



speculative fiction **FOR THE REST OF US**

Expanded Horizons Issue 16 – March 2010

<http://www.expandedhorizons.net>

Expanded Horizons extends special thanks to this month's "Story Sponsor," who wishes to remain anonymous, and who has generously given to Expanded Horizons in honor of hearing dogs.

Table of Contents

General Akmed's Revenge? by Saladin Ahmed.....	1
A Curse, Like a Keepsake by Stellan Thorne.....	6
Visions by Fadzlishah Johanabas.....	9
The Spitfire by Julie K. Rose.....	19
Contributor Biographies.....	22
Saladin Ahmed.....	22
Stellan Thorne.....	22
Fadzlishah Johanabas.....	23
Julie K. Rose.....	23

General Akmed's Revenge? by Saladin Ahmed

“Today we destrroy Amerrrica.”

Muhammad Mattawa twisted his face into a melange of rage and barbaric triumph. He was rallying a bloodthirsty crowd. He needed to be more forceful. He raised his voice, tried again.

“Today we destrroy Amerrrica! TODAY WE DESTRRROY AMERRRICA!!” Muhammad shook his fist at the American air, held his conqueror’s scowl for one long moment more. It slipped into a clowning smile when he looked at his friend Ali, who sat on their apartment’s ratty couch, watching Muhammad practice. “Well, what do you think?” he asked Ali in Arabic.

“I think you’ve got it down, dude.” Ali said in English. Smug, American-born Ali with his effortless slang. “I also think,” he began, switching to Arabic, “this is the stupidest fucking movie script ever written. And racist! I mean, the fact that they’re still making stereotypical shit like this...” Ali ran a

hand through his spiky black hair. “How many times you going to practice that one line, anyway? Let’s get high.”

Muhammad shrugged in surrender. He hurled the script at his best friend’s head. Ali was right, of course. *Desert Rangers II* was the worst script Muhammad had ever read, in Arabic or English. The movie certainly qualified as “Public Insult to Islam” — a punishable crime in his homeland. Worse, his role was tiny. But “General Akmed” was the only part he’d landed in the year since he’d played “Terrorist #3” and been shot in the head onscreen by an Austrian body builder-turned-action star. There wasn’t a lot of work out there for Muhammad. In a stroke of luck two years ago, he’d played a Cuban drug dealer’s henchman. Mostly, though, it was sleazy oil sheiks and men who cackled as they blew up children. Then again, Muhammad reflected, the fact that he had shown up to his last two auditions late due to car trouble and reeking due to long nights of hashish and video games probably hadn’t helped his career.

An hour later that same sweet reek filled the apartment, leavened with the fried onion-and-cumin smells of Ali’s cooking. Muhammad’s half-eaten plate sat before him. A video game controller was in his hand.

“Alright, motherfucker,” Ali said in English, “Keep an eye on that score!” *Super Mario Brothers* © 1986 Nintendo Entertainment Corporation flashed on the screen in white light-letters.

1986. Some part of Muhammad knew it was an arbitrary, European number. According to the Islamic calendar the year was 1406. But living in this country it was hard not to feel that it was 1406 only for old men like his uncle, a hearer-of-voices who had told Muhammad many times that an unseen *jinn* protected the Mattawa family. This *jinn* had not saved his uncle from being tortured and crippled by the Internal Security Police back home, though the fact that one of the thugs had suffered a heart attack during his uncle’s public trial had once inspired credulous notions in Muhammad. Still, when he’d crossed the ocean to America, Muhammad thought, he had moved away from such superstition and into the future.

#

According to the *Desert Rangers II* script, General Akmed was the terrorists’ supreme commander. But the part had little screen time. Muhammad’s lines consisted mostly of the direction [*screams in Arabic*]. His main lines in English were “Die, Deserrrr Rrrangerrrrs!” and “Today we destrrrroy Amerrrrica!” The triple “r”s were there in the script. Eric Williams, the director, had explained that Muhammad was to roll his tongue.

Eric was a bony, sadistic man. Back home, Muhammad had often been warned about the Jews of America. But his agent Sol, a mostly-former actor who also had a part in the film, was kind and helpful — almost fatherly. Eric, on the other hand, was neither Jewish nor a kind man. Muhammad wasn’t sure Eric was a man at all. He did not believe in *ghuls*, but when Muhammad looked at the director he did wonder. Eric was also co-producer and co-writer of the script, in which Lieutenant Snake and his Desert Rangers battle a mad Middle Eastern dictator who’s uncovered an ancient magical artifact.

Muhammad picked his way across the set. Someone tugged at his sleeve.

“Watch out, Mo. Director dickface is in a choice mood today.” Muhammad smiled at egg-bald Sol, who was playing Lieutenant Snake’s hard-nosed commander. Sol could make the huge vein in his forehead throb powerfully on command, and Eric made much use of this talent. Muhammad envied Sol’s role, with its exasperated lines like “If you’re gonna screw me, Snake, you could at least give me a reacharound!”

“Mo! Get over here!” Eric had noticed his arrival.

Muhammad walked over to discuss his scene with Eric.

“Listen up! You’re giving your ‘we’re gonna take over the world’ speech and -”

“Yes, this is what I am wanting to ask you about, Mister Williams.” Eric’s look made Muhammad cringe at his own bad English. “I am saying what in my speech?”

“I told you before, it doesn’t matter! Until we get to the last line, you’re just background noise. Everything’s gonna be focused on Chuck. Just mumble like it’s Arabic. You don’t really have to be saying anything.”

“Yes, but...”

“Goddammit!” Eric snapped, “Just start out calm and then make it angry! Like that Ayatollah asshole.”

“Excuse me, Mister Williams.” Muhammad struggled with his tenses. “That is Iran, what you are talking about. They are not speaking Arabic there, but...”

One of the crew groaned, said “Aw, come on!”

Eric squinted at Muhammad, as if seeing him for the first time. The director lowered his voice. “Do you know what kind of schedule we’re on here? We don’t have time for you to get cute. Or to suddenly develop a fucking attitude. You understand?”

Muhammad didn’t quite understand, but he knew when to grin stupidly and say “Sorry, Mister Williams. No problem!”

#

Muhammad’s problematic attitude came up again at the end of his weekly English lesson/American breakfast with Ali. From an unseen television somewhere in Johnny’s Hollywood Diner, an announcer roared “IT’S A NEEEEW CAAAR!!!” Ali snapped his fingers in front of Muhammad’s face, and he realized he’d been staring into space.

“What the hell’s wrong with you today, anyhow?” Ali asked.

Muhammad blinked, tried to clear his head. “What is this word, ‘Anyhow’?”

“Not now, dude. Answer my question.”

Ali looked concerned, but Muhammad didn’t quite know what to say. “I... I do not know. Lately, I am feeling that I am in a video game,” he said in English. “In Super Mario Brothers! Every inch of ground I am gaining is a danger, a...” – what was the word? – “a... *an* obstacle, you understand?” Forks and plates clinked around them and greasy smells filled the air.

“Not *understand*. *Understand*. Emphasis on the *stand*. Enough with the English lessons, anyway.” Ali sipped his coffee and smiled in a bemused way that irritated Muhammad. “So you feel like Super Mario?” his friend asked.

“Yes!” Muhammad half-shouted in Arabic. Since I’ve left home, I’ve made it through obstacle after obstacle. Found new worlds. Overcome monsters and bottomless pits. I think I am going to rescue the princess. But then, without warning, fireballs erupt behind me and I leap without looking into a pool of lava!” Muhammad knew that he was too loud, that he was speaking too quickly, that he must sound crazy. But he found he couldn’t help himself. He’d been holding too much inside. “Yes, I leap into the lava and I’m done for. But then, it’s even worse. I’m not quite done for! Instead I find myself all the

way back at the beginning of this tiresome world, facing all those obstacles over again. And I say to myself ‘there’s only so many times I can come back!’ But I can’t check the corner of the screen. How many chances do I have left?” Muhammad pounded the Formica tabletop for emphasis. “How many!?” he shouted. Then, embarrassed at last, he looked around sheepishly and fell silent.

Ali stared for a moment, dumbfounded. Then he cracked a grin, and gave Muhammad a tsk-tsk-tsk. “Have you,” he asked in English, “been dipping into my stash?”

They parted ways after breakfast, and Muhammad begged off when his friend invited him to a party that night in the Valley. There was too much going on in his head for him to try and be social.

For several years now, Muhammad had been dreaming at least partly in English. In his daydreams, too, the language’s strange words and phrases had crowded into his brain. He supposed this was only natural. But lately there had been more to it. He heard and saw certain lines from his life played over and over again in his skull. One moment they were strange and foreign, the next they were disturbingly familiar.

Sorry, Mario, but our princess is in another castle!

Today we destrroy Amerrrica!

IT’S A NEEEEW CAAAR!!!

And somewhere behind all the blaring English he could still hear the worst sounds from home. The bullying Internal Security Forces with their American-bought uniforms and rifles. The shouted charges against his uncle, who swore before God that he had heard the voice of a *jinn* mocking the government.

Slander! Blasphemy! Public insult to Islam!

His uncle’s reedy Arabic, whimpering words in the public square.

In the name of God, just kill me!

The sound of his uncle’s bones being broken. The consoling words, like smokeless fire speaking, that had echoed impossibly in Muhammad’s head as he was made to watch his uncle being beaten.

Muhammad woke in the night, sometimes, with all these sounds and words insisting he listen to them, picture them. More and more often he worried that he was losing his mind.

#

As Muhammad walked toward his rusty Dodge, silently praying to himself that it would start again, he passed a newspaper box and a headline caught his eye.

US BOMBS LIBYA

He scanned the story as best he could through the grate. *US warplanes...over 100 dead...baby daughter was slain.*

Why had he looked? Muhammad took a breath and did what he always did with the news — tried to pretend he hadn’t read it. He moved on.

An American couple in their twenties was walking by, clearly enjoying the warm April morning. Before coming to the states, Muhammad had worked at *kebab* stands in Sweden and West Germany. There were big blonde men in those places. But there was a way of being big and blonde that only American men had. A way that somehow reminded Muhammad of a swinging fist. This man had it. He squeezed the woman beside him immodestly, smirked as he called her “Princess.” She was blonde, too.

Thin in a way that seemed unhealthy to Muhammad's eyes. He felt ashamed for being aroused by this unhealthiness, and looked down as they passed.

Though he couldn't say why, he stopped walking and pretended to look in a store window. Then he discreetly turned to watch the couple for a moment. The pair stood in front of the newspaper box. They didn't notice Muhammad. They were drunk and in love and he was just one of Los Angeles' million oily immigrants.

The woman pointed at a headline and said sad-sounding words, but Muhammad couldn't quite make them out over the street traffic.

The man's voice was clear. "You ask me, we should just nuke these assholes!"

The woman looked disgusted and thrilled. She swatted the man's arm and said something Muhammad couldn't understand.

#

Muhammad looked on with Eric as Artie the propmaster held up a gaudily painted bronze bowl.

"Wow, Artie, where did you dig that up?" Eric asked, smiling for the first time in days.

Artie scratched at his sizable paunch. "I got it on a lark in Egypt last year. The old-timer who sold it to me said it'd grant me a wish. But it must be all used up — I keep trying this one wish involving Madonna, but no go." One of the cameramen chuckled obscenely. "Anyway, I had to paint over it to make it show up on camera. A few bucks for a can of gold spray paint and now we got our evil artifact!"

Eric looked genuinely pleased. "Well, Artie, maybe you're worth half a shit after all. We need to save every fucking penny if we're going to afford Mister Bigshot Action Star's goddamned salary!"

"Where is Chuck, anyway?" someone behind Muhammad asked.

Eric made a disgusted noise. "Are you kidding me? We've got him for six days next week and that's it. We've got to shoot around him as much as we can."

Muhammad turned to go practice his getting-shot-nineteen-times-while-Lieutenant-Snake-says-a-one-liner face in the mirror, but Eric grabbed his arm.

"So, General Akmed, here's your prop. Hey! Maybe you can actually read these damn squiggles." Eric handed him the bronze bowl.

The metal was like none Muhammad had ever touched before. Somehow warm and cool, smooth and rough all at the same time. Under the cheap gold paint embossed Arabic wreathed the bowl.

But it was an odd Arabic. Old and weirdly vowelled, like the language of the Qu'ran read in a warped mirror. Boyhood religion lessons came back as Muhammad pieced together the strange phrases and read silently.

O believer! Know that this bowl holdeth a servant of Solomon, son of David, God's prophet, to whom God did grant dominion over winds and birds and jinn.

O believer! Thou hast seen kin-blood spilled. Thou hast crossed the endless western oceans. Thou hast followed the setting sun farther, to a land of disbelievers where the air itself doth choke and the earth itself doth tremble. Thou hast been watched by God and Solomon's servant.

O believer! As you stand in this land, hold this bowl and recite! Then shall ye reap the knowledge of

Solomon! Then shall ye sip from the benevolent cup of Almighty God!

Muhammad's mind raced with unfathomables. This old engraving was describing L.A.! Inside his mind, the words repeated themselves in a voice not his. A voice not human. The same smokeless fire voice that had spoken to him at his uncle's trial all those years ago.

Below the weird words was engraved the traditional Islamic declaration of faith, as familiar to Muhammad's eye as the preceding lines were strange. He gripped the bowl, felt a feverish madness closing in on him. By sheer force of habit he recited the declaration in Arabic.

"There is no God but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God."

Muhammad only half-heard Eric's barked demands for a translation. Something strange — something impossible — was happening, and he stood transfixed.

Clouds of opalescent smoke rolled forth from the bowl and roiled around him. Muhammad let go of the bowl with a yelp, but it just floated there in midair. He thought his heart might beat its way out of his chest. The clouds billowed out to fill the studio and peals of thunder shook the building. To Muhammad it sounded as if the universe were being cracked open like an egg.

Had he finally lost his mind? No... no, Eric and the crew were running around, screaming terrified things!

A fanged face of shimmering smoke began to take shape before Muhammad. A chillingly familiar voice like a thousand harps strummed by sword-blades seemed to scream behind his eyes.

ONE WISH, O SON OF ADAM! SPEAK IT CAREFULLY!

Muhammad's mind raced with a hundred horrible thoughts. He tried to ignore the inconceivable chaos around him. Tried to control his thinking. What must he do? What must he say?

Video game music, the cruel words of passers-by, old stories of the *jinn*, his wounded uncle's whimpers, the sound of warplanes — all of it hammered at his skull as he tried to clear his mind of strange language. *In the name of God, just kill me!* echoed in his head in Arabic. Smoke billowed and the studio roof rained plaster.

In spite of himself, bits of English slipped from his lips.

...princess...

...destrrrroy Amerrrica!

A NEEEEW CAAAR!!!

Muhammad wasn't quite sure which bit had slipped first.

A Curse, Like a Keepsake by Stellan Thorne

They called him the Baron, the man that owned the Castle. He lived in the penthouse, far above us, and there was a sleek elevator that opened only with his silver key. Sometimes I overheard a snatch of gossip about him: he was solitary, foreign, a heartless skinflint, but— *oh*—he had such wonderful taste: every scrap of carpet, every chandelier, had to pass under his gaze. He had an eye for beauty.

Nobody spoke to him and nobody saw him, but he sent letters in his careful hand, about rent overdue. My mother told me how much we owed. She'd sold the last of her finer things, her pearls and furs, but that was not enough. She told me he had no pity for widows and orphans. She had written to him often, without effect.

But my mother asked for sympathy, and I did not. I was a clerk, I knew how skin prickled at the sight of a blank check—so that is what I gave him. I told him I would do anything.

The Baron's post-box was marked No. 1. Ours was No. 232. A day after I had written to him, I found the key, slipped in there without envelope.

When my mother was sleeping I made myself ready. I combed my hair and put on my best shoes. I was old enough to fight, if another war came, and soldiers had to take care of their feet. They could rot in the damp of the trenches. You became a corpse from the feet up.

The concierge was dozing. I turned the key in the lock.

The Baron's private elevator was modern and sleek, like the dashboard of a car. There was no operator. I hadn't quite expected one; still, it unnerved me. I touched the handle lightly. Nowhere to go, but up. My hair was still damp, slicked back from my forehead. It gleamed the same color as my eyes in the elevator door.

The elevator shook to a stop, and the doors slid open, all on their own. It was not at all what I had expected. A dim and narrow hallway, the door small and rough. I knocked. There was a sound from within, a kind of rustling; I thought of leaves caught in the wind.

"The door is open," he said. He had a voice like a marble slab. "Come inside."

Inside, there was a single light: a gnarled lamp, burning bright with naphtha. It cast a circle of shivering brightness. I saw the shadowy edges of the room. There was a bookcase, narrow and crammed, a tangle of pillows, a fraying tapestry.

The Baron stood at the thick-curtained window, his back to me. He was hunched and massive, a great shadow in the gloom. "So," he said. "Do you sing?"

I begged his pardon, I did not understand.

"Can you dance? Do you play harp or violin? Are you a poet, or a player?"

I shook my head. "No, sir, I am not."

"Then, we have a problem. Something must be exchanged."

I knew, then, what he meant. "If you just give me more time, I could get your money."

"I am not interested in prattling about money."

He turned to me then, quite slowly. The lamplight glowed on him. He wore a simple copper mask: a slit for mouth, a crude nose, two holes through which I saw his eyes. They were raptor eyes.

I did not move or make a sound. I could not tell if I was afraid.

"But," he said, "I will make a deal with you."

#

I knew the word for young men who traded for their company, and my company is what the Baron

wanted. He had a deck of ancient cards, with strange-eyed queens and fraying kings. We played cribbage, he taught me écarté and bezique, and all the while he watched me from behind his copper mask.

His terms were generous, now, and my mother thanked God and Providence, and when she slept I would turn the silver key in the lock and go to his penthouse in my best pair of shoes.

He did not touch me. He was very careful not to, an arm's length away always.

When I asked him why he wore the mask, he had poured me wine, and wound an ancient phonograph. He had even let me win a hand. I thought him in a good mood.

"My mother was a sorceress," he said, "and she laid a curse on me."

I laughed. He did not. He shuffled the cards, one-handed—made them dance in a wavering column. I saw the blurry shapes of suits, the flash of face cards. It was a magician's trick, a good one.

"I have learned some sleights, over the years, but I never could undo it." He collapsed the tower of cards, fanned them out on the table. One fell face-up, the Jack of Hearts. "I am cursed, and it will last 'til Judgment Day."

He looked up. His eyes caught me. Another magician's trick, I thought. The music hissed through the air, a song in a lilting language.

"I need to go," I said.

"Yes. It's very late." He sat slumped in his great chair, his gloved hands curled on the armrests like claws. "You will come again, tomorrow?"

#

I was good at my work, and was promoted—I came closer to paying our debt. At night I felt the Baron's scrutiny like a fist, as he spoke gentlemanly pleasantries. He shuffled the deck, cards flashing red-white-black in the lamplight, and he looked heavy with hunger.

"My mother said to break my curse I would need to find a wife," he said.

I asked him why he had no wife. He laughed, then. I did not. He stood up slowly, loomed, and looked at me.

"Do I frighten you?"

"Yes," I said.

"Good. You are honest." His hand went to his mask, and I flinched, a little. It seemed to satisfy him. "Have you ever seen a monster?"

My eyes went to the window. He always had the curtains drawn. Below him were the lights of an unsleeping city, but he stayed in here, where the air smelled of dark ages. "I don't believe in monsters."

"There are things in this world that eat tender youths," he said.

"Yes." I thought of gangrene and gas. My father's letters, his leaking boots.

He went to his desk, and poured a glass of cognac. "You should leave. I am tired of being humane."

I took a step closer. I could hear him breathing. One more step and I could reach out, rip the mask from his face. I wanted to look at him as he looked at me.

“Leave me.” He shattered his glass against the wall. Shards sprayed like stars across the Turkish rugs. *“Don’t you know about monsters’ appetites?”*

#

When the last cent was accounted for my mother embraced me, weeping a little. Now perhaps I could work less, she said. My eyes had been so troubled lately, and I never had much sleep.

I bought myself a new suit, new shoes. The Baron wrote to his tenants—to my mother—in his careful hand, about rent and renovations, and he did not mention me. But I dreamed of him, each night, and woke up knowing it was not debt that called me.

I still had the key; he had never reclaimed it.

The elevator shook when I rose, as if angry. The door to his penthouse was ajar. Inside it was dark and dry-aired, like a just-cooled furnace, and everything was shadowed save for one glinting thing: his mask, like a dead face on the table, in the mess of ragged-edged cards.

He sat unmoving, in his claw-footed chair.

“May I come in?” I asked.

”Close the door, if you do,” he said.

I did, and was clapped in darkness, but I still saw his eyes.

“Well,” he said. *“You owe me nothing.”*

I moved slowly in the dark, though I knew this room well. *“May I light the lamp?”*

He laughed. *“You do not believe in monsters. Go ahead.”*

I brought the light closer, and he shielded his face. His gloves had ripped; his fine old waistcoat was moth-eaten. I set down the lamp and went to his side. He could still be human, in the wavering light.

“When I was young I was a handsome man, like you,” he said. *“I had a vast demesne, and all my desires were granted me. Now this is my only Castle, and my curse is all I have left.”*

“You’re a fool,” I said. I rose; I opened the curtains.

The city glowed like a second sky. I had seen men in the alleys, with faces not less monstrous than him. Perhaps he did not know that, here in his fraying room.

He stood up slowly; he unfolded. He took off his gloves, and his claws were the color of stone. *“Come here, I shall eat you up.”*

“I owe you nothing,” I said as I went to him. *What I gave, I gave freely.*

He trembled, and blinked against the starlight.

”I am going to open the windows,” I said.

”I will be cursed still, always.”

“Yes,” I said, *”you’ll learn to share it,”* and let the night air in.

Visions by Fadzliah Johanabas

“Can you take me to the toilet? I think there’s a monster in there.”

I studied the girl before me, who could not have been older than eight. She spoke with a slight lisp, her two front teeth were missing, and her long hair jutted out in places, as if she had just gotten out of the bed. Her white-with-cartoon-prints hospital pajamas looked a size too big for her. I bent down to her eye level – she had the longest lashes I had ever seen; she would grow up to be a beautiful woman.

“What’s your name, *sayang*?” I use the affectionate term on most patients; it comes naturally.

“Qistina. I’m scared.”

I gave her my brightest smile. “Come. I’ll go with you. There are no monsters in the toilet, you’ll see.”

Her eyes told me she was still contemplating my words, but she nodded and turned to walk into the communal toilet. I followed her closely. I found it odd to have a pediatric patient walking about unattended, but I also knew around this time, the other night nurses would be busy administering medications and checking up on their patients. I smiled at the memories of my own experience. This was one of the perks of being promoted to a Sister; I checked on the nurses instead of patients.

I couldn’t blame the little girl for being afraid. The fluorescent lights were near expiring; the one at the far end was flickering with a faint buzz. Though the old-olive-green tiles were cleaned on a regular basis, the rotting wood on the doors showed. Even the mirrors were littered with rust stains. The doors on all seven stalls stood ajar, and Qistina gave me a quick glance before entering the one nearest to the entrance.

“I’ll be right here, *sayang*.” I took the chance to straighten my dark-blue uniform and white hijab. The still of the night augmented the sounds around me; the jet of urine on water in the ceramic bowl, the constant drips from the tap of the middle sink, the groaning and churning of old piping within the walls. My body gave a sudden involuntary shiver. I wasn’t quite sure why.

I almost jumped when I saw Qistina standing beside me, looking up with a serious face, even biting her lower lip.

“Are you done?”

She nodded.

“Did you flush?”

She nodded again.

I opened the tap for her, and water spat out in choked bursts. The wall piping groaned even louder. Qistina ran her hands under the water and bolted out. I gave a small giggle and turned the tap off before exiting the toilet. Qistina didn’t wait for me; I saw her tiny form making a sharp right into her ward. I giggled again. Monsters, really.

I didn’t follow Qistina to make sure she was back on her bed. I had two more floors to cover. During office hours I took care of the male Medical ward; most times it could be mistaken for an infirmary from the number of extension beds and overflowing patients. Once or twice a week, I would do the night calls, covering a quarter of the hospital, from all the Medical wards, both male and female, to the Medical Pediatric ward, and lastly to the Coronary Care Unit. My work was to make sure things were

running smoothly with the nursing staff. And that night, all was quiet so far, which I was thankful for.

The long corridor toward the CCU was deserted, and my heels made echoes as I walked. The black plastic chairs lined along the inner wall looked worn but still usable, and outside the half-opened windows, the sky was pitch-black. There were no stars; they were seldom seen in the heart of Kuala Lumpur. The glow of city lights reached far over the tall canopy of rooftops and trees.

Much to my surprise, a grey-striped cat paced in front of the CCU, mewing in a small voice for such a big cat. I tsked at the laxity of the cleaners and maintenance staff. This was the third floor, and they should have known better than to let a stray cat wander about. In a hospital, no less. I made shooining noises and waved the cat away toward the staircase. It scampered at my approach, but stayed a few meters away and sat staring at the door. I decided against chasing it away.

As I opened the door leading into the CCU, a whiff of rotten meat assaulted my nose for a fraction of a second, and then it was gone. Maybe I was imagining it, but the odor lingered at the back of my throat, threatening to make me gag. I went straight for the nurses' counter.

The two nurses at the counter stopped writing their reports and stood up to greet me. One of them, a plump woman with a kind, open face gave me a warm smile. Sue Yin had been my junior at nursing school. The other one, petite, looking barely out of her teens, clutched a patient's file until her knuckles were white. I had to admit, some of the more strict and demanding Sisters made the newer nurses feel intimidated by anyone wearing the dark blue uniform.

"Good evening, Sister Rohana," said Sue Yin.

"Sue Yin, what's that rotten smell?"

Both the nurses made an attempt to sniff the air around them. Then they gave each other a confused look and a small shrug.

"Nothing unusual, Sister."

I decided not to press the matter. "Anything to report?"

The small nurse reached for a piece of paper on the counter but Sue Yin stopped her and gave her a smile. If it was meant to reassure the junior, it was working. She looked visibly relieved. Sue Yin turned back to look at me with an almost imperceptible shrug which I responded to in kind. "Seven patients," she started, her tone confident. "Three empty beds. Two beds are booked for patients coming from the wards, both of them male. The patients are all stable, except for one." She pointed at a room facing the entrance. "Seventy-two year-old Malay man. Acute myocardial infarct four days ago. His children agreed to withhold inotropic support yesterday, but he's still holding on."

I craned my neck to catch a glimpse at the old man behind the glass-panel window. He was frail and leathery, all bones and not much flesh. His chest under the blanket rose and fell in time with the respirator machine. I then looked at the overhead monitor and searched for his vital signs. The patient's blood pressure was impossibly low, barely compatible with life, but his heart was beating at a steady rate of eighty per minute. I raised both eyebrows but gave no comment. I had come across patients like this one several times throughout my career, patients who should have already died but held on to life with tenacity and desperation. None of them lasted more than a few days.

"I hope the rest of the night will be quiet. Just page for me if you have any problems."

They returned my smile and nodded. "Have a quiet night, Sister," piped the small junior.

When I opened the door to exit, I took another look over my shoulder at the old patient lying comatose

behind me. I intended to give a silent prayer for him, but my own heart stilled at what I saw. I blinked once, twice, but it was still there. I scampered out of the CCU, my heart beating so quickly my chest ached.

By the time my shift ended, I was down with fever. My joints ached, the back of my eyes throbbed, and I was shivering despite the warm dawn. My drive home was a haze; it was a small miracle I made it home without causing an accident. The house was empty. My husband had left to take my two children to school on his way to work. I peeled off my uniform and undergarments and shrugged on a batik kaftan, too feverish and shaken to take a shower first. I collapsed onto the bed and tried to sleep.

Even with my eyes closed, even nearly ten kilometers away from the hospital, I could still see it.

The creature – I had no other name for it – squatted at the head of the old patient’s bed, its body humanlike, but not quite. Its limbs were long and spidery, with long spikes jutting out from its knobby shoulders and thin forearms. Paws that perched on the bed ended in claws, like a vulture’s. Its whole body, thin and long, was black, but under the fluorescent light it glistened. Scales? Tiny feathers? I didn’t want to find out. What I could still clearly remember was its face. Red eyes glowed from deep, skeletal sockets, and yellow fangs protruded from its much-too-wide mouth. Its nose looked as if a huge part of it had dropped off, yet despite it all, it looked almost human. It was looking down at the patient, long blue tongue rolling out to lick his forehead. Its head moved upward, slowly upward –

I jumped out of the bed and rushed to the shower. I didn’t bother to take off my kaftan. I turned the tap on and stood under the needles of cold water. My knees shook and buckled, and I dropped onto the tiled floor sitting. I cried, wanting to forget what I had seen, desperate to tell myself I only imagined it, but I couldn’t.

* * * * *

It took me three days to recover from the fever, but I could still visualize the creature. If anyone could explain what I had seen, I knew I wouldn’t find the answers in the hospital. There was only one person who could help me.

I had not come back to my parents’ house for years, not since my mother passed away. I stopped seeing the place as home when I began a family of my own, and without my mother around, I had no reason left to come and visit. Until now.

The house was deep in the paddy fields of Kedah, two states north of Kuala Lumpur. I drove alone; I didn’t want my children to skip school, and my husband had to look after them while I was away. When I parked my car by the dirt road a good walking distance away from the house, the sun was well on its way to setting. Yellow dust from the village road now coated my silver Corolla. I made my way down along the narrow packed-earth path without wasting time. I never liked walking through the paddy field at dark. Still, I stopped midway to take in the familiar sights and smells I had deprived myself of for much too long. The paddy shoots, peeking a few centimeters above the muddy, flooded field, were still green. They bent in waves with the soft evening breeze. The rich scents of mud and greenery filled my nostrils and I breathed all of them in as much as I could. Soon this whole expanse would be golden with ripe paddy stalks. I smiled at the memories of my childhood.

My parents’ house was old even by the village standard. The wooden walls and stilts were dark with age, and the woven nipah roof looked like it was due for a fresh change. The windows were closed except for the ones in the main hall at the front of the house. A woman in a plain white *baju kurung* stood at the base of the staircase leading to a small patio in front of the main entrance. Her long black hair whipped about with the strong wind, but her face was mostly covered. When I approached her, she

walked away. I was too tired to care.

“*Assalamualaikum*,” I called out. “Abah? Are you in?”

The front doors creaked open and my father stepped out, squinting to see me. He looked much older than when I last saw him. The years without my mother had not been kind on Abah. He was gaunt, his hair more white than grey, and his white T-shirt hung limp on his body when it used to bulge at the abdomen. He had more wrinkles on his tanned brown face, but he still looked the same. Stern but kind. I felt a stab of guilt for not coming back to see him even during Eid holidays, for not picking up the phone to call him.

“Ana? Rohana, is that you?”

“I told you, you need to wear glasses, Abah.” I walked up the steep stairs and took his hand to kiss it.

For a while he stood perfectly still and unresponsive, but before I could stand straight again, he rested his left hand at the back of my head. “Welcome home, Ana. Welcome home.” His voice was deep, but a higher-pitched crack broke through.

The inside of the house looked just the same as I remembered. The faded peach leather sofa set sat in one corner, the surface peeling in a few places. Thick dust had settled on the plastic plants and flowers I had bought to brighten the house. The scent was familiar too, a mixture of incense, unfiltered tobacco and massage oil. I leaned back against the plush sofa while my father disappeared into the kitchen to boil water. Only when he came back with a steaming teapot and a plate of cream crackers did I realize I had dozed off.

Abah took a seat opposite mine. “You drove here without stopping?”

I stifled a yawn. “There’s a woman in front of the house looking for you, I think.”

Abah rose and walked toward the window. The floorboards creaked with each step. He stood still in front of the window for almost a minute before turning back to look at me. “You saw a woman?”

I nodded.

“In a white *baju kurung*?”

I nodded again.

“Come here, Ana.”

I sighed and complied. He indicated for me to look down by tilting his head. The woman in white was still standing outside where I first met her, bathed in the light of the single bulb at the patio. When the wind picked up, her hair lifted off her face.

Only, there was no face.

I screamed and staggered back. I would have fallen if Abah did not brace me. He uttered a string of prayers into my ear and after a while my sobs calmed down.

“Who – what is that?”

“You were not supposed to be able to see her. I’m sorry, Ana. I’ve grown old and weak.”

* * * * *

My father is a *bomoh*, a local witch-doctor, or a shaman. People would come to him at night to be healed from various ailments and woes. Some sought exorcism from evil spirits, while others would

come hoping to glean winning lottery numbers. Abah always turned them down, those people looking to get rich fast and easy. He is always helping people, healing them. The only thing is, I don't believe in his traditional methods of medicine. I fell in love with modern medicine the day I broke my left forearm in the paddy fields when I was ten. When I wanted to take up nursing, he refused to support me. He wanted me to stay in the village. I left home with my mother's blessing and two hundred ringgit in my pocket.

Now, as I watched him sitting cross-legged across the hall, a bowl of incense crackling in front of him, I felt the same rebellious feeling all over. He had a thin film of cataract coating his pupils, yet he refused to be treated at the hospital. Still, there was no modern medical explanation to the things I had witnessed.

"Is that... thing outside dangerous?"

"Not if you disturb it first. Not unless its master wishes you harm."

"Its master?" I leaned forward despite finding this conversation incredible at the very least.

"There are creatures in this world people are not meant to see, much less control."

"Like the *malaikat* and *syaitan*?" I inquired, referring to the Quranic term of angels and devils.

Abah nodded. "Ana, I've taught you to read and memorize the Quran. Surely you understand what you've been reading?"

My cheeks burned at being berated, never mind I was almost forty. I looked up and saw Abah looking straight at me.

"There are good beings, like the *malaikat* and the *bunian* and some *djinns*. And there are others. The creature you saw outside is a crossbreed between a *syaitan* and a *djinn*. Such evil spirits can be tamed to do a person's bidding. With a price." The last sentence came out as a firm and final warning.

"Why would people want to control them?"

"Wealth, fame. Greed can make people do anything."

"What's the price for keeping them?"

"Most of the time the master's blood, every week or every month. But sometimes, with the stronger ones, an unborn child is needed to tame them."

I gasped and gripped the sofa. "Surely people won't go that far?"

"You're a nurse. You've seen women giving birth to dead babies."

"But that's because of complications. Cord strangulation, fetal distress –"

"And sometimes the doctors cannot explain what went wrong."

I felt my mouth opening and shutting but no words came out. Abah was right. *Masya-Allah*, I thought. *Who would do such a thing?* "But why is that creature out there?"

"Its master died last week. It took him a month to die before his family came and sought my help. The creature kept him alive so it could feed. I banished it from him. When he did die, his body was rotten. Now the creature's lost and wants a new home, a new master."

"You dealt with it here, in our house?"

Abah shook his head. "No, two villages away."

“How did it find you?”

“These creatures cannot travel far from objects that keep them anchored in our plane. If they need to bridge the distance, they usually employ animals. Monkeys, cats, rats. I still can’t find the small idol that belongs to the creature, so it lingers around. It’s angry at me, you know.”

“Are you in danger?” I thought about bringing Abah to Kuala Lumpur. Forcing him, if I had to.

Abah chuckled. “It can’t do anything much without its master. But I need to send it home.”

“I saw something like the one outside a few days ago. Actually, that’s the reason I came back.”

If Abah felt hurt at what I said, he showed no sign. “What did you see?”

I described the creature in the CCU to the very last detail. Abah didn’t interrupt me. I felt like unloading a heavy burden; I had not told anyone about what I saw, not even my husband.

“That’s a *hantu raya*.” That simple, like a consultant physician making a spot diagnosis by listening to a patient’s history.

I had no idea what Abah was talking about. “What’s a *hantu raya*?”

“They are strong creatures, usually tamed to help their masters gain wealth. Lots of wealth.”

“How?”

“Eliminating the competition.”

I shuddered at that thought. There were more than enough patients who suddenly fell ill and comatose without logical explanation. Then a thought occurred to me. “Abah. I’ve never seen these creatures before. Why now?”

“You used to be able to. You’re just like me, and my father, and his mother. They were strong *bomohs*. When you were eight, and I was healing a man haunted and harmed by an evil spirit, you came into the room and saw the creature straddling the man. You reached out for it, and it reached out for you. It took me a week to banish it off you. Your mother decided it was safer for you to not see these creatures. So I took your vision away.”

“How come I don’t remember?”

Abah chuckled again. “I’m a strong *bomoh*, too.”

“Abah, is that why you didn’t want me to go? You want me to be a *bomoh* like you?”

He looked at me in silence, his face impassive. When I thought he wouldn’t answer my question, his lips parted.

“I wanted to keep you safe.”

* * * * *

Abah looked uncomfortable, out of place, sitting in my office. I watched him as he looked about, fidgeting with his prayer beads, looking at framed family pictures.

“Sister Rohana,” Sue Yin called from my door. “The patient’s children are here.”

I smiled at Sue Yin and beckoned to let them enter. Three men huddled into the room, all of them looking significantly older than me. If anything, they looked just as lost as Abah. I pointed at the sofa. “Please, have a seat.”

Two of them sat, but the other remained standing with his arms crossed. I assumed he was either the eldest or the dominant sibling. “Is there anything, Sister?”

“I’m sorry to call for a meeting on such notice. Your father. There hasn’t been any change, is there?”

“No, and the doctors and nurses keep on telling us every single day he’s about to die.” He didn’t sound pleased.

“I’m sorry about that. Most patients don’t survive long with your father’s vital signs. We prepare family members for the inevitable. But your father’s situation is – how do I put it – unique.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Abah, who was silent throughout the conversation, spoke up. “Does your father keep a *hantu raya*?”

One of the sitting men shot up, his face flushed. “How dare you? Who are you?”

Both siblings asked a barrage of questions with ever rising voices. I would too if I hadn’t known any better. Then the third sibling, slim and refined in a crisply ironed batik shirt and black slacks, stood up and rested a hand on each of his brothers’ shoulders. They stopped their questions mid-sentence, their faces still red and angry.

“How did you know about that?”

From the look on their faces, the other two siblings had no idea what was happening.

Abah, still calm on his chair, looked straight at the man who just spoke. “It’s not letting your father die. It needs blood to survive, so it’s keeping him alive.”

“I thought so.”

“What? What are you talking about?” asked the other two brothers almost at the same time.

“You knew about it?” I said.

“He wanted me to take over when the time came. I take care of the family business, so my father told me his secret about a year ago.”

“And you don’t want it.” Abah’s words were not a question.

“No. I want to be successful on my own, not this way. It’s wrong. But please, help him. Help him die.”

Abah nodded his promise.

The five of us entered the CCU like a small army. I led the way, and Abah strode by my side, his face determined. The three brothers trailed close. It was past visiting hours, and to my relief, the on-call doctor was not around. The afternoon-shift nurses had just finished passing over to the night-shift ones, and all of them stood up when they saw me.

“Sister Rohana,” one of them spoke up. “You’re not on-call, are you?”

I smiled at the nurses. “Just visiting a patient.” I looked at the old man lying on the bed with the respirator attached. The black creature was still perched over his head, licking his forehead. I turned to Abah and found him looking at me.

Abah turned to talk to the three brothers. “Wait outside,” I heard him say. “If you hear anything, feel anything, just recite this verse and refuse any suggestions in your head, no matter how tempting.”

I waited for the afternoon-shift nurses to leave before approaching the three night-shift ones. “I’m

going to close the door and shutters for the patient. Just continue your normal duties and whatever happens, don't go into the room."

I registered the confused look on their faces. They were scared, even. No one works in a hospital without hearing ghost stories.

"Please. The sons have consented."

They nodded and continued reading the case notes and reports, but they kept on stealing glances at the room. I decided it was good enough, and entered the room with Abah. While he took out his incense bowl and a *Yaasin* booklet, I lowered the blinds to ensure complete privacy. The creature had stopped licking the old man's forehead. It was looking at us. I could feel its lazy curiosity. I could feel it smiling. The stench of rotten meat assaulted my senses.

Abah looked straight at the creature, both his hands gripping the foot of the bed firmly. "Get out of this man, demon spawn."

"No." It was just a slow, gravelly whisper, but to me it sounded like the rumble of a landslide.

"Get out of this man, demon spawn."

"No." This time, the answer was accompanied by a laugh. I clamped my hands over both ears.

Abah lit the incense and recited the *Yaasin* without opening the booklet. It took him nearly ten minutes to complete the verse, but the creature showed no outward reaction. In fact, it looked bored.

"Ana, open the windows." Abah did not take his eyes away from the beast. He grabbed onto the patient's right big toe and started reciting the *Yaasin* again.

I fumbled toward the window and pushed it ajar. A fresh night breeze gave me slight relief from the powerful stench. I heard a roar and I whipped back toward the head of the bed. The *hantu raya* was squirming, snapping at the air in front of Abah, its purulent spittle spraying on his face. It made an attempt to claw at Abah, but could not quite reach him. It couldn't do physical harm unless instructed. Abah continued in his crisp, melodic tone. His recital was too fast for me to follow.

The creature roared and snapped, and when it could not get any reaction from Abah, it turned toward me.

Take me in.

The command came like a huge mental wave, sending me staggering back. My head throbbed as if hit from behind with a helmet.

Take me in.

I saw myself in a big bungalow, with a Mercedes parked in the driveway. My family looked happy, jubilant. Even with our pooled income, we would never afford this luxury. But it was possible, with a little help.

I shook my head to clear the images. *No*, I commanded back.

Take me in.

This time, my children were both lying on hospital beds with respirator tubes sticking out of their mouths. Physically they looked fine, but they wouldn't wake up. My husband was haggard, his shirt creased and old. It was so real that I found myself crying. *No*, I thought. *Please, not this. Not to my family.*

Take me in. I promise you wealth and continued health. You can have anything you want, just name it.

When I refused its demand and promises, the hantu raya immersed me in another vivid vision. This time I was sitting by a grave with a *Yaasin* booklet opened in my hands. My whole family was dead, Abah included. I felt myself weakening. Wave after wave of lifelike mental images assaulted me. I slid onto the floor clutching my head. With just a simple answer, all my pain and dread would go away.

“Ana, be strong.” Abah’s voice was a rock, and I was slipping away, rushed by a torrential current. I held on to that rock no matter how slick my hands felt.

“No!” I screamed, grabbed the *Yaasin* booklet, and recited almost as fast as Abah.

The room shook, the cabinets rattled. The monster thrashed about, screaming in frustration.

“Get away from this man,” Abah commanded. “In Allah’s name, get away now!”

The creature gave a high-pitched screech and lunged over me, jumping out the window. I scampered up and secured it. I turned to look at the old man on the bed. Even though it was not possible with the respirator attached, I saw the patient give a long sigh before his cardiac monitor showed a straight line.

Abah leaned against the wall and wiped sweat and pus from his face. He looked tired and much older. I wondered how he had the strength to do what he did. I could barely hold myself upright.

“Abah, you’ve got scratch marks on your face!”

He let out a long sigh. “I’ll be fine. That *hantu raya*’s a strong one.”

“Is it gone?”

“I have to destroy its idol to banish it. For now, it’s out there, lost and angry without a master.”

I looked out the window, at the starless sky.

“Don’t worry, Ana. People can’t see these creatures, so they can’t do actual harm.”

I hoped Abah was right. When I opened the doors, all three nurses were huddled together, their eyes wide with stark fear. They could not have seen or heard anything from the creature, but I knew they heard the loud recitals, my scream, and the shaking furniture.

I called the three brothers to attend to their father, who now had maggots streaming out of his mouth. Abah did his best to clean the body, but there were too many of them, squirming out of his eyes, ears and nostrils too. One brother gagged and vomited in front of the door, and the other rushed out of the CCU. One of the nurses came to help, but when she looked inside the room, she gave a shrill scream and ran away. Luckily the rest of the patients were comatose, or they would have suffered another heart attack.

I took Abah’s hand and supported him as we walked out of the CCU. He was visibly weak from the ordeal. I wasn’t any better, but being younger had its advantages.

The older man in the batik shirt approached us. Tears were streaming down his face. “Thank you. At least now he can rest.” I understood he also thanked us for saving him from the same fate.

As we drove home, I stole glances at Abah. His eyes were closed, and the lines on his face were less obvious. I kept on remembering his voice, his strength. He had always been there for me when I was growing up. He had been my strength, and he still was. I had so much to atone for with Abah.

“You should come home more often,” Abah whispered. “I miss you.”

I choked back my tears. “I miss you too.” Long moments of silence followed, but the silence felt comfortable. “Abah, thank you.”

* * * * *

I stopped by the Pediatric ward for my usual rounds. It was almost ten and parents were tucking their children to sleep. The night was quiet, and so far, the wards were managed well. I looked forward to finishing my own report in my office. As I walked out, I turned back to face the nurses.

“How is that little girl? Qistina, I think.”

“We don’t have a Qistina here, Sister.”

“That’s two weeks ago. Maybe she’s discharged.”

“No, there wasn’t one two weeks ago either. The only Qistina we had was a nine-year-old, about a month ago.”

“Oh? What happened to her?”

“She passed away.”

I staggered back. The girl I saw was a ghost. And she may not have been the only one I had come across. What about other patients walking alone at night? Were they real, or ghosts as well? I thought I could deal with it, after what I had gone through. I couldn’t. I ran away from the ward as fast as I could. In my blind rush I stumbled into a stack of boxes. I felt the palm of my hand snaring against a sharp metallic edge. The cut was not deep, but I was bleeding.

I forced myself to calm down, and made my way toward my office. I stopped by a public toilet to clean my hand. The stench of urine was strong; I would have preferred to use the one near my office, but I didn’t want to leave a trail of blood along the way. I ran cold water over my palm. It stung at first.

A brown tabby purred and rubbed its body on my legs, weaving between my feet. I jumped, surprised, and then laughed at myself for being so jumpy.

“How did you get here?”

The cat gave another purr and settled down beside my feet.

I laughed again under my breath and reached for the tap to turn it off. My hand didn’t make it that far.

In the mirror I saw the familiar skeletal face with red eyes and protruding fangs. Pus seeped out of what remained of its nose. It was tall, but it hunkered down so that its face was level with mine. One of its hands reached out from behind me toward the sink. It was smiling.

I tore my gaze away from the mirror and looked down. Spindly fingers moved in a slow motion, reaching toward my hand.

The *hantu raya* was lost and hungry. And it wanted my blood.

I attempted to scream, but its other paw clamped my mouth shut.

Drip, drip, drip.

The Spitfire by Julie K. Rose

The Spitfire Mk 1 can reach speeds of 362 mph, particularly when evading a Bf 109e. Its speed is significantly lower when wheels-up in the middle of a Welsh creek, known to the locals as a cilfach. Which is where we find RAF Flight Lieutenant Robert K-S, of the -- Group, – Squadron, who was brought down in late July 1940 by a Messerschmitt somewhere west of Cardiff, in the Vale of Glamorgan.

Since the early, summer-yellow morning he had been on patrol above Wales, protecting Cardiff and the other shipping ports as best he could, waiting for the chance to engage the enemy out over the southern coastline. He had to cool his heels in the late afternoon; the fighting had moved to Dover, at least temporarily, and he was ordered back to the base.

Which is why he had been surprised by the attack of the Bf 109e. He returned fire and evaded, quite niftily he thought, but stalled out at the top of his climb-and-dive, and ended up unconscious and upside-down in a tiny Welsh creek while the fighting went on without him.

He eventually woke and pulled himself away from the wreckage of his plane, heartbroken at her shattered bullet-proof glass and flaming tail section. He didn't notice that he was also bleeding and broken until he tried to heave himself up the gentle slope.

It was a bloody bad turn of events, he had to admit through the haze of pain. He lived for that flying time, high above the wreckage of his own life, his marriage, the broken mind of his Clara.

And now, he might never fly again, he thought, digging his fingers into the thick mud of the creek bank, not with this leg injury. Stuck behind a desk. Home every night for tea. “No,” he grunted, and continued digging and dragging himself away from the plane.

Down in the creek the lazy buzzing of the dragonfly had given way to the gentle trickle of water over small rocks and moss, and the tick-ticking of a 6,000 lb. fighter plane about to explode.

Growling with frustration, Robert gritted his teeth and pulled himself up the slope, his right leg sticking out at an odd and disconcerting angle. He continued inching along, grasping at tiny stones and delicate wildflowers, anything to help pull him away from the time-bomb wreckage.

With a final grunt he heaved himself to the top of that gentle rise, dizzy and exhausted by shock and blood loss. Leaning against the rough bole of the twisted oak, he closed his eyes, panting. He thought of his Clara, and the bruise blossoming under her eye like a wood violet the last time he saw her, on leave weeks before. He never meant to strike her, but she never seemed to mind.

Down in the cilfach, the Spitfire pinged and knocked, spluttering gas into the bucolic little waterway. He turned his attention back to the tiny creek and his sad wreck of a plane. “Poor girl,” he muttered. And then, the world filled with the sound of tinkling, shattering glass.

The cilfach went shining and golden.

And the world went black.

He coughed himself into wakefulness, the smoke's tendrils wound deep in his lungs. He wiped his stinging eyes and looked around. The gentle slope was blackened and the only remnants of his beloved plane were the pieces of shrapnel sticking into his legs, his arms, the tree behind his head. “Bloody hell,” he whispered slowly.

The tiny creek had become a river of fire, the gasoline that had leaked now lit and leaping high into the black night. The flames grew taller and taller, swirling. Mesmerized, he watched them dance. The fire grew and spread until it seemed to fill the entire sky, astonishingly beautiful and, he thought, quite horrible.

Heart pounding, he pulled himself quickly to his feet, impervious to the heat and the ugly and jagged wounds torn into his skin. He backed away, toward the darkness of the far reaches of the countryside, where the shimmering heat and light could not reach, where he heard those clear, high voices. He turned his back on the fire and stumbled forward a few paces. He stopped suddenly, a chill racing from the top of his head down his back.

“Stay,” a voice whispered.

He shook his head. “I am hallucinating – concussion. Blood loss,” he muttered, struggling away across the hillocks of grass beyond the ciffach. He looked down at his leg and realized it was no longer bleeding, no longer stuck out at a right angle from his knee, but straight and whole. “My God,” he whispered. “What – what –“ He looked around, wild-eyed, heart now pounding furiously. “What in the bloody hell –“

“Ssstay,” the voice whispered again, sinuous and warm.

The heat at his back intensified, and he cried out as it reached out and seared his shoulder, spinning him around to face the wreckage.

The flames had formed themselves into a great arch. Fire-winged angels, fierce-faced and beautiful, hovered near the acanthus-wreathed capitals. “Stay,” a voice whispered on the smoke. Robert blinked, and the great archway opened further and beyond, he saw cool, green grass and flowing blue water and sparkling summer sky.

“Come.”

He understood that it was not a request, and walked toward the great flaming arch. “I am dreaming,” he muttered, his heart strangely calmed. The slope down to the water’s edge and the final resting place of his beautiful plane was no more than a foot or two. He stepped down easily and stood ankle-deep in the stream, realizing only now that the crash and blast had left him with only one boot. He reached down and pulled the other off, tossing it onto the grassy slope.

The water was not boiling, as he expected, with the flames and the writhing smoke, but gentle and cool as it had been minutes, or hours, or perhaps days before when he had crashed. He stood in the water, feeling the tiny, inexorable current, feeling the pebbles between his toes.

He felt as though he stood in that water for hours, feeling only the cool blueness. “I’m dreaming,” he muttered again, eyes wide in wonder, looking up at the still-flaming arch that seemed to eat the entire sky.

And then, on the far side of the archway, beyond the night and the fire, suddenly stood Clara, barefoot in the green grass.

His heart constricted. “Darling –“ Robert began, walking toward the arch. “Be careful –“

She looked up at him and nodded. “We were sent to the country, remember? After they began bombing London? After they nearly destroyed St. Paul’s?”

“What?” he asked, stopping short of the arch. “They – no, only the docks, Clara,” he said, shaking his head. She was so sweet, but so simple sometimes, he thought. “No one has bombed St. Paul’s, darling.”

“Ah,” she sighed, shaking her head sadly. “What day is it?”

“July the 30th. 1940.”

“Yes, too early,” she nodded, chewing her bottom lip in that way that maddened him.

More of her nonsense, he thought sadly. “Clara, I’m sorry,” he said, stepping toward the arch.

“Hmm?” Her pale blond hair was frizzy and wild, not in the elaborate pincurls she usually wore.

It looked like a halo, he thought wildly. It suited her.

“I’m sorry, darling. I didn’t mean to hurt –“

She scowled slightly and waved him away with her hand. She counted off on her fingers. “Six weeks, Rob. Six weeks until it begins.”

“Until – Clara, the war’s already begun. I was on patrol today. I crashed –“

“Until hell,” she said, shaking her head. “St. Paul’s...the smoke and the noise. The twisted bodies. Sirens. Every night, Robert. Every night. It will never, ever end. Hell on earth forever and ever. And then they said, ‘You’ll be safe in the country,’” she said, then suddenly laughed. It sounded wrong and hard in her mouth. “Coventry, and Plymouth, and the countryside...”

“Clara, what –“

“And you, you bastard,” she said, looking up and pointing a finger, as if she had just remembered he was there.

“I said I was sorry,” he whispered. “I swear, I will never strike –“

“You went and left me all alone.”

“You know it is my duty to serve.”

She shook her head and looked down and counted on her fingers. Finally, she looked up at him again, with a sigh. “Today. In Glamorgan. You died. You left me all alone with the fiery skies.”

He took another step forward, standing on the threshold, just under the great, hot arch. “Clara, I’m dreaming,” he laughed. “I’m not dead.”

She smiled sadly. “Nor am I, my love. Nor am I.”

Contributor Biographies

Saladin Ahmed

His appears or is forthcoming in *Strange Horizons*, *IGMS*, *Clockwork Phoenix 2*, and *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*. His poems have appeared in journals including *Callaloo*, *The Brooklyn Review* and *Big City Lit*, and in anthologies such as *Inclined To Speak: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Poetry* and *Abandon Automobile: Detroit City Poetry*. He is also an Active member of SFWA.

Stellan Thorne

Stellan Thorne is a queer poly geek, living in Manchester with his partner, their best friend, two cats and a snake.

Fadzlishah Johanabas

Fadzlishah Johanabas writes short stories, focusing on speculative fiction, when not messing around with a person's brain (literally and physically). Other than surgery, he procrastinates about everything else — including maintaining his blog, <http://fadziruddin.blogspot.com>.

Julie K. Rose

Julie K. Rose is an author and regular reviewer for the *Historical Novels Review*. Her short fiction has appeared in the speculative fiction zines *Behind the Wainscot* and *Serendipity*. Her writing reveals an interest in the intersection of the spiritual and secular, the supernatural and the everyday, the past and the present. She lives in the Bay Area and can be found at <http://juliekrose.blogspot.com> or on Twitter [@juliekrose](https://twitter.com/juliekrose).