \_And I’m saying some quick money isn’t worth it. You have people to protect, Tai.\_

Hake didn’t need to say the rest. It had been five years since that morning in the eastern hills, and the memory was still raw. The day the Empire crushed the Achuri. The day that started his life on the streets.                      The day he’d let Hake die.

Tai bowed his head. “You’re right. I just want us out of here before the snows come.”

\_We’ll get there. You’re just lucky you’ve got me to keep you from doing dumb things. Like that time you wanted to steal those Imperial officer uniforms?\_

Tai grinned, almost feeling Hake's elbow in his ribs. "Yeah yeah. And if I'd listened to you we wouldn't have ended up sleeping under an Imperial wagon cart praying to the Prophet the mules didn't smell us."

\_And I didn't even rub it in. Let's check on the kids.\_

Tai had sent them mostly to Riverbottom today, expecting busier streets as people came to gawk at the wreck of the rebel attack. More people meant more Imperial soldiers around, but also more chances to make some money—and they weren't doing anything illegal.

\_Usually.\_

Fisher was two streets down, third in a line of frail children sitting against the carved wood wall of a luthier shop, palms held out. Two were Maimers, missing a hand or limb, another three Mothers, young girls clutching even younger children. Tai glanced up and down the street, then crouched and mussed Fisher's black-and-silver locks. "Hey Fishy, how's business?"

She smiled at him, eyes sparkling, seeming somehow too large beside her snub nose. "I saw three butterflies and two maven's heralds and a red songpickler, right over there on that rooftop." She pointed, a Mother nearby giving them a sidelong look.

Tai smiled. "That's great. Any...customers, too?"

"Oh, yeah." Her eyes refocused on him, one hand digging in the waist of her skirt. "Three this morning." She passed him a handful of Imperial marks.

"\_Three?\_ Fisher, that's great!" A sale or two a day was usually the best his kids could do. "Need some more?"

She nodded, already searching the street for more wildlife. It was the game she played to keep herself occupied on long days. They all had something—math games, magic tricks, stones to play if no one was around. And Tai—

\_You've got me.\_

He pulled three pebble-size balls of yura, gray-green lichen bound together with beeswax, and dropped them in her hand. She palmed them, eyes focusing down the street. “Tai, watch. I can get this one too.”

\_That's my girl.\_

Tai grinned, spotting an Imperial down the street. “Work your magic. I'll be right here.” He crossed the street, finding shade under a shopfront awning.

The woman approached with chin held high, as though bad luck and poverty were catching. Her shimmering white gown, stiff back and Achuri attendant all marked her as an Imperial citizen, but nothing so much as her hair. Silvery pale, thin as spiderwebs, it was braided and tied in elaborate loops on all sides of her head. A lighthair. Tai fingered his own hair, dark like everyone else's, but conspicuously thinner than the local Achuri black. A child of the earth, Jaja would say to him. Son of no one, son of everyone, and no reason to be ashamed of it.

Except that lighthairs ruled the world.

One of the beggars spoke up, a young mother holding a child, but the woman kept walking.

Fisher put on a bright expression and called, “A few coins for a smile, my lady?”

Tai grinned. He had taught his gang high Yersh, having learned it himself at a young age in Jaja's pleasure house—it sounded especially dainty in Fisher's tiny voice. The Children of the Earth were the only gang in town who spoke proper Yersh, and it made a difference in sales.

The woman stopped in her tracks, gazing down at Fisher. “Put your hand down girl, I know what you’re up to.” She spoke with the heavy vowels of the capital. “What’s your price?” The woman glanced around her as she asked—unlicensed sale of yura was technically illegal, though all the gangs did it.

“It would be twenty marks, ma’am.”

“Twenty marks?” The woman sounded offended, but it was clearly an act. Lighthairs couldn’t buy anything without first making a fuss over it, even if it was illegal and best done quick. “For a single ball?”

“Aye, madam.” Fisher’s eyes were bright, mischievous. She knew he was watching. The woman sighed and nodded at her attendant, who counted out marks. Minus the cost of the yura, that was twelve marks in their pocket, enough to feed them all lentil and renders tonight. Tai stood as the woman tried furtively to pocket her moss balls. He would give Fisher another ball of yura and—

“Watch!” The woman called, spinning around. “City watch! Thief!”



**#36 - Urban Fantasy**

Someone had barred the thick oak door from the outside. Accumulated dust on the bar told Danae that no one had touched it in decades. The stench of rotten flesh came from under the door. Father Thomas had told the Hounds this was where the Dominican scholars from St. Rose Priory came to when it all began, seeking a safe haven in which to unlock the mystery of the dead walking the earth, hiding tomes containing sacred and profane knowledge in a stone basement that, once upon a time, had been a wine cellar.

The Hounds cracked and dropped glow sticks on the floor. The extra light showed cobwebs draping the corners, the hall's ceiling and up the stairs behind them. Danae stood in front of the door with her pack mates at her back. A ponytail of brown hair, speckled with gray, descended past her shoulders, falling over her compound bow, quiver and leather vest. A few loose strands brushed against the "M" and "T" scarred into her face by her ears.

Kendall stepped to her side, rolling his head around to loosen his neck. The numerous braids of his dark blonde hair, flecked with road dirt, brushed the hilts of the machetes on his back. A raven, one of Feather, sat on his shoulder. He stroked the back of his hand, the skin scarred to identify him as a breaker of the seventh commandment, along the bird's throat.

"What's the plan?" Kendall asked.

"There could be as many as 20 in there," she said.

Kendall sniffed the air. "I think there's 23."

Danae knelt in front of the door and tilted an ear toward the crack. Feet scraped along the floor within. Hands and fingernails pounded and clawed inside the door. The blows and footfalls

were aimless and uncoordinated, lacking the concerted effort of creatures guided by a higher intellect.

She stood. "I don't hear a Wreck."

"Don't smell one either," Kendall said.

Gilden, Kendall's half-brother, a colossus of muscle more than a foot taller than either her or Kendall, rubbed the top of his shaved head, ran his hand down his face and tugged on his goatee. "My guess's under 20. Want to bet?"

From under the brim of his black leather hat Jarib muttered, "Who gives a fuck? They'll all be sent to judgment no matter how many there are."

With his thin face and sharp jaw locked into a murderous glare, it was hard for Danae to tell if Jarib meant the ones in the room or every Shambler and Wreck inhabiting the planet. She knew to him it didn't really matter. She looked at the Feather raven sitting on Kendall's shoulder.

"Any movement outside?" she asked.

The bird shook her head and ruffled her wings in the negative. Danae gauged the height of the hallway's ceiling and estimated the size of the makeshift library behind the door from what they'd seen of the estate's exterior. There wasn't going to be a lot of room. They could open the door, let the Shamblers pile out and take them out one by one at the top of the stairs, using the stairwell as a chokepoint.

Gilden stared at the door and flexed his hands. Kendall shook his out with a little smile. The brothers wanted a fight. It had been a long walk. If a Wreck was hiding inside with an assault rifle, she wanted to get to it as fast as possible. On occasion Wrecks hid themselves inside a group of Shamblers to appear less threatening, limping with a slack-jawed hunger until the time

was right and Dux's virulent artificial intelligence flared in their eyes as they drew their weapons.

"This is going to be loud," Danae said to the Feather. "Stay with Jarib. Jarib, if Feather sees we've drawn a horde's attention from outside the house--"

"I'll run out and handle it," he said.

Kendall tilted his head towards the Feather and the raven pressed her head against his cheek before crossing the hall and alighting on Jarib's shoulder. Danae nodded at Gilden. He set the heavy maul in his hands against the wall and unslung the assault rifle from his back so he could take off his clothing. She removed her bow and quiver. Kendall's hands went to unhook the necklace holding his wedding ring from around his neck.

Danae shook her head at Kendall. "Keep it and your clothes on. Gilden is going to take up a lot of space. Gilden, when you get in, plow through. I'll follow, then Kendall. Stay close and don't get swarmed. Jarib, none get past you."

As Gilden and Danae stripped down to what God had given them, she caught Gilden glancing through the corners of his eyes at the corded muscles rippling under her tanned skin. She ignored him.

When they were finished, they bundled their goods and handed them down the hall to Jarib, who set their gear next to their packs behind him. A sliver of a malevolent grin cracked Jarib's face as he pulled his favorite .45's from under his black longcoat. Kendall fell in behind Danae and drew his machetes.

Gilden stepped in front of Danae. His massive back, with the cross that had been branded into it, blocked the entire entrance. He cracked his knuckles.

"Ready when you are," he said.

"Before we enter," she said, bowing her head and clasping her hands in front of her, "let us pray."

The three men and the raven lowered their heads. Kendall and Jarib crossed their weapons in front of them. Flesh-craving moans from the other side of the door added a harrowing chorus to her words.

"Saint Michael the Archangel,

defend us in battle.

Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the Devil.

May God rebuke him, we humbly pray;

and do thou, O Prince of the Heavenly Host,

by the Divine Power of God,

cast into Hell Satan and all the evil spirits

who roam throughout the world seeking the ruin of souls."

"Amen," her pack mates responded.

She raised her head. Gilden snarled as his back broadened. His muscles, tendons and bones popped with growth. Fur sprouted on Gilden's back.

Rage clouded Danae's mind and reddened her vision. Her skin bristled with anticipation. She snarled as the bones and cartilage in her ears and face shifted. "Send them to Hell," she growled.

**#37 - Historical Fantasy**

The attack came at dawn.

Euthalia woke to the terse, worried voices of men, and she wrapped herself in her cloak and pulled on her boots before crawling out into the dawn light. “What is it?” she asked, only half-expecting an answer.

But Miloslav stopped mid-sentence to turn toward her. “Get back!” he snapped. “Hide yourself!”

Euthalia swept her eyes across the camp, seeing only men picking up weapons, and looked up the river, where she saw a dragon.

Its head rose from the water and curled upward, glaring down upon the surface in disdain. Its body was long and narrow, and she saw now oars protruded from either side, launching it across the river. Behind it came other boats, also bearing beast heads, but somehow — because she had seen it first, or because it was the nearest, or because for just a moment it had been a real sea serpent in her mind — the first one seemed the most frightening.

Pirates, she realized. Terrifying, horrific men who went a-viking to prey on traders.

Traders like them.

She shrank backward. “Do we run? Hide?”

“Get out of sight,” ordered Miloslav. “They may wish to trade, not fight. They are traders themselves as often as pirates. They may wish only for news of Byzantium, or trade in southern goods.”

But Euthalia, who had never been a warrior, yet looked at the ships and knew this was not the approach of a trading party. And the men with Miloslav knew it, by the way they gripped their weapons, and Miloslav knew it too, by the way his mouth stayed tight at the corners as he spoke. Her father knew it by the way he came to join Miloslav, weapon in hand and looking more worried than ever she had seen him, even when he had failed to marry her to a Byzantine merchant.

Euthalia turned and scanned for a place to hide. She settled for a bundle of fabric, bright with southern dyes, and wriggled beneath it. Any part of her which remained exposed would look like spilled fabric and would not betray her.

She could see nothing now. She curled up, trying to disappear beneath the fabric, and listened through the muting of the fabric and wood.

Her father's voice came first, calling down the river. "What do you carry to trade?"

For a moment there was no answer, and she tried to imagine the dragon-boat sailing by, eyes forward and passing unseeing over their camp, the sea-serpent leaving them all untouched. But a moment later, there was the unmistakable scrape of a hull running aground, like massive claws against sandy rock, and she knew the dragon had landed.

"What do you carry?" The voice was gruff, huge, the voice of a sea serpent or a man who rode a dragon. It wrapped about the words as if familiar with them but not quite comfortable, a second language.

"Good sailing to you, and safe travels to you as to ourselves," called her father. His voice held a note she had never heard before, not only the unexpected deference she had heard in

Byzantium but an additional undertone of fear. Her father, a warrior and a chief of warriors, feared these Northmen come down the river.

Come down the river, she realized, through her father's lands, or near enough to them. For it was impossible to reach the south and east from the north and west without passing through the middle, and certainly these boats had sailed this river down from their North home. For a moment she wavered between fierce indignation at the effrontery of sailing through her father's lands without permission and horror that they might have sailed past her home, might have stopped at Melnik, might have killed or taken her mother and her brother and all the people she knew there.

The man with the dragon voice did not return her father's greeting. "You come from the city, I see. Tell us what you bring away."

"Spices," said Tikhomir, "and silks, and dyes for fabrics. And iron ore, to be smelted into steel. It will make fine weapons."

"Hm." The voice seemed to consider. "Their ore is better, no argument there. It will make better weapons, that is true." There was a slight sound of steps, and the voice faded and rose as it spoke; Euthalia guessed he was turning to take in all their men, Miloslav and the others. "We will take the ore and the dyes, and half the spices."

Tikhomir hesitated only just noticeably. "And will you pay in coin or barter?"

A laugh arose from the dragon's throat, and then from many, many more throats. Euthalia did not know how many men rode the dragon-ship and the other boats, but she knew she had seen many oars. How many? Twenty at a side? That was a fair guess, making forty per boat. And

there had been three boats. That made one hundred twenty hostile men, warriors who rode dragons and spoke like sea serpents.

One hundred twenty, to oppose her father's band of sixteen.

Euthalia could stand it no longer. She pressed herself against the ground, the weight of the fabric over her, and peered out with one eye from beneath the bale of cloth. Now she could see, though it was hardly enough to be helpful. She knew her father's boots, and those were Miloslav's beside him, and the big set of feet facing them, visible between their ankles, must belong to the man with the dragon's voice.

The laughter slowed, and the man with the dragon voice spoke again, a trace of levity still coloring his tone. "The ore, and the dyes, and half the spices, or all and as many slaves as survive the fight."

Her father did not answer immediately, and that was his mistake. There was a nearly-imperceptible movement in the third set of feet, simultaneous with a rub of oiled leather and a soft sound like a punch into a cow's flank. Miloslav's right foot took a step back, hesitated, and then he folded to his knees, clutching somewhere on the front of his torso.

"He will not be one of the slaves," said the dragon voice.

Miloslav tipped forward into the sandy dirt, one arm splayed and the other trapped beneath him. He had not even struck a blow in his defense or his chieftain's, a sad and pitiful death.

"Now," said the dragon voice, "will you fight, and die? Or will you surrender, and live as slaves?"



“Wait,” urged her father. “I have another prize to offer. We are traders, and we would do business as men of trade.”

“Oh?” The dragon voice was only faintly curious. “What can you offer that is worth your lives?”

**#38 - Mystery/suspense**

It was a tiny Italian restaurant in SoHo, New York named Bella Italia. Muted overhead brass fixtures hung low from the ceiling. Candles lit the tables. An L-shaped bar sat right up against the wall to the left of the front entrance. A t-shaped island, that held all kinds of plants on the top, divided the room. Booths hugged the island and tables were scattered across the rest of the space. Italian music played softly in the back ground.

Everyone seemed to know each other. Older, heavy-set, Italian couples sat twisting their spaghetti on stainless steel forks. Young women decked out for a girl's night fiddled with the shiny trinkets on their wrists and around their necks. It amazed me how comfortable my best friend, John Howard, seemed with everything and everyone.

The hostess and the bartender immediately greeted John like friends, which was odd. John never even mentioned this place or these people to me before. He slung his arm around me and said, "I want to introduce you to my friend, Dillon. We go way back so take good care of him."

The pretty little hostess coyly tucked some hair behind her ear and disappeared into the back-room with a little bounce in her step. After a couple of minutes she came back and gave John a hug. She reached over, touched my arm and shot me a little smile. "Nice to meet you, Dillon. Everyone's ready go in back."

John seemed like a regular here. I tried to come to terms with the new side to my "best friend". This wasn't like him. I had known John for about ten years now, ever since our freshman year of college. We'd been through a lot together and I knew him pretty well, or at least I thought I did. Lately he's been acting strange and its been pissing me off.

John led me to a dingy, cramped, smoke filled room in the back of the building. It looked like a break room. A big round folding table sat in the middle of the room beneath a single hanging light bulb. Cinderblock walls and cubbies set up along the back wall completed the dismal picture. Almost completely isolated from the rest of the building, it was hard to imagine a loud, busy restaurant operated just down the hall. I could barely hear the chatter of the customers, the sound of silverware banging, or orders being called from the kitchen.

My eyes settled on an average height, slightly overweight, middle-aged guy with an intimidating stare. He wore a power suit with his black hair slicked back. One hand held a drink, and the other held a cigarette. A stream of curses poured out of his mouth.

I guess I looked curious because John leaned in close to me and whispered, “That’s the restaurant owner, Paul Rizzoli. He put this game together.”

I wasn’t sure exactly what made me think it, but Paul seemed to be more than just a restaurant owner. He had this intense energy and a commanding presence. It freaked me out. A group of guys revolved around him. They imitated him and looked to him for approval on the smallest thing. They were trying to be copies of Paul. My instincts had me on high alert. John didn’t normally hang out with this kind of crowd.

I felt very out of place. These goons were all loud, intimidating, and thuggish. They had very disturbing sense of humor. The second I walked in, I heard them telling crude jokes and I’ve never heard more swearing in my life.

“It looks like you’re not the only new person here tonight. Let me introduce you around Dillon.” He walked me over to the table where most people seemed to be gathering. “This is

Tony and Mark. I met them the first time I came. This is Peter and Rick; we meet a couple weeks ago. Guys, this is Dillon.”

While I was getting acquainted with everyone, I could hear Paul tapping his feet and drumming his fingers on the table he was leaning on. Then, in a thick New York accent he said “There'll be enough time for chit chat during the game. Let's get started.” We all took our seats.

Mark dealt the first hand. "The game is five card draw, aces are high. 25 dollar ante everyone."

We all put in our money into the pot and got our cards. Three kings! I couldn't believe it, I got a three of a kind. We went clockwise around the table betting. I called and decided to discard two of my cards.

We showed our cards, and I had won! Tony had three 10s, so I scoped the pot over toward me, relishing in my luck. I sensed Mark tense up next to me, and saw Tony do the same thing a couple seats away. I could almost feel the anger pour out of them.

I was having a hard time concentrating on playing the game. By 11 o'clock, I was tired, down money, and ready to go home. John's luck tonight was unbelievable. He showed no signs of wanting to give up on his winning streak yet. I thought that John was full of it when he told me he would win big tonight. Half an hour later, I finally had enough.

When I got to my car on the other side of the parking lot, I turned to glance back at the place. Paul Rizzoli's face disappeared from the window next to where he locked up behind me. A chill ran down my spin.

A few minutes later he came running out of the building carrying a black duffle bag. He didn't have that before. Seconds later, a couple of guys burst through the door after him with guns drawn.

John jumped in the car yelling, "Drive! Now! Go, go, go!"

A gunshot rang out behind us.

**#39 - Space Opera**

Chapter 1

"You can still back out."

Veronique blinked up from the virtual pages of *The Book of Saintes*, her empty stomach threatening to heave.

Across from her in the limo-flyer, her chaperone, Mother Elowyn, scowled as if she'd never seen such an unworthy prospect in all the couvents on the planet of Sainte Haleigh. The contemptuous offer marked the first words the wrinkled and gray-haired matron had spoken to Veronique in the hour since they'd boarded the flyer at Couvent Fontaine. Now, with the drop in speed and altitude churning the acid in Veronique's stomach, they must be making their approach to the seaport city where her father, Baron Fontaine, lived.

Hardly the time to reconsider.

Veronique surreptitiously wiped her clammy hands on her long skirts. What did Mother Elowyn expect, giving her the *The Book of Saintes* to read during the flight? Its gruesome accounts of the women martyred during her planet's settlement would make her feel faint any day, particularly so today. Maybe if she'd been allowed to bring something more entertaining, like *Haute Mademoiselle* or *Le Vivre Outré Chic*, she wouldn't have worked up such a case of nerves.

"I can send for another girl to take your place." Mother Elowyn sighed with resignation and retrieved a messaging film from the drab olive folds of her robes. "If you've changed your mind--"

"No." Veronique took a deep breath and straightened her spine. "I'm not afraid."

Her escort raised a sparse eyebrow. "You should be. Rank might impress the convent's bridal selection committee. But Baron Fontaine won't wave you on with his approval simply because you're the daughter of one of his first-tier wives." She accepted the steaming cup of tea offered by a eunuch servant. "For a marriage alliance as important as this one with House Montclair, you'll face his most intense scrutiny."

"I'm ready." Veronique clasped her shaking hands in her lap and bowed her head, the way a humble, well-behaved convent girl would. Despite her twenty-three Galactic Standard Years of training in protocol and manners, she admittedly fell short of an ideal convent lady. But she could fake it well enough to pass for one when needed.

The wizened matron's mouth twisted with skepticism. "Rejection isn't the worst fate you face. Many girls far better than you have gotten banished for a single trivial mistake. Too many lately. You're better off returning to the old maids' home than--" Her gaze fixed on the floor and her scowl deepened. "By the Living Saintes, what have you got on your feet?"

Veronique raised the hem of her robes just enough to reveal her pink-beribboned sandals. The gleam of satin and tiny crystals sent a thrill through her. "They're Baldacinni's."

She didn't expect Mother Elowyn to appreciate this season's most fabulous designer shoes. But anyone could see how feminine and elegant--not to mention expensive--they were. Far too chic for staid and provincial Couvent Fontaine. But if she was to join the fashionable and elegant women of Couvent Montclair, she had to dress the part.

"Are you insane?" Mother Elowyn blinked at the extravagant footwear. "You can't possibly appear before Baron Fontaine wearing something so scandalous. He's banished girls for far less."

Veronique drew her voluminous silk skirts over her exposed toes, her face heating. "He won't see them. I promise."

"Prepare for landing," the eunuch piloting the flyer announced over the comm system.

Mother Elowyn huffed and shoved her untouched tea at the eunuch waiting by her side. "We haven't time to find you a different pair. If you had any sense, you'd bow out now. If not, you'd better pray to all the Saintes that Baron Fontaine doesn't notice."

The flyer banked in a tight turn. Outside the window, the city of Sainte Tiffany spread out before them. Veronique pressed herself against the pane for a better view. Between the Sea of Sainte Ophelia's Tears and the cliffs above it, each House staked out its territory. Massive stone mansions stood within walled compounds, protected by shimmering domes of dimensional fields. Farther out, the glittering glass towers of the business district loomed like a field of crystals. In the far distance, ground traffic thoroughfares cut through a maze of boxy tenements where the common folk lived.



Veronique's skin tingled beneath her silken robes. All the big Houses. All the best shopping. The most glamorous galas. Everything important on this far-flung ball of rock happened in the city of Sainte Tiffany. And if she made it through her interview with the baron today, she would find herself at the center of it. As a wife at Couvent Montclair.

Before she could pick out the fortress that belonged to House Fontaine, the flyer touched down with a whisper of thrusters. A pair of eunuchs rushed to bring Mother Elowyn her veils.

Veronique fumbled to pull her own veils over her face and secure the wind tethers. Deep breaths, she reminded herself. Focus. Just answer the baron's questions. Yes, sir. No, sir. Eyes on the floor. Keep every inch of skin covered.

The door beside her slid open. Veronique stepped out of the flyer, down the steps, and onto the landing pad. The light of KUB-4712--the massive, bright-burning star that was their sun--blinded Veronique for a moment before the filters in her veil adjusted to its intensity. It was only the fourteenth hour of morning, yet the sticky coastal air settled heavily in her lungs.

She glanced back at Mother Elowyn. The old woman's gnarled fingers struggled to position the veils over her grey head. She cursed at the eunuchs' efforts to sort them out.

"Useless fools," Mother Elowyn spat. "At this rate, we'll miss our audience entirely."

Veronique swallowed. For most girls at Couvent Fontaine, a missed audience meant another try on another day. But with just weeks before she turned twenty-four, the isolation and endless whist games of the old maids' home were closing in on her.

**#40 - mainstream lit, contemporary, suspense, mystery, amature detective, paranormal**

Prologue: Strangers in Mecca

The limousine slowed almost to a complete stop before it lurched first to the right, as I was thrown onto my sister Kat, then to the left into the empty space which should have been occupied by our long since deceased sister Bette, as the limo lumbered over the speed bump, entering the old subdivision.

Wait; there are no speed bumps in Mecca!

Barely a word had been spoken since leaving the cemetery. Greta, sitting across from us, was staring straight ahead as if we weren't there. There was a run in her stocking. Piper, beside her, hiding behind a Catholic newspaper, was sobbing silently. A small, dark pool of tears had collected on her skirt. The newspaper was in Spanish (when had she learned Spanish?) Well, at least she was doing something. The fortress the paper created reminded me of the cereal boxes she would line up in front of her bowl at the breakfast table so she wouldn't have to look at us. Piper was the baby of the family and had always been sulky. Today, I'll give her today.

As we pulled into the subdivision, we'd long lost our sad, small procession of cars. "Sycamore Grove, Neighborhood of the Future" the sign read. It was one of the first post WWII master plans of Southern California, just twenty minutes east of Los Angeles. My father called it Mecca.

"Daddy, where's Mecca"? I would say.

"Right here, baby, right here!"

Today, from my vantage point in the back of the limo, my seat almost on the floor, the view out my window was exactly as it had been in the fifties from the back seat of mother's blue station wagon, only something had gone terribly wrong in Mecca.

The Jones' noble sycamore, fort and headquarters of the neighborhood club had been reduced to a pile of firewood stacked against the old garage. Where the tree had stood was now a pitiful sapling staked with an old mop, bound with blue painter's tape. There were five cars parked at the old Ball residence, three of them on the front lawn, all up on wood blocks.

Turning to the right, before the next speed bump, the Blades lot came into view: (tacky religious pageantry, homage to the Virgin Mary, or was it sacrilege?) I wasn't certain. Shiny aluminum pie tins dangled from every tree, protecting the ripened fruit. Iron bars on windows and doors protected the inhabitants. The entire neighborhood had become a foreboding, fortress of wrought iron ornamentation, except for mother's. That had been her last holdout.

As the driver opened our door, a blast of hot August air woke us from our fugue state. Barking dogs and the distant chorus of a Mexican radio station hung on the heavy static air. As we filed out of the limo, strangely in our natural birth order, I focused on my sibling's shoes. Bits of grass and clods of mud clung to their heels. We'd go in the house, sadly and quietly pack up. Send away the hospital bed and oxygen tanks. Take the handicapped ramp down from the porch. Strip beds. Put away charts, monitors and walkers. Responsibly dispose of medications and needles. We'd cancel utilities, put up a for sale sign. Then it will be time to leave, for good. But I still had a question.

“Where's Mecca now, Daddy? Where's Mecca now?”

Part One

A Heart Flush

CHAPTER ONE

I came into the world, late on a cold and rainy Sunday evening, January twenty third, the saddest day of the year, according to a recent study completed by the Cardiff University in, Wales. How depressing. I'm certainly glad no one knew this at the time.

1955 Los Angeles, California, the day I came into the world, Liz Taylor gave birth to a baby boy. Mother told the story many times how the maternity ward and nursery were abuzz with the exciting news. Father would report of the many fans and reporters loitering in the lobby all hoping to glimpse the famous mother and child.

Often while growing up I wistfully fantasized that the babies had been mistakenly switched at birth. Not that there was anything wrong with my family. Perhaps it was just a childhood fancy, having a glamorous movie star for a mother, or maybe the first intuitive intimations of not feeling I belonged in this particular family.

My father Edwin "Eddie" Richter stood six foot tall: chiseled face, blue eyes with an olive complexion, straight, light brown salt and pepper hair; German heritage. Mother, Helen Flannigan: big green eyes, creamy white skin, thick wavy, strawberry blond hair, and an easy smile. She was Irish, first generation. They already had three of me at home: Greta Garbo age ten and Bette Davis eight, pretty pale faced blonds with blue eyes, and an eighteen-month-old, Katherine with auburn hair, fair hazel eyes and mother's creamy skin. I had straight, dark brown

hair, huge brown, almost black eyes with skin that tanned and freckled in the summer. My name is Isabelle. Shortly after my birth, they high-tailed it out of L.A. to raise us in the suburbs of Orange County. Two years later we welcomed another baby girl, this one a green eyed red head who screamed all the way home from the hospital. Piper Laurie.

Dad called us his “Heart Flush”.

Mother a star struck young women from New England took to naming her first daughters after Hollywood movie stars then reverted to the Old Testament then back to Hollywood. I have often wondered why?

Was I wanted? Was I a surprise? Was I even theirs? They got me and then kept me, one way or the other, so I guess it doesn't matter now. Many years later they fought to keep me, and to protect me from learning their secret. A carefully guarded oath they eventually took to their graves.

Unfortunately, I have become the unwitting bearer of this mysterious knowledge and like a relentless detective I've become obsessed with discovering the deeply buried truth.

They call me Issy, this is my story.

**#41 - Women's Fiction**

The bullet. Where it started and where it stopped. That's what the newspapers focused on. The Bee, in particular. A big, thick, black headline with Paloma's picture right underneath it. A much smaller photo that included Samantha underneath that. Kneeling in the driveway over her wife and looking devastated and helpless as anonymous neighbors surrounded her. A less concerned neighbor with a real heads-up sense for the news had taken that particular shot, immortalizing Sam's grief.

There was never anything about the Cheerios scattered everywhere or the busted can of Campbell's tomato soup all over Paloma and the driveway; a different color than the blood but still runny and red. But if you looked closely at the picture from the Bee, that one with a shattered and terrified Sam, you could see the Cheerios.

The offending bullet traveled through an exterior wall and across their suburban street. Then through the soup can and the cereal box, which had all been nestled inside the reusable Safeway tote as Paloma unloaded the truck. Finally, as the newspapers loved to point out, the bullet came to rest right at the center of Paloma's heart. The detail made very good copy. Sam would admit to that; she had a hard time getting it out of her head at night. Surely it must have been equally as hard to forget for the readership of the Sacramento Bee.

The bullet; the bullet was what so much of the story had revolved around. A real hook for hanging a byline or a criminal case. So it was also well-documented that the offending Ruger P-series was loaded with .45 ACP rounds. Sam had looked up the particular type of ammo on the internet, even watched a 17-minute-long video titled 'At what distance is .45 ACP still lethal?' Turns out that at even 200 yards you could stop another human in his or her tracks with the

cartridge. Unfortunately for Paloma Mireles, she'd only been on the other side other side of the street and a box of Cheerios away from Craig Winston when he'd taken the shot, firing wide and easily missing his wife Barbara (fortunately for her).

Samantha Benson now sat holding Barbara Winston's hand, just like old friends; though they'd only spoken a couple times in the three years since the shooting. On her other side, Sacramento police detective Mary Fuentes held Sam's other hand. They spoke quite often. Practically every day.

They were the last three people in the cool courtroom, AC ticking along. The jury came back late in the day with Craig's sentence (life, but with the possibility of parole), so the attorneys and the reporters beat feet quickly to get back to offices and finish paperwork or make filing deadlines; maybe even with enough time to spare to get home for dinner at a decent hour. After all, the sun hadn't set and the summer heat was bound to give way to a pleasant night. Maybe folks had been rushing off with the thought that they could catch the last of the light. Fire up the BBQ, open a bottle of wine and forget the day.

Sam figured she'd do the same thing. Although wine wasn't on her menu. There was still a third of a handle of Tanqueray on the kitchen counter. She'd noticed it as she was leaving the house this morning, and the corners of her mouth had turned up in anticipation. A few things still made her smile, and Tanq and Tonic (T&T) was one of them. The rest of the bottle would be gone by tomorrow morning; so she'd have to stop on her way home from work on Friday to stock up for the long weekend.

The image in her head of plucking the green bottle off of the shelf at BevMo dissolved as Mary Fuentes squeezed her hand.

“You good, kid?”

Sam smiled over at her, no teeth in it. “I’m good.”

On her other side, Barbara Winston was silent. Barb was always silent. Always had been, probably always would be. But she was also sweet. She turned to Samantha as she stood. She looked down at the floor, and then up. She held open her arms a little ways, purse falling to the crook of her elbow.

Sam stood and gave her a hug, her shoulder-length blond hair falling forward as she did so. A good hug; a strong one. She still had a lot of those left in her and it felt right when she handed them out.

“I’m sorry.” Barb’s voice squeaked at Sam’s ear.

Sam nodded and she held Barb tighter for a moment before the other woman stepped back. Met Sam’s blue eyes; nodded herself, turned, and walked down the long bench row and out of the courtroom.

Mary laid a hand on Sam’s shoulder as they watched Barb leave.

Sam’s sister Lucy and their dad Jim had been in the courtroom too, earlier. They’d also left not long after the sentence was read. Jim had laid his hand on Sam’s shoulder, a lot like Mary just now. His grasp firm and sure, but holding little promise of comfort. Jim knew Sam was beyond that, so he gave what he could and left it there.

Lucy had bent forward from the row behind Sam to give her a hug around her neck and a kiss on the cheek.



“We’re going to pick up Jeffrey from the sitter and then go visit mom. See you at dad’s for dinner tomorrow?” Lucy sighed. “Don’t blow us off again. You’re bringing the buns for the burgers and dogs.”

Sam nodded. Silent, just like Barb.

Back in the moment, Sam placed a hand over Mary’s at her shoulder. Then she picked her bag up from the wooden bench and they filed out.