Random Wikipedia Article

Fantasy Faction Monthly Writing Contest Anthology, May 2016

Various Authors

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# Random Wikipedia Article

### Fantasy Faction Monthly Writing Contest Anthology, May 2016

I don't think we ever had a prompt that was so not fantasy related and so open. I'm really curious about the stories this will produce and the wide variety of themes. Steampunk, Portal, Grimdark, Military, Erotica, Parallel Universe - depending on the article you get, everything is possible. Please take the first you get and don't try to find the "right" article. None will be and you'll only get the muse's kiss if you take the first article.

*All content originally appeared on the Fantasy Faction Forums in the Monthly Writing Contest. You can see more information (and even participate in the forums!) on this particular contest by visiting the site.*  
<http://fantasy-faction.com/forum/(jun-2016)-random-wikipedia-article/(jun-2016)-random-wikipedia-article-submission-thread/>

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# The King is Coming

## By Mr.J



He is pointing at me again, stabbing a porky finger right to my nose. ‘He is coming. You are all doomed. Flesh will be seared from bone, blood boiling in your veins! Your eyes will swivel inside your head and melt into liquid and dribble from your sockets at the mere sight our Lord’s rebirth. You must praise the King.’

The pink man was sweating now, as he always does, staring at me with his puffy little face and rotund belly like my very presence was demonic to him. Perhaps we are. Though if our little village, Chinua, is touched by demons then I fear what the Preacher’s soul is slick with.

I shake my head slowly. I knew he must be crazy. The wives had tutted pitifully at the man’s chants of doom to our supposed unclean souls; I just didn’t believe it was true until now. I dared not touch him, save the diseases he might spew from his stale breath inhabits me. The strange, foreign sickness we had not known existed until his kind brought it here. Whole villages shrunk to their bare bones at a mere cough from a pink man – but Chinua had stayed strong, we let the healthy and abandoned from their now ghostly villages shelter within our clean walls.

Chinua would always survive. No stink breath and foul boils of foreign man can take the land we grow and sow from beneath our feet. It’s ours and not his. Whatever his King might say, or do.

He talks of this King all the time. He is coming. Apparently.

I walk away from him, fearing I may catch more than just his ills. He has built his little nest in a white shed on the edge of town – painted it himself, placed his wooden symbol above the doorway and would desperately welcome any to his ‘paresh’. Whatever that is.

I’d presumed all we had to do was swish our tail and he’d fly away, like the flies covering our cattle, buzzing about his King. But now - I worry. Not for him, but this King. We need no King here, no one does. We are majesties of ourselves – each and every one safe in their own kingdom. There’s been delicate talk on the villagers’ lips.

He was coming from somewhere, reborn or resurrected. A zombie? ‘No’ – an elder had said, punctuating it with his puckered face and waving his wiry arms like sticks – ‘A Crown. A Golden Man in a Pretty Chair of Gold.’

I do not understand why he speaks of such things with awe and wonder. He had too much life of the world before perhaps – before he came to Chinua and understood the way of the world. But if this King of the pink men be a zombie with a crown or a golden mortal in a chair – there was no room here. Not for them. Not with our own Lord to protect us.

Chinua would fight back. I knew it would not be long. I just had to wait; I let the afternoon sun settle over me as I shelter beneath the big green leaves of the black tree in my yard – in my hammock, dusty feet, old feet now, dangling over the edge. I shake my head and shut my eyes for a sleep.

I opened my eyes to a dying orange sun. There were folks talking in huddles nearby. The hum of tense chatter pulsing in the thick air of the early evening. The Woman was banging her crooked staff into the cracked ground, like she was digging for gold like the Spanyard’s who swarmed across the hills in our lands. I toppled out of the hammock and strode over to them – she had her face downcast, deep frowns buried into her leathery face.

‘He is Coming.’ She said, eyes watery and shimmering like pearls.

I nodded and gestured for the crowd to part; after much grumbling I was left alone with The Woman, our oracle and guide – a teacher of the past and future. ‘There is blood in the streets. Fire in our homes. Death in the bones of us,’ shaking her head as if to throw the images from her mind, ‘He is sleeping and shall wake. He must.’

I turned away and sheltered my eyes from the setting sun, the shadows settling across that single white shed among our houses at the edge of the village – the pink man shaking himself out there now, a hand raised to the air, his echoes crying faintly on the breeze as he preached of his Coming King.

The King.

He would not be reborn, not here. Not in Chinua.

I felt better now, not happy. For I knew it would mean his death – but I tugged the strings weaving from my conscience to my heart. It would be a better place with him gone. The King could not come here.

I rested a gentle hand on The Woman’s shoulder and turned her about to lead her home. Her tent – lying in the cool shelter of the gum trees – was safe there. The King would not harm her.

I rested my gaze on the pink man for the last time he would be sane. ‘The King is Coming.’ He yelled into the sky. ‘The King is Coming.’

I ignored him, trudging up my steps and closing the shawl across the doorway, securing any searing heat and light from entering the cool walls. There was only one Great King. He.

He would protect us. Like He always did. No one needed the pink man’s golden zombie king.

I waited all night, sheltered in the dark and carving my mask. We need not wear them. He did not expect it of us. But I consider it a respect. A standard to show Him, Chinua is in peace and servitude to his slumber. I hear the bells now, the humming in the air. The bugs and the animals alert and wary.

I slip the mask over my head, embracing the great eye sockets and feel the wooden snakes tumbling from the face in my fingers. He is already screaming. The night has shattered to a greater blackness, a shining beacon consuming the pink man’s shed in an impossible crater. He is on his knees outside. The Chinua folk are coming now, one by one. We stand together to protect ourselves from the world – the world that wants us dead and perceives us as nothing but a bug beneath their boot.

I stand before the pink man, wrapped in his white sheet, bawling like the child he once was.

‘You are heathens! Demons. Sinners. Evil incarnate!’

I shake my head, the rest of us following suit.

‘No sir. We are good here. Good Honest People. We do no harm to others cos we know the truth of this world. We do not need your false prophets – no white man’s lies. The Sleeping King. He knows our plight. Wraps us to his bosom sir. He will wait for us all, in the end.’

The pink man screamed as he felt the bones in his face crackle and break, skin stretching from his face to tear away from flesh. He cried out and let the juice from his eyes settle in the back of his head and wept blood from his sockets, smearing down his pink face like tears.

‘The Sleeping King will wait for those chosen to inherit this world with him.’

The abyss opened up to him, its sheer endless terror writhing into his very soul.

‘But not you.’

The portal shuddered black and swam in a thick liquid – a watery world opening itself to him, an impossible place.

A towering city of glass under the sea. A throne at its centre, a crown for the Great One. A Sleeping King – taller than mountains, its sheer size a horror to the small man’s gaze – he could feel acid bubbling on his tongue, his innards willing to exhale themselves from his body at the mere sight. A grand creature writhing with its power.

Asleep. Waiting. Protecting.

The pink man slithered away into the night, his soul departing into the shimmering blackness before us. I watched carefully and breathed in its power. Every time He appears I feel drawn to Him, desperate to step inside and embrace his rest on the throne beneath the depths of our world. But there was too much to do, too much life to live, still.

Chinua had to be protected. He would make it so, love us as much as we feared and loved him. It was the right way. I remembered the pink man’s words to me, his thick lips betraying his sour soul. If we are truly demons here, the men and the women outside, determined to break and stamp their will upon our lives – must be sheep wrapped in devil’s clothing.

# The Voice of the People

## By Jmack



Sister Patalinghug enjoyed sweeping the front stoop of the church. The scratch of the straw across the stone was the sound of work getting done, even though the dirt and pollen would gather again over the long, hot course of the day. The sound swept across the quiet street and echoed off the plate glass window of the facing shop with a satisfying crackle. Sometimes, she heard it bounce off buildings beyond. Just so did the Word of God spread about the world, each little prayer, each little work, impacting on things unseen.

Many days, the air of Manilla was like a mat of leaves, so humid that while higher pitched sounds still traveled, voices barely moved. These were days she could speak her thoughts out loud and trust that no one would hear. No one except the saints, the Virgin, and her crucified Lord. But she was speaking to them, so that was alright.

"Blessed Mother, Sister Margaret wet the sheets again last night. You must stop her from doing that, because it makes her so embarrassed. But God's will be done. The pharmacist's daughter has gotten herself pregnant. Saint Lucia, find her a husband fast. But God's will be done. And Holy Jesu, there is an election tomorrow if you didn't notice. I pray there will be no fighting, and not too much cheating, and good weather, and a wonderful defeat for the President. Your will be done."

With each prayer, she swept dirt from the stone and heard her work reverberate. And then she didn't.

Sister Patalinghug paused, puzzled. She scraped the broom on the stone again, then looked across the street, expecting to hear the sound returning. Nothing. She squinted in the morning sun. A shadow squatted before her.

"Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle -" she began, but the sound was swallowed up. Then she was.

.........

President for Life Ferdinand Marcos folded his arms across his chest and let his gaze touch on all the millions of rooftops of the sprawling, bawling, fetid capital city, and all the myriad of islands, villages, bays and forests of his Phillipines. It is good to be me, he thought with great but humble satisfaction. It is good that I am a generous and charitable man. I am only taking away their voices, not their souls.

He could take away all their souls. The shadow had offered that. But he chose not to. Only a few would go to feed the spirit's hunger; the rest he spared.

Marcos hovered in the air a thousand feet above the Presidential Palace, content that all his people could see him and wonder.

Even now, the shadow would be making its way to the dismal house of that irritating woman, Aquino, a no-talent housewife completely in over her head and possessed of only one virtue for politics, that of being the widow of a corrupt saint cut down in his prime. Marcos rather regretted having ordered that assassination. It had caused much more trouble than it was worth. Who would have thought that the man's wife, this Aquino woman, would have become the focus of a so-called people's revolution?

Let's see what they do without a voice.

I am a blessed man, thought President for Life Marcos. God has surely blessed me.

.........

Cory Aquino was eating toast, and worrying about a tooth. It had begun to bother her the night before at the rally. She'd been speaking, yelling really, surrounded by thousands of cheering Filipinos, missing her husband and feeling a headache coming on. The headache started in her jaw and slid up the side of her face. The thing must be impacted. She chewed on the other side.

The election is tomorrow, she thought for the thousandth time. The crowds are in the street right now, and I have to go back out there with a rotten tooth. Life was unfair in many ways.

She didn't really want to be President. She wanted her husband back. She wanted her children by her side, a little bit of money, and peace and quiet. But she'd married a politician who'd gone up against a tiger and lost. Well, she might be a woman, but she'd found a tiger inside herself.

All night long, she'd been hearing the low roar of the crowds in the great square a mile away. Now it was oddly quiet. It must just be the calm of morning. There would certainly be a storm.

She set down her tea spoon with a clink. Well, actually, she set it down with a --- nothing. She lifted it, and tapped it on the porcelain cup. Or tried to tap it. She felt the resistance, the zing of metal on ceramic through her fingers, but not the little ring of honest sound. A chill crawled up her neck and through her scalp.

Something was watching her. She breathed in, banishing the fear, imagining herself that tiger, and turned to look it in the face. "Have you been sent for me?" she asked the thing that crouched at her garden window. The sound of her voice vibrated in her own ears but nowhere else. "Good," she said. "We've been expecting something like you." A scent of jasmine filled the air around her, a bloom of purity and power.

A news reporter had said that the people power movement was on the side of the angels. She'd decided to take him seriously.

.........

Unsupported, Marcos fell. First Lady Imelda watched it happen. The crowd around the palace found its voice, screamed, then cheered. It wasn't fair, thought Imelda. All I ever wanted was a little home, a little money, shoes on my feet.

Curse the people, thought the soon-to-be former first lady. I will see them all in hell.

She sensed a spirit by her side, and an offer.

# Safe Harbor No More

## By NightWrite

Dark clouds groaned and rumbled high above, swollen with their burdens. Both sea and storm bucked against ships as they struggled to find a place in the harbor. Apollonia found it a harsh contrast to the sea's usual calm appearance.

Gone were dockhands working pulleys and cranes to move goods on and off ships. No more gulls glided about to steal bread or fish, no birds had been seen in days. The wharf market was empty of any who might sell their wares despite the crowd which flooded the area. The smells of fish and spice were gone, carried off by harsh winds. The white marble of the upper city had lost its sun-streaked glow, the buildings turned the dull color of bone.

The crowd swelled and shifted as people fought their way onto scattered ships, possessions clutched tight and children carried close. A cacophony of broken sounds filled Apollonia's ears. In her arms her youngest brother, Kleitos, added his own whimpers. He clutched to Apollonia tightly as tiny shakes racked his body. All around them there was a feeling of oppression. A heavy weight upon her shoulders, as if the gods gazed straight at her.

Close to her side Apollonia could hear her mother voice prayers to the gods and curses to the priests in equal measure. Her mother had called them arrogant fools for they had chosen to stay within their temples. To pray for forgiveness and mercy. To turn back the gods' anger. Her father had told Apollonia they did what they thought was right and her mother, like many others, were looking to blame someone for their current plight. Apollonia didn't blame them like her mother, but she still found them foolish. The gods wouldn't be turned from this path they'd chosen. To think and try such might just make it worse.

Apollonia shared a look with her younger brother, Heron, who stood between her and their mother as their father struggled to carry three of their bags and comfort their mother at the same time.

A great burst of lightning fell from the heavens to land in the city. Where it struck Apollonia didn't know, but the thunder rocked the harbor. A great wave stirred in the crowd to rise it up into a new frenzy. Kleitos screamed in her arms and Apollonia struggled to calm him. Her words did little to soothe his tears as their bodies were pushed by the crowd this way and that. She felt like one of the boats at the mercy of the violent waves.

Their destined ship came closer and closer, people pushing to get their families aboard. When it was their turn the man at the gangplank raise his hand to stop them.

“Sorry, we've not got enough room for all of you.”

“Please, at least take my children. We'll find another boat, but please take them.” Her mother's pleas struggled to rise over the noise of the harbor.

“Fine, but we have none to spare for their care.”

“Thank-you,” her father said.

“Apollonia you need to take your brothers and go,” her mother said.

“What about you?”

There father's face tightened with an emotion she couldn't name. “Your mother and I will be fine. I'm sure we'll find another boat soon.”

“Your father's right. Just focus on your brothers and stay together.”

“Yes mama.”

Her parents hugged her and her brothers before her father handed her one of their bags. She shouldered it as the the crewman helped them get aboard. The gangplank came up behind them and it felt so much more final then. She was leaving home for the first time in her life and it wasn't how she expected her first time at sea to come about. Yet the whims and wrath of the gods influenced many things. The expectations of one mortal girl was a raindrop in the sea of their immortal lives.

The dock was crowded by children and a few adults. The oldest amongst them were the crew, whose members moved about the ship in preparation for departure.

By the time the ship had left the harbor rain fell like daggers from the heaven. Apollonia watched as the sailors ran about the deck to keep control over the sails. Neither of her brothers had wished to join the other passengers below deck, instead they had wanted to watch the workings of the crew. They stood huddled together, wrapped in a heavy cloak their mother had packed, under an overhand out of the way.

They were further out to sea and the rain had lessened when horrid noise filled the air. As if the ghosts of all those damned by the sea had risen up to scream. Their echoes filled her ears and shook her skull. Apollonia followed her brothers from their shelter as they ran to the deck's edge.

The island was still choked by storm clouds, but it was as if a giant drain plug had been pulled to suck up creation. From the heavens the great storm itself was pulled down as the island was dragged beneath the waves. Many ships close to the island shared a similar fate, swallowed up by the sea.

The hunger of the ravenous maw which had appeared in the sea seemed endless. More and more of the sea and sky were swallowed as it vortex widened.

Shouts rang out around her and Apollonia looked to see others had joined them. Passengers and crew alike watched as the island crumbled into the abyss. Crewmen stumbled about in haste as the maw of the sea reached towards them in its slow creep. More ships fell into its dark depths.

Then the oppressive weight which had hung in the air lessened.

The great maw of the sea closed itself and while the sky still raged, a calm had fallen over the sea. The change didn't matter to Apollonia. Where their island home had once stood was now placid seas. Her home was gone and she doubted her parents weren't taken with it.

So many people gone, the rest left adrift to the sea's mercy.

In that moment she knew not whether she should thank the gods for sparring so many lives. Or to curse them to deepest oblivion for the theft of her home and life.

# Infinite Memory

## By Venandiaer

I will not forget that graduation, when all our lives began. None of us understood, none of us realised, what our newfound talent had doomed us to. It all flashes past me, freedom, love, betrayal, hate, pain, constantly, like a movie in fast forward. I see it all.

This scorched land, so bleak, where the dust twists and wind howls, I remember it. Plants clawing for life, the people filled with unfounded hope and determination. A lone figure stood, his hands sheltering his eyes as he strode through the desolate hamlet. Long deserted, a ghost town that seemed to be haunted with memories.

Smoke assaulted his nostrils. Scorched ruins, skeletal wreaks that once brimmed with the sound of childish laughter, echoes of familial life.

The flames burned high as they hungrily devoured the remnants of what was left. Once loved relics, cherished toys, worn-out cloth. Charring, it all turned to ash.

The hamlet began to sink into cinder, but none of this mattered. The heart of the land had long stopped beating. He was just clearing out the remnant, ridding the world of its filth. Good riddance.

His foot crunched on paper. A photo, a boy and a girl, their bright eyes sparkling. So naïve. A grim faced adult behind them, harsh but proud. He hesitated, before throwing it on the bonfire. The flames crackled hungrily as the past burned.

He turned as his childhood, the ground on which he was born, burned before him. Anguish, hate, and loss seemed to be all twisted in his face, as he strode determinedly forward.

They had not been unkind, the overseers. But he would never forgive them. Not after what they did. His memory was burned. For most it can be hard to forget. That which impacts you the most, for good or bad, will often stay with you forever. But in my case… He had finally had enough. He wanted freedom from this living torture.

At the edge of the hamlet, his bright-rimmed eyes stared down into a hollow valley below, a dust bowel that accentuated its hidden treasure. Stone had been hewn away, a complex of worn buildings built into the side of a single hill. The place where it all began.

He had made it back. Almost thirty years since he had last laid eyes on it. Squinting against the rising winds, the dust seeming to protest, he pushed onward toward his inner hell.

An ancient school, long abandoned, that had periodically reopened years after by a private group. It was during this periodic re-opening, far from the big city, that it had all started. Invitation only, the students had to be of a special calibre. If only he had been normal, he would not have this agony to live out.

Ordinary classes, ordinary curriculum. They had all been smart, that’s for sure. So smart, so special, that’s why they had been isolated. Why special? Because this is where they had been trained, experimented, for infinite memory. Everything he saw, everything he heard, smelt, felt... He could never forgive them.

He walked past the empty rooms, sand and shattered glass fallen like snow. This single hallway, once filled with sounds of those just like him… so many memories. He had been made to never forget. Because of them, because of this, he could remember everything from when he was a child, and everything after. All those smiling face, voices bright as day. All those faces, contorted and pale as the moon. How many still lived? How many would share this fate?

Why is it that the past gnaws at me like hungry demons? So little joy.

He paced across the courtyards, over broken concrete and twisted metal. They taught sports. Once. Physical trials seems so insubstantial now.

Memory that can never forget. What a fool they had been. How can they understand the pain I feel, everything you have ever lived through stuck forever in your conscious mind?

He pulled a small black object from his pocket. Time to finish this. Time to finally end this. A quiet whine, and then a shower of light. The remote explosives sent the entire complex up in flames, a sudden jolt shaking down to the foundations.

How futile it had all been. He closed his eyes as his memory was finally cleared, and the world was obliterated.

An eagle cried high overhead, out of sight as the sun rays beat like blinding talons. Dust swirled across the baked earth, mini twisters dotting the arid landscape. No-one stood, no-one tried to remember that institution, nor the hamlet nearby. He had gone, and his memory with him.

Miles away, seemingly in another world, the rain clattered loudly on the windows. Lydia Norris sat, staring at the shimmering crystals of ice, a glass of water sitting untouched on the small table before her. How long she sat, listening and watching, she knew to be exactly three minutes and thirty-six seconds. Sighing, she moved her head three centimetres to the right, scanning the short letter once more. Brief and to the point. Signed in pristine hand: In memory, Dale. He had gone, left without warning. She knew he wasn’t coming back.

She felt that she should mourn, and a part of her did. Yet another part of her felt glad. Dale had not lived the most heartening of lives, and his talents had not helped. He wanted to seek peace, and he would find it there. Lydia knew his pain, she understood better than most.

Heaving herself from her chair, she subconsciously registered five paces to the rain drenched window. Steering up with bright-rimmed eyes, she sighed. Indeed, she understood, and she would not forget him. She had no choice. Yet as she stared out in the roiling sky, she smiled. The rain had stopped, and as she watched, a few simple sparks of sun began to break through, a light in the dark.

Even though they knew infinite misery, she lived for the rays of joy. That, she was glad to never forget.

# Cat Country 100.3FM

## By Lady\_Ty

 

Gooood Mornin' all you shakin' wakin' Catfolk of every shape and size, Gingerfluffs, Skinnyshanks or Hairyhunters, every darn one of you in our great little ol' KNSR's Cat Country 100.3FM community.Hey rootin' tootin' Oldie Country Cats, I'm Crooksy, aka Crookshanks Kneazle, radio whizcat and close friend of adorable Hermousene Ginger.

We're fired up and hissin', ears a-pointy tails a-swishin', ready to prance and pad through the day with plenty of Country Music Oldies on your favourite local radio, Cat Country100.3FM. Over to the Egyptian Mau Weathercat Team -

*Hi Crooksy, Chief Mau bringing you today's weather . We prophecy it'll reach a scorching top of 50C for the wild Demon Devon Rexers out there in Grand Forks, so seek some shade and streeeetch. Cooler for the Ragdoll Rogues of Thief River Falls, with 30C and sunshine, so a good day to check out the fishin' with a swift paw and a fast hook..*

Thanks Mau. All just right for our humpadoo bootscootin' Cat Country Mewsic Festival kickin' off today and all through the week here in Fisher, best Cat city of this great little ol' State. Glad the skies are calm as some of our fantastical neighbours are joinin' us from Country Plains.

Dragon Highlord Vulk Agni is flying across to present Red Hot Prizes for Best Howlin' and Yowlin', Sleekest and Smoothest, Ruffest and Tuffest. He's bringing local MP Wilde Hunter and The Naughty Nymphs & Saucy Satyr Singers, all headin' here to make sweet mewsic at the Festival and to host Mad Midnight Picnics In The Woods afterwards.

Woooohooo can't wait for splendour in the catnip, tanglin' in the treetops. Hmm, over to a message from our sponsor –

*Hello there Cat Country charmers, The Amazing Maurice here with that product you've all been waitin' for, my perfect product, Spraaay.*

Do you suffer from Itchybum? Are you raw in the rear? Is it hard to get your tongue into those awkward places for relief? Do you back up to rub that itch on human legs but it's still sore? Spray on Spraaay and itch no more. All together now

Spray on some Spraaay,

Spray everyday,

That Itch won't stay

Spray on some Spraay.

Only $3 a box or $7 for two, tell all your friends, call now on 5673420 to order and get a free set of claw sharpeners. But hurry, hurry The Amazing Maurice may leave town…..

Sounds soothing, back to a listener request on your favourite local radio Cat Country 100.3FM. Mungojerrie and Rumpelteaser of Thief River asked for a Golden Oldie, Norwegian Forest Zombison's heart rending hit, Stand By Your Troll, a touching reminder of the value of true love however painful the sacrifice.

*Sometimes it's hard to be a Zombie*

Giving all your love to just one Troll

You'll have dead times,

And she'll have live times

Doin' things that you don't understand.

But if you love her, you'll forgive her

Even though she gave away your hand

And if you love her, give your toes to her

Cause after all, she's just a hairy Troll.

Stand by your Troll,

Give her an arm to cling to

An eyeball to come home to

When nights are cold.

Stand by your Troll and show the world you love her

Rip out your heart and love her like no other

Stand by your Troll.

What a great song, what a great singer. A quick cut to Catnip Now Network anchor, Catiane Amanpaww, for an emergency newsflash -

*The value of the Purr is falling, markets are reeling on Wail Street, with the news that media baron Mercat Cattodumpf, has gained 98% control of Owlpost Inc. under suspicious circumstances, leaving vital questions unanswered.*

Why did Cheshire Cat fade out of the boardroom?

Why did Si and Am sell out so fast and catch the Orient Catspress?

Why are Warm Kitty and Soft Kitty hiding in Sheldon's slippers?

Where oh where has Pussycat gone? Where oh where can she be?

Major stock holders Pussycat and Hedwig have disappeared together. It is rumoured they went to sea with plenty of money, but no sightings by the Seacat Patrols have been reported. Another source suggests they went to London to visit the Queen, but this is unlikely as she's been isolated since the Catinental Catflap closed.

Gobblecat King Jareth of White Persia is furious and has hired Mister, a famous Chicatgo catective to search for them, with trainee Wizard Baker.

We asked Lord of the Skies Gwydir what this would mean for airmail. He was concerned that letter post will become obsolete and all communication controlled through Cattodumpf's nefarious See-mail. The Tortoiseshell Council will confer on preserving quill and ink and report back early next century.

The Cat Mint assures us that there is sufficient Purr in the Reserve Cupboard to guarantee Mousegages on your homes, do not panic. Further announcements later.

Holy Litter Catwoman, CNN hinting at some backsider trading there. Should anyone see Hedwig or PussyCat you could dob them in to the authorities. Or not. Depending on how you feel. And what they have to offer. Cats always know which side their paws are buttered, after all. Time for another important message from our sponsors -

*Calling all WildCats, do you suffer from Bloodtooth? Spray on Spraaay and those fangs will shine like ivory castles………………………..hurry, hurry……………..*

You're on Cat Country 100.3FM, your favourite radio station, welcoming our very own local jazz-cat, Manx Mooncat, from Hard Ice Café, believe he has a very special song for us.

*Peace and light, Crooksy, peace and light. Good to be on 100.3FM. As you can imagine life with no tail is a harsh start, so I grew up on the big city streets hangin' with Sundog the Hippypup. Then one night the Dark Barkers caught me and dragged me to a life of hell. Today I'm singing one from the heart, Mirkwood Prison Blues for my friends still languishin' there.*

I hear the Nazdogs comin'

Demons, kept by evil men

And I ain't seen the sunshine since I don't know when

I'm stuck in Mirkwood's dungeons and time keeps draggin' on

But those Nazdogs keep a-comin altho' ol' Sauron's gone.

When I was just a baby, my mother said to me

Always be a good King, don't never wear those Rings

But I wanted to be famous and flashed it, low and high

Now I hear ol' Sauron laughin' and hang my head and cry.

I bet there's hobbits feastin' on a fancy homecooked stew

They're probly drinkin' coffee an' smokin' pipeweed too

Well I know I had it comin', I know I can't be free

But those Nazdogs keep a-flyin' and that's what tortures me

Well if they freed me from this dungeon and loosed me from this mine

I could die a little gentler, seein' stars that shine

Far from Mirkwood prison, that's where I want to stay

A-livin' with the hobbits to sing my blues away.

Wahey Manx, I'm not an emotional mog but my whiskers are twitchin', that is sad. Relieved you are safely back with us and reminding you listeners Manx will be at the Festival all week, be sure to drop some Tunachews in his bowl if you see him.

Award winning Mercat author, Celeste Sunk, wrote Princes of Toads, which won the 2015 Yugo Award for Best New Fantasy. Our much loved critic, Mrs Norris of Furry Fantasy Faction is here with a review. Glam grooming to you Mewriel, and glad to hear the retired founder of FFF, Mr Argus Filch is settled in Caretakers Cages Retirement Home.

*Luscious lapping to you, Crooksy. This first book of The Spawn Empire series introduces ToadPrinces Jaran and Jog.*

In their youth they fall foul of the FrogFather and are cruelly parted. Jaran is banished to ride a camel in the terrible Dry Sherry Desert, far from water and squishy bugs. Tiny Jog is transported by rabid reindeer to State of the Leering Snowman. He trudges through the frozen waste, desperately yearning for his beloved soulmate Jaran. That little spec of green in an unwelcoming, white, white world while Jog struggles to control a humpy horror amid burning sand.

Oh listeners you will search your souls, as you drag yourself along with each tortuous webfootstep or gasping gulp. This book merited 4 stars for the exquisite anguish I felt for our dear ToadPrinces. If it had included the Ice Giants Saga or the Bedouin Brouhaha I would have given it that one extra star. Maybe in Volume 2. I will not spoil the story, but urge you to read for yourself. Hint – Happy Ending!!!! Only $5.99 at Rowl's Book and Bootlegge Emporium on Prowl Street.

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*Spray on some Spraay*

Spray every day …………………..

Time to leave Country Cats 100.3 FM.

But you are all welcome back for a Mad Midnight Picnic…….

# Stories, Good and Bad

## By Alex Hormann

I have a story, if you'd like to hear it.

You would?

I can't promise it will be a good one. So few stories are worth hearing these days. Not like in the good old days. Back when I was your age we had stories and songs worth knowing, worth remembering. I bet most of you kids don't even know the national anthem.

What? Yes, yes, I'll start.

Always in a rush, you youngsters. I wasn't in much of a hurry, when I was a girl. Not even in the cold grip of winter. Yes, it was winter when first I met Miss Julia. She didn't like to be called Crane, though. Not back then. Said it sounded too close to 'crone'. Had a way with words, did Miss Julia. It was one of the games she used to test us with. She'd say a word, or hrase, and we'd have to twist its sound, its meaning. I remember one occasion when she tried to convince us of the links between 'cycle path' and 'psychopath'.

But that all came later. When I first arrived at the School, I had no idea who Miss Julia was. Who anyone was. I was new to Potsdam. Ma and Pa had been forced to leave home, so they'd dragged me with them, away from my old school and all my friend. I ended up, in large part due to my family's musical leanings, enrolled in a school so (possibly in)famous it was known simply as the School. With a big capital S. At the reception, I nervously introduced myself, and was told in no uncertain terms that I should go straight to Miss Crane's office, lest I be stricken from the register.

I didn't understand why at the time, but I later came to learn that it was common curtes in Potsdam to introduce oneself to one's immediate superior before any other. I rather feared that all the School would be quite as set in their ways, bent as the Devil himself on remaining trapped on their social ladder. Luckily, I was soon to be proven wrong in that regard.

Miss Julia's office was at the end of a long corridor which slowly spiralled into the underbelly of the main building, the walls marbled with layer upon layer of mould. I thought this odd, but the School had never received much in the way of funding. Nobody thought a schoold dedicated to music would ever have enough pupils to merit any investment. Despite the vaguely offputting aroma flooding the hallway, I decided that the pattern of mould on drystone was pretty, if nothing else. It ran for nearly a hundred metres, shifting hue from green to brown to yellow to blue and bthen at last becoming green again, flecked throughout with tiny pellets of black, uninterrupted by any door other than Miss Julia's.

I knocked once, twice, then twice more in quick succession. The way my Pa had always taught me a lady should knock. The door was windowless, a slab of half-rotten oak on rusted hinges. A slab of bronze had been fixed about halfway up the door. Turned green with verdigris, it read:

Julia Ettie,

To learn, to search and to serve

That is my duty

“Enter,” spoke a voice frm the beyond the collapsing barrier. It was a soft voice, musical. It had to Crane, I thought.

Sure enough, the woman I would come to know as Miss Julia was alone on the other side. She was old, I thought on that first meeting. Now, I know she can't have been older than fifty. But fifty is a grand old age for a child.

“Miss Crane,” I said by way of introduction, “My name is Samantha. Samantha Mack. I was told to see you.”

“Mack, eh?” Miss Julia smiled. She had the most wonderful smile, that woman. The sort that exists in spite of horrors, rather than in ignorance of them. A smile designed to make the world a better place. And it did so for me, in that moment. All my worries flew away like starling from a shaken tree, anf there was only the excitement of my new life left behind.

There. Wasn't that a nice story?

Oh, you wanted to hear more. Well yes, of course there is more. There is always more to a story than can ever be told. But did I not warn you? This is not a good story.

So be off with you. Do't you have other stories to read, to hear, to appreciate.

I'm sure ther all far better than this one.

Or perhaps not? Perhaps, just perhaps, you would like to stop here.

# One Last Drink

## By tebakutis

The man named Servius Tuccius Cotta approached the refugee camp with his head down. He had not been born the man he was now, but those names remained a part of him. Even with Batavia in revolt against the empire, those were still his names. He’d earned them, no matter who he served.

This battered camp was perhaps threescore tents and lean-tos, but many huddled in the cold and mud. People fled Tongeran when runners brought news of fighting between Julius Civilis and Claudius Labeo at the Mass river, and Tuccius suspected more would flee in the hours ahead. These were uncertain times.

He was an assassin by trade, a man who killed so others wouldn’t have to. He had tracked Labeo for the better part of the day, ever since the man slipped free of the Tungrian lines. Every last Tungrian had abandoned Labeo for Civilis, but Tuccius did not blame Labeo for that. He had planted the seeds himself.

Labeo’s distinctive tracks entered this camp, and several circles assured Tuccius they did not leave. Labeo’s fine boot prints differentiated his tracks, another mistake. That was the problem with men accustomed to luxury, even experienced cavalry commanders. They loved expensive boots.

Tuccius affected a limp as he entered the camp. His own cloak hung on his frame. No one gave a beggar a second look, and a beggar among refugees was a stalk in a field of wheat.

He passed figures huddled around sputtering fires, listened to coughs and moans from those who’d been injured or taken sick. A drizzle had fallen since dawn, beating on people and tents alike. Tuccius held out his bowl at each fire, muttering apologies, and each time, the refugees turned him away.

None of the refugees at these fires were Labeo. None wore the man’s fine boots. Tuccius moved on.

It was at a small fire at camp’s edge where he finally found a man whose frame and bulk suggested regular meals. Mud covered the boots protruding from his cloak, but the tips were distinctive.

Tuccius extended his bowl. “Please, I’m sorry. Anything you can spare.”

“Off with you, beggar.” The man beside Labeo glared, his face covered in mud. “We’ve nothing for you.”

“Don’t be cruel.” Labeo motioned Tuccius to the fire. “You may warm yourself by our fire.”

“Thank you, master.” Tuccius found a place between two other scowling refugees, both women, and sat.

One woman wrinkled her nose and scooted away, reacting to the dung Tuccius had smeared on his cloak earlier today. The other stared at the fire without speaking, barely breathing. She had lost someone today. Tuccius had seen that blank look on so many faces since Batavia rebelled against Rome.

Labeo’s cowl obscured his face. All Tuccius could make out was a strong chin thick with stubble. This assassination must be quiet.

Many in Batavia respected Claudius Labeo for his actions at Nijmegen. They resented Civilis’s decision to exile such a useful commander, but killing him would have been an even bigger mistake, at the time.

Poisoning Labeo’s drink would be easiest—Tuccius carried a powder that would bring on the runs days later, when he was gone—but Labeo would be watching for poison. He could follow the man to the latrine ditch, but Labeo was a notable warrior as well. There was no guarantee Tuccius would prevail.

“What brings you here to us, friend?” Labeo asked. “Have you fled Tongeran as well?” He motioned to the others. “We are all Tungrians, here, and any countryman of ours is welcome.”

“I’m Marsaci,” Tuccius muttered. There were too many things he did not know about Tongeran, and presenting himself as a Tungrian invited questions he could not reliably answer.

The woman who had moved away wrinkled her nose. “We don’t need no stinking Marsaci in our camp.”

“Why?” Labeo asked. “A beggar is not to blame for this war.”

“It’s Labeo’s fault, you ask me.” The mud-covered man spit at the fire. “If that stubborn cunt hadn’t set fires all over Batavia, Civilis would have sent the legions running by now.”

“Perhaps,” Labeo said, and Tuccius heard no anger in his words.

“Bah,” the boiled man said. “Need to piss.” He rose and stalked from the camp.

Tuccius rose and followed him. “I shall not trouble you further.” The man who’d cursed Labeo was an opportunity. If he could convince an actual refugee to murder his target…

Tuccius found the smaller man at a makeshift latrine, dug by those among the refugees who knew defecating where you ate and slept was a wonderful way to start a plague. The refugee stood with his back to Tuccius, whistling as he aimed a golden stream into the ditch. Tuccius limped closer.

“Marsaci!” The refugee turned, his cock flopping before he crammed it back into his soiled breeches. “Come to contribute?”

“Did you mean it?” Tuccius asked.

“Mean what, beggar?”

“About Claudius Labeo being the cause of all this.” Tuccius made himself shudder.

“What’s it to you who I back? You heard something?” The mud-covered refugee leaned closer, eager for gossip. Without food, gossip was the only nourishment many had.

“I heard Labeo’s working for the Romans again, against Civilis,” Tuccius whispered.

The refugee scoffed. “Labeo’s a cunt, I’ll give you that, but he’s no Roman spy.”

“Really?” Tuccius said. “And a Roman spy wouldn’t disguise himself as a Tungrian refugee?”

“Say what?”

“Did you notice the boots of the man beside you, his bearing, his girth? He’s no beggar. I think he might be Claudius Labeo.”

“You think so?” The boiled man leaned closer. “Say, has Civilis got a reward for him?”

Greed and desperation made fools of all men. “As much gold as you can carry, last I heard. We could take him, between the two of us. We could split the reward.”

There was no reward, of course—offering a bounty for Labeo would be foolish when Civilis lacked the money to pay even his own soldiers—but this refugee wouldn’t know that.

The refugee pulled a small flask from inside his cloak. “You’ll help me? I ain’t killed no commander before.”

“I’ll help as I’m able,” Tuccius said. “I need the coin.”

“Then let’s drink to our new wealth!” The refugee raised the flask and took a long drink, Adam’s apple bobbing. He passed the flask to Tuccius. “To piles of Roman gold.”

Tuccius hesitated, but only a moment. The man had drunk before him, and this was too good an opportunity to scuttle. The water tasted foul. Soon after, they were off to murder a commander.

“Say there, beggar, what’s your name?” The refugee might be nervous.

“Tuccius.” No harm in giving his real name, and he needed to keep this man calm. “What’s yours?”

“Claudius,” the refugee said, as he straightened and turned.

Tuccius missed a step as mud roiled around him. “What?” His eyes watered and his throat clamped.

“Claudius Labeo,” the small, mud-covered man said. “The big man at the fire is one of my many loyal soldiers, but there’s no way you could know. My reputation is bigger than me.”

“But I…” Tuccius coughed and fell, trying to understand the fire consuming his belly. “You drank…”

“Did I?” Labeo smiled with teeth far too clean for the mud cloaking his face. “Seems a tongue could clog that spout pretty easily. Have you ever tried that, Tuccius?”

Stupid. Tuccius had been stupid, too focused on the boots, the cloak, the bearing. Claudius Labeo was not a big man with a fine cloak and fine boots. He was a small man, dressed like all the other small men in the refugee camp, and he had just beaten an assassin at his own game.

Tuccius’s eyes glazed over as his vision swam and the poison burned through his gut. Yet despite his agony, his fear, he respected Labeo’s gambit. There was no shame in dying to a man like this one.

“You were only doing your duty,” Labeo said, as his voice came from somewhere far away. “I won't let you suffer. Go in peace.”

Tuccius felt cold steel against his throat. He would have thanked Labeo for that mercy, had he been able to speak, but perhaps the man understood anyway. Tuccius imagined his wife, his daughter, and home.

One day, he hoped, Civilis or Labeo would bring them peace again.

THE END

# The Gambit

## By ArcaneArtsVelho

Pawn d4.

Knight f6.

Pawn c4.

Pawn c5.

Pawn d5.

Pawn b5.

A man reached out his grimy hand and picked up a white pawn from c4. He twirled the piece between his bluish fingers, looking intently at the board, before putting it back down to its previous spot. He scratched his scruffy beard and pulled the collar of his coat higher. “Although I have enjoyed our games during these last two days, I haven’t spoken much in a fear of fraternizing, but…” he said hesitantly to his opponent. “I have to ask, what gambit is this?”

The man on the opposite side of the chessboard shrugged. “I have no idea what it’s called”, he said and let out a short, amused breath that twirled across the dim room. “I’m not really an expert at chess; my son is. But I’ve played enough with him to pick up on a few strategies. Nevertheless, if it has a name, I don’t know it.”

“Well, maybe the winner of this game should come up with a name for it. Would that bet sound good to you, captain?”

“I not a betting man, but I’ll amuse you since you are the only one willing to play with me.”

“I think captain Benko means that you are the only one who plays well enough to have a chance against him,” said a third man who had been sitting on the other side of the room, trying to pretend not to care about the game. Now, however, his curiosity got the better of him and he strode to the others.

“Yes, colonel, that is what I mean. But I would never say it.”

“Well, perhaps it’s time for me to learn this game.” The colonel clasped his hands behind his back and leaned over the board. “So, what is *a* gambit?”

The first man chuckled from beneath his woollen collar. He seemed less tense now. “I’ll explain it, colonel. A gambit is like a diversion. It’s a series of first moves where you take a piece, usually a pawn, and—“

The door of the room slung open, cutting off the explanation. An icy breeze along with a hunched soldier rushed in from a trench outside the door, distant shell impacts and a muffled banging of a machine-gun accompanying their entry. The soldier closed the door and caught his breath. “Colonel Jány, captain Benko,” he said, saluting the officers.

“Yes private?”

“Colonel, sir, they need you in the command bunker. Both of you.”

“What’s happening?” captain Benko asked, getting up.

“Well...” the private started but then nodded towards the man sitting by the chessboard. The captain and the colonel moved closer to the private who continued in a whisper, “The Soviets are making a push.”

The colonel nodded, and the captain moved immediately to the door, opening it to his superior. “Private, you stay and watch him,” he instructed.

“I’m not going to run,” the man at the table said and pulled up his coat, showing the shackles on his ankles and gently jingling them with his foot.

Captain Benko gave a brief smile. “Oh, I’m not afraid of that. I’m afraid that you cheat.” With that he stepped through the door but then stopped. “Oh what the hell,” he said and came back. He set his king on its side. “You name the gambit and then tell me the next time we play. In the mean time, you could teach the private here how to play.” Then he hurried after the colonel, leaving the private and his teacher.

The mood among the commanders of the Hungarian Second Army was grim as the communications officer told the news. “We have reports telling that the Soviets have started an offensive against the Romanian Third Army on the northern side of Stalingrad.”

“On our side,” colonel Jány muttered, nodding. He cleared his throat. “I’m sure we’ll hear similar news from the Romanian Fourth Army on the south side. The Soviets are most likely going to try and pincer their way through the thinned lines of the Romanians in order to cut off the Germans in the city.”

“Colonel, if the Soviet Fifth Tank Army and the 21st Army with its tank and motorized brigades are both involved on the northern assault, we are talking about hundreds of tanks and other armoured vehicles; the Romanians can’t stop that many. Nor can we or the Italians,” captain Benko said and shook his head. “As you said, we are all too thin. And we don’t have enough of anti-tank weapons to deal with a full-blown tank offensive head on.”

“You are right, captain Benko, the situation is not good.” The colonel checked the most recent radio transcripts and then a map showing the latest troop movements. “We knew this was coming; for the last few days, the Romanians have been telling they are hearing sounds of tanks assembling. They have asked for reinforcements and supplies but so far received none.”

“But are the reinforcements coming?” the captain asked.

“According to the Germans, yes, but there’s no accurate information as to when.” The colonel took a deep breath and ran his eyes over the officers gathered in the room. “Any suggestions, gentlemen?”

Had it not been for the faint sounds of war coming from outside, the next few moments would have passed in complete silence. After a while, captain Benko stepped up. “Well, if the reinforcements truly are coming, then I’d say we need to buy some time for the Romanians. If the Soviets really are conducting a double envelopment manoeuvre, they are going to concentrate their forces against the defenders nearer to the city. So we, further north, could make a move of our own with relatively little resistance.”

“Are you saying we should attack? Abandon our defensive positions, however poor they may be?”

“No, sir. I’m saying that we could create a diversion.”

“A diversion? Like that gambit of yours?”

“More or less. My company—which is understrength as it is—could go over the Don River and sneak or punch through all the way to the Volga. There we could make our presence known and possibly force the Soviets to slow down their pincer. Hell, in the best case they could turn most of their attack force towards us if they estimate our size wrong. That’s unlikely to happen, but if it did, you could coordinate defences better with the Romanians to hold until the reinforcements show up, or even launch a counter-attack to the Soviet’s flank.”

The colonel looked through the others in the room, for a second opinion, but was met only by shrugs. “Well, that’s our plan then. Go make ready.” Everybody saluted the colonel and sprung into action. Before captain Benko could leave, the colonel walked to him. “What happens to the pawn in the gambit?”

The captain gave a faint smile. “By definition, a gambit means sacrificing a piece in order to gain an advantageous position.”

The colonel nodded and shook the captain’s hand. Then captain Benko left the bunker.

\*\*\*\*\*

Thirty two years later:

“...and that’s the main difference between the Benko gambit and mister Argunov’s Volga gambit. If you want to know more, you should buy this book,” Pál Benko said, smiling. The crowd applauded, but then Pál grew serious. “As to the gambit’s name… I didn’t name it after myself; I’m not that vain.” The crowd chuckled. “No, it’s named after my father who passed in the Second World War. He was very supporting and always willing to play a round of chess with me; even after he was pretty sure he’d lose. I dedicate this book and the gambit to my father’s memory. Thank you.”

After the event, when the spectators had gone and Pál was ready to leave, he saw and old man sitting by a chessboard reserved for an earlier exhibition game. He moved closer to the man and saw a face that was familiar to him from old Soviet chess magazines. “Mister Argunov?”

The sitting man motioned Pál to take a seat on the other side of the table. “I came to set one thing straight; the Volga gambit was in fact also dedicated to your father.”

Pál sat down looking puzzled. “How so?”

“During the war, I was held captive by the Hungarian Second Army, and your father showed me compassion by letting me play chess with him. I was the last person to ever play with him. And when I later found out that he had passed during a push to the Volga river, I named the gambit he had used in our last game accordingly. I could tell you more if you would entertain an old man with a friendly game of chess.”

“Of course!”

Argunov smiled as he picked up a white pawn. “I think we both know how this goes.”

“At least until b5.”

“Indeed.”

Pawn d4.

Knight f6.

Pawn c4.

Pawn c5.

Pawn d5.

Pawn b5.

# Never Trust a Thief (Especially if you're an Asshole)

## By Rukaio\_Alter

Peter Cross didn’t want to show it, but he was nervous.

Not that that was a surprise mind. If sitting in a room with several of the greatest thieves in the world didn’t make you at least slightly nervous, you were either suicidally overconfident or just plain suicidal.

Keeping his face a perfectly composed mask, Cross glanced to his left. Sitting beside him was Charles ‘Cutthroat’ Taylor, one of the most ruthless men in the business. A silk scarf covered the scars on his neck where, rumour had it, he once slit his own throat to conceal a diamond beneath the skin.

In the corner, playing Russian roulette with an old revolver was ‘Immortal’ John, a man supposedly able to escape any life-threatening situation through pure luck alone. The constant empty click of the revolver as he checked chamber after chamber was the only noise in the empty room.

Cross’s eyes moved to the man on his right. It was difficult to mistake the smooth black tuxedo worn by Pierre Voltaire or, as he preferred to be called, The Magician. Nobody knew how he got aware with his seemingly impossible heists. After all, a Magician never reveals his secrets.

But, most dangerous of all, in Cross’s opinion, was the woman staring directly at him. Scarlett. The Woman of 50 Faces. A true Master of Disguise, able to impersonate almost anybody in the world, be they man or woman. Her most infamous feat was impersonating a groom on the night of his wedding day. And, somehow, consummating the marriage. Even Peter wasn’t sure how she did that.

Scarlett winked at him. Peter felt a shudder go down his spine.

They’d also briefly dated.

Fortunately for his sanity, Peter was distracted from his raging sex drive by his watch beeping. He looked down at it and frowned.

“Alright, I’m not unused to being played like a chump,” he said loudly. “But it’s been 30 minutes since we arrived here and there’s still no sign of our employer.”

“You suggest we leave?” Scarlett purred. “What a shame. I thought this whole mysterious business seemed… rather exciting.”

“Dodgy is what it is.” Taylor growled in a husky voice. “Anonymous employers are always a pain to deal with. Half the time they just end up being police stings. If this schmuck thinks he can order us around from the shadows, he’s painfully mistaken.”

“I assure you, Mr Taylor.” A voice blared from a speaker. “I have my reasons to stay secret.”

Peter assumed the sudden announcement was meant to surprise and shock the group. Unfortunately, they were all professionals who had dealt with these sorts of power plays before, thus none of them reacted with little more than a raised eyebrow.

“I don’t care about your reasons.” Taylor said. “If you’re not going to show yourself, I walk.”

There was a chuckle over the speaker. “Very well. But I pray you keep your tempers in check.”

The door clicked and in walked the most punchable man Peter had ever seen in his life. Every facet of this man, his suit, his posture, his walk, his billion dollar watch just screamed ‘rich, sleazy scumbag’. And his face… his face was twisted in a near constant sneer, so obnoxious that it practically invited violence.

“Oh sod.” Taylor swore. “You’re that asshole Shrek guy.”

“Martin Shkreli.’” The man’s face flashed with annoyance.

“Who is he?” Scarlett asked. “And why is he an asshole?”

“I am a revolutionary.” Shkreli sneered. Or at least Peter assumed it was a sneer. With a face that smug, everything seemed to come off as a sneer. “A man willing and able to cast off the shackles that bind the ordinary man and rise above the writhing masses to true greatness. However, such achievements invites contempt from the envious and untalented. Hence I am unjustly persecuted and slandered for my great accomplishments.”

“I see.” Scarlett turned to Taylor. “For real though, who is he?”

“He’s a skeezy businessman who bought the rights to a life-saving drug and raised the price by 5000% solely for profit.” Taylor explained. “Then he acted like a douche when people called him out on it.”

“Wow.” Scarlett said, turning back to Shkreli. “You are an asshole.”

“But Mr Skekeli, I thought you were supposed to have been arrested for tax fraud.” Peter said. “What are you doing here?”

“That’s Shkreli.” Shkreli corrected through gritted teeth. “And I’m out on bail. Being a skeezy tax cheat- ahem, I mean, entrepreneur has its advantages.”

“Then what have you hired us for?”

Shkreli’s sneer widened into… a larger sneer. “It’s very simple. I want you to break into the main lab of Imprimis Pharmaceuticals.”

“Oh hell no,” Immortal John suddenly spoke. “I am not breaking into a pharmaceutical lab. I have seen 28 Days Later. And Resident Evil. No good can come of this.”

“It’s not a dangerous lab, you moron.” Shkreli sneered. “I thought you were supposed to be a professional.”

Immortal John blinked. Slowly.

“Say, would anyone here object if I punched this guy in the face?” He asked.

There was a chorus of ‘nopes’ from Taylor and Scarlett. Peter, on the other hand, was more composed.

“I understand the urge,” he said, “but maybe wait until he’s explained the job before we punch his teeth out.”

“W-Wait, we?” A drop of sweat ran down Shkreli’s brow.

Peter didn’t say anything. He simply leaned back in his chair and folded his arms.

Lacking much of his previous swagger, Shkreli continued his story. “Well, I want you to steal a certain formula from Imprimis Pharmaceuticals. You see, they created a successful alternative to our drug, Daraprim-“

“The one you price-gouged dying people for?” Scarlett asked.

“Y-Yes, that one.” Shkreli wiped his brow. “Anyway, that drug will cut into our market. So I want you to steal it and wipe away the competition.”

“And what’s in it for us?” Taylor asked. “Because, I’ll be honest, you’d need to pay a lot of money just to get me out of this room without punching your face off.”

“Yes, but I have something far more priceless than money.” Shkreli said, a touch of his former smugness creeping into his voice. “Something only I can provide. Once Upon a Time in Shaolin.”

“Look, I do not need to know what you got up to in Shaolin.” Immortal John said bluntly. “As far as I’m concerned, with a face and personality like that, you shouldn’t even be allowed to breed.”

“He’s talking about the Wu-Tang Clan album.” Taylor explained.

“Oh.” John said. “I don’t listen to hiphop.”

“They’re a band, dumbass.” Taylor explained. “Once Upon a Time in Shaolin is an album they made and released one copy of. And Shitkicker here bought it.”

“That’s Shkreli!” Shkreli snapped. He then immediately backed down when Taylor raised a fist. “B-b-b-but you’re right! I have the only copy in the world. And I’m willing to let you all have a listen to it, provided you accomplish this job for me.”

The group exchanged glances.

Peter spoke up. “Look, Mr Sugarlala-“

“Shkreli.”

“Whatever.” Peter continued. “You seem like a perfectly nice guy-”

“No he doesn’t.” Scarlett said.

“…True.” Peter admitted. “You seem like a complete asshole, but your deal is very tempting. In fact, I think we need a few minutes outside to talk over your offer.”

“Very well.” Shkreli nodded. “The door is over there. Try not to scuff the carpet.”

“Are you sure I can’t punch him before we leave?” Immortal John asked as he was escorted out. “Just a little?”

Peter tried to hold in his sigh of relief. Shkreli hadn’t noticed any irregularities. Not that Peter thought that egomaniac would notice anything odd. Not even that one of the group was a body double.

Now he could only hope that their accomplice had pulled off his end of the plan…

A few minutes later, Shkreli was pacing through the corridors of his building. For some reason, the conversation with the thieves had left him with a lingering nervousness. And not just because they’d had an intense discussion on the way out about whether or not to kick his face in. Come to think about it, it was odd that Pierre, the Magician, hadn’t said a word throughout the entire meeting.

To settle his nerves, Shkreli decided to travel to his secret underground vault and listen to his exclusive album while also partaking in his usual puppy/kitten kicking. However, when he reached said vault, he found the door swinging wide open.

In panic, Shkreli opened the safe to his album, only to find his prized possession missing and one solitary note left behind.

Dear Shukrayli.

We’re thieves, remember? Thanks for giving us access to your building so we could steal your album.

Yours Sincerely, Pierre Voltaire and other Criminals with Standards.

Fists shaking, Shkreli crumpled the note. Then, leaning his head back to the sky, he let out one solitary scream.

“THAT’S SHKRELI!!!”

# Curse the Schedule

## By m3mnoch



"Hey, Boss. What's this?"

Reggie, watching the pile foundations as they were hammered into the ground for the new Waterford Commercial Building, turned and faced Jake.

"What's what?"

Jake's gloved hand extended out from where he was adding cement for the stabilizer in their little Kushlan mixer. He held out a small piece of metal in his palm resembling a beaten up, washer-like ring.

Reggie rolled his eyes and returned to the foundation work. His crew needed to have these piles in the ground and the formwork and rebar set up in the next 4 days. Because, like all construction downtown, things were tight the whole schedule through.

"No, really. Come look at it," Jake said.

Reggie grunted, turned, and stalked over. He jerked the metal bit out of Jake's hand and held it up to examine.

"I found it in that last bag of cement. It was still sealed." Jake rubbed his chin. "Do you think it's a coin?"

"No, asshole." Reggie was pushing the disc around in his palm. "Coins don't have holes in the middle."

"But it has writing on it."

"No kind of writing I've ever seen. It just looks dented. The hole's not even round. It's probably just some tag or washer that slipped in at the bagging factory." Reggie tossed the worthless thing into their little mixer along with the rest of the contents from the cement bag. "Now, hurry up and pour that slurry. We've got that next pile coming and I want the damn thing stable. We've got to finish this foundation today."

Jake's nose twitched. Like he was considering fishing the worthless chunk of tin from a mixer full of wet cement. Finally, he sighed, tilted the drum over, and dumped the mixture into the hole.

Reggie lifted his arm and waved to the pile driving team, signaling the hole was ready.



Reggie collapsed onto the couch in the construction trailer that served as his office. It'd been a long week and felt like an even longer day, but his team had mostly finished the foundation. They had a couple more forms to throw together in the morning, but they would make their deadline. More or less.

The flimsy, aluminum door rattled as someone pounded on it from outside.

"Come in," he hollered, exhausted.

The door screeched open, and Jake leapt into the trailer.

"Boss, did you hear about that trucker?" Eyes the size of hubcaps, he fanned his arm out wide, pointing to some spot in the distance. "The one what had his rig burned up. Him inside."

Reggie shifted a little. "That's too bad. Which trucker?"

"The guy what brought in our cement."

"Huh?" Reggie sat up. He remembered the guy. Jaded and sarcastic, but hell of a work ethic. Those haulers always sit and watch his boys unload, but this one rolled up his sleeves and started throwing 80lb bags like he was one of them.

"Yeah. He was headed back west and his truck caught fire. Burned him right up. Black and crispy, even!"

Reggie grimaced, then lifted an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Yeah! For real! At least that's what ol' Jim Barnes was sayin'. I guess he knew the guy." Jake still wide-eyed, bobbed his head, fists on his hips.

Grunting, Reggie leaned forward and grabbed his laptop from the counter. "What company did he drive for again?"

"Oh, I don't remember. Why? You gonna look it up?"

The clicking of keys paused as, face lit by the glow of the screen, he stared at Jake.

"Well, what was the brand of the cement? Cemex?" Maybe there was something in the invoices.

Scratching his chin, Jake shook his head. "Nah. It were Twig-something-or-nuther."

"Here it is. Twiga Extra. That's right. It was delivered by Heising Hauling." Reggie clicked, scanned, clicked again. He kept at it for a few moments while Jake tapped his foot, sucking on his teeth with impatience.

"Oh, wow." Flipping the screen around, Reggie pointed to the article. "Look. He burned right up in the middle of I-10."

"Whoa. . . . Hey, what's that?"

"Where?"

"On the side there. The thing about the ship."

Reggie rotated the laptop back around and checked the *related articles* section. "Looks like a cargo ship went down a week ago. An engine fire, too."

"Bad week for diesel, I reckon." Jake shrugged, scratching his head.

"Wait a minute. The ship had just dropped off cargo in L.A." Reggie squinted. "No shit . . . Guess what it was hauling?"

"Some damn illegal immigrants?"

Glancing up, Reggie said, "Really?" He swore Jake said things just to make him say that.

Jake shrugged. "Them bastards're tryin' to take my job."

"No. Not illegals. It was carrying a load of Twiga cement. Fresh in from somewhere called 'Dar es Salaam'."

"I knew it! It's them damn terrorists!"

"Probably." Reggie nodded and clicked while Jake watched. "Maybe not. I guess it's not in the middle east, but somewhere in Tanzania."

"Where that devil from them Bugs Bunny cartoons was from?"

"No, that's Taz-mania. Different part of the world. That's over by Australia, I think. No, this place is in Africa."

Lower-lip extended and looking thoughtful, Jake nodded as if that made sense to him.

"Holy shit."

"What?"

"The Twiga warehouse in that Salami-whatever-city had a riot or something. Guys with guns, the employees, I guess, came in. Shot everything up. Everyone was killed." He bent closer to the screen. "And, I mean everyone. It says here some stocker guys went crazy or something."

"It's them damn terrorists, I tell ya."

"There's more. This is talking about how the Twiga factory 30 kilometers away exploded the week before."

"Really? Man, them terrorists got it out for our Twig friends, eh?"

"Maybe not this one. This says it was an explosion in their lab. Powdered limestone or testing chemicals or something."

"Yeah, but them ISIS bastards will make a bomb out of anything. Could still be terrorists. They got any pictures of the dead people?"

Sighing, he handed the laptop to Jake and stood up. "I've got to finish up this transfer paperwork tonight, so I'm going to make some coffee. You want some?"

Brows furrowed, Jake stuck his nose in the computer and mumbled, ”Sure, sure. I wanna find out more about these cement terrorists. Gotta be alert, ya know."



NEWS ANCHOR:

*Our lead story comes to us tonight from the construction site of the upcoming Waterford Commercial Building where two men were burned alive in a freak accident.*

*Officials say the men, identified as Reginald Johnson and Jacob Williams, switched on a coffee maker when there was an electrical short, and the construction trailer they were in caught fire. Both men were killed before the fire department could arrive.*

*Construction at the site has been delayed until further notice.*

*When we reached out to the Waterford family for comment, they offered their condolences to the families of the victims, and assured the other workers that construction would continue soon.*



. . . Six years later.

NEWS ANCHOR:

*Our final item of the evening is regarding the Waterford Commercial lot downtown. What might have been the third sale of the now-famous property has been postponed once again for tragic reasons.*

*Commercial real estate agent Derrick Smith has been found dead after plunging eight stories from where he and a potential buyer were inspecting the property. Witnesses say the pair climbed the scaffolding surrounding the unfinished building to admire possible views from any new construction.*

*Authorities have not yet released the name of the person allegedly interested in buying the property that some characterize as haunted, but they have the individual in custody for questioning regarding the incident. This is the eighteenth death associated with the Waterford property in the last six years.*

*We'll bring you more as the story develops.*

# The Colliery

## By Anonymous



August pushed through the stalks of wheat and shielded his eyes from the sun, searching for a better view of the colliery. Just a little further and they'd be close enough. He stopped when he could see the headframe, standing proud over the huddled buildings and the empty courtyard.

John squeezed past him, dark eyes intent on their goal. "Are they gone yet?"

August shook his head. "What if they catch us?"

"It won't take long. I know where I need to go."

August shivered, despite the oppressive heat. "Can't we just ask?"

"They wouldn't listen."

"But my da—"

*"No.* I have to do this." John glared at him. "I didn't ask you to come."

August looked away, silent. He didn't have a choice. He couldn't let his friend do this alone.

John snorted, then leaned forwards and craned his neck. "They're leaving."

"All of them?" August squinted and tried to count the adults as they left the mine.

"Would any of them miss the ceremony?"

"I don't get it. It's just a school."

John shrugged. "At least they're distracted."

The moment the adults were gone the boys broke cover, racing to the colliery entrance. Inside, the heat wasn't so unbearable, and the darkness was a balm to August's strained eyes. At least, it was until he saw it.

The shaft was a black hole in the middle of the room—an empty maw that oozed malevolence. His stomach twisted at the sight, and he took an instinctive step backwards.

John didn't seem to notice his distress. The older boy cast wary glances towards the shadowed corners of the room as he approached the pit.

August gritted his teeth. He had been down there once before, and he had lived. He shouldn't be scared—it hadn't been that bad. Not until he started seeing things at least, and that would *not* happen again. He wasn't crazy. Besides, up until a few years ago, *all* kids went down the mines to help—John had worked the traps for years.

Unable to tear his eyes from the yawning pit of darkness, he forced himself to move. The pit grew; the darkness deepened. Almost at its edge, swaying slightly, he steadied himself against a table. He had to do something about that evil darkness. He reached a trembling hand towards one of the davy lamps the miners had left on the table.

John reached it first, calmly picked it up, and lit the wick. "Look. You should stay here."

August nearly collapsed with relief. "You sure?"

John nodded and strolled over to the chains suspended over the shaft. "I won't be long." He strapped himself into the harness, then hesitated. He glanced at August, then looked away. "If anything happens… Thanks." Without looking up, he descended into the pit.

The lamplight faded into the depths. The rhythmic clatter of the chains was a lifeline in the dark, a thread that told him he was not alone.

August couldn't keep his gaze away from the pit. He lit another lamp and hung it in the opening—anything to fight back the shadows.

He waited, nervously glancing around the room. His gaze never strayed for long.

The chains stopped. Silence.

Seconds stretched to minutes. The only sound was August's breathing, fast and getting faster. His pulse started pounding in his ears. The world seemed to contract, swallowed whole by the vast and endless shadows that lurked in the abyss, until the last things left were the boy, his laboured breath, and the weak light that stood between him and the darkness.

The lantern wavered, flickered, then went out.

August's heart thundered, and he shakily edged away from the pit. He was halfway to the door before he could breathe and think again. The miners must not have filled their lamps before they went, and he must have used up the last of what was left in the one he chose. No reason to be afraid. Still, he took a fresh lamp from the cupboard by the door and made sure it was filled. When the lamp was merrily burning he ventured back to his pit-side vigil.

Shadows safely chained once more, he paced and fidgeted. Surely John should be back by now? The mines weren't *that* deep. But the chains remained silent. A thought struck him, and he froze in horror.

What if John's lantern had run out as well?

He would be deep within the earth, alone, with no light to guide his way. Lost. Begging for help. And there was only one person here to answer his call.

The rest of the village would be no help; the new school's opening ceremony would go on for hours. August could run and get someone, but then they'd be in real trouble. Besides, he didn't know for sure that John *was* in danger! No. He only had one option. And if it scared him shitless then it was his own damn fault.

He rolled his sleeves up and faced his nemesis. The lamp lit just the first few feet; the dark beneath was an endless chasm, willing him to fall. Dizzied, he swayed a little, but with a burst of anger he steeled himself, leaned out, and grabbed the chain. He pressed the cool metal against his forehead for a minute to let the world stop spinning.

Panic calmed, pulse still racing, he hauled the chain until the harness reappeared. Before he had a chance to listen to his doubts, he grabbed the lamp, strapped himself in, and started to descend. Within moments the mouth of the pit faded into shadows.

The clatter of the chains sounded different here, and no longer gave him comfort. The sphere of light felt far too small. The weight of earth above seemed to press down on him; his chest began to hurt.

It took all his focus just to move one hand over the other, to keep the harness moving. The world blurred, faded; something within him came apart and suddenly he could feel the earth around him. Just like last time.

A smoky darkness flowed through the rocks and earth, filled with a brooding power which hungered for the spark of life. Tiny cracks and fissures ran deep into its heart, each filled with a slick and oily fire. August could *feel* it. It echoed the rapid throb of blood through his veins, called to him like nothing else. He tried to fight his rising terror, but the world began to crack and groan as it responded to his fear.

It was happening again. But this time, he knew more. The veins of darkness in the earth were *coal*, the lifeblood of the world. The thing that lurked within its cracks was a gas: firedamp, a hazard feared by every miner. Exposed to flames, it could explode at any moment.

Understanding calmed his fear, and his heartbeat slowed once more. The firedamp settled down as well. August hesitated. Maybe he *was* crazy. Gases do not respond to emotion.

He crushed his wish to be as far away as possible, and carried on into the dark. With his newfound senses he could feel the jagged shape of the mine, a gnawing wound that would not close. He cast his thoughts out through the shafts and passageways, searching for anything that would hint at where John would be.

A short distance into a half-collapsed drift, not too far below him, a slight vibration seemed to be just what he hoped for. He worked his way down to the opening and hooked the harness to a bracket in the wall. He paused, reluctant, wishing he could leave. He took a deep breath. He had made it this far; he could finish this.

Half a dozen paces into the tunnel, he found a discarded lamp—still a little warm. He called out. The echoes lingered, almost masking the faint reply that came from further in. Careful not to trip over the tracks, he hurried deeper into the drift. Finally, he found his friend.

John crouched by a spill of rubble which completely blocked the tunnel. His sweaty hair was plastered over his forehead, his clothes and face were black with dust. His voice wavered, uncharacteristically high. "August? Is that you?"

"Yeah. You okay?"

John sighed, relief flooding his face. "Twisted my ankle. Tripped when my lamp went out."

"Yeah, mine went out too."

"I wondered how you knew."

"Shall we…" August frowned. "Why did you come over here?"

John tensed, staring at the floor.

"Oh." August's stomach dropped. John hadn't been an orphan for long, and of course an empty grave was not the same. This was where it had happened. A patch of dirt at John's feet caught his eye—a tiny grave, freshly broken.

A fluffy ear stuck out from the earth.

John bent down and tenderly reshaped the mound, until the bear was buried. He wiped away his tears, and set off towards the shaft without a word.

# The Panther Spirit of the Swamp

## By Lanko

From the trees I watch the pygmies creep through the bog mounted on their wattled cranes, their lanterns held in front of them like fishing poles.

Searching for me while the undead became another danger lurking in the flats required great courage, even though I was the one who lured them here, a safe area. A hunter doesn’t go to his prey’s nest, but hides and patiently waits until it enters his hunting ground.

One of them stopped and cast an inquisitive glance: “Is there something behind me?”, and then moved on, disturbed.

The mind may not notice and even lie to itself, but your spirit knows and tries to alert you. It’s the hunter’s greatest trick to make you ignore that warning; when you think you are really alone, yet feel the eyes of someone looking in on you. Never dismiss it as just the wind or your imagination. Because it’s not.

But now is not the time for hunting. Today I prepare the true hunting ground, for a great feast is coming. I jump, landing behind them. One of them falls from his wattled crane and the startled, riderless bird flees further into the marsh.

“Trespassing.”

“Panther Spirit,” one of them says, raising his arms. “Alliance. Witch.” He throws a small package in front of me. I shake my head. The other pygmy throws his. Silence. And the pygmy who fell from his mount throws a third offering.

“I will hear your chief.”

We proceed to their tribe, with me scouting ahead, no undead in our way. Their village is encircled by ankhs and altars, all of them preventing not only the undead from approaching it, but me as well. We walked along a path that led us to a hidden entrance, the dozens of altars and symbols actually all false in that area. I didn’t know this, and neither does the witch.

I’m not afraid of being trapped. They are more desperate than me.

The undead have been restless, surrounding them for most of the day, retreating only for brief intervals, where a few brave warriors go out to hunt. They think the witch needs to sleep and can’t control the undead all the time. It’s only partly true, but they don’t need to know the whole story.

We, mortal enemies, celebrated the alliance with a small feast, the pygmies slowly dancing in circles under the sound of drums and flutes; they looked like children playing. I preferred to watch their shadows on the walls, taller than their souls, contorting furiously as the flames moved.

What for them is a demonstration of union and strength, for me shows only weakness. Walls and huts means permanence, other predators now know where you are. Trophies and treasure makes you too proud and careless. Commitment to others will drag you down. But I believe is too much for the humans to live in silence and isolation, only with the freedom of body and mind to survive under the wandering stars and the whispering wind, adapting to the unknown.

They gave me an ankh, supposedly to protect me from the witch’s sorcery. The undead returned, surrounding the tribe, their moaning an ululation of despair. Two of them approached the gates and placed a spear on the ground.

The witch wants to see me.

The Zebra Spirit ignored her and was hunted down for being impolite. The Hippo Spirit went and became dinner for the undead. So it would be ill-mannered to decline the invitation and ill-advised to accept it.

But a hunter doesn’t run, and sometimes you do have to go right into your prey’s nest. She lived in a cave by the lake. I could never approach this place without the pygmy trinket. And they couldn’t come here to kill her because of the marsh and it’s poisonous flora filling the ground, water and air.

Not the first time I saw her, and I also know her true nature, but it still unsettled me seeing her sitting cross-legged, her raven hair and dark liquored eyes and skin untouched by the dirt or the smell of the swamp.

“The Panther Spirit. I saw you in the pygmy’s tribe.”

“They offered me an alliance to kill you.” Unlike the other two Spirits of the swamp, I am direct. She stood immediately and the undead surrounded me.

“And you think you can do it alone?”

I closed my eyes, inhaling slowly. “Alone? I am the Panther Spirit. I reign over this place. I hear the swamp, the wood and the lake talk; insects and birds singing; the scent of soil and beast; all breathing life into the animal hidden within me.” I looked at her and smiled. “My dear lady, make no mistake. I’m by myself, but I am not alone. Your undead can’t kill me.” A total lie, of course.

She laughed. “Zombies don’t kill. They recruit for their cause. But I prefer my cats with shining fur instead of rotting flesh.” She sat again. “Why did you come then?”

“I have no sympathies for the pygmies. Always contesting my preys. Tell me why you are so eager to destroy them and we can be allies.”

“Our government wants a dam in this region. I came to prevent it. The consequences for the biodiversity here would be devastating. One day I got lost, left my car to get a better signal for my phone and… I… I died. I don’t even know how it happened. It took me awhile to realize it, even seeing my corpse in front of me. The pygmies came and carried it inside their village, chopped me to pieces and put me in their cauldrons and… and… I will have my revenge!”

I didn’t understand half of what she said. The undead screamed with her. They also wanted their vengeance, and I saw it in their eyes, staring at me. They see me. They feel it. They know. But they can’t do anything unless she says so.

“They also want their revenge,” she said.

“There’s a hidden passage to the tribe unguarded. Attack tomorrow. I will trick them.” I removed the amulet the pygmy chief gave me and offered it to her. “Use this. A gift from me, the protection of the Panther Spirit. They won’t be able to harm you.”

She reluctantly picked the ankh. “Tomorrow then.”

“Witch is dead?” asked the pygmy chief.

“She will come in two days. With me here, her spells won’t work. Prepare yourselves.”

Tired from the celebrations, they went to sleep, only to awake in the morning to the screams and the echoing gong of the alarm. The undead carried torches, putting the tribe aflame and then blocked all exits. The pygmies, dazed and panicked, and too short to escalate their own walls, were cornered and surrounded by the fire.

The witch observed all this from outside, delirious in joy.

From a tree, I stared at the pygmy chief, giving him my most feline smile. Nothing more delicious to repay betrayal with betrayal. He stared back with pure hatred, and screamed magical words before the inferno swallowed him.

The witch also screamed, as the trinket I gave her shattered and lightning engulfed her. The undead stopped, falling motionless on the ground. The witch stared at her hands, the pygmy spell slowly causing her to fade. She ran away.

I jolted after her. It’s hard to chase spirits, but she was still too attached to her worldly feelings and desires. So she didn’t float above the marshes, didn’t pass through trees and raised her hands to protect her face from vines and branches that wouldn’t touch her. We ran, the fog getting more and more thick, but I’m used to this endless grey. We arrived at a familiar site, where a metal mount of those building the great wall of stone was half drowned into the bog.

The place where she died.

Intuition? Last memories while still alive? A familiar place, perhaps, as even ghosts need a sanctuary.

“It’s a bit ironic,” I said, approaching her slowly. “You didn’t want the great wall on the river built, but cornered the pygmies in their own tribe and killed the other two spirits of the swamp, thus leaving the outsiders undisturbed. But fear not. Now that the pygmies and the other two spirits are gone, the flats are mine alone to reign and that will soon change. If it’s a consolation.”

She looked at me, then her eyes went wide with realization. Hopefully remembering the moments before her death and the pygmies.

“You gave me quite the trouble these past months. My body needs flesh, but my spirit requires a bit more than that. Now I will finish what I started.”

So I caught her in my whisper, and as it happens with all my preys, her soul struggled against mine with a ruthless cry, but my ears heard only the silence so loud.