



Welcome to the Critiki Room!

with Amber Herbert, Kate Jonuska and Mark Stevens

2024 Colorado Gold Writers Conference

Submission #1

“You want to save the day again?” Witch-hazel Rue said, their extra-wide smile sending twists in the grin-lines of their fairy face.

“I don’t recall saving the day last time,” Reg said.

“No,” Witch-hazel said. “But you wanted to.”

Reg raised a finger, ready to argue. The voice of his cousin murmured out of an old memory, though, like the voice out of the little niche at the back of the oracular cave. “You think you know best,” the murmuring memory of a voice said, “but you don’t.”

Reg put his finger down. He might have been able to argue with Witch-hazel Rue, merely a fairy princess (or prince, depending on who answered when the question arose). But Squid, a cousin (or sibling, depending on which paperwork sat on top of the stack) brooked no disagreement.

Witch-hazel’s wide and wicked smile turned their eyes all crinkly. A deep, genuine joy burned behind those grey-green eyes, even if it seemed to be a joy had at seeing the funny side of pain.

“You’re not ready for this,” Witch-hazel said. It felt to Reg like, until a moment before, they were going to ask if Reg were ready.

“It’s the next thing needs doing,” Reg said.

“That is true, petal,” Witch-hazel said, and their sharp smile softened just a little. “We’re too deep in now to pull out till the deed is done and done to the edge of exhaustion.”

“Do you have to make everything sound vaguely sexual?”

“Yes,” Witch-hazel said in a tone that left no room for argument. They beckoned with a long-fingered, empty hand at the empty door. “After you.”

There was no further option for delay. Reg gave a mock salute, his the wrinkles in his hands as ever stained with the black of a sorcerer’s hot magic—like the grease in the cracks of a mechanic’s hands but more ashen. Reg pulled the goggles down on in front of his eyes, then, quick so he couldn’t think about it, he jumped out the door.

Submission #1, continued

He had never leapt from an airplane before. And he still hadn't, since this was more like a zeppelin or other lighter-than-aircraft, except that the balloon wasn't large at all because it was filled with a helium treated with the magical trickery that dragons used to keep themselves aloft. He had never planned to do skydiving at the best of times, meaning with a parachute and after learning how to do it. It had never sounded appealing to him.

Ironically, then, leaping out of this pseudo-zeppelin without any parachute at all had sounded more like a challenge than stupidity.

The skyscrapers and grid of streets stabbed up at him from the ground. It looked so distant, here where it was empty and cold and the wind walloped him constantly. Soon enough, it would look much closer. He had prepared himself psychologically. Still, the feeling paralyzing him was not fear. It was beyond that. It was a pre-mental, non-thinking that

took hold of his body and left him incapable of thinking or moving.

He would need to do some thinking and moving before getting closer to the ground, though, or this would be a short day and, what might be worse, he would let Poppy down. He didn't think that dying from slamming into the ground from a half mile up would be enough to hide him from her displeasure. She probably knew a guy in the afterlife. He had recently gotten pretty fuzzy about how the afterlife worked.

Best not mess up.

Submission #2

The Unicorn

A half-empty bottle of Jim Beam whiskey and crushed Bud beer cans scattered across the kitchen counter meant trouble. Donny's thin shoulders sagged. If he'd returned with the cigarettes sooner, he could have escaped into the night before his foster mother got nosy. Mosquito bites and sleeping outside on hard ground didn't hurt as bad as waiting around for a whipping.

Her rings flashed as she dealt the cards with quick, precise movements. The jewels were fake, just like her. Shirleen. Even her name sounded bogus.

Two men in sweat-stained undershirts slouched around the dinette table with her, sloppy stacks of coins and bills in front of them. Probably some losers she'd picked up at the casino and

brought home to rip off playing Texas Hold'em or one of her other games.

Without taking her focus from the other players, her flabby arm shot out and she wagged her fingers impatiently. "Quit sneaking around. About time you got back with my smokes."

He was skinny but tall for his twelve years, so the clerk at the corner store never asked questions whenever he came in to buy her cigarettes. Donny darted into the room, pretending he had a superhero's cloak of invisibility, and dropped the fresh pack on the speckled Formica tabletop next to an overflowing ashtray. He ducked his head and made a break for the door. There still was time to see Annie tonight.

The woman scruffed the neck of his torn t-shirt before he had taken two steps and yanked him to face her. She fixed watery eyes on him. "Hand over the rest."

Submission #2, continued

“That’s what they cost.” Donny clutched a unicorn charm on a thin metal chain in his pocket. She’d never have missed the change if she was winning.

The woman’s face flushed, and the vertical lines between her penciled eyebrows deepened. “You better not be stealing from me, you little shit.”

“I’m not—” His head snapped to the side as she smacked his cheek with the back of her hand. The blow stung worse than a hundred wasp stings. He bit back tears. Just wait ’til he was bigger. No way she’d hit him. Until then, better him than the other kids she kept. He could take whatever the old bitch could hand out.

“Aw, come on, Shirleen.” The man next to her, the one who’d been watching him with squirmy eyes, fanned his cards face down on the table and tilted the chair back on two legs. “He didn’t do nothin’ wrong.”

She extricated her claws from Donny’s shirt and primped her bleached helmet of hair, her rouged lips turning into a pout. “I’m not running a charity here.”

“Forget him. Let’s play.” The other man scratched wiry dark hair in his armpit and popped open a beer.

Donny bolted from the kitchen into the dark alley, slamming the rusted screen door behind him. No way in hell was he coming back tonight.

Submission #3

Elfego Rivera & Borderland Justice

Town of Socorro, Socorro County, New Mexico Territory,
1908

Under a silver-dollar moon, the weathered brick walls and iron-barred windows of the Socorro County sheriff's jail were bathed in a chalk-white glow, washing them of any color. Hiding behind a nearby shed, Elfego Rivera checked the pocket-watch his grandfather had given him to confirm it was nearing midnight. The jail windows were dark. Surely the sheriff had gone home to bed, along with the rest of the sleepy little town. No one else would be on duty. No one expected trouble at the county jail, much less at that hour. Much less from a fifteen-year-old like Elfego. That kind of thing only happened in the dime novels he was fond of reading.

The only prisoner in jail that night was Elfego's seventeen-year-old cousin Emil. One week earlier, the foolish cabrón had gotten into a fistfight with a Texas cowboy who'd been passing through town. Between the two of them, they smashed a window and broke a few chairs over each other's heads in the Singing Cholla Saloon. Nobody's fool, the cowboy had ridden on, leaving Emil to take all the blame for the damage. Emil was sentenced to work off what he owed, but only after six weeks in jail. Elfego couldn't imagine cooling his heels in a cold, tiny cell for six weeks. Neither could Emil, who begged him daily for help.

Elfego didn't know who started the fight, but it wasn't fair that Emil should be thrown in jail because he couldn't pay the repair bills. It wasn't his fault the cowboy had skipped town and couldn't be held responsible. And that's why Elfego waited nearby in the moon-lit night, behind a tumble-down tool shed, with a ladder, some tools, and a coil of rope.

Submission #3, continued

He'd seen the inside of the jail once before. He and some classmates spent a night in the jail after they white-washed one of their schoolteacher's bulls as a gag. That one incident was enough for Elfego.

He pitied anyone sitting in lock-up; but, during his brief visit, he noticed a ventilation hatch on the low, one-story roof. It latched from the outside, so it couldn't be opened by the inmates, but anyone on the roof could open it, if it wasn't padlocked.

The plan was simple. He'd climb to the roof on the ladder, open the hatch and drop a rope to his cousin. If there was a lock on the hatch, he'd remove it with a hacksaw. Two saddled horses were hidden from view nearby, tethered in the shallow arroyo that ran between the jail and the town cemetery. Once his cousin was free, Emil would ride through the night to Belén, in Valencia County, where he could stay with an aunt. Hopefully, his cousin would find work and

make enough money to pay off his debt. Then, perhaps, the Socorro County sheriff would forgive Emil's youthful indiscretion and let him return home.

Submission #4

Like My Mother

Chapter 1

A twirl of excitement dances in my stomach. I'm turning eight on Tuesday, and my mother's coming to help me celebrate. It's been over a year since her last visit, and I know she'll be surprised at how much I've grown.

Just before the sun comes over the edge of the plateau, the sandstone cliffs along the river turn a deep orange. It's a small flash of time during which Mother told me I should always make a wish. A wish on the morning glow. Like the wish before blowing out candles on a cake, or a wish on the glittering line of a falling star.

I have my wish ready. That this will be one of the good visits, starting with the train being on time. My mother has trouble with delays.

A breeze ruffles the golden cottonwood trees next to our porch. I shiver and pull down the sleeves of my cardigan and adjust the collar on my blouse. That's when I notice there's a catsup stain next to the top buttonhole. Mother won't like that.

The dance in my stomach climbs up my throat and turns itself into worry. I take a deep breath like Aunt Veda taught me. Moist soil from last night's rain. The sweet breath of the last of the roses from Arnetta's garden next door. Soil. Roses. Breathe. I repeat the focus on my breath until the sky is a searing blue, the color of mountain larkspur.

"Hey Nan!"

My best friend, Lena, skips across the alley. She's ready for church with her ruffled yellow dress, black patent shoes and white socks turned down with a yellow trim of lace. The flip of her black hair frames her face.

Submission #4, continued

“Your hair looks nice. You’re wearing the headband.” I bought the black plastic headband at Woolworths and glued yellow sunflowers to it as a present for her eighth birthday. Sunflowers are her favorite flower because they grow wild and don’t need a lot of tending.

Wild and Independent. That’s how Lena and I see ourselves. Which is why I don’t understand the church part.

“Mama says hairspray is poison, but she let me use her brush curlers. Golly, Nan, you must be excited. It’s today, isn’t it? That your mom comes?”

“The train should be arriving about now, so it won’t be long.” Lena teeters on the porch step like she needs my permission to leave.

“You should get on to church. You don’t want to be late. Bad impression and all.”

Because of her baptism next week and becoming a disciple of the Mormon’s Jesus. She hasn’t said much about it because she knows Aunt Veda and I are agnostic and are more focused on simply being good people. I sometimes get mixed up with the word and say agonistic, which isn’t the same thing at all, sounding more like I’m suffering, which I’m not. At least not about whether or not there’s a god.

Submission #5

From inside our hover tent, my cousin Gael and I gaped at the 300-plus kilogram creature pummeling against my brothers' refuge. If our flexi-pane dome shelters were bear-proof, why was a grizzly fracturing the sides? The animal already took out their propulsion unit. Fleeing wasn't an option.

"According to my wildlife database, the grizzly's night vision is like ours," Gael called to the men over the comm system. "If we turn on our proximity lights, it might get distracted and leave."

Gael pressed her face so close to the side that her breath fogged the flexi-pane wall. Her gaze never left the beast. I could almost hear her brain evaluating and discarding strategies to save the guys—ideas leaking like sweat from her pores.

Shuddering, I took another step back into our tent's recesses. I could run calculus and trig equations in circles around my cousin. But when she stepped up in a crisis, I stayed out of her way.

"Don't do anything to make it come after you." My brother Milo's voice came across the comm with the composure of ordering appetizers for dinner. Regardless of the danger, he'd stay calm. He always did.

At the attack's start, the guys turned their tent's transparency setting to blackout mode, hoping the animal would lose interest and leave.

Great idea—too bad it didn't work.

Something attracted this animal, and it wasn't giving up.

The bear stood on his hind legs and stretched, its full three-and-a-half-meter height towering above their tent. The creature raised its snout. With nostrils flared, it took in all the invasive scents we'd left in his territory. After nearly a week on the trail, our camping protocols had become routine. We'd stowed dinner remnants in odor-proof containers and extinguished our holographic campfire that emitted a realistic smoke aroma.

Submission #5, continued

What unnatural fragrance could it smell?

It must be after something.

Or maybe we'd invaded the creature's domain, and it was angry.

I clasped my hands and squeezed, waiting for it to strike their tent again.

When it plunged, dropping the full force of its weight on their tent, their dome shuddered under its powerful paws. The grizzly's dagger claws screeched against the polymer until its forefeet hit the ground with a reverberating thud.

"Ugh." Gael pounded a fist against the wall.

If the bear heard her in our tent, its attention didn't falter. It slouched, slithering to the ground with fat rolls rippling like a water-filled balloon. The creature stuffed its nose under the edge of the guys' dome and scooped the ground under the rim. Dirt and pebbles flew to either side, spraying our tent with debris.

"It's digging underneath," I called to the comm but couldn't imagine what Milo or Issey could do about that.

"Really?" I winced at Issey's sarcasm. "We can hear it."

With a thought directive, I accessed a Colorado wildlife guide I'd downloaded before the trip. "There hasn't been a grizzly sighting in Colorado in hundreds of years."

Submission #6

“You’re not going to like this one.”

Keira’s gaze rose from the life book she was reviewing to look at her Librarian. The woman’s dark brown eyes averted Keira’s gaze, holding tightly to her own book. Gold glittered along the side binding, blocking Keira’s ability to glean any knowledge. The clever Librarian’s fingers tapped along the back of the book, rocking slightly on her heels.

“I rarely enjoy collecting souls, Odera, and I doubt this one will be much different.” Keira brushed her blonde curls from her face back and tucked them into the hood of her ebony cloak, her shoulders slumping forward. “Just tell me my assignment so that I can be done with it.”

Odera’s eyes looked everywhere but at her partner; tracing the imposing walls of the Library, covered in the histories of every human to exist, to the onyx floor running underneath their feet. She bit her lip before eventually placing the book down on the corner of the desk.

Keira tugged the book closer to herself, not looking at the cover, drumming her fingers along the top. She watched Odera closely as the girl opened and closed her mouth, seeming to rethink what she wanted to say repeatedly, her brows knitting together.

Keira ran her free hand along the handles of her blades, strapped to her waist and hidden. She felt the familiar curve as the sheath created a semi-circle, and the comfort of their presence settled a small part of Keira’s racing heart.

As Odera still seemed to be debating in her head, Keira finally huffed a breath and demanded, “What is it?”

Odera squeaked, before rushing out, “She’s a mom.”

Keira’s own brows knitted together before she glanced down at the book under her fingers. The Life of Julia Miller was embossed on the front in golden calligraphy, same as every life book kept in the Library.

The Library of Human Life and Death.

Submission #6, continued

Keira flipped open the cover and began looking through the pictures outlining this woman's life. Images of a crying child to a smiling toddler, a teenager leaning against a car to a graduation ceremony. Many moments make up a life, and even the quiet ones of Julia Miller sitting on the front porch with a small toddler in her lap, looking at rocks scattered across the worn wood, filled the pages of the thin book. A lump filled Keira's throat when she saw two bright-eyed young girls with Julia, laughter almost echoing outside of the photo. They were all holding ice cream cones, their hands sticky and wet, and the youngest of the girls had chocolate stains covering her chin and cheeks.

"I tried to trade it out," Odera broke the silence, tugging lightly on one of the many black braids adorning her hair. "I tried to see if Titus would let you take his collection, but he said-

"-Death assigns who he must," Keira finished robotically. "Each Assistant has the responsibilities assigned, and Death is not to be questioned."

Submission #7

“I can hear our baby.”

Sam rocked back so quickly that the whisper-soft bed sheets engulfing the two of them fell down around his waist. “You ... what?”

“I can hear our baby,” Darien repeated. She sounded just as dazed as she had the first time.

Sam shook himself and peered more closely at his wife. Outside their luxury suite, the moon hung full and low and bright in the star-flecked Hawaiian sky. It lined her eyes in silver and glinted off the ends of her thick, dark hair, still tousled from her nightmare. Shock wormed icy fingers through Sam’s belly; he had no idea what to say.

Maybe because he’d taken hits by defensive linemen that stunned him less than the words that had just come out of Darien’s mouth.

“... What?” he repeated.

“I ... just a second. Just give me a second.” Darien’s chest rose and fell in a shallow breath, and she closed her eyes. Two silver-lined tears squeezed out of each corner and trickled down her cheeks. Sam stared, his mouth slightly open. Darien wasn’t prone to strong emotion—years of working with sick and hurting animals had made her all but bulletproof. With her, sudden tears were unheard of.

They scared him almost as much as the misty, humanoid shape coalescing on their balcony, just on the other side of the sliding glass door.

“I ... feel it?” A visible tremor ran the length of Darien’s body.

“I ... I don’t know how to describe it.”

Sam draped his arm around his wife and pulled her close, ignoring the ... thing ... outside. He leaned down and rested his forehead against hers. Her whole body was trembling.

And, he realized, so was his.

Submission #7, continued

“I think it’s happy,” she whispered.

He pulled back and met her eyes; they were filled with an odd mix of bewilderment, fear, and wonder. For a long, incandescent moment, he couldn’t speak. Instead, he nuzzled her face, caressed her shoulder, tried to work past the muddle of emotions eddying through him.

“That’s ... amazing,” he finally managed, and immediately kicked himself; the word was completely inadequate. But when he opened his eyes, Darien was smiling. She understood. Somehow, she always understood.

A shimmer of silver-flecked movement caught Sam’s eye and he risked a glance at the patio again. The thing was still there, but hadn’t come in yet.

Maybe we’ll get lucky, and it won’t, he thought.

He looked back at Darien just as her smile vanished.

“Ankle Tickler’s back,” she said.

“In your head? Like, you can ... hear him?”

“Yeah.” Darien pressed her palms to her eyes.

“Is this ...” Sam did his best to suppress a chill. “Is this another Wormwood scenario, or ...?”

“No, no. At least, I don’t think so.”

Darien started to push herself upright. Sam released her and sat back, scanning the dark hotel room. It was all gleaming hardwood, polished marble, and creamy white furniture—there was no sign of the freakish little beast that had haunted their entire honeymoon.

Submission #8

We worked the Heaps. We'd never uncover everything in the miles of decaying junk, but occasionally, something useful would surface. Daylight months were the worst for salvaging. They steamed and stank. The incessant, brutal winds made our work even more challenging.

"Nora! Look!" Rose yelled. Two years younger and as naïve as a mouse, she waved something over her head. "This matches Mom's teacup."

I trudged across a stretch of something gooey—didn't look down—and she handed me a hairline-crack-riddled plate. Not a perfect match, but our blind Mom wouldn't notice. She'd treat it like her cup. She'd place it on a small shelf and touch it each morning. She wouldn't use it.

"She'll love it. Nice work." I hated how tired Rose looked. How old. Only eleven, she already had dark circles under her eyes.

She pulled a tattered tarp from a crunchy pile and wrinkled her nose. "Well? Did you do it yet?"

"Shut up. You're as bad as Jay."

"Can you blame him? You've been with him long enough." She dropped the tarp and kicked another pile. "And anyway, you won't have a choice much longer."

"Maybe I will. Turning thirteen shouldn't be the reason for making babies, you know. It's stupid."

Rose snorted. "You and your reasons. Why can't you just be like the rest of us?" A rusty pipe snagged her pantleg. "Dammit!" She caught herself before falling into the pile.

"I can't just be anything. You know that." There had to be more than day-to-day survival in our small village, but my time was running out. I'd be expected to start making babies soon.

Some eleven-year-olds in our village were already mothers, but thirteen was considered the safe, appropriate, and expected age for healthy females to breed.

Submission #8, continued

I didn't want to. I had my own ideas.

Rose sighed and wiped sweat from her forehead. "Oh, come on. Jay loves you. And you love him, right? I'll never be so lucky."

"Maybe I'm not feeling lucky. Jay just isn't—"

"What? He isn't what? Lovey-dovey enough? Cute enough?"

She wasn't wrong. Jay was hot. By all physical accounts, he was perfect.

I sometimes felt ugly next to him.

"He's just not . . . never mind! I don't have to justify my feelings to you."

Rose's mouth hung open. "Fucking wind!" She squinted, screaming at it instead of at me, hiding her hurt.

You're an ass, I thought. She was my best friend. We shared everything.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to say it like that. It's just, things are crazier than usual lately."

How could I say Jay was not enough? Things weren't quite right about our pairing. The idea of getting pregnant was the farthest thing from my mind. Everyone expected we'd become a bonded couple since we grew up together, but hell. We all grew up together. Maybe the excitement had worn off. I loved Jay more as a friend.

A bizarre bird hovered over us.

Submission #9

The festival emcee, Nartsys is brimming with blix's usual over-the-top dramatic enthusiasm. Nartsys is bouncing on blix's rear haunches on the stage, which is towering over the produce booths in one corner of the town square. Blix is a chimera with the green body of a lion and the upper body of a bright yellow faerie. Nartsys is wearing a loud neon white bedazzled kaftan and Viddan's winning hat from last year, which sends up periodic fireworks into the crisp spring air. Blix is just about to begin the opening remarks when Viddan and Eagnaí arrive and send the kodels out to graze.

"Bring us some of that organic buckwheat when you come back. This grass is good, but that buckwheat is delish," says Hardy as blix trots off.

"Got it," Viddan says as blix lightly pats Laurel's receding rear end.

"See ya, Viddan—hope you win," says Laurel.

"Thanks, Laurel."

Eagnaí is searching the crowd for blix's posse and runs off as soon as blix sees them crowding around an oversized cookie kiosk. Viddan starts to say something but decides not to bother. No sense harping on every little thing. Instead, blix studies the flooring of the town square, which changes every year. Last year, the town square was tiled in iridescent metallic tiles that emitted soothing tones when stepped on. In spite of the constant toning of the tiles, it was quieter and a less chaotic festival than usual. This year, the square has been turned into a large koi pond covered with transparent glass. The large fish are graceful and mesmerizing, and Viddan watches them swimming and weaving through pale pink kelp for a long time.

Submission #9, continued

Nartsys taps blix's throat to activate the magic microphone implanted there. "Welcome to BLELBY Fest, our most important national celebration dedicated to our most important deity. We are beyond pleased to announce that this year, the Blajimolalan pop group, the BLTs, will be performing some of their greatest hits, including Dangerous When Wet, Snizzle Frackle Urg, and Who the Bluck Do You Think You Are to Tell Me I Can't Dance. It should be an exciting performance, and we can expect their final song to end in the usual melee. So if you're in the mood to punch someone, be sure to stand in front of the stage." Several audience members wrestle playfully as the crowd laughs.

"Also, I have the privilege of making the biggest announcement in Galenskap's long history. Right here on this very stage, in our own little village of Galenskap, our CREATOR, the god-goddess above all gods-goddesses, the

one and only beloved BLELBY will be here." The packed audience breaks out in cheers and whistles.

"This year, BLELBY will be choosing the winners for our annual Galenskap Hat Competition, so get ready, milliners, for the competition of a lifetime. We are rooting for Viddan, our longstanding champion, but you never know—someone else might surprise us."

Submission #10

Chapter 1

The Sonoran Desert sprawled in every direction, a vast expanse of sunbaked earth and resilient vegetation.

Towering saguaro cacti stood like silent sentinels against the backdrop of the rugged Sierra San Pedro de Martir mountains. Creosote bushes and Palo Verde trees dotted the landscape, testaments to life's persistence in a harsh climate. In the stillness, a camera mounted on a telescopic pole snapped to life, rising to its full height. It focused on a faint tremor that scattered tiny granules of sand. The ground quivered beneath the camera's unwavering gaze, and with each passing second, the tremors intensified. Fissures snaked across the earth, the once-solid ground tearing like thin parchment. Desert creatures fled in panic, scuttling over the fractured landscape.

A dozen other instruments—hidden in the sand and scrub—clicked on, measuring every jolt and shift. A sleek seismograph's pen scratched feverishly on its drum, documenting the tremor's impact. Accelerometers embedded in the sand recorded the intensity, while GPS receivers relayed real-time data on the tectonic upheaval. Cameras streamed live feeds of the unfolding chaos.

The tremors grew to a crescendo. Sand dunes shifted and cascaded like ocean waves, and ancient rock formations splintered, sending debris hurtling through the air. Desert birds took flight in a panicked swarm, their wings beating frantically against the dust-filled sky. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the shaking stopped. Silence descended, broken only by the hot wind sweeping through the canyons. The instruments clicked off, retreating back into the landscape, leaving the desert scarred and unsettled—a wound that the relentless sand would soon conceal.

Submission #10, continued

Chapter 2

Dr. Ava Morgan sat in her office at the Brunell-Cooke Institute for Seismic Research, surrounded by towering stacks of journals, magazines, and articles that covered every surface, threatening to spill onto the floor.

The room was a testament to her relentless pursuit of knowledge, each document meticulously read, analyzed, and stored in her eidetic memory. She was so engrossed in her work that the clutter had become a familiar landscape, a reflection of the complex, multifaceted world of seismic activity she navigated daily.

Her role as a geoscientist was not just a job—it was a calling that demanded complete immersion in the patterns and

anomalies of the Earth's movements. Today, as she did every day, Ava methodically worked through her assigned list of seismic sites, pulling up live feeds and data streams from around the world. Each site held its own fingerprints, but her favorite was the Great Rift Valley, one of the most significant and seismically active geological features on the planet.

Submission #11

1. Kitchen Critic

Deep breath. Don't let her get to you.

The ghost leans over my shoulder. I think she's judging my knife cuts. I wonder if she was a chef when she'd been alive. With a heavy sigh, I pick up the cutting board and move it to the spacious kitchen's center island, putting my back to her. There. That'll show her.

The ghost appears in front of me, leaning over the counter, spectral golden curls grazing the onions. I jump and my hand slips, the knife slicing into my finger. "Ow! Look what you made me do!"

Goldi smirks and drifts to the refrigerator, clearly pleased with herself.

A crimson drop oozes from the wound. My heads spins as I stare at my blood, no longer seeing a tiny droplet, but a

sanguine puddle shining obscenely against the white bathtub, spilling into the clear water...My wrists sting with the memory. I shake my head to clear it, forcing myself to the present, where the pain is only in my finger.

After bandaging my finger, I go back to cutting the onions. Goldi stands waiting for me. She looks at the cutting board, nose wrinkled. A small drop of blood mars a piece of onion. Ew. Ew.

I start separating the good onions and toss the ruined ones. I used to love cooking. As a foster child, chores are second nature. From yardwork to laundry to dusting and organizing an old woman's Hummel collection, I've done them all. I don't complain about them the way some kids do. They're a fact of life. I've never loved or hated them, except for cooking. I've always loved cooking. The kitchen is where my memories of Mom are strongest. She was happy in the kitchen, laughing and calling me Chef Everly.

Submission #11, continued

The sting of abandonment doesn't touch those memories. All I feel is her love. When I cook, I pass that love along. None of my foster parents have truly loved me and I've never loved any of them. It's the other kids I love; they're who I cook for.

Goldi, the ghost who started haunting my foster parents' kitchen about a month ago, has made it her mission in death to ruin cooking for me. Seriously, who haunts a kitchen? I bet even Cat Cora wouldn't be able to concentrate with a ghost watching her. Goldi never leaves the kitchen. I think she's trapped here, not that I know much about ghosts, but I doubt taunting a teenage orphan while she cooks was Goldi's top choice of how to spend her afterlife. It doesn't make a lot of sense though. I've lived here for over a year, and Goldi only appeared recently. So where did she come from?

Submission #12

DAPHNE'S HERO

CHAPTER ONE

Gwanati City, Gwanati, Africa

Henry Wallace Huntington, III, sat stiffly upright in the drab, windowless room and stared at the heavy metal door through which airport security officials had rudely deposited him two hours earlier. His anger and impatience had waned, then fizzled, and finally fled altogether. They were replaced by a nagging fear of what could be taking place beyond the closed door. He tried to remain calm. If Gwanati officials were looking at him through some peep hole or hidden camera, they would see he had nothing to hide. He was a law-abiding citizen of the United Kingdom in the country on business. A gentleman and proud of it. At age fifty-six, he was a respected journalist, too, if one could use that rather derogatory term to describe an Assistant Editor of the Queen's Journal of Zoology and Genetics.

Under the present circumstances, it was hard to maintain a gentlemanly appearance. On top of the inconvenience, it was hot. Very hot. Sweat was beginning to soak through the pits of Henry's cream-colored linen suit. He mopped his brow with the handkerchief his Aunt Mildred had given him before he left London. Mildred had no concept of Africa, of course, having never left the Midlands. None-the-less, she considered handkerchiefs an essential tool for anyone traveling.

"Nothing is properly cleaned in foreign countries," she had said, wagging a finger at him. "You'll need something to dust your chair with before you sit down."

The folding chair Henry sat on at that moment was metal and hard. There was nothing else in the room but a small rectangular metal table, well-worn and spotted here and there with dark stains of questionable origin. Henry didn't want to put his hands on the table unless he had to.

Submission #12, continued

For the life of him he couldn't understand why he had been stopped on his way into the country. The Foreign Office had advised him that a new band of rebel guerillas was loose somewhere in the jungle, but a lot of countries had those, didn't they? Certainly Henry looked nothing like a guerilla. His passport was up-to-date, and his letters of introduction were impeccable. He had arranged for a guide to meet him at the airport and take him to Dr. Emma Duncan's elephant preserve. How embarrassing to be detained by the authorities. What would Dr. Duncan think?

And heaven only knew where his guide, Mr. Shingala, was at that moment. How would Henry ever get to his destination? He was probably on his own in this strange country, and he didn't know where he would spend the night. Hopefully not in this awful room. He tried to keep a stiff upper lip. With any luck at all, the Gwanati officials would return soon, once they realized they'd made a terrible mistake. They would

make their apologies, which Henry would graciously accept, and then he'd be on his way.

The door he'd stared at for two hours opened without warning.

Submission #13

White Canvas

Calli

Ignore the voices. Concentrate. Red rock. Blue Sky. The cliff line, the domes of sand, the arch of juniper. This is where the missing pieces are. In the delicacy of grass, the contrasts of curve and line, color, and the texture of the landscape.

“When Rembrandt was asked how a person becomes a painter, he replied that you must take a brush and begin.” Mr. Fiscus sweeps his hands in the air in front of us as if he were conducting an orchestra.

Seven easels balance like cranes on the sandy ground. Tubes of white, crimson, black, blue, and yellow sit next to three finely tipped round brushes. Next to them is a jar of turpentine, a wooden pallet, and a soft charcoal pencil.

The charcoal is inadequate for my vision. I put it down and pick up a brush. Dip it in crimson. No mixing. Think of it as my pencil as I paint a line of cliffs.

“Ah. Bold. Right to the paints for the sketch. Yes.” Mr. Fiscus’ breath curls around my jaw from behind me. Stale smoke and coffee. This tells me he is not Mormon, or at least not a practicing one. I’m not sure about the other painters, or why it should matter. Except that it does.

Mr. Fiscus is our coordinator for the WPA federal government project. Some of our work will be used in advertising, some will be used in the new exhibit in Salt Lake. The lucky ones will find their pieces on the walls of collectors.

I shift. Take in a breath. Put down my brush. The color isn’t right, or the sun is changing the colors before I can make them right. I close my eyes, feel the warmth of this chameleon sun mixing with the wind. This is what I want to capture, sun and the wind flowing together. And the smell of dew on the grass and the scent of cliffrose blossoms.

Submission #13, continued

There is an unwanted conversation going on in my head. Not voices I recognize, but their tone suggests an argument. The doctors always acted as if the voices I hear aren't real. They never considered that I might have a gift. That they are the one's lacking the skill to listen. Nonetheless, a chill starts low in my spine. I count back how many days it's been since my last treatment.

The gray-haired man next to me scratches his bulb-like nose. I think he introduced himself as Sid. He is quickly filling his paper with charcoal lines. His composition choice is a white-domed sandstone formation that looks like the breasts of a nursing mother.

She abandoned you then? Your mother?

How could I feel abandoned by someone I never knew?

My sister, Veda, has the right to that sentiment, but not the little girl who ended up with the pinched-nosed aunt and silent uncle who deferred to every claim that I was damaged.

Submission #14

Mins were dying at an incredible rate, and they were unable to procreate. It was their own fault that they were dying. They had sterilized the Gols on the planet Fradar long ago and forced hysterectomies on all the young Gol females. The Min's plan had been to increase their percentage of the population to cement their dominance over the Gols.

A plague found its way to Frader that only infected fertile beings--finding its way into the sperm and the ovaries of the Mins. Because the Mins had removed all the reproductive organs of the Gols, the Mins were the only ones dying.

But what the Mins didn't know was that there was a secret colony of Gols where scientists had been working on creating artificial reproductive organs that were not made of organic tissue--they were mechanical, and they were specifically

aligned with Gol anatomy. While the Gols could have shared the technology with the Mins, they had been so badly treated by the Mins for centuries that they were unwilling to risk empowering them to take even more control of the struggling planet.

The Mins had not been particularly efficient overlords. In fact, they were both arrogant and lazy and had delegated most of the actual work on the planet to the Gols. It was this foolhardiness that led to the Gol scientists being able to develop the artificial reproductive mechanisms.

However, not all of the Gols were willing to let the Mins perish. Some Gols wanted to switch positions with the Mins and take over control of the planet. They wanted to punish the Mins and to make them suffer as retribution for their cruelty. Other Gols were more idealistic and pushed for a more equitable situation. But they were few and far between.

Submission #14, continued

Hantoon and Mewle had been friends for years, but they were on opposite sides of this issue. Hantoon wanted every Min on Frader to die and to suffer terribly in the process. He believed that it was exactly what they deserved. While Mewle believed that the Gols could demonstrate their superior nature by being compassionate towards the rapidly diminishing population of Mins.

Mewle's father, Trandon had been one of the scientists who had developed the artificial reproductive technology and she had argued long and hard with him to share the technology with the Mins. He loved his sensitive and loving daughter and wanted her to be happy, but he had seen too much cruelty at the hands of the Mins; he was unmoved.

Hantoon had been in love with Mewle since they had been children and he was worried that she would get herself in serious trouble over this issue. He knew that she rarely backed down when she believed she was right, and she was passionate about saving the Mins from annihilation. And while he tried to keep an eye on her, he was often busy working with Trandon on the delicate procedure required to install the artificial reproductive mechanisms.

Submission #15

Chapter 1

Monday, August 3rd 2037

It's not my execution today, but the next one could be.

The bus is crowded with supernaturals and the soldiers tasked with keeping us in line. We don't speak, but our fear is louder than the silence. It's palpable, that dread, and it tells me that every single supernatural is thinking the exact same thing—the next execution could be mine.

My hand is sweaty from clinging tightly to my best friend and roommate Trix's hand. It's too hot for this, but neither of us cares. We're each other's lifelines.

The bus pulls to a stop behind several others on 14th St. in Denver. Dread becomes despair—a living, breathing entity. A crowd is gathered, screaming for our heads.

Their angry shouts can't penetrate our silent grief.

Two soldiers stand, facing us. "Everyone up. Exit in an orderly manner, row by row. Anyone tries anything, you'll be detained."

The instructions aren't necessary. It's been thirteen years since The Department of Homeland Security began the Purification, an operation designed to rid the United States of supernatural creatures. Supernaturals are what we call ourselves. To them, we're unnaturals.

As we file off the bus, there are sounds in our silence. Hollow footsteps echoing on the floor, the ruffling of fabric as people stand, the occasional sneeze.

Outside, soldiers in army fatigues surround two men in suits waiting below the steps to check us off their list. The Suits are special agents with Homeland Security's Division of Domestic Terrorism of the Unnatural Kind. The DDTU. Our lives are in their hands.

Submission #15, continued

As I near the door, the shouts of the crowd reach my ears.

“Burn them all!”

Trix reaches back and gives my hand a brief squeeze. Their comfort calms my pounding heart, though they won't be able to do a damn thing to protect me if the agents decide they don't want to play nice today. The collar around Trix's neck—leather braided with gold—immobilizes their power. The leather and cobalt collar around my own neck renders me just as helpless.

Trix steps off the bus. One agent, a young man with sandy hair and kind eyes says, “Miss Beatrix Catherine Fleming, shapeshifter?” He has to nearly shout to be heard over the crowd.

Trix sighs. “It's Mx. Trix Fleming.”

“What?”

“I had it legally changed. There's an addendum in your registry. Mx. is a non-binary salutation.”

“You're all its if you ask me,” the other agent says. He's older than the first. His sharp, angry features send chills through me. He sneers at Trix, who stands straighter and though I can't see their face, I know they're glaring right back at him with their cat-like eyes.