



speculative fiction FOR THE REST OF US

Expanded Horizons Issue 8 – June 2009
<http://www.expandedhorizons.net>

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Forbidden Pleasures by Michelle Belanger..... | 1 |
| Princess of the Stars by Catherine Knutsson..... | 7 |
| King of Sand and Stormy Seas by Silvia Moreno-Garcia..... | 10 |
| Night Out by Eliza Victoria..... | 15 |
| Bhima by Ajay Vishnawathan..... | 23 |
| Contributor Biographies..... | 26 |
| Michelle Belanger..... | 26 |
| Catherine Knutsson..... | 26 |
| Silvia Moreno-Garcia..... | 26 |
| Eliza Victoria..... | 26 |
| Ajay Vishnawathan..... | 26 |

Forbidden Pleasures by Michelle Belanger

I was perhaps ten feet away from the stage. On it, three performers hung from the ceiling, suspension hooks sunk deep into their flesh. They wore expressions of studied concentration, their eyes focused and far away. Their outflung limbs trembled slightly, and they swayed gently on their chains. Beneath them, two other participants engaged in a grisly tug of war, bodies pitched forward as they strained against the hooks in their backs. The blood flowed freely, but they gritted their teeth and continued to struggle forward in opposing directions.

Behind all this, on a slightly raised dais, an Africasian woman was stretched on a wheel. Her lithe, almond-colored limbs were splayed in an “x”, and the long rope of her braided hair pointed toward the floor. An Amazonian mistress, clad entirely in black rubber with a futuristic gas mask, presided over her. She held a wicked-looking flogger, and with this, she lashed the bare skin of the girl on the wheel. Each braided lash was tipped with a glittering metal stud, and these left a pattern of nearly-black

bruises whenever they connected with her flesh. The restrained girl's cries, throaty and ululant by turns, were clearly not of pain.

I sat at my small table nursing a drink, angled slightly away from the spectacle. A particularly strident cry from the girl on the wheel got my attention. I looked up in time to see dots of blood glistening in the hot lights of the stage. The mistress had laid open flesh. I felt neither shock nor arousal.

Had I really gotten that jaded? I took a sip from my drink, and I could barely taste it. I felt numb and faraway. I supposed it was inevitable. I had lived too many lives. I'd seen all the world had to offer ten times over, and now almost nothing got a rise out of me. It was the world we lived in nowadays. So many people lamented over how permissive it had grown. For me, there were just too many things that were forbidden.

I closed my eyes against the black-clad visions around me and started to lose myself in contemplation of the past. More and more the past was calling to me and the here and now seemed flat and textureless when compared to my ancient memories. It was so different back then. We had our own spaces, our own structure. Temples that stretched many levels beneath the earth. We kept to our own people, and death was no more inconvenient than changing a soiled suit of clothes. With our hardy bodies and endless succession of lives, we went to extremes that this culture merely dreamed of.

But that was a different age, and so many lives ago that it was unwise to count. Things had changed between now and then. Civilizations rise and fall. Ours was no different. And now here we were, wanderers without a country, haunted by memories we could neither recapture nor forget.

A shift in the emotions around me pulled me from my reverie. Marcus was working his way toward me, attempting to navigate the jostling crush of patrons. I could feel his sense of urgency. I met his eyes, effectively closing the distance between us.

“What's wrong?”

From habit, I asked the question out loud, though my spoken words had no hope of carrying to him over the pounding pulse of the techno. He heard the intent, if not the language. Telepathy was like that. Very rarely did a communication come through word for word.

His eyes on mine, I got the impression that there was trouble by the VIP room. A slight jerk of his head in that direction confirmed the impression. I nodded, thinking, I'll take care of it. This elicited a curt nod, and before I could rise from my table, he had already turned on his heel and headed back the way he had come.

I moved easily through the crowd, making my way toward the stairs that led to the second level. Unlike Marcus, the crowd parted around me, always allowing me just enough room. In clubs like this, it was a good talent to have, but not everyone could master it. It was part timing, part subconscious cues. A few of the patrons who verged upon Awakening looked up as I passed by, sensing something from me but not comprehending what it was. I smiled to myself.

Marcus made it to the hall just as I was mounting the stairs.

“It's some mundane,” he said, catching up to me. “He tried getting into the VIP room, and now he's giving one of the girls a hard time. There's a couple of Warriors up there, and I'm afraid it might go bad.”

I shook my head.

“Can't have that,” I responded. “I respect the Warrior caste, but they go too far sometimes. This isn't

the old days. We don't have the luxury of that kind of violence."

Marcus nodded. He was wide-eyed and a little breathless from contending with the crowd. I could sense fear in him. It wasn't just fear for the situation; he always hated "situations" with the Warrior caste. Probably because he knew them all too well.

"I'll take care of it," I assured him, taking the stairs two at a time.

On the upper level of the club, there was a smaller bar, a walkway, an area for tables, then an open space that sometimes served as a dance floor leading back to the VIP lounge. About halfway between us and the VIP lounge, I could see a knot of people forming. This was in the open space, and fortunately it wasn't as crowded up here. Most of the patrons were downstairs watching the stage show, so even Marcus would be able to make his way to the problem without too much delay.

I could tell just by the energy up here that a fight was about to break out. At the heart of it were two of our people. Ryan stood next to Amalthea, looking frightened and protective all at once. Amalthea was trying to stand her ground, her pointed little chin jutting forward in defiance. At five foot nothing, she couldn't muster a whole lot of menace. The fact that she was wearing fairy wings and a bright green, gossamer dress certainly didn't help. Ryan, though a wonderful guy, was nearly as feminine as she was, with a build so wraith-thin that sufficiently strong language might knock him over. Needless to say, he did not cut a threatening figure in his black mesh shirt and ankle-length skirt.

Opposite Amalthea was the interloper. His hair was arranged in little blond spikes in an oblong strip atop his head. Everywhere else, it was shaved to the scalp. He had zero-gauged rings in his ears and a corkscrew-shaped piercing through one eyebrow. An inch-long spike pierced his libret. He wore a black T-shirt and black bondage pants with cascades of chromed chains dangling from the pockets. In style and clothing, he fit right in at the club. But even from here, I could see his energy wasn't right. He was definitely not one of us.

He stood about a head taller than Amalthea and under his tee he had a pretty muscular build. There was a definite threat to his posture. He leaned into Amalthea's personal space, one stubby-fingered hand on her wrist. He was speaking to her in forceful tones as if Ryan wasn't even there.

"Shit," Marcus said with a wince. "He's touching her. He wasn't doing that before."

Behind them, two of our Warriors had already noticed the spectacle from the VIP lounge. They were two of the hair-trigger ones, too, Wolf and Jordan. They were both shouldering past the doorman and heading straight for the little threesome. Both of them were over six feet tall, stoutly built, with big, barrel chests. They weighed about 250 a piece. Energy crackled off of them, and their darkening expressions and flashing eyes portended a storm. You could mistake them for therians, if you didn't know what you were looking for. But they were no different from the rest of us. Unfortunately for this situation, they tended to feed off of conflict. If I didn't intervene, they would quickly make things worse.

I stepped up the projection trick and cut a swath through the people dividing me from the scene. Summoning energy to my hands as I closed the distance, I felt my pulse pounding all the way down to my fingertips. In a moment, I was there, just a few seconds before the Warriors loomed up behind Ryan and Amalthea.

"Hey, maybe we should talk about this," I said quickly, projecting calm and trust and "hey, I'm a nice guy, really". As I did, I reached out and placed a hand on the interloper's shoulder, gently, as if I only wanted to get his attention. I made sure at least two of my fingers connected with the bare flesh of his

neck, right near a pressure point. Locking eyes with Jordan to warn him off, I gave a quick, deep pull on the interloper's energy. Jordan pulled up short, putting out an arm to hold back Wolf as well.

The interloper swayed suddenly, his eyes fluttering like he was going to pass out. For a moment, while his attention was diverted, I allowed myself to smile. With a final triumphant glance at Jordan, I put on my most personable face and radiated concern.

"Hey," I said solicitously, putting my other arm out to steady him. At the same time, I turned him away from everyone else so he was only facing me. "You all right, buddy?"

He eyed me suspiciously, not knowledgeable enough to connect his sudden dizzy spell with my contact, but wary all the same. When I met his eyes, I thought rather forcefully, Maybe you need to sit down.

He looked a little unfocused still from my first attack, but to my surprise, he shook the suggestion off. Belligerent eyes rose to meet my own.

"What the fuck?" he demanded. "Get your hands off a' me. You're doing some freaky shit."

Lovely. An asshole and Awakened. It seemed the Universe was trying to prove I could still feel something tonight. Unfortunately, aggravation was one emotion that had never been dulled over the passage of time.

The interloper shrugged my hands off and took up a defensive stance. He faced off with me, but out of the tails of his eyes I could see him surveying the positions of Ryan and Amalthea and especially Jordan and Wolf. I was about to give Jordan another look to make sure he kept out of this when I saw Marcus step up to the both of them. Above the pulse of the speakers, I could hear him addressing the Warriors in low, placating tones. Gods bless Marcus, timid streak and all.

"Hey," I said again, holding my hands up where he could see them. "I just heard there was some trouble up here and I want to avoid a fight."

His eyes narrowed as he regarded me.

"What the fuck are you?"

Oh boy, I thought. Here we go.

"That depends on what you mean," I responded carefully. I felt Ryan tense. This was not the type of conversation we liked having out in the open. Fortunately for everyone's sake, the Warriors were too distracted by Marcus to have heard what he asked.

"I mean, what the fuck are you?" he repeated, an edge of sarcasm to his tone. "When you came up here and oh so officiously interrupted my conversation with this lady, I figured you were her boyfriend. I mean, that skinny little faggot sure as hell ain't dating her," he said, jerking a thumb toward Ryan. "But you got tits. You a drag queen or a dyke?"

I wanted to laugh. That was it? He was confused about my gender? This little gutterpunk could shake off my suggestions and see right through my glamour and all he wanted to know was whether I was male or female? He was wide Awake and he didn't even know it! He had no idea what he was really seeing. I couldn't help the sardonic smile that spread across my lips.

"You're in a fetish club and you're worried about drag queens, dykes and faggots?" I asked. "Well let me shatter your narrow little world, blondie. I'm none of the above. I've got both sets of plumbing, and it had nothing to do with surgery."

He looked more confused than when I'd drained him. However, I did not have the patience to explain to him the intricacies of hermaphroditism just then – especially not my particular brand of it.

“Look,” I said, drawing myself up to my full height of six foot one. “You need to go. We can do this the easy way or the hard way.”

Belligerent fire lit his eyes. Once again I thanked the gods that Marcus had our two hair-trigger Warriors otherwise engaged.

“The easy way is you walk away right now and we pretend that you never touched the lady here,” I said in a low tone pitched to carry over the music but only to the ears of this small group.

“And the hard way?” he asked, a cocky half-smile curling his lips.

“It's not what you think, but you'll still need someone to carry you out of here,” I responded with quiet threat.

He snorted and lunged at me. It was then I realized that he had a knife. Apparently Ryan had seen this before I did, because he already had his long-fingered hand wrapped around the guy's wrist before I could blink.

The interloper's arm was stopped mid-motion and he stared incredulously as the strength of Ryan's grip forced him to relinquish the knife. He might seem like just a pretty boy, but like all of us, Ryan was strong when he needed to be. The knife never even hit the floor. Amalthea, like a flash, scooped it up and secreted it away in some portion of her outfit.

“What the hell,” the interloper whispered, all the air going out of his lungs.

“That would be the hard way,” I observed.

Almost on cue, the Warriors stepped up behind him and grabbed him by either shoulder. But Marcus had done his work. Their energy was subdued. They were no longer going to gleefully pummel the boy to a fine powder. It's not that I objected to violence. In another day and age, I would have been right there egging the Warriors on. Hell, how many orders had I given that ended some poor idiot's life? But that was ages – almost worlds – away. In the current social clime, we had to be more discrete.

I nodded my thanks to Wolfie and Jordan as they held him restrained. He hadn't started to yell or even protest. This might have been the Warriors' doing, or maybe he was still too dumbfounded by Ryan's show of strength and Amalthea's show of speed to properly react. Even as the Warriors stepped forward, Ryan, Marcus and Amalthea took their places, moving casually around me and blocking us from view.

Once again, I called energy into my hands. From the way he eyed me, I knew he could sense it, even if he had no idea what he was picking up on.

“You're all a bunch of freaks,” he managed, but it was a breathless accusation, desperate and barely audible.

My hands throbbed with the rhythm of my pulse and the gathering energy made them feel swollen and warm. I tingled from head to toe, but in my hands, it was pins and needles, almost like I'd pinched a nerve. If this had been some Hollywood movie, my hands would have been glowing with some CGI effects. As it was, if you knew how to look, you could see an agitation in the air around them, like shimmers of heat rising from the pavement on a hot summer day.

Our interloper took a step back, but all this did was press him more firmly against the immovable bulk

of Jordan and his companion.

I allowed myself a smile as I reached out and lightly connected with the skin at his throat. There were some pleasures in the world after all. Pleasures I could rarely indulge in, but pleasures all the same. We had rules against what I was doing, but he had touched one of our own and threatened violence greater than anything I was going to visit upon him. So he was beyond the bounds of our community's edicts.

I fed from him deeply and without conscience, pulling in wave after wave of his vital energy, and making sure he'd feel it in the morning.

When the punk hit the floor, everyone reacted on cue. The Warriors stepped back and took up position at a discrete distance so the threat they projected simply through their very existence was minimized, at least to an extent. Ryan took up a post not far from me, looking appropriately aghast and concerned while Amalthea scooted off to the lady's room to dispose of the live steel. Marcus, all a-flutter, went in search of a bouncer or other club employee.

I knelt at the interloper's side, making a great show of checking for a pulse and feeling the temperature of his pallid, sweat-slick face. There were no obvious signs of violence on him, save for a small rosette of burst capillaries in the shape of one of my fingertips. Anyone else would merely assume it was a hicky. While I inspected him, I used the contact to pull even more of his energy away, making sure that he wasn't waking up any time soon.

"I think he drank too much," I told the bouncer when he bent down over the interloper's inert form. "He was pestering Ryan here, then he just passed out."

The bouncer un-gently hefted the young man to his feet, muttering, "He'll have one hell of a headache when he comes to."

I smiled.

"Of that I have no doubt."

When the bouncer had gone, I shook the last of the energy off of my hands. Amalthea had returned from her errand in the lady's room, and she bounced up to me, hugging and petting me in thanks.

"Oh, Gabriel, I'm so sorry," she gushed. "But you saw for yourself. He just wouldn't go away. Almost none of the tricks worked on him."

"He's gone now," I assured her. "I'll have Marcus watch him if he comes here again."

She gazed up at me, her sparkling eyes, which almost matched the green of her dress, earnestly searching my own.

"You had fun, didn't you?" she asked impishly.

I chuckled, looking down at her.

"Whatever do you mean by that?" I inquired.

"I never see you smile any more, and you smiled when you dropped him. You loved every minute of it. Admit it!" she goaded.

Suppressing a wicked grin, I said, "There are some things I still enjoy."

I kissed her lightly on the forehead, then handed her off to Ryan. After a quick sweep mentally to insure that all was well upstairs, I headed back down. They were doing a live branding right after the suspension show. I didn't want to miss it. I was always intrigued by the extremes this subculture went

to, and I was curious to see if I would have any reaction to the event at all.

At least the energy such spectacles inspired throughout the rest of the club was enjoyable, although truth be told, thanks to the interloper, I had already fed quite well.

Princess of the Stars by Catherine Knutsson

In the beginning, all was dark. Night was alone, and walked the black expanse of the heavens, searching for someone to walk with. He found no one, and over time, the depth of his loneliness overwhelmed him, and he wept with sorrow. His first tear became the sun. This second, the moon, and the third, the most beautiful tear ever wept, became his daughter, the Princess of the Stars, who danced through the heavens and was Night's greatest joy.

Every night, Night would watch the Princess of the Stars brush her long, shimmering hair. Sparks flew off into the darkness with each brushstroke, and became stars, or comets, or planets. Night sang as his daughter brushed her hair, and his voice became the song of the celestial winds. Some nights, his daughter would sing with him and their voices would become a shower of stars, or the ripples of the aurora borealis, washing the heavens with its light, or the sound of nothing at all.

But one night, while her father walked the heavens, the Princess of the Stars heard a new song. She set her brush down and listened. The new song came from far below, and in its melody were words of love and loss. She had never heard of such things, but once she knew that love could be lost and love could be found, she could think of nothing else.

"Father, what is love?" she said upon his return.

Night blinked, and his blink became the first day. "Nothing you need worry about. Go back to brushing your hair, my daughter."

But strains of the new song haunted her mind until she began to hum the song to herself, and the more she hummed, the more the song wound itself around her heart, squeezing it tight until she vowed she would find a way to catch the song and weave it into a necklace of starlight.

The next night, while her father walked through the heavens, she took the sickle of the moon and began to cut her hair. Great rippling strands of light washed across the heavens, so when she cut the last strand, she was no longer bound to the heavens and began to fall. Down and down she fell, with streams of stardust trailing behind her and her father's voice calling out in anguish as he watched what his daughter had done.

But the Princess of the Stars didn't care, for the farther she fell, the closer the song was, the song of love and loss, and she wished to claim that song for herself.

#

Wolf sat on the hilltop, watching the bright light descend from the heavens. A web of sparks trailed behind the bright light, and when the bright light fell below the pines, the sparks clung to the night,

glistening like frost-points.

Wolf rose. The bright light was a wondrous thing; he should like to see where it fell.

As Wolf wound through the pines, he heard many things: the soft susurrus of Night crying, the haunting lament of the loons, and the whispered steps of the Dark One, searching for the bright light. Wolf could smell the Dark One's taint on the air, the stench of decaying skin, of rotting flesh.

Wolf broke into a lope. He must arrive first. Something so bright could not fall into the grips of something so dark.

Flaming pines stood like great torches, forming an avenue that led towards the great light's resting place. Wolf ignored the hiss of his paws as they struck the embers of the pine-fire, for there, at the end of the avenue of flaming pine, sat a girl, with moonlight hair, with eyes of night, with teeth of star. She stared up towards the heavens and wept.

She was the most beautiful creature Wolf had ever seen, and for her sorrow, Wolf sang.

She turned her night-dark eyes to him. "I have heard your song before," she said. "Come closer, and lay your head on my lap. Only your song can ease my heart, for I fear it will break into as many pieces as there are stars in my father's realm."

"Why will it break?" asked Wolf.

"See there?" she said, pointing towards the great bands of light that shimmered in the heavens. "That is what is left of my hair. I cut it from my head so I could come down to hear your song and now, that is all that remains of me in my father's realm. I can never return."

So Wolf began to sing of his world, of walking the pine forest in autumn, of snow in winter, of stars falling on a moonlit lake, and the girl ceased her weeping. But, as Wolf closed his eyes and moved close to rest his head on the girl's lap, the Dark One swooped down, scooping the Princess of the Stars into his arms, and stealing her away.

Wolf tipped his head towards the heavens and howled until he thought his heart would break into every star in Night's sky.

Night heard Wolf's song. "Now you know what it is to have a loved one stolen from you," he said.

"She came of her own choosing."

"That is so," Night answered, "but knowing it does not lessen the sting in my heart. Would it in yours?"

"No," Wolf said. "It would not." Wolf shut his eyes and howled, a howl so long and sad that Night joined him and the heavens shuddered with pain.

"Stop," the stars begged. "You must stop, or we will fall to the earth."

"Do it," Night said, "so the land may know the anguish of a father's loss."

"No," Wolf said. "Stay where you are, but give me Birds of Dawn to bring light to this world so I might find the Princess of the Stars."

"Done," said Night. "And if you do not, may the Birds of Dawn peck your eyes from your skull so you never see daylight again."

#

We search the air, we Birds of Dawn. We search the sky and the clouds and the boughs of pine. We glide on wings of red and gold, of blue and vermillion, and below us, the wolf runs, his tongue lolling out of his mouth, never tiring, never tiring.

We search the ages, all ages, of before and beyond, for the Dark One cares not for time, and neither do we.

We search – we search!

#

First: the Dark One hid the Princess of the Stars at the bottom of a lake amid water-wrack and snails, but when Wolf howled, the water shook and the water-wrack parted so moonbeams shone down on the Princess of the Stars.

Wolf dove in, but when he reached the bottom of the lake, all that remained of the Princess of the Stars was a single teardrop, crystalline in the cold.

Second: the Dark One hid the Princess of the Stars in cave deep in the mountains, sheltered by layers of heavy snow. The Princess shook with cold until her shaking caused a mighty avalanche. The Birds of Dawn bore Wolf to the cave, but when they arrived, all that remained of the Princess of the Stars was a thread unraveled from the stitching on her moose-skin dress.

Third: the Dark One hid the Princess of Stars at the edge of a mighty volcano that spit fire and scalded her skin until her skin wept. She begged for water and when the Dark One brought it, she threw the water into the volcano and extinguished its fire. Wolf saw the great stream of smoke and ran as fast as he could, but when he arrived, all that remained of the princess was a smoldering doe-skin shoe.

Fourth: the Dark One hid the Princess of the Stars in a bank of clouds, high above the world. “There is no way out now,” he said, “and you are so ugly, so scalded and bald, that no one would want you anyhow. You’re lucky I haven’t thrown you away. I should, but I’m not tired of you yet.”

“But I am tired of you,” the Princess of the Stars said as she reached into the cloud and withdrew a bolt of lightning. She threw the bolt of lightning at the Dark One and broke him into a thousand tiny pieces that scattered on the wind. Some dropped to the land below. Some flew into the heavens above. Some remained in the clouds, lurking there until it rained, but all of the pieces, glittering and black, contained the essence of the Dark One.

The Birds of Dawn lifted Wolf up into the clouds and placed him next to the Princess of the Stars. “You are wounded,” Wolf said.

“I will heal.”

“You are tired.”

“I will rest.”

“You are sad.”

She smiled and her teeth of stars glittered in the moonlight. “Sing me your song and I will forget.”

So Wolf sat down on the cloud and sang. The Princess of the Stars rested her head on his thick pelt as the Birds of Dawn raced through the ages, gathering the pieces of the Dark One in their beaks and spreading them through the heavens. Those pieces are still there today, eating stars at every chance,

hoping each one is the princess who broke him apart.

And, if you look northwards, you'll find the Princess of the Stars, safe, resting her hand on the Great Wolf's pelt, listening to his song through all the ages that once were, now are, and will be again.

King of Sand and Stormy Seas by Silvia Moreno-Garcia

This story was previously published in Shimmer in 2006.

He stood at the edge of the beach and leaned forward trying to spy beneath the water a kraken or a two-tailed mermaid. Only there were no mermaids today, no terrible krakens or glimmering serpents. Just Lysander, alone, under a light drizzle.

He swung his arm in a mighty arc, ready to throw the sword into the water, ready to say goodbye. And then he couldn't and instead the sword landed against a rock, fell with a loud clank while the seagulls watched.

Lysander sat down. Small crabs scuttled by.

"If you don't want it, you can give it to me," someone said behind him. "It's a waste of a good sword."

He turned. It was a young man, barely a man actually, lean and tanned and smiling.

"I could sell it," said the young fellow eagerly.

"What would you buy?"

"Pair of shoes," he replied, wiggling his toes.

"A pair of shoes," Lysander grumbled. "A pair of shoes for a fine sword."

"Well, if you don't want it, I could use it. What are you doing with something like that anyway?"

"I'm a knight."

The boy snorted. "You're no knight. You stole it."

"I didn't steal it," Lysander muttered as he rose and moved towards the rocks, towards his sword.

"You're keeping it then?"

He didn't answer, placing the weapon in its scabbard once more.

"Can I look at it?" asked the boy, edging closer to him.

"Where the hell did you come from anyway?"

"There," he said pointing towards a smudge that might have been a hut.

"Well, go back there then."

"This is my beach. You go back home."

"Your beach?"

"Mine," said the kid.

Somehow he liked his insolence, the way the words came out. "King of sand and stormy seas, are you?" Lysander muttered.

"Can I look at it then?"

"If I let you hold the sword, will you go home?"

The boy nodded. Lysander unsheathed the sword and handed it over to the young man. The blade was blue with fine letters spelling conjures of protection. Once Lysander had taken the sword to a magician. He had told Lysander the writing on the sword predicted that the man who wielded the weapon would become a hero. The magician, it turned out, had been a charlatan.

The kid held the sword with both hands, clearly impressed.

"Now I know you stole it," the boy said, handing it back. "Who are you?"

"I told you. I'm a knight."

He began to walk away from the boy. But it was of no use.

"I'm Endric," said the kid, jumping to his side, his bonny shoulders peaking underneath his worn shirt. "If you're really a knight how come you're not wearing your armour?"

"Knights don't wear armour all the time."

"I guess. But they always say they do, in the stories. They ride black stallions and the ladies throw roses at them when they walk by so they might wear them as favours. But I've never met a knight before. What's your name?"

"Would you mind leaving now?"

"Why, you're going to throw the sword away again?"

"It's none of your business."

"It is if I could get myself some shoes."

Lysander stopped and stared at the annoying kid with the large, eager eyes. But Lysander would have been eager too if a knight had appeared all of a sudden, turning a dull and gray day into an exciting encounter, perhaps the start of some adventure. Didn't all boys want to be knights anyway? Lysander thought so.

"So?" pressed the boy.

He sighed and rolled his eyes. "My name is Lysander and no, you can't have the sword."

The boy shifted his feet and looked down. "If you give me five coppers I'll take you to an old pirate cave. Authentic, I swear."

"Why would I want that?"

"Isn't that why you're here? The pirates? Look, you go around people here will show you whale bones and tell you it's a sea monster. But I'm honest. I swear, it's a real pirate's lair. Everyone's interested in pirates. And it's cheap, I'd charge double but you're a knight," the kid stood in front of him, barring his way. "It's the least you can do you know, seeing you're cheating me of a good pair of shoes."

Lysander had to laugh at that. The wind was picking up a bit, flapping his torn cape around him.

Lysander knew if he agreed the kid would try to sell him a mermaid next, but somehow he felt like taking a peek at the lair. He pretended he was a pirate when he was a child, wishing for a ship with black sails to take him far from home. In the end Lysander had left, but he was not to become a pirate king or a hero or any of the other things he'd once fancied.

"Very well," Lysander said.

"It's close," Endric replied.

#

The pirate's lair was in fact a rather small, damp cave. Endric lit a lamp that lay next to the entrance and then took him on a tour of the meagre quarters. Some sleeping mats on the floor, a couple of tin cups and a pile of dirty clothes made the magnificent pirate's den Endric had boasted about all the way. At the back of the cave was a stone with several drawings on it.

"This used to be where they came after their raids," explained Endric, tiptoeing around the sleeping mats. "And that, it was their altar to the god of thieves. They used to place gold coins and necklaces in front it. But the gold's gone now."

"It looks like a rock," Lysander said. "Some scuff marks on it."

"Well, that's how much you know about pirate altars. Iraerson made those marks, he was a mighty water-wizard and the companion of a great pirate, Sheadril. Iraerson, he was a priest you see, and had a statue made all of gold to his god. Put it on a pedestal, on that very stone. But they took the statue along with the rest."

"Who?"

Endric shrugged. "Fish folk, thieves, other pirates. It was a long time ago this I'm telling you. Before I was born. There's no pirates here anymore."

"No, there's not," muttered Lysander, looking closer at the marks. They extended to the wall and in fact seemed to be letters and drawings. Most of them images of fish and fantastical animals; a mermaid swimming next to a dolphin.

"I have a collection of pirate things, you know. Things that I've found. Even a knife and a skull. It's only half a skull, but good as new. The jaw only," Endric touched his own jaw to illustrate his point. "But it's in great shape. I can show you, but you'd have to pay double."

"This is fine," he moved towards the entrance.

"I thought you like pirate stuff."

"Not really."

"Why are you here then? Nobody comes here except for the pirates. I'll show you another pirate lair, come on."

"It's fake," he glanced outside at the relentless drizzle and the sun hiding behind thick clouds.

"What?" the boy blinked.

"Your pirate lair, it's fake," he muttered, tired of it all, the conversation and the bleak sky grinning at him. "It's a fisherman's cove. They would keep their boats here, their nets and sometimes they'd salt their fish."

"How would you know that?"

"I grew up here."

The boy leaned against the cave's entrance and wiped his nose with a bony hand. He was probably thin from watered fish broth and stale bread. Probably half a dozen brothers and sisters as skinny as him hovering around the table. Meagre food, only a pair of shoes for them all and plenty of blows to quiet them down. Lysander used to hate the fish broth more than the blows.

Lysander shook his head, unsettled. He no longer wanted to think of pirates or fish folk.

"Why, you don't say, the fisherman's son became a gent?" said the kid in open mockery. "I've never hear of a fish-boy being no knight."

"Mercenary," he grumbled under his breath.

"What?"

"A mercenary," he said loudly and stepped out, heading back the way they'd come, hoping to lose the boy.

But he was not an easy one this kid. Sticking to him, matching his pace.

"That's true?"

"Yes, it is," said Lysander.

"You're from here? Were born here?"

"I played in that damn cave myself."

"A real sword-brother," said Edric in awe, looking him up and down. "Then you can do tricks and such, and have a horse. My uncle's got a mule, but no horse. Have you been in a big city?"

"Some."

"Which ones?"

"Some."

"Did you work for a great lord of a city?"

"Will you leave me alone?" he bellowed, unable to contain himself any longer.

It was the kid's fault. He'd been pestering him, hanging behind him like a shadow. He wasn't used to it, to people like that. It was too much. The damn smell of fish, the rain and the sand clinging to his clothes.

The boy chewed his lower lip for a moment, then threw his head back defiantly.

"A mercenary doesn't have a weapon like that. That's a noble man's weapon, it's got an inscription. Mercenaries are not allowed to inscribe them. I know that. You're a thief and a liar."

"Then I'd better bash your head against a rock and get rid of you."

"You'd have to catch me first, and I'm fast," Endric did not move but his body was tense as a wire.

"You've got to be fast when you're a fish-boy. You'd know that."

Lysander let out his breath slowly. "I know that."

They looked at each other, the kid flexible as a deer and the older man a mass of iron, a sculpted giant.

Finally, he reached between the fold of his cloak, pulling out a small bag.

"Five coppers," he said, handing him the coins. "Get lost."

The kid took them, sticking his hands in his pockets and shifting restlessly. He continued to look at him, finally turning around and walking away.

Something itched inside, something he didn't understand and he wasn't sure why. But the words were slipping out quickly, too quickly for him to stop.

"You're right, it's a nobleman's sword," Lysander said. "But I didn't steal it."

The boy stopped, and blinking started walking back.

"It was a gift. From the sea if you can believe that," Lysander muttered. "I used to come here. Pretend there were sirens and monsters in the water. Just at the edge of my vision, just waiting, hiding beneath the waves. I told myself they were real, not just tall tales fishermen tell."

Lysander let the waves lick his boots and crushed a sea shell as he moved towards the water, the tide pushing brown seaweed in his direction.

"I ran around making up stories about heroes and monsters. I always expected something to happen. I knew I was destined to be a hero. It must have been like that. All the heroes must have felt what I felt, must have known they were destined for greatness. I knew."

Now the boy was at his side and the wind in his face. The ocean like a mirror, gulls above in a cacophony.

"And one day, I must have been younger than you, there it was. On the beach. A sword. Meant just for me. A magic sword. I knew it. Clear as water, a magic sword. I took off my shirt and wrapped it around the sword and I left. I didn't doubt my destiny for a minute. I knew it must have always been like this."

There was only the gulls and the splash of the water. The boy opened his mouth weakly, like a fish, words finally pouring out.

"What happened?" he whispered.

Life happened and it turns out it is seldom a fairy tale. Killing men for a living and following a nobleman for some cause you can't recall, that happened. Scars upon scars and restless nightmares and an empty feeling in your gut. Blood, your own and blood of others, the dead buried or sometimes left to rot in the open. All of this and more and suddenly too much had happened. Forgotten wounds ached and the sword was too heavy to carry and he was old.

This he thought and might have tried to explain to the boy. Only it was too difficult to explain how it is to feel caged and lost and crumbling.

"There are no krakens and no mermaids, and certainly no magic swords, and fisher-boys never become heroes," muttered Lysander, placing his palm on the hilt of the weapon.

Endric rubbed his hands, eyes fixed on the sea. "There are krakens. My grandfather almost killed one once."

"So did my father after some drinks," Lysander snickered. "So did everyone."

"There are krakens," repeated Endric defensively. "I don't know about magic swords or knights, but there are krakens."

An uncomfortable silence wrapped them. It would be getting dark soon and Lysander wanted to leave. He'd spent enough time in this place. It was clear there was nothing left, whatever magic he'd once imagined erased by the tide.

He unsheathed the sword.

"Are you really throwing it away?" asked Endric.

"I'm giving it back," he answered. "Giving it all back."

Lysander flung the weapon as hard he could. The sword shone like a star, catching the light of the sinking sun, then splashed loudly into the water. Endric just stared. The boy was frozen, watching the place where the sword had disappeared.

"I'm sorry about your shoes," Lysander said.

He produced two more coins and placed them in the boy's hand, then walked away.

Perhaps beneath the sea a kraken coiled a tentacle around the sword. Perhaps one day the tide would carry the weapon towards a deserving hero. Perhaps there were still mysteries hidden within the waves.

But if the sea had any secrets Lysander did not care for them.

Night Out by Eliza Victoria

They are sitting on the front steps of the Puso Theater, he in a black jacket, a blue tee, pants; Nalla in a sleeveless pink top, a red sarong, a pair of flip-flops. Has to be my age, Nalla thinks, studying him closely. She sees him often enough on the same sidewalks, waiting the night out in the same places with her fellow Fleshies. He works alone, without a Caller, a trick that is hard to pull even if you're extremely likeable. She has dumped her own Caller just recently, after she caught him cheating on the commissions, and now she is having a hard time, customers just plain ignoring her like she has WD. Too damn many Fleshies, Nalla thinks.

But this one appears to be doing well, she thinks, moving a step lower, sitting next to him. A Zoner Player is clipped on his ear, his black eyes now blue, flickering every now and then with vidlink static.

Two cars streak across the sky, one red and one yellow, like colored balls, air traffic starting to get as congested as land traffic. Maybe thirteen, fourteen, Nalla thinks. Fourteen, tops.

"Oh, for crying out—" The boy reaches up and unclips the gadget from his ear. His eyes turn black immediately. "Unbelievable," he mutters.

"Lost Net connection?" Nalla fires up a cigarette and smokes slowly, savoring the taste. She'll never be able to buy another packet, with the way things are going. "Sucks, huh? Net's congested around this Area, especially at night."

He doesn't reply. Nalla turns her head slightly and sees him staring intently at her.

"You're smoking," he says with wonder.

"Yes. Want a stick?"

“That’s bad for the environment.”

Nalla frowns and holds up the packet to the light thrown by the air cars. “The packet says these sticks are treated.”

The boy pauses, then breaks into a small smile. “Treated cigs,” he says. “Those things cost a fortune.”

She laughs. “That Zoner costs more.”

“Darn thing doesn’t work anyway.”

Silence. The boy holds the Zoner loosely in his fist. Now robbed of entertainment he simply stares at the traffic over their heads.

“So,” Nalla says as she exhales the smoke. “Are you waiting for a customer?”

“No,” he replies.

“I am.” She sighs. “He’s late. I think he’s already dumped me.”

“I’m waiting for my boyfriend.”

Nalla takes another drag and nods. A lady in front of them raises her hand, and an air autocab lands in front of her.

“Are you going to marry him?” she asks.

The boy’s expression is bleak. “I don’t know,” he whispers. “Maybe. If he’d like to.”

“Why not? The government will pay for everything once you agree to raise a tube kid.”

He clears his throat. “He’s an Area Lord.”

The Area Lords are the estate owners, the rich entrepreneurs, the bosses.

“Oh.” Nalla laughs. “Excuse *me*.”

They fall silent again, waiting. A blue air car pulls away from the air traffic and lands on the sidewalk.

“Here’s the customer,” Nalla says.

“And here’s the boyfriend,” says the boy.

Nalla lowers her cigarette. “Are we,” she said, “looking at the same person?”

They are. The boy turns to Nalla, and his eyes widen.

*

The boy stares at Dave for a very long time before screaming, “You idiot. You heartless, sick idiot.”

They are standing behind her, the boy screaming loud enough to attract glances from the pedestrians but not loud enough to actually engage Nalla’s attention.

“You’re smoking.” Nalla glances over her left shoulder and sees Dave looking at her. “That’s bad for the environment.”

“They’re treated.”

“Aren’t you even listening to me?” the boy shouts, looking very distressed. Nalla finds his expression both touching and oddly amusing.

Dave turns to him and sighs. “I have nothing to say to you, Cy.”

Cy. She smokes. Cy. So that’s his name.

“The fuck you don’t!” Cy retorts. “You’ve hurt me and now you want to hurt her, too?”

“Whoa.” Nalla raises her hands. “Whoa, whoa, *whoa*.”

Dave says, “This isn’t helping.”

“Oh really?” Cy starts to cry. “Then what will, Dave? Tell me what will.”

“You know what,” Nalla says. “If you just chose to fuck girls over guys, you wouldn’t have this problem.”

Dave looks off.

Cy pitches forward and yanks Nalla by the wrist. “You’re not sleeping with her,” he says.

“Then who will?” Nalla asks dryly. Cy looks at her. She couldn’t read his expression. “I’m not joking. I need the money.”

“Die alone,” Cy tells Dave, and pulls Nalla away.

*

Cyan met Jonah weeks before Dave happened. He was inside the Puso, sitting in the center row, shoveling popcorn into his mouth. An old Tagalog film was playing.

Jonah was sitting behind him. Another man was sitting two seats to Cy’s right. It was this other man that Cy had been studying from the corner of his eye. The man was not paying attention to the movie.

Cy continued to watch with growing boredom. One of the leads had just exchanged her virginity for a hamburger. He snorted. The man sitting two seats away leaned a little bit closer and said, “Do you have the time?”

“Fifteen minutes to one,” he replied. The man nodded and thanked him as though the information had saved his life.

A few moments later he leaned again and said, “Is this seat taken?”

“No,” Cy said. He was starting to get annoyed. Maybe I should just jump on the guy and get it over with, he thought.

The man stood up and moved a seat closer to Cy. Onscreen, the actress flapped her skirt and shouted, “Hamburger! Hamburger!”

Cy laughed.

“Hoy.” The man had unzipped his fly, his plump manhood standing erect. “You want to touch it, kid? Come on. Touch it.”

“You should be ashamed of yourself.”

Cy and the man glanced over their shoulders. Jonah was glaring at the man.

“Mind your own business,” the man said.

“That’s a good idea,” said Cy, and turned to his customer. “Look,” he said exasperatedly. “I don’t have a Caller, so I can do you at nine-five. Where do you want to go?”

Cy heard a sudden intake of breath, like someone had just been punched.

“You’re a Fleshie?” Jonah said.

Cy rolled his eyes.

“This is unbelievable,” the man said. He shook his head in disbelief and zipped up his fly.

“What?” Cy said. “Wait!” But the man had already stood up and left.

“What is wrong with you?” Cy told Jonah, who wouldn’t look at him. Then realization hit. “You thought I was just an ordinary kid?”

“Oh, God,” Jonah said.

Cy laughed. “You actually thought that?”

“I think I better leave.”

“No, sit down. It’s okay.”

He sat down obediently and covered his face with his hands. “God, this is embarrassing,” he whispered.

Cy smiled. “What’s your name?”

“Jonah. Look, I am really, really—“

“It’s okay. I’m Cyan.”

Jonah seemed to calm down a bit. “Cyan. Hi.”

“Hello.”

“How old are you, Cyan?”

“Thirteen.”

“You’re young.” Jonah said. “You’ve been a Fleshie long?”

“Ever since I got emancipated,” Cy answered. “So, Jonah, you want to do this? I can lower my fee to eight.”

Jonah looked at him.

“I’m in a bad situation here, you know? I have to pay my rent.”

“I’ll pay you,” Jonah said, “but not for that sort of thing. Just talk, I guess. I live within the Area.”

“You know,” Cy said. “I had a customer once who made me dress up like a tiger. And I thought that was weird.” He paused. “Okay.”

Cyan knew at once that Jonah was an Area Lord the moment they boarded his car and pulled up over the city. One so rich he could afford not to work. He owned a penthouse apartment with its own parking pad. They zoomed right into it, fifty floors from the ground, saving them the trouble of riding packed elevator cars.

A Hover Guard with Jonah’s monogram pointed its camera eye at Cyan. “Identify yourself,” it said.

“It’s all right, he’s a guest,” Jonah told it. “Guard the pad.”

The Hover Guard soared away.

“Wow,” Cyan said. “I wish I could afford one of those.”

Jonah’s home was neat and bare. “You want something to drink?” he asked as he shrugged off his jacket. Cy smirked.

“What, you don’t have a bot to do that for you?”

Jonah groaned. “I hate those things. The last one I bought broke down so often I just end up doing what it’s supposed to do.” He folded the jacket in half and slung it on one arm of the couch. “So? Drink?”

“No thanks.” Cyan sank on the couch. Jonah had disappeared into the kitchen. “Jonah? How old are you?”

“How old do you think?”

Cy shrugged. “Nineteen?”

Jonah came back with a cup of coffee. He was smiling. “I’m twenty-five.”

“Really?” Cy sat up. “So you’re a War Orphan.”

The smile faded a little. “Yes.” He sat on a recliner. “My father fought in it.”

“Do you remember how it was like,” Cy said, “before the war?”

“Kids acted like kids,” Jonah said.

Cyan’s eyebrows rose. “Are you married?”

“Was.” He waved a hand. Cyan followed the gesture and saw a row of framed photographs sitting atop a narrow table pushed against the wall behind him. There was a woman in most of the pictures, smiling heartily.

“Did she die?” Cyan asked, standing up to approach the table.

“She sued me for divorce three years ago.”

“So you have a kid.” Cyan picked up a picture showing Jonah and his ex-wife together. They were on a beach, the sea and the sky shining the same radiant blue. Probably taken in Australia, which did not participate in the war. The remaining seas in the country did not look that blue anymore. “I mean, the courts won’t grant a divorce unless you have at least one.”

Then Cyan found him, a little boy in green shorts standing on the same beach.

“His name’s Justin,” Jonah said, watching Cyan as he picked up the photograph. “He chose to be with his mom.” Cy heard him swallow his drink. “Well, I don’t blame him. Maui lets him do anything, maybe even download porn feeds. I’m the strict one, the bad cop. I want him to stay inside the house. But I’m not doing that just to make him miserable. I want Justin to be a kid, for once. I want him to treat me as a parent. I want him to be innocent.”

“So you want your son to be baffled when a guy suddenly sits next to him in the theater and asks him to touch his dick.”

Jonah lowered his eyes, looked away. Cy glanced at him.

“I’m sorry,” Cyan wanted to say, but then thought, Why bother.

“When you’re innocent you feel safe,” Jonah suddenly said. “Like the world makes sense. When you learn something too early it becomes hard for you to be happy.”

Cy wondered if Jonah's high on something. Then he thought, When was the last time I felt safe?

Cyan turned back to the pictures. In one of them, a younger Jonah held the newborn Justin in his arms. Justin's eyes were closed and his skin was very pink.

*

Cy has dragged Nalla into a tiny diner. The sky is brighter now, lit up by the air traffic jam.

"I don't think I understand what is going on," Nalla says cautiously. The diner is not very clean. The tables are rusty and the cups are chipped; the floor is sticky with spilt coffee. One of the waitresses is a robot, but she's not very efficient. Everything looks old.

"What's your name?" The boy is now looking at her. Finally. He's been staring outside the window through bloodshot eyes for the most of the twenty minutes they've been sitting in that booth. He has made a call through his Zoner a while ago, but he didn't look at her then, either.

"Nalla," she says. "Cy, right?"

"Cyan," he says. "Sorry I had to—"

"Look," Nalla leans forward. "I don't want to be rude, but I'm sure sooner or later you're going to cheat on Dave, too, because everybody cheats in this age and time. I think—"

Nalla hears a sharp zing and a whoosh—the sound of a card being swiped, followed by the diner door opening. Cy straightens up as if the sound is a promise and smiles, his face brightening considerably.

A man in shirt and jeans emerges from the street and surveys the place for a second, his gaze sliding over the stools and the waitresses like fluid, dead-tired, like he's seen this scene too many times and is sick of it, his eyes lingering on the few faces like he knows what he is looking for and where it is but doesn't want to come to it, yet. Or maybe it's just me, Nalla thinks, fighting the urge to light another cigarette. Then the man approaches them, to her surprise, and slides into the booth, sitting next to her.

"Hello, Jonah," Cyan says.

"Cyan." The man looks at him, takes a deep breath as if to say something, reconsiders, looks at her. "Hello."

Nalla stares at him, mouth agape. "Well," she says. She looks at Cyan. "Someone sure recovers fast."

"It's not like that," Cyan says.

Nalla raises an eyebrow. "Oh, please. You're rich enough to have a Zoner. Share a little! You into three-ways, sir?"

Jonah shrinks back, looks at Cyan, takes a deep breath.

"It's not like that," Cyan says again, but Nalla doesn't care anymore. She has been insulted.

"You drive away my only hope for pay tonight and now you bring me to the seediest diner you can find just to parade a customer I can't have in front of me," she says quickly and softly. "I have to applaud your creativity."

"Nalla, it's not—"

"Let me guess," Nalla says, jutting her chin at Jonah's direction. "You're an old customer."

Jonah shakes his head.

“A former Caller?”

“No.”

“Um, a mentor? Benefactor?” Nalla makes circular gestures with her hands. “Brother?”

“Just a friend,” Jonah says.

“Oh,” she says. “I don’t get it.”

Nobody speaks for a moment. Jonah looks at Nalla as if she were a new species. Nalla hates him already.

Jonah says, “Is there a problem, Cyan? Your call sounded urgent.”

Something in Jonah’s voice sounds concerned but stern, as though he’s annoyed but is just too polite, or too weary, to show it.

Nalla looks at Cyan and sees that he has picked it up, too; it is all over his face.

“Is it money, Cyan?” Jonah says. “Because if it is, I—hello?”

Nalla notices that Jonah also has a Zoner, only he has the smaller, more expensive kind, no larger than an ear plug, Version VX something-or-other, with holo-capabilities and wider range. Jonah’s eyes shine blue, and he starts grinning like a fool. “Of course,” he says. “Of course.” A moment later his eyes turn black again and the grin disappears. “Sorry about that. Justin needs a ride home. Would you like to hop in? We can talk in the Skyscraper.”

“You have a Skyscraper?” Nalla exclaims, unable to contain herself. She slaps Cyan’s hand playfully. “Why do you get all the Area Lords?”

“Justin?” Cyan says almost at the same time.

“Yes.” The grin comes back, and Jonah fights it, unsuccessfully. “I fought for custody.”

“Huh,” Cyan says.

“He saw Maui with a Fleshie and—“

Cyan stares at him. Nalla still cannot make heads nor tails of the conversation. She itches for a cigarette.

Jonah scratches his forehead, refusing to meet Cyan’s eyes. “I didn’t mean it to sound like—“

Cyan lowers his gaze and stares at his folded hands on the tabletop.

“I mean, if you’re going to come with me to Justin’s school, you can’t tell him that you’re—“

“Who is Justin?” says Nalla. But nobody answers.

“Is it money?” Jonah asks again, almost eagerly, like he wants to redeem himself.

“No, it’s okay,” Cyan says, to Nalla’s disbelief. “I’ll just call again.”

“Here it is anyway,” Jonah says, laying a card on the table. “I have to go get Justin.”

Jonah stands up and walks back to the door. He pauses long enough for a person to change his mind and say wait, but Cyan just waves his hand. Nalla looks out of the window, watching Jonah walk from light to dark to light, his jacket cut into pieces by the glare.

When she turns back to face the table Cyan is already eyeing the card like he wants to burn it.

“Let’s get out of here,” he says. They stand up, and the robot waitress suddenly comes to life, startling the customers sitting on the stools by the counter. “Thank you for coming to,” she starts to say, but something twangs and she slumps over, something that happens all the time, apparently, thinks Nalla, because the human waitresses just walk around her, saying, “Coffee? More coffee?”

*

“You know,” says Cyan, “a customer once told me: ‘Love is lost in this age. People decide to have babies just to fill space, to add to the statistics, and not to fill a longing in themselves. There’s not even lust, because lust requires even a small amount of love, of care, of hope. There is only movement. Friction. Heat. A mere response to nature.’”

They’ve gone back to the Puso Theater, to the steps. Cyan wants Nalla to choose where to go—a bar, a resort, anywhere, he’s sure Jonah’s card can handle anything—but Nalla suddenly feels too exhausted and can’t decide.

“Maybe he’s quoting from a book,” Cyan says. Nalla doesn’t reply.

A neat-looking man with a briefcase approaches them and says, “Uh—“

“Sorry, sir,” says Nalla. “It’s our day-off.”

Oh, the man says voicelessly, and walks away like he has a flight to catch.

“I’m sick, Nalla,” Cyan says.

She sits up. “What?”

“I’m sick,” Cy repeats. “I have Walker’s Disease.”

Walker’s Disease. The deadly WD. In Japan, where it started, they call it AIDS-II.

“You got it from Dave?”

Cy nods.

“Where’d he get it?”

“Oh, I don’t know. He travels. Maybe he went to Tokyo or Taiwan.” Cy smirks. “Danced with somebody.”

Nalla fiddles with the cigarette packet. “Are you doing okay?”

“He knew,” Cy says, not hearing her. “He knew he had it but he still wants to spread it around. What kind of monster would do such a thing?”

Nalla pries the packet open and pulls out a stick.

“I’m just glad I caught him in time,” Cy says, looking at her. “Before—before he—“

Nalla lights up the cigarette and pulls a long, deep drag. She spews the smoke and smiles at him.

“Please,” Cyan says. “Please tell me you didn’t sleep with him.”

Nalla’s smile trembles at the edges. She shakes her head.

Fresh tears roll down Cyan’s face.

“I’m sorry.” Cy takes her free hand in both of his. “Nalla, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay, you know,” she tells him. “I knew this would happen sooner or later.” She pulls her hand

away. "Didn't you?"

A softdrink commercial comes on the Net, and all the windows of the buildings and the the passing cars turn blue, washing the ground with blue. It's like the city is taking a call on a Zoner Clip, ignoring them.

"So," Cyan says, sniffing, "have you decided where you want to go?" He brandishes the card in front of her eyes. "This is a gold mine."

Nalla laughs.

"Come on," Cyan says, pulling her up and down to the sidewalk.

"Where are we going?"

"Oh, I don't know. Anywhere." Cyan looks up at the air cars, his hand poised. He laughs as though the cars have said something funny. "Australia."

Nalla stands close to him. The commercial ends, and the city regains color so abruptly that Nalla has to shut her eyes for a second.

"Australia sounds good," Nalla says, opening her eyes, and Cyan smiles at her and raises his hand.

Bhima by Ajay Vishwanathan

He was rare, desired, and blessed; he was white. Scores of revering eyes peered at him as he sat on Bhima's left shoulder, his own small beady eyes fixed on his paws as he gnawed at them furiously, his long grubby tail twitching and snapping around Bhima's neck. He was no ordinary rat but the auspicious one whose occasional sighting evoked celebrity attention, who wasn't overtly concerned at ogling humans moving in excited circles around him. It was a relatively quiet day at the rat temple in North India where hundreds of freely roaming sacred rats, in jumbled shades of gray and brown, scampered across marble squares, spied through tiny holes in the walls designed specifically to let them crisscross the temple grounds, and nibbled at sweets and grains placed in metal saucers.

Reposed against a wall in a shady corner of the temple, his run-down green cloth bag parked next to him, Bhima seemed oblivious of the activity around him as eager devotees tried to engage the white vermin on his shoulder, leaning forward to feed him and touch him. The uninterested animal chucked a quick memento of attention at them, took a few hasty nips at Bhima's long beard and scurried away behind one of the clay pillars. Bhima opened his eyes nonchalantly and watched the small crowd drift away; the half a dozen gray rats frisking on his lap didn't appeal to them. A bright red turbaned man appeared from behind the group and smiled at Bhima.

"I see you still attract the white *kabas*," he said and sat cross-legged next to Bhima. Middle-aged and influential, Bulaki was the head of one of the many families that took care of the temple. He had resisted frequent attempts by other families to evict Bhima from the temple premises by pointing out to Bhima's special power of enticing the white ones. They thought he was useless, and claimed that his constant unkempt presence during the day was drawing negative attention. They also suspected that Bulaki's real sympathy for him stemmed from his feelings for Bhima's daughter, shreds of an age-old

romance that was throttled when she fell one day from a moving cart and died. Bhima, who had just lost his wife, wasted in mourning, and slowly gambled away all his assets. Bulaki had provided him with a windowless ramshackle cabin a mile away from the temple where Bhima spent his nights. In the past year, he had started spending many hours during the day sprawled lazily among the scuttling rats, feeding on the leftover proffering, much to the displeasure of some of the town elders.

“They want you out, Bhima,” said Bulaki, spraying red saliva from his betel leaf-chewing mouth, “and you know how feisty they can get.”

Bhima sat silently, head lowered and knees close to the chest. He looked immensely old, older than he actually was, tiny tufts of hair growing out of dry moles on his withered face, patches of color on his skin eaten away by years of turmoil. An untidily tied saffron bandana, jaded and crinkled, around a flat head accentuated his nonexistent eyebrows and the heavy white rings around the iris.

“You are a good man, Bhima, I know. Life hasn’t been the same since Leena... just wanted to tell you that my resistance is slowly wearing down, might not last too long.”

Bhima looked at Bulaki and nodded. “I know.”

#

It was a Sunday morning. Encircled by playful rats and curious spectators, two white ones lounging at his feet, Bhima’s torpor belied the intense scene of dash and bustle that unfolded around him: bare feet hustled in and out the door as little creatures frantically weaved around them in droves, sometimes running a wrong route on the black and white floor and tripping on someone’s feet, generating a ripple of excitement in the gathering; a modest group of three sat in a corner singing to the drone of a three-stringed instrument, their voices barely audible above the cacophony of constant chatter and prayers; an older lady filled a massive pan of milk to its brim, her smile widening as she watched a jostling ring of rats lapping up the liquid; a young foreigner, his pale skin accentuated by the brown kurta that he wore, walked around with his camera, enthralled by the incongruous symphony between man and beast. A hint of a smile escaped Bhima’s lips as he wondered who was more excited, the youngster who had just sighted a white rat among a crowd of dusky companions or the locals who had sighted a white man among a sea of tanned skin.

Dara, a broad-shouldered man, whose chest was covered in brown beads that hung from his neck, interrupted Bhima’s reverie. His beads heaved conspicuously and clunked together as Dara smiled at his friend and sat next to him.

“Do you smell ghee?” he said, as he drew in a deliberately long breath. “Makes me hungry.” Dara, who grew up with Bhima in the same village, was the only friend who had endured the gossip and ranting about Bhima and stuck with him. He admired Bhima as a person and empathized with his plight.

Bhima nodded yes.

They watched the excited foreigner, his camera flashing incessantly at the rats, pots, people, saucers, the holes in the walls, the colorful henna tattoos on the feet of ladies, the tobacco-stained smiles; one of the men seemed a little annoyed at his new bride being captured unabashedly by a stranger’s lens.

“Dara, have you felt,” said Bhima, puckering his depleted brows, “that the number of white ones has decreased?”

“Uh... no,” replied Dara. “Why?”

“I have a feeling that the black ones don’t like the whites.”

“Why? Have you seen something that I haven’t?”

“I think the white ones are being harassed.” Bhima pointed out to the little white kabas sitting next to his cloth bag. “Look at the mark on his forehead. That is an attack, not a birth mark.”

Dara peered at the animal and shook his head. “Bhima... you are imagining things.”

“I’m not, believe me. Am I not the guy who attracts the white ones? I’ve seen similar scars, up close, my friend, on many other whites,” Dara contended, “Not just this one. I’ve seen them being chased around by larger black rats.”

“So, you think they are dying?”

“I don’t know... maybe.”

“You are getting old,” said Dara as he rose; his exotic beads bounced noisily, startling the dozing rats. “The heat is getting to you. Go home and get some rest.”

#

Bulaki looked pensive, his head deflated without his colorful turban, as he stroked his curled moustache with his finger. It had been a joyless day for him; his brother had notified him in the morning that the elders had finally decided to ban Bhima from idling on the temple grounds, and now, Dara had interrupted his dinner to inform him that Bhima had not been seen for three days.

“I am too frightened to knock on his door by myself,” said Dara, standing solemnly, his eyes unable to meet Bulaki’s. “I thought you might want to --.”

“I’ll go with you.”

The night was staid, dark; heavy clouds eclipsed the stars. The fluorescent street lamp flickered randomly as Bulaki drove his car right up to Bhima’s shack. Their shadows cast on the wooden door seemed ominous as they stood in front of the house, waiting for Bhima to answer their knocks; he didn’t.

Dara pushed nervously at the door, which creaked open. The light from the street lamp beamed into the pitch-dark room, onto an unassuming string bed, where Bhima was lying with his back towards them. As they tiptoed into the small space, they heard muffled sounds of shuffling feet along the walls. Bulaki couldn’t see anything beyond the column of dim light as he sat at the head of the bed and felt Bhima’s forehead; it was deathly cold. He shook Bhima’s shoulder timidly but the man didn’t move. An inexplicable feeling of grief surged through Bulaki as he sat there motionless, next to the body of a man he could not disconnect from his life. He had not interacted much with Bhima but there was something about him that he felt strongly about. Maybe because he was the father of the woman he once loved. Maybe because Bhima never objected to a courtship that society frowned upon or cast blame on Bulaki when he was unable to reach out and save Leena as she lost her balance and fell off the cart.

As Dara walked in towards the bed, the wind nudged the door that swung further inward, bedimming an already dark room; his foot caught on the strap of Bhima’s green cloth bag that was lying on the floor. The bag changed position and something jumped out of it, setting off a series of agitated, scraping noises around the bed. Dara pulled out a match from his pocket and struck it. In the light of the flickering flame, they saw eyes, an army of them, all nervously staring at the men, some on top of an iron trunk, some on a heap of crumpled clothes, some near Bhima’s legs, but most lined impatiently along the gray walls.

Dara and Bulaki stared dumbfounded at over a hundred fidgety rats.

All white.

Contributor Biographies

Michelle Belanger

Michelle Belanger is best known for her non-fiction portrayals of the modern vampyre culture, and has had short fiction published in magazines such as [Dark Realms](#), *Necropolis*, *Wicked Mystic*, *Tongue of the Serpent*, and other similar horror/dark fantasy publications. Her first novel, *This Heart of Flame*, will be released by Stonegarden Press later this fall.

Catherine Knutsson

Catherine Knutsson divides her time between writing and wandering the wilds of Vancouver Island. Her work has recently been featured in [Goblin Fruit](#) and [Mythic Delirium](#), and her debut novel, *THE SHADOWS CAST BY STARS*, will be published in 2011 by Atheneum. Catherine is a member of the Métis nation.

Silvia Moreno-Garcia

Silvia Moreno-Garcia is a Mexican native who now lives in Canada with her family and two cats. When she's not writing, you can find her working on [Innsmouth Free Press](#). She [blogs](#) and [Tweets](#) from time to time. Her story, *King of Sand and Stormy Seas*, first appeared in the print zine *Shimmer* back in 2006.

Eliza Victoria

Eliza Victoria lives in the Philippines, where she has published fiction in various publications (Philippines Free Press, Philippine Graphic, Story Philippines, Very Short Stories for Harried Readers, and Philippine Speculative Fiction IV). Visit her at <http://sungazer.wordpress.com>.

Ajay Vishwanathan

The author works with bugs he cannot see. Dr. Ajay Vishwanathan's work has appeared or is forthcoming in over thirty literary magazines including [elimae](#), [the Times of India](#), [Bartleby Snopes](#), [The Houston Literary Review](#), [The Cynic](#), [Boston Literary Magazine](#), [Breadcrumb Scabs](#), [Cantaraville](#), [The Legendary](#), [Bewildering Stories](#), [Khabar](#), [Six Sentences](#), and [Little India](#).