

# Eldritch Science



Fortune Diver by Alan White

January 2025

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# Editorial

For better or worse, I am making a change in the publication schedules of Eldritch Science and of The N3F Review of Books Incorporating Prose Bono. Henceforth, Eldritch Science will appear in the odd-numbered months January... The N3F Review will appear in the even numbered months. Because The N3F Review will now be bimonthly, it will tend to be twice as long, though the forthcoming issue may be relatively short. The stories here won the N3F short story contest. We congratulate Charles Walter, whose story has already gone to another market.

## About the Contents

The first three short stories herein are winners of the 2024 National Fantasy Fan Federation Amateur Short Story Contest.

The First Prize went to *We Follow Dragons* by Miranda Rain. This is a classic fantasy tale, with a nod to post-apocalyptic fantasy.

The Second Prize went to *A Part From Reality* by Robin Rose Graves. This is a gripping "It's All A Sim" science fantasy offering.

The Third Prize went to *The Universe is a Capricious Place* by Charles Walter. This tale has been accepted for publication elsewhere, so you must read it there.

The Honorable Mention went to the humorous tale *All That Glitters Can Be Sold* by Jordan Kirton.

Finally, P. N. Harrison gives us his very clever and very short story *Sigils*.

## Eldritch Science

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## We Follow Dragons

### Miranda Rain

Everyone knows the story of Óro. An arrogant man, Óro slighted the god of dragons, and as punishment he was made to roll the sun up the celestial mountain. Though it sears his hands, though the pain is maddening, each morning he begins his task anew; each day at noon, when he reaches the summit of the mountain, the sun rolls back down the other side, plunging the land into night. Again and again, every day until the days run out.

The stories tell us how to live. The moral of this one is simple: honor the dragons.

The sun, almost at the peak of the sky, shines ruthlessly down through the fresh green canopy. I'm chatting with my father when the lookouts catch their first glimpse of the other dragon. Like the rest of our family—like me—my father's been tense and excited in equal measure since Kahiraí brought the news, and when a whistle and a shout go up from the outskirts of the dragonwake, he breaks off in midsentence.

"Come," he tells me. "Let's go and see."

He slashes at flowering and fruiting vines, clearing a path with his machete. I roll my shoulders, shifting the weight of the twelve-gallon cask, and follow. All around, others drop what they're doing and swarm to the desert's edge for a look.

The lookout who spotted the dragon is glowing with smug pride. He gestures toward it, as though it weren't already the center of everyone's attention.

There isn't much to see. Only a distant speck. Still, we are spellbound. It is not every day we see a dragon other than our own.

#

The desert nights are cruel. Some mornings, the greenery of the dragonwake is edged with frost. We set up camp in the evenings, and gather around cookfires to talk and eat and warm ourselves. I was helping to erect a tent when I heard the hoarse call of Kahiraí's signal trumpet.

Kahiraí had returned not long before sunset, her waterskins hanging nearly empty and her face alight with the rumor of news. She came out of the north, the dragon Tohosátwa's present bearing, and ignored the lookouts who hailed her. She would speak only to Elder Sihála.

It was Sihála who had called the gathering. She sat with Kahiraí by her side, in the litter made for her by Lóhek the woodworker, ignoring the questions of the assembling crowd. In her prime, the elder was tall and formidable, but old age has shrunken her, turned her joints swollen and arthritic; her hands are misshapen claws, and she can no longer walk even with assistance. In truth, I find her intimidating still. People say that before he passed, the previous captain taught Sihála much—not only the ways of leadership and discipline, but also the secret lore of warfare, passed down since the time before the Change, which we common people are forbidden to know.

"Kahiraí has brought news," Sihála said, once everyone had arrived, or near enough everyone. "Both happy and troubling. Repeat what you told me, Kahiraí."

Kahiraí has never relished attention. She stood stiffly as she delivered the news, her eyes fixed on some distant point. She had ranged north, she said, ahead of the dragon Tohosátwa. There, less than three days out, she had come across another dragon. The dragon's family fed and watered her, and she spoke with their elders.

This other dragon, Kahiraí said, was heading south, its course intersecting Tohosátwa's.

A stir went through the crowd. People raised their voices to shout questions and concerns, all at once so their words were impossible to make out. Elder Sihála lifted a crabbed hand, and little by little the clamor died away.

"That isn't all," Sihála said into the silence. "The dragon Tohosátwa and this other dragon have crossed paths before. Four years ago."

I knew the dragon of which she spoke, then.

#

We decamped at dawn. All morning, there's been a strange feeling in my stomach, a queasy blend of anticipation and apprehension. I've slept little, yet I don't feel tired at all.

My father found me once we were under-way. "You look as if you're struggling," he told me as he approached. "Ready to admit defeat?"

"No, Father," I replied. "I think I'll give it another few days before I give up."

It's an old and dear joke. I was young when I first shouldered the cask of firewater, and my father was sure I would last less than a week before I gave up. That was four years ago, shortly after our last meeting with the other dragon's family.

We stopped to talk, surrounded by the sounds of our wandering family: laughter, shouting, the whack of machetes. Birds sang. Somewhere, a baby bawled. The peace of the day struck me as deceptive. My palms were damp with sweat.

My father told me Elder Pálka had asked him to join the greeting party, and he had accepted, and would I like to come along? The elders had picked out a number of gifts for the other dragon's family, and an extra pair of hands would be a great help.

I said I'd come.

It's a great honor to be chosen for a greeting party, but as our family's spirit-brewer, it's one of which my father is worthy. His is an old and noble trade, older even than the Change. In that time, before we followed the dragons, people dwelt in "houses," great tents that couldn't be moved. Once you had erected one, it stood where it stood, and couldn't be taken down again without a great deal of effort.

It's always struck me as odd. What good is a tent that can't be moved?

Still, that way of life had its benefits. The brewers of old would dig "cellars," deep pits in which they would store their casks. No need to carry them around.

To this day, every brewer's apprentice entertains the notion of storing casks in one place. It's no longer such a good idea. The shifting dunes of the desert would swallow them, or else, if their

location were too clearly marked, they might be stolen. Besides, there's no guarantee you would ever return to the location of your cache. The dragons go where they will.

#

The dragon Tohosátwa walks and never stops. Its gait is slow and plodding, the gait of a creature that rests with its eyes open and walks in its sleep. We follow in its footsteps, my family and I, and it shelters us from the inhospitable desert.

The desert wasn't always a desert. Before the Change, it was a jungle. We know this from the stories that survive from that time, and because there is proof in the sand. Seeds and the pits of fruit lie buried in the dunes, shriveled and blackened but recognizable all the same. Dragons do not create life; it is there already, patiently awaiting their passage.

Where a dragon treads, the desert blooms. Grass sprouts, bushes flower, tall trees burst from the sand. Dragons are so full of life that it spills from their feet and into their footprints. A long trail of verdure, which we call the dragonwake, marks a dragon's passage on the dry face of the world.

The growth of the dragonwake dies soon after it sprouts. It cannot survive the baking desert sun, the freezing nights. Follow the wake far enough in the wrong direction, and the plants turn dry and brown and fall away, until there is only sand, stretching to the horizon. Nearer the dragon, the plants are lush and living, and clear springs split the sand. There is food, water, shade. There, a family may survive.

Following the dragon Tohosátwa is not strenuous. We need not hurry to keep up, though we must keep moving every day. This, my father likes to say, is what it is to be human. We may not know where our lives are headed, but if we are patient, we will find out.

The dragon Tohosátwa walks. I have never known it to stop.

#

The dragon Tohosátwa stops.

Unlike humans, dragons always know where they are going. Perhaps once in a generation, one might pause—for a few moments, or for an hour or a day. It might smell the air and appear

to deliberate before it sets off once more. Such an occurrence is invariably a great omen.

The dragon Tohosátwa does not stop now because it is uncertain of where to go. It stops because it has caught the scent of the other dragon.

I do not often get this close to the head of the dragonwake. We are forbidden to touch the dragon or to climb its great verdant back, where only nesting birds may go. Usually the augurs who chart its course and interpret its behavior are the only ones who follow it at this short a distance. Sometimes when the wind is right, one can hear them bickering over the significance of portents.

I wonder what they think of this.

I peek out between stands of young green bamboo and the trunks of trees muttering audibly with the speed of their growth. The other dragon, the dragon Mahannaké, is closer now, close enough that I can make out the shape of it, the fuzz of vegetation that covers it like plumage. It is more colorful than our dragon, wreathed in gaudy blossom, cinnabar and sky-blue and pink where Tohosátwa is a uniform green. It has stopped as well and sat back on its haunches.

I imagine the family of the dragon Mahannaké, as worried as I, wondering what the expanse of dead dry sand between us will be: a meeting place, or a battleground?

Movement catches my eye. A number of distant figures separate from the green of the foreign dragonwake. At my side, my father stirs. "Time to go."

It is traditional, when dragons cross paths like this, for their families to exchange gifts of goodwill. This is done with some ceremony, by greeting parties that meet in the desert, at the midpoint between the two dragonwakes: neutral ground, where neither family is subordinate to the other.

The gift I am given to carry is a carved chest of sandalwood. As we draw near to the other family's party, I see a flash of sunlight. I squint, and—yes—my breath catches: an adze with an obsidian blade. An item of great value. Briefly I worry that our gifts will seem paltry in comparison.

And then I forget all about the gifts, and about my fear of a confrontation between the drag-

ons, because there she is.

Naharátsa.

She is fuller-figured, and her hair is longer, and she wears the robes of an augur, but I recognize her at once. She looks at me, and my heart stumbles in my chest.

The exchange of gifts passes without incident or offense. Lóhek the woodworker holds the obsidian adze reverentially, like a sacred thing. Afterwards, while the elders are discussing where to set up our shared camp, I work up the courage to speak to Naharátsa. My throat is dry, and my voice comes out hoarse: "Hello."

Naharátsa smiles. "Hello, Háko," she says. "It's good to see you again."

#

Since the family of the dragon Mahannaké has gifted us with an item as precious as the adze, it seems only fair that my family make the trek to the other dragonwake. When we go, we give the dragons a wide berth, every one of us trying to guess what the dragon Tohosátwa is thinking. It's useless, of course; though most of us have walked all our lives in its footsteps, the dragon's inner life remains impenetrable to us.

We make camp early, with Óro's sun just beginning its long tumble. This we do in a desultory fashion, clearing firepits for use when the evening grows cold, gathering around them without speaking much. I help my parents pitch their tent. My father chatters to hide his worry. My mother is silent.

These days, even under ordinary circumstances, my mother never speaks to me more than she must. She is never uncivil, but the warmth she used to show me is gone. I wonder if my father has noticed. He might not have; he has always been bad at noticing things outside of himself. There has been no change in the way he treats me. That is how I know my mother has not told him the things I told her.

Her silence only adds to my unease. As I work, I do not even set down my cask. I barely feel its weight on my back. Like everyone else, I fear trouble.

Dragons are great spirits, but they are also



animals, with the passions of animals. Their actions are difficult to predict, no matter what the augurs say, and they do not always pass each other by at a distance. Sometimes they are too proud to turn aside until one has intimidated the other, or until blood has been spilled.

I think of the story of the dragon Haúapé, which was particularly large and powerful, and which would challenge any other dragon that crossed its path. It did not matter if these others backed down from its challenges or stood their ground; Haúapé would attack regardless, and send its opponents away bleeding and cowed.

Until one day, when it limped away from a fight with a ragged wound in its side. In spite of its augurs' prayers, the injury festered, and the dragon Haúapé died.

I have always thought that perhaps the dragon's death was a good thing. Whenever I think this, I make a gesture of contrition, because dragons are great spirits and it isn't good to think one deserving of death. Still—the dragon Haúapé was dangerous. It invited its own demise.

The dragon's family were the real victims. They were not warlike themselves, only had the misfortune of following a dragon that was. When the dragon Haúapé lay down and died—so the story goes—its family made camp in the shadow of its corpse and waited to starve.

#

Once the tent is set up, my parents sit down outside it. I sit with them until I can no longer bear the waiting and my mother's silence, then rise again and set off with no destination in mind.

After a time, a voice calls my name. Looking up from my troubled thoughts, I see someone coming to meet me: Naharátsa, smiling, raising a palm in greeting. "Háko," she says again. "Would you like to walk with me a while?"

I tell her I would.

We wend our way between unlit cooking fires, away from the main body of the camp. Neither of us speaks. I want to say something, but I don't know what.

At the edge of the camp, Naharátsa draws the knife at her belt and reaches out to cut a ripe pomegranate off its shrub. With a practiced hand,

she slices into the fruit, and it splits open, like a flower greeting the sun, revealing its bounty of red flesh.

"Have some," she says, offering the fruit to me.

I try to meet her gaze, but my heart is beating too hard. "Thank you," I manage, accepting a cupped handful of juicy red seeds.

We are silent for another little while. Finally Naharátsa asks, "Have you heard the story of the stone-pickers?"

"I have," I say. "But tell it anyway."

She smiles at me. "Well, they say before the Change made wanderers of us, there were people called stone-pickers. They were gatherers of such skill that they could delve into the earth and come up with a harvest of shining stones."

It's a familiar story. Hearing Naharátsa tell it makes me feel a little more at ease. I've always liked stories about the strangenesses of the world that was.

"Do you think the stories are about pomegranates?" Naharátsa asks. She holds up a pomegranate seed between thumb and forefinger, and it catches the sun, vivid vermilion. "Shining stones out of the earth. Sounds like a pomegranate, doesn't it?"

It's my turn to smile. "It does."

Naharátsa pops the seed into her mouth.

"Now you tell me a story."

At first, I can think of nothing to tell. My mind is preoccupied with the meeting between the dragons Tohosátwa and Mahannaké; but these thoughts lead my mind on to the one who first brought word of that meeting.

"You've met Kahirai," I say, half-querying. "The scout?"

"Oh, yes. I spoke with her when she stayed with us. She seems very competent. A little formal, perhaps."

"Well, she's shy. It's part of why she enjoys her job so much, I think."

Naharátsa nods. "No one to be shy of in the desert."

There was a time when Kahirai belonged to a different family which followed a different dragon. Then, thirteen years ago, she joined my family

to marry Abár the tent-maker. It was a windfall for us; she is the best scout we have. I tell Naharátsa the stories Kahiráí has told me, of how her dragon used to sing. She says she still dreams about it: sitting outside her tent at night, hearing the dragon's mournful song on the wind.

Naharátsa is delighted. "I can't imagine it. The dragon Mahannaké never sings. Though sometimes it snuffles to itself."

"The dragon Tohosátwa is the same. Some people are shy about singing, so perhaps the same is true for dragons?"

"A shy scout for a shy dragon." She grins at me. "Shyness seems a common trait in your family."

I feel my face grow hot. Naharátsa laughs. Her laughter is just as I remember it: clear, unabashed, sweet as desert rain. I think it will stop my heart.

We enter a grove of citrus trees, fruits already ripening on their branches. A pair of birds alight in the canopy above, and I make a sign of respect, because birds are the reborn spirits of augurs. The birds watch us for a moment, cocking their heads, then take off in a flurry of wings, chasing after one another through the trees.

"Have you ever thought about leaving your family?" Naharátsa asks. "Following another dragon?"

I avoid her gaze and do not reply. Again my face grows hot. Usually, when a person elects to join a new family, it is a matter of marriage.

I have thought about it. Since the first time Naharátsa and I met, I've thought about it a great deal.

#

It's a strange experience to meet a new family, with their faces so like ours, yet so new.

The last time the dragons Tohosátwa and Mahannaké crossed paths, they passed one another at a distance. I never saw the dragon Mahannaké up close, though I did of course see its family. That evening, the two families set up camp together, and there was a great feast. My father, with much solemn care, tapped a cask of his firewater, and the adults got roaring drunk upon its contents.

The mood in the camp that night was strange. There was a thrill in the air. The children

played late into the night, and nobody told them to go to bed. It must have been a lot of fun for them, making friends with children they had never met before. The adults had fun, too.

That was the night I first met Naharátsa. She was brilliant and well-spoken, already in training to become an augur at such a young age. Her skin was smooth and dark, and little ornaments of carven wood were woven into the long braid of her hair. By chance, we found ourselves in the same small company of adolescents; later in the night, we found ourselves alone. Where the others went, I'll never know. Naharátsa and I spoke for hours. I was nervous. She seemed perfectly at ease.

"Is this your first time meeting people outside your family?" she asked me.

"No," I said. "It's happened twice before—only one I'm old enough to remember."

We were in a copse of palm trees, close enough to the bonfires to see them, but far enough away that we sat ourselves in almost perfect darkness. We could hear the adults talking, their voices raised, not in anger. I shivered a little with the nighttime chill.

"Can I tell you of the first other family I saw?"

Naharátsa was smiling, eager. I nodded, and she launched into her story.

This had happened, she told me, when she was only a little girl. In the other family, there had been two women who sat side by side by the campfire, like husband and wife. Naharátsa had watched them, and had seen one's hand seek the other's, had seen their fingers intertwine.

Come morning, after the families had parted ways, Naharátsa sought out her mother's mother, who was one of the elders of her family, and asked her: "Did you see the two women who sat together like husband and wife?"

"I did," said the grandmother.

"But—how can a woman be another woman's wife?"

The grandmother was silent. She always considered her words before she spoke. Naharátsa walked alongside her, waiting. Finally the grandmother said: "It isn't too different from a man being a woman's husband, I think. Or a man being

another man's husband."

"But, Grandmother," Naharátsa had protested, "you elders always say the family must grow. That more children must be born. If two women marry, how can they have babies?"

And the grandmother had smiled, and said, using her pet name for the girl, "My little Natsa—can you tell me why we follow in the dragon Mahannaké's footsteps and eat the fruits that grow in its wake?"

The young Naharátsa pondered this. "Because we could not survive the desert?"

"For our survival, yes. But, little Natsa, there's no point in survival if we can't be happy. Our lives are hard, and we must take joy where we can find it. We shouldn't have children because we must, but because we see joy in our lives and we want to give another the opportunity to experience the same. If not for joy, we might as well have let the dragon disappear over the horizon and withered away in the sun."

Naharátsa grinned at me. The distant bonfires edged her features in orange light. Her teeth were pale blue in the dark. "That's when I knew," she said.

"Knew what?"

"That I was going to live for joy." She paused, and then, with an air of mischief: "And that one day, I would be another woman's wife."

I said nothing. In my family, too, the elders spoke of the need for new births. It was difficult to imagine them allowing a marriage between two women.

"I think my grandmother knew before I did," Naharátsa was saying. "I think she was trying to give me her blessing. My grandmother always had very good foresight. She was an augur, you see, and when she died, her spirit was reborn as a bird."

I found my voice. "I think I'd like that too."

"What—to be reborn a bird?"

I tried to put my feelings into words, but they were like the wind in the treetops: too quick to catch. I wanted what she had described—to intertwine my fingers with a woman's—but I was going to have that someday, wasn't I, when I mar-

ried? Why, then, did I feel such a hollow ache at the thought?

I swallowed the lump in my throat and shook my head. "Never mind," I said, and took her hand. "Come on. Let's listen in on the adults."

The following morning, the mood in the camp was still strange, but differently so. The adults were spent and bleary after their night of revelry, but that was not all. There was sorrow in the air. It took me a while to understand why.

It's a good thing when families meet, so they can exchange gifts, stories, news—and even a few members. A family needs new blood now and then, or it will turn in on itself and become sickly. That morning, when our families parted, we were all saying farewell to some of our own.

For me, bidding Naharátsa farewell was worse. I didn't want the night we had spent together to be our last. But when I found her face in the crowd, she smiled sadly, and that smile told me everything I needed to know.

#

I duck underneath big yellow cucumber blossoms, bending low so the cask won't snag.

"That looks cumbersome," Naharátsa says.

"It is," I admit. "But I'm used to it."

"Well, let's take a break so you can rest. I'm getting sore muscles just looking at you."

I shrug off my cask and set it on the ground. Naharátsa puts her hands on either side of it, but only manages to lift it halfway before letting go. The cask thumps down, its contents slopping inside it, and Naharátsa looks at me wide-eyed. "It's so heavy! How long have you carried it?"

"Four years," I say. "Since my father tapped his last cask, the last time our families met."

Naharátsa looks impressed. I try not to feel prideful. My father says there is no virtue in pride. Virtue lies in humility, he says, in obedience and long toil.

"And you carry it every day?"

"Yes."

"No wonder you're so big and strong."

Ah.

I look down at her, the way I look down at most people. *He's big for his size*, my family likes



to say, after a slip of my father's tongue back when I first began to grow.

I don't like to be reminded of the way I'm built. I can draw my shoulders back so they will appear narrower, but doing so makes my chest stick out even more. There's nowhere I can hide my bulk.

Naharátša must see the shadow cross my face. "I didn't mean to offend," she says.

"It's alright." It comes out terser than I intended. Casting about for a change of subject, I gesture to my cask. "You, uh—you can sit on that, if you'd like."

"Thank you."

Naharátša perches on the cask, and I sit down cross-legged on the ground. Somewhere nearby, there is the rill of a freshwater spring where before there was only parched sand. The sound fills the long silence.

Finally, with an effort, I speak. "Are you worried about the dragons?"

The question makes her smile. "Not at all," she says. "The augurs of my family—we have been cataloging signs for some time now." And, struggling, the way all augurs struggle when they try to explain the mysteries of their art: "The signs, they... I've seen their symmetry. The portents do not lie. This meeting will be an auspicious one."

I nod. I wonder.

Perhaps she senses my doubt. "Are you afraid they'll fight?"

"I don't know. I hope not. But..." I hesitate, then forge on: "It's said the dragons are very wise, but sometimes I doubt it. Sometimes I think they are just big beasts, driven by instinct."

I regret my words immediately—my blasphemy would horrify any of the augurs of my family—but Naharátša just smiles. She leans in close, and I can't breathe.

"I think so too," she says softly. "Great spirits or not, I believe the dragons are rather stupid."

She sits back, an impish glitter in her dark eyes. I stare at her for a moment—then breath escapes me in a disbelieving laugh. Naharátša joins in, and we laugh together.

This time, our silence is easier.

#

The afternoon passes like a held breath. As the sun nears the horizon, the woodsmoke smell of cookfires reaches us on the breeze, but by unspoken accord Naharátša and I do not yet return to the camp. There is something between us, waiting to be said.

Naharátša studies me. After a while she speaks. "You have changed, Háko."

I feel a pang of fear. "Well," I mumble, "it has been four years since you saw me."

"No—it's something more than that. Something deeper."

Yes. Like the land, I've gone through my own change.

Four years ago, in those first weeks after the dragon Mahannaké disappeared behind the horizon, I felt very out of sorts. When I thought of Naharátša, about her hair and the curves beneath her clothes, I experienced an almost physical malaise, as though I were taking ill. And when I thought of her story of the married women, I felt instead a breathless horror I didn't understand—a feeling like falling out of a tree, weightless in the moment before you hit the ground.

The stories tell us how to live.

I want to tell her. I don't want to tell her. The truth wells up in me like springwater, clamoring to be spoken—but the last time I gave in to the impulse, it made my mother hate me. I couldn't bear to see her disgust echoed on Naharátša's lovely face.

Even as I open my mouth, I have no idea what I'm about to say.

Before I can say anything, there is a distant crash.

Naharátša and I stare at each other.

Another crash. Above the treetops, terrified birds take to the air in a great rattle of wings. There is an unintelligible shout from the direction of the camp.

"The dragons," Naharátša breathes.

Before I can react, she is off, her robes flying as she sprints towards the noise. I scramble to my feet, calling her name, but she either doesn't hear me or doesn't care.

I set off after her. Only the habit of years

stops me long enough to collect my cask. I don't bother slinging it onto my back, just hug it to my chest as I rush through the jungle.

The camp is in disarray. A fire burns unattended in its pit; another has been trampled to a black smudge. Frightened people hurry back and forth among the tents.

Someone grabs me by the arm, hard enough to bruise my flesh. It's my father. He doesn't look at me while he speaks, but scans the jungle with fear-wild eyes. "Where's your mother?" he demands.

"I don't know," I stammer. "What's happening?"

"I'm going to find her," my father says, as if he didn't hear my question. "Stay here. Don't move. I'll be back." And then he is gone as well. Around me, members of both families scramble this way and that. My heart hammers at my ribs. I stare into the jungle. Where is Naharátsa?

Another crash, another cry. This one is deafening, even at this distance. Not human. I've never known the dragon Tohosátwa to raise its voice before, but I recognize the sound instinctively: the scream of a dragon in distress.

Before I know it, I'm running again.

I glimpse others running through the jungle as well. Someone comes barreling at me from the treeline: a young man I don't recognize, a member of the dragon Mahannaké's family, his face twisted with fear. I only barely manage to jerk my cask to one side so he won't slam into it face-first. He hits my shoulder instead, and goes tumbling to the ground. I don't even stop moving.

After an eternity, I emerge in a clearing.

It's a surreal sight. In a dragon's wake, the jungle grows thick and crowded, and the only clearings I've seen before have been human-made. The trees in this one have not been chopped down with axes and machetes, but stomped flat by great feet.

There's no time to ponder the flattened jungle. It is a mere backdrop to the sight of the two dragons.

They circle each other slowly. Where they tread, new life bursts from the ground, only to be crushed again moments later. They make no

noise, now; the scene is near-silent, but for the crash and splinter of falling trees. There is the dragon Mahannaké, with its garish coat that makes the dragon Tohosátwa appear almost drab by comparison. Underneath the plumage, they are all but identical. Great humped backs, snarling mouths.

The dragons shift, step by step, and more details come into view. A narrowed eye, glittering with avian hatred. A flank, gashed and bleeding, staining the dragon Tohosátwa's lush plumage a deep crimson. A stab of horror: is it a killing wound?

Without warning, the dragon Mahannaké lunges. The dragon Tohosátwa twists away, but not quickly enough. The pair of them crash together, and I watch, breathless, as Mahannaké attempts to clamp its jaws about Tohosátwa's neck. The resulting wail of protest is so loud that I drop the cask and clamp my hands over my ears. In the next moment, the two dragons part again, back to their circling.

It's like a dance. A choreography of animal brutality.

People have gathered at the clearing's edges. They watch, uncertain of what to do, even the augurs among them. I scan their faces, but I don't find Naharátsa.

A shrill sound cuts through the noise: the whistle-speech the guards use to communicate across distances. Further along the treeline, a contingent of them is gathering. Among them, I see the face of Elder Sihála. I collect my cask and hurry over. "Elder!"

Sihála's litter is nowhere to be seen; too unwieldy, perhaps, for these circumstances. Instead, a burly subordinate carries her like a child. The hem of her tunic is riding up over her swollen knees.

"You should not be here," she says as I approach. If she feels the indignity of her position, she does not show it. "It's dangerous—"

"Naharátsa came this way," I say, making the gesture of penance even as I interrupt her. "The young augur from the other family. Have you seen her?"

"No. She's probably around here somewhere. The augurs have no clue what to do, but

they're standing around nonetheless."

I open my mouth to respond when something behind Sihála and her subordinate catches my eye. My stomach lurches at the sight: a broken body, too damaged to identify. I wonder if it's someone from my family. A red trail glittering on green leaves tells of how someone dragged the body away from the clearing, out of the path of the rampaging dragons.

Elder Sihála does not follow my gaze, but she must understand what I'm looking at. "Yes," she says. "You see? Dangerous."

Another whistle. With an effort, I look away from the body. The guards are watching the dragons with a mix of emotions on their faces. Awe, yes, and a great deal of fear—but determination too. All of them carry cudgels and shields.

Sihála presses her tongue to the back of her teeth and whistles a sharp reply. The sound rises and falls, a message in the secret martial language, and it must hide a command, because the guards start forward as one.

"What's going on?" I ask.

The elder does not take her eyes off the carnage in the clearing. "Dragons are great spirits," she says, "and so their anger is very great, too. They are consumed with it. They don't understand what they're doing."

"You're going to *attack* them?"

It's inconceivable. Harming a dragon is the sort of sin for which one is banished to the desert to die.

"Of course not," Sihála says, with an edge of irritation to her voice. "I doubt we could harm the dragons, even had we a mind to try. No, we simply intend to... corral them. Intimidate them, so they won't hurt each other more."

I look again, and I understand. Not shields, but frames of hollow bamboo. Noisemakers. And the cudgels are not cudgels after all, but beaters.

The dragon Tohosátwa screeches. Wood splinters. The guards are picking up speed, their noisemakers clattering, their voices raised in a chorus of ragged cries. The dragons pay them no mind at all. I try not to think of the trampled corpse behind me.

And then—a flurry of motion in the corner

of my eye. A figure emerges from the jungle at a headlong run.

Robes trailing like wings. Locks of hair coming loose from a thick braid.

Naharátsa plants herself before the guards, palms upraised. "*Stop!*"

The guards' advance falters. Elder Sihála swears. "What is the girl doing? Is she mad?"

I wonder the same. In the clearing, Naharátsa's words carry over the noise of tortured wood. "This isn't the way! You'll only get yourselves hurt!"

Sihála whistles impatient commands. The guards waver, caught between their captain and the strange fervor of this young augur. Naharátsa, straining to be heard, continues speaking.

"There is no need to endanger yourselves! The signs do not lie. *The dragons aren't fighting!*"

And the guards scatter.

Naharátsa lowers her hands, an expression of surprise on her face.

I scream her name.

The dragon Tohosátwa is making a dash for safety. Its great loping steps are completely unlike the lumbering gait to which I'm accustomed. Fallen trees splinter beneath its tremendous weight. For the first time, I realize what an amazing turn of speed a dragon is capable of, when the situation demands it.

Behind it, the dragon Mahannaké pursues.

They are not heading for Naharátsa, exactly. She just happens to be in their way. An insignificant speck, too small to be an obstacle. The kind of thing one does not step over, but on.

She turns with nightmare slowness. A fall of her hair hides her expression from my view. She makes no attempt to run.

My body moves before my mind. The air is full of crashing and horrified cries, but the noise barely registers. I make for Naharátsa at a desperate sprint. I'm so far away. With every one of its ponderous footfalls, the dragon Tohosátwa covers half a dozen of my strides. In my mind, I see blood-smear grass.

It comes down to a hair's breadth. I skid to a stop just past Naharátsa. The dragon Tohosátwa charges towards us, its great shaggy head lowered.

Time has all but frozen.

I've forgotten that I'm still holding the cask. My body has not. My arms move in a vicious arc over my head, and the cask leaves my hands with all the strength of four years of long toil behind it.

It soars through the air—  
—and strikes the dragon right in its mad glaring eye.

The cured vines that bind the cask snap with the force of impact. The wood shatters. The dragon's affronted howl is deafening. For one endless moment, brilliant sunlight glitters like pomegranate seeds on the explosion of priceless, wasted firewater.

In the next instant Naharátsa grabs my arm and pulls me to the ground. I bury my face in the churned-up mud as the dragon loses its footing and falls. Only dumb luck and the grace of the spirits prevents it from crushing us both.

Then we're on our feet again, and Naharátsa is pulling me towards the treeline. Her voice sounds distant to my ears. "Look! Look!"

She is pointing past me. I turn. In the middle of the clearing, the dragon Mahannaké crouches over the dragon Tohosátwa, its jaw clamped around Tohosátwa's neck, its hips working.

I cannot parse the sight. My mind is full up with the enormity of what I've done, the magnitude of my sin. My thoughts roar so loudly that I can hardly hear anything else. The elders will turn me away for this. I will be banished.

Out in the clearing, the sun shines on the fragments of a firewater cask, half-buried in muddy earth.

#

The mood in the camp tonight is strange.

The news has spread. One day, months from now, the dragon Tohosátwa will lay a clutch of eggs and bury them in the sand. Later, the eggs will hatch, and there will be new dragons to roam the desert and make it bloom. It's a cause for great celebration, and yet the day's events worry at the families' good cheer. The tumult, the fear—and the casualty: a man who was looking for his daughter. The daughter is alive and unharmed, but her father is not.

And then there is the question of me.

I sit by one of the cookfires, staring into the flames, waiting. Before long, there will be a gathering—a trial, I suppose—where my fate will be decided. The words of the elders carry weight, but in most matters, they have no power to command. Banishment is the exception.

My parents found me earlier. My father tried to comfort me. "Shame about the firewater," he said, a weak attempt at levity. My mother said nothing. After a time, they drifted away. They cannot stand to look at me, I suppose, after what I've done.

Someone sits down next to me. I raise my eyes, and Naharátsa wordlessly offers me a bowl of food.

"I'm not hungry," I say.

She nods and sets the bowl aside. Then she gets comfortable: legs crossed, hands in her lap. She looks up at the sky and breathes deep. Around us, people are staring while pretending they're not. I'm too numb to care.

"Your intentions were not evil," Naharátsa says, after a time. "What you did, you did to save me."

"It doesn't matter what my intentions were," I mumble. "You know what the stories say."

Everyone knows what the stories say. Attacking a dragon is the greatest sin there is. Anyone who commits it is ostracized from their family and left to die in the desert. The stories tell us how to live—none more so than these.

Naharátsa cocks her head. "Well, perhaps the stories are open to interpretation."

I blink. "What do you mean?"

"I spoke with Elder Aíniku, the senior augur of my family. He agreed that, even if the family of the dragon Tohosátwa chooses to banish you, there's nothing to say you cannot follow the dragon Mahannaké instead."

It takes a moment for her words to sink in. "You mean...?"

"It would be a new beginning," Naharátsa says, softly, for my ears only. "You could choose what to bring with you, and leave the rest behind. Your sin. Your name."

I gape at her, and she laughs.

"This is what an augur does, you know,"

she says. “We see beyond the appearances of things.” Her smile is radiant. “Elder Aíniku says he would welcome a brave young woman like you into our family.”

The moment stretches long. Naharátsa’s eyes glitter. Night-birds moan into the silence. The night is bright with torches and fires and the stars overhead.

I think about what I have been taught, about the honor in long toil, in perseverance; about the way my fate will find me if only I wait. For the first time, I wonder if it’s possible to reach out and seize it instead.

In my chest, there is a flowering, a spreading of great wings.



Afternoon Tea by Tiffanie Gray

## A Part from Reality

By Robin Rose Graves

The orange sign manifests from nowhere. *Road closed.* Goldie applies pressure to the brakes of the vehicle while Ronan curses under his breath. “We’re going to be late,” he says. She places a hand on his arm. Two figures dressed in luminous yellow vests walk onto the road in front of her stopped vehicle. Goldie rolls down the window as they approach.

“Turn around and take the detour,” the

worker tells them.

“We didn’t see any signs before this one,” Goldie answers. “Can’t we go around? We’re late for our shifts as it is.”

“I’m afraid not.” The worker inhales, hesitating for a moment. Goldie senses he is fumbling for an excuse. Her brow furrows. “A sinkhole in the middle of the road. There’s no going around,” the worker answers. Goldie leans her head out of the window to get a better look. The sun sets earlier with each passing day in wait of winter’s arrival. She sees a blanket of fog so thick beyond the orange sign she believes she is looking at a wall of white.

“C’mon, Gold. We’re wasting our time,” Ronan says.

“Listen to Ronan,” the worker says. “I’m sorry for the inconvenience.”

“What did you say?” Ronan says. He blinks. “How did you know my name?” Goldie sees her friend’s eyes narrow. The worker pulls his jacket shut further to cover his face as Ronan looks for a sense of familiarity.

“Do you know him?” Goldie whispers.

“No,” Ronan says with confidence. The other worker approaches and calls for their attention.

“Go ahead and drive through! Road’s all clear!”

When Goldie turns to look through the windshield of her car, the fog is gone without a trace. She sees an uninterrupted black paved road stretching before her.

“Didn’t you say it was a sinkhole?” she asks the worker. He shakes his head.

“A fallen tree. Have a safe drive.”

One glance at the clock in her car tells her she doesn’t have time for further dispute. She gives the car gas and drives slowly through. The farther she gets away from it, the less she remembers the incident.

Once she clocks in, the only thing on her mind is a full cup of coffee and tips. Ronan disappears to the kitchen where she sees him only through a small window for the next several hours.

It’s almost closing time when the woman arrives. The one with bleached blonde hair and artificially white teeth. She smiles when she sees

Goldie. Goldie returns a meek smile. She has long begun to suspect the woman has feelings for her. The topic of Goldie's girlfriend always manages to come up. She senses a hope they will have broken up, so that she could make her move. However, she is an excellent tipper and Goldie needs the money to do something nice for her upcoming anniversary. She throws a little weight into her hips as she saunters over. Goldie flips her mug and fills it with steaming coffee.

"Mmh!" The woman says, holding the mug between her hands. Her eyes wander past Goldie to the glass cabinet, housing an assortment of treats. "What is freshest?"

"They were all made earlier this morning," Goldie lies. Some have been in there for days. She is surprised the woman hadn't noticed, since she's been here most days this week.

"Then I will take my favorite. The black forest cake."

Goldie notices her tongue as it darts out between her lips, keeping them moist. She is a little older than what Goldie would usually go for, but she can't deny she is attractive. Lopey tells her it's all in her head, but Goldie wonders if that is only jealousy speaking.

Goldie fetches the cake for her before busying herself with menial tasks for the excuse to keep her back to the woman. She dumps out used coffee grounds, replaces the filter and begins brewing a new pot. This late at night, she usually wouldn't bother, but her hands need to be busy.

Besides Ronan, hidden in the back while he cleans the kitchen for close, Goldie is alone with the woman.

When the coffee finishes brewing, Goldie carries the pot over and tops the mug off. Her eyes meet the woman's, prompting her face to light up. Her lips part. Goldie anticipates the question about Lopey. She averts her eyes.

"Are you aware you are living in a simulation?"

The coffee pot slips from her hands, quickly claimed by gravity. It bounces off of the checkered floor, spilling its contents at Goldie's feet. Goldie stands still, ignorant of the mess she made.

"Oh dear, I assumed it would be a shock, but I'd have thought you would have noticed

something is off by now. Just earlier today, we had yet another glitch..."

Goldie leans against the counter, questioning the stability of her own legs. She wants to claim she has no idea what the woman is talking about, but then she thinks of the wall of white. How quickly it appeared, and subsequently, disappeared. "Who...are you!?" Her syruppy service voice gone, true panic taking over. She debates yelling for Ronan's attention. The woman was strange, but Goldie never before considered her a threat.

"My name is Olive," the woman says. "I am one of the programmers of this universe."

Carefully and slow, Goldie reaches for the pot, never breaking her view of Olive. She returns it to the counter, a small amount of coffee trapped inside.

"Is this a game to you?" Goldie asks. Olive shakes her head.

"I am telling you this, well, because you are my favorite one."

The absurdity of her answer convinces Goldie of nothing besides that she had misread Olive entirely. She had assumed Olive only came to the diner because of some interest she had in Goldie. The first time she had ever seen Olive had been her first day at the job. She sat in Lucy's section and was attended by her, but Olive's eyes kept wandering towards Goldie. Goldie had asked and no one at the diner had seen her before. A coincidence, she had assumed at the time.

"I created you," Olive says. "You were my first and took the longest to develop. I guess you can say I think of you as my daughter, in a way. You see, I don't have kids in Reality. Adoption or surrogacy isn't as simple as it is in your reality for same-sex couples. There's still a stigma."

"I think you're mistaken." Goldie tries to steady her breathing. "I was born like any other human being. I have parents!"

"Do you?" Olive questions. "Or are they nothing but memories I programmed into your mind? When was the last time you saw your parents?"

Goldie pauses. "Dad passed five years ago, and mom moved across the country. She always liked it best in Florida." She can picture her moth-



er clear as a photograph in her mind. But when Goldie tries to recall the same time they were in the room together, her memory comes up empty. "I have...memories of my childhood!" she insists. "Once, when I was little, I rode my bike into a tree. It collided right between my legs, and much to my mom's embarrassment, I screamed 'Ow! My vagina!'"

Olive laughs. "Yes, I recall! I came up with that. I thought it'd be funny." She digs her fork into the chocolate cake and eats it. "Oh, and remember when you fell into a frozen lake when you were eight? That actually happened to me." She chews before swallowing. "Ice is very dangerous. I figured if I could program the lesson into your brain before you'd ever encountered it, I could potentially save your life."

The fork screeches as it rubs against ceramic.

"I had no childhood?" Goldie says. Her body is sinking. A part of her torn off.

"Well, yes and no. You remember your childhood, but as for actually experiencing it, no," Olive explains. "You've only technically been living for three years."

"When I started this job..."

"But you have lived," Olive says. "You have made choices outside of anyone's influence. You didn't exactly follow my plan for you. The waitressing job was supposed to be temporary. I had hoped it would have inspired you to go to college."

"And Ronan, he was one of my later creations. I based him off of my wife in Reality, hoping you two would be a couple." Olive takes a long gulp of her coffee. Goldie wonders if she can even taste it. The coffee, too, is only simulated. "Him being transgender was unforeseen, but of course that isn't why you didn't end up with him."

"You don't like Lopey?" Goldie asks a question that has been on her mind for awhile.

"Penelope is one of Helen's...we don't get along," Olive discloses. "Other than that, she's fine. We can't make choices for you. We design your past and then you are set free to decide your future. It can be...difficult to keep emotional distance from our creations. I am not the only one who feels this way. We wanted what was best for

you, not necessarily what was best for our experiment, or most accurate to the way Reality works. We created a world without predetermined hate. Where people could love who they love and be who they are. Your world is still young. Maybe you have yet to develop prejudices like in our Reality."

"So you've been checking in on me?"

"Yes. Of course I don't have to enter the simulation to do so, but I wanted to get to know the person you were becoming first hand," Olive answers. She laughs lightly. "Yet another way I've failed to keep a distance to this project."

Goldie's brow furrows. "Why are you telling me all of this?"

Olive is quiet. Her head down.

"Isn't telling me this considered interfering with the data?" Goldie's heart skips. She is frightened by the implication.

"We're...abandoning this project," Olive answers. Goldie's mouth is dry. "It was our first foray into a large scale simulation and we learned many things that can be corrected in our next attempt."

"What!? You're shutting us down?" Goldie feels the noose of oblivion tighten around her neck.

"Oh heavens no! We're just...letting you go. No longer moderating your world." Olive drinks her coffee. "Life will continue as normal. You won't notice any difference. I guess that's why I had to talk to you. This is the last chance I'll have." She meets Goldie's eyes. "I wanted to say goodbye." Olive's eyes shine. Goldie can tell she is fighting off tears, a fact that makes her uncomfortable. The woman is a stranger to her. Nonetheless, she feels compelled to comfort her. Goldie places a hand over hers and gives it a small squeeze.

"I'm proud of you." Tears squeeze from Olive's eyes, streaking down her cheeks. She smiles and Goldie retreats her hand.

"You're really never going to see me again?"

Olive shakes her head. "Being allowed to check in will only distract us from the new project."

"I see," Goldie says. She looks at Olive's

empty plate. "Would you like another piece for the road?" she offers. It feels like all she has to give Olive.

"Thanks but it won't exist in my reality," Olive answers. "I can still taste it here, but it's only feedback sent to my brain, similar to what I'd experience if I were eating. I'm a diabetic in Reality. I have to watch my sugar. But here, I get to taste the sweets without it affecting my body," she laughs.

"And it was an excuse to check in on me," Goldie assumes.

"Yes. That too." Olive seemingly has to force herself to smile then. "Well, good luck."

Goldie watches as she leaves.

"Good luck to you too, I suppose," Goldie mutters. She reaches for the mop to clean up the coffee she had spilled. She holds it in her hand as she searches the floor for the puddle. It had been more than half of the coffee pot. How did a puddle of that size go missing?

Goldie jumps at the sound of a door's lock clicking into place. Ronan wears a jacket over his stained chef's whites and is already changed into sneakers. His eyes wander to the dirtied mug and plate Olive left behind. He exhales. "We'll clean that up tomorrow morning. Let's go." Goldie abandons her mop and follows him out of the diner. He locks up behind her and together they carpool home.

###

Goldie quietly closes the door behind her once she arrives home. She stands in the dark, allowing herself to be alone. She is alone now, she knows. Any inkling of what she thought might be watching from above had now been answered. And is she disappointed in the answer? She is more inclined to deny.

"Is that you, Honey bee?" A voice calls from the other room. The light turns on. Lopey appears in the doorway. A book in hand, thumb pressed between pages, marking the spot she left off. "Would you like me to reheat dinner for you?"

Goldie shakes her head.

"I ate at work," She answers. She slips her shoes from her feet and carries them with her as she crosses the floor. Once they are neatly stowed away in their appropriate spot, she returns to the

sitting room. Lopey is still waiting for her. She pats the cushion beside her.

"What's the matter?" Concern wrinkles Lopey's face. "Talk to me."

Goldie inhales, exhales her problems and joins her, resting her head on Lopey's shoulder. Lopey's arms close around her.

"I had the weirdest encounter at work."

Her shoulder vibrates with laughter, causing Goldie to lift her head out of annoyance.

"Oh tell me about it!" Lopey leans towards the side table and hands Goldie an opened envelope. "Our mail lady insisted I opened it while she was still there."

Goldie pulls out a folded sheet of paper. On it was scrawled 'invite me in to talk.' Her brow furrows. She looks towards Lopey.

"Did you?"

"Yeah." Lopey shrugs. "I made her some tea, offered her some cookies and we chatted for about an hour." Her face presses into Goldie's hair. She inhales a deep breath. Goldie is reminded of how she always told her she smells of coffee and sweets when she comes home from work.

"Her name was Helen."

Goldie's breath catches.

"Your programmer?"

Lopey nods. "I assume you met yours today as well?"

"Yeah," Goldie answers. "Do you...believe any of that crap?"

"Seems pretty damning to me if we both experienced it," Lopey says, with a shrug.

"But if that's true..." Goldie cuts off. Her mouth is dry. "Then we aren't real. We're just dreams. Less than that. Coding. Ones and zeroes."

Lopey rests a hand on Goldie's thigh, giving it a squeeze. "You feel pretty real to me," she says.

Goldie stands, creating space between her and her love.

"Can't you feel me?" Lopey asks.

"That's fake too!" Goldie covers her face with her hands. The cake, she remembers, it was nothing more than a ghost of the experience in Reality. The real thing, she would never know. Could Olive detect the difference? A vital piece Goldie lacks and something she will never have. Always a

ghost. Always a mockery, a cheap replication of the real thing. Perhaps it would have been more merciful for the simulation to have been shut down.

Her eyes land on the urn resting on the fireplace. Her father's ashes. She has memories of the funeral, standing by her mother, both dressed in black. It was an implanted memory. Fabricated. Her loss meant nothing. The time spent with her dad meant nothing. That didn't exist either. More made up memories.

Goldie swats it from its shelf. She hears Lopey audibly gasp before it crashes on the floor. A cloud of ashes - Dad - hovers in the air before settling. A noise squeaks through Goldie's tightened throat. She falls to her knees, hands clutching broken pieces of ceramic, never to be whole again. "What have I done?"

"It's okay, Honey Bee," Lopey rushes to her side. Her hands on her back.

"What have I done!?" Goldie repeats. She clutches the broken shards. They dig into her skin. "Fix this, you asshole!" She screams at the ceiling. She knows Olive can't hear her. A vanished coffee spill the last gift to her.

"Bee, you're hurting yourself." Lopey's hands cover hers. Her fingers slip into her fists, attempting to pry them apart. Goldie looks at her torn skin, blood beading where the ceramic dug in.

"I...still bleed," Goldie remarks. Lopey has procured a handkerchief, blotting at the blood.

"Of course you do." Goldie hears her snuffle. Despite her efforts to conceal it, Goldie has hurt Lopey too. "We're still going to hurt and bleed. Grow old and die." She applies pressure to the cloth pressed against her hand. "Isn't that living enough for you? Who cares if we're made out of numbers instead of flesh? We all want the same things."

Goldie's eyes fold shut, squeezing the tears collecting in her eyes. "She's selfish..." Goldie utters. Lopey's face presses to her hair again. She doesn't speak. "Making us and then leaving us. Telling us the truth. It would have been fine if she never said anything. I wouldn't have even missed her."

"I know," Lopey whispers. "The truth often

isn't easy. But it also is rarely given."

"Do you think it is better that we know?"

"I'm not sure," Lopey confesses. "But it doesn't have to ruin the quality of our lives, now that we know." Lopey pulls her hands away from the broken mess. "We can sweep him up. Try to salvage as much as possible."

"It's a good thing he wasn't ever real. He didn't deserve this indignity," Goldie says. She disappears into the bathroom, removing the white handkerchief and running her hands under cold water. Ashes wash off with the blood. Little specks of a person running down the drain. Or were they ashes of any old thing, charcoal handed to her in a pretty porcelain vase for Goldie to hold dearly, pretending it was once a man. She hears the invisible audience laughing at her expense. She is rough on her wounds while she cleans then, trying to drown out the noise. They sting once she leaves the bathroom.

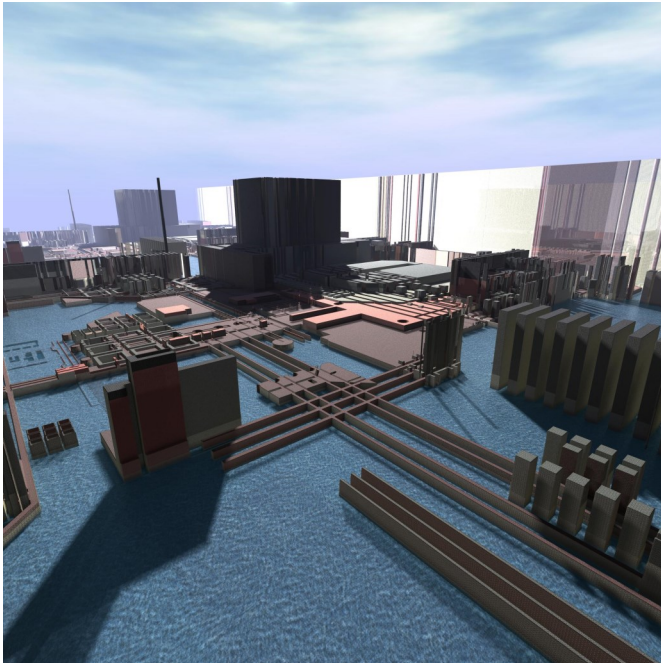
Lopey holds a flower pot.

"This was the best thing I could find," she explains. Without looking, Goldie knows what is inside. "I thought we could cover him with dirt and plant some seeds. Give him a new life."

At first, Goldie dismisses it. She can see the strain in Lopey's smile, desperate to make things right again. For her sake, she considers the pot, the ashes inside. Real or fabricated. She can't tell and Goldie is slow to accept that she may never know. And the plant that will grow will be the same.

Except they chose to grow the plant.

"Thank you," Goldie says, accepting the pot. She places it on the mantel where the urn was before. She leans in to kiss Lopey. She couldn't choose what they were made of, but she could choose what to do with it.



The Shipyard by Tiffanie Gray

## All That Glitters, Can Be Sold!

Jordan Kirton

Magpie's smile was as fake, as the goods on the back of his wagon. He glanced at the tattered map beside him, squinted through his annotations and decided a hill should be coming up any minute. He jostled under the country lane's bumps and lamented the loss of feeling in his backside.

*The pitfalls of being a travelling merchant.*

The wheels churned through the gravel and flicked up stones which made Magpie cringe. He cautiously assessed the damage to the wagon. Scratches had tarnished his freshly painted sign, "**Magpie's Emporium.**" The golden gilding was peeling and he regretted not choosing the deluxe paint, but he knew a sales tactic when he saw one.

*"Ultra-deluxe, non-peeling paint, guaranteed for seven years".*

He nearly took the saleswoman in as an apprentice, but he had to get out of there fast, be-

cause a wizard had taken an interest in the area.

*Why?*

Magpie had not stuck around to find out, but he always knew when something was not right. Wizards saw through his tricks anyway.

*Rotten luck, but at least it's not raining.*

He hated pulling into a new spot and having the tacky canvas wrapped around his wagon. The rain dampened his revelry. He leaned forward, patting Scarab, his golden mare, and they trotted down the hill to Damsen. He had a good feeling about this village. As it came into view he studied it: thatch roofs, wooden houses, blurry people. Thistle, burdock, dandelions, and hawthorne littered the country road.

*A fine array to stock up on. Hopefully there are no blooming Wizards!*

As Magpie reached the bottom of the hill, the blurs of colours and shapes grew clearer. Then he saw the troll.

Scarab whinnied and Magpie patted her head, "Easy girl."

The troll was built like a house and Magpie had a lot of valuable merchandise in the back, so he tapped his foot. A soundless spring opened a compartment by his side and he reached down to grip his crossbow. He studied the scene and tried to find the bridge, it took him awhile, but then he saw it: a piece of wood strewn across a dried up puddle.

A watering can lay beside it and Magpie's eyes burnt into the troll; he was sure the troll's hairy cheeks grew red. Magpie took his hand off the crossbow and jumped down, tying Scarab to the nearest tree.

"Greetings fair traveller, I am Dins'unk, the troll of Damsen. I ask you for a —"

Magpie reached up as far as he could and brushed the top of the troll's elbow.

"What on earth are you doing?" The troll shouted.

"You've got some leaves up their friend, probably from jumping out of those bushes and scaring my horse. I thought trolls lived *under* bridges?"

"Ahem, not all. And I'm a big fella, not enough room under there for me."

"So I see." Magpie said, kicking the piece

of wood.

“Don’t do that.” The troll screamed. “That took a lot of work. Without me tending to this bridge, people would never be able to get into Damsen.”

“Call this a bridge? Now, if you’d be so kind as to let me pass –”

“- I’m an honest troll, doing honest work, I assure you friend, I –”

“- The day I meet an honest troll, is the day I’ll be riding a dragon. Shove off and jump back into the bushes.”

“The only shoving I’m gonna be doing, is to you and your cart, if you don’t pay the proper tax. Bridge upkeep aren’t easy, so if you’ll be so kind as to pay one gold coin, I’ll let you go about your business.”

“One gold coin? All my money is tied up in my merchandise.” Magpie began, but stopped himself, he had a better idea.

“Troll’s have a hard life.” Magpie mused.

“You got that right.”

“Tiring, working, *slaving*, all day long, and for what? So humans, and other creatures, can come along and demand the use of *your* bridge. The bridge you’ve spent so much time tending.”

The troll nodded.

“It’s too hard. One coin here, one coin there, it’s not a life, you aren’t living, only *existing*. Don’t you want more for yourself, for your family?”

“It’s just me at the moment.” The troll said.

Magpie shook his head and held his nose while walking closer to Dins’unk. He placed a hand on *something* and said, “Poor fellow, you haven’t got the time to raise a family, you do too much.”

“Nobody cares about us trolls.” Dins’unk cried.

“It’s terrible, it truly is. So let me help you, with a proposition.”

“What kind of proposition?”

“A partnership.”

“I’m not that kind of troll.” Dins’unk said, eyeing the bushes.

“Not like that. A business partnership .”

“Go on.”

“Damsen’s too small for you. I have some-

thing you ought to be afraid of here,. One spray of this potion will have you running for the hills.”

The troll began to stroke its chin, or at least that is what Magpie thought it was.

“Human ingenuity, made by the finest alchemists in all of Bloomdale, but, I’m an honest man. If you help me with a little display, I’ll cut the profits with you.”

“Display?”

“That’s what I said.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“As I was saying, I have a potion here...”

“... That will have me running for the hills, why didn’t you just use it in the first place?” The troll asked.

“Because sometimes it takes more than one application and besides, I don’t want to waste the merchandise.”

“Is that right?” The troll’s eyes narrowed.

“*That’s right*. So, if you’re willing, you can push me towards the cart, dance and stomp around, making sure the villagers can hear... then I’ll give you a quick spray and you go running off into the woods over there. After I’ve finished with the town, I’ll stop just up the hill, and I can give you a share of the profits.”

“Fifty per-cent.”

“Fifteen.”

“Fifteen! Fifty.”

“Alright, you twisted my arm, forty, but make it realistic.”

“Agreed.” The troll whispered.

Dins’unk opened his mouth and roared.

Magpie ran.

*This seems a bit too realistic.*

He scampered over to Scarab, who was rearing, but he reached the back of the wagon and grabbed the nearest bottle. Magpie backed up and felt the wood of the wagon dig into his spine. Dins’unk blotted out the sun when he raised his arms, but before a killing blow was struck, Magpie threw the bottle. Dins’unk screamed and stomped back into the bushes.

*Perfection.*

Magpie smiled and made sure to catch the villagers in his peripheral vision. But he did not need to be coy, he could hear those cheers.

*Maybe my luck’s turning after all.*

The reception into the village was fit for a king. He was a hero and heroes had influence. Scarab neighed, as the gathering split to let him through. Magpie shot smiles like arrows and tipped his dapper hat to the more sombre gentlemen. Children ran after the wagon wheels, carrying laughter and joy, two commodities he could do with following him and he carried on through the village, until he reached the inn, The Pretty Peacock. He patted Scarab one last time, jumped down from the wagon and spun his hat with the air of a magician, before placing it on his head like a crown. Then he reached into his pocket for a packet of sweets and extended it to a group of children.

“No charge.” He said smiling.

They snatched the packet and lost themselves in the growing crowd of villagers, but their laughter could be heard for miles.

*Good advertising and they’ll be back for more.*

“Good morning ladies, gentlemen and children! My names Murphy Magpie and this here is my emporium. I’m a travelling merchant and have I got deals for you! You name it, I’ve got it. Tools, treats, toys and games, potions, lotions and everything in between. You mister,” Magpie pointed to a thin, gawky teenager, “a piece of fine silver jewellery, for your beloved?”

The man blushed and Magpie caught his quick glance at another young man.

*Profit to be made from that one.*

“You there, good sir, that’s a nasty scar, I’m sure the misses would want it gone?”

The man rubbed his weathered cheek.

“Don’t worry, when the scar’s gone, you’ll still have your war stories.”

Magpie moved on, spotting a woman who looked like Dins’unk.

*Maybe I should set them up?*

“My madam, I have been far and wide in this world, but never have I gazed upon a prettier flower in all of Bloomdale. But I’ve seen too many ladies fall prey to the devil which is old age.” Magpie took off his hat and held it over his heart.

“How would you like to keep age at bay? Everyone’s welcome in Magpie’s Emporium. Best prices in all of Bloomdale!”

“Never mind all that.” An old man shouted,

stabbing the ground with his cane. “How did you make that troll run away like a scared chicken?”

“That? You won’t need any of that. The troll’s gone. As long as I’m here, he won’t bother you.”

“But you ain’t staying here, are you?” The old man accused.

“Sir I -”

“-You’s a travelling merchant, you said so yourself.”

“That’s right sir, I am-”

“-So it’s only right, we is able to defend ourselves.” The man said.

Agreement rustled through the crowd.

“I never thought of it like that sir. You have my apologies. I see you’re a sharp man, one of the village elders, I presume?”

“S’right.”

“Just a moment sir.” Magpie said, strolling to the back of the wagon. He rummaged around and lifted out a glass bottle with a clear liquid.

“Troll’s bane, made by the finest alchemists in Bloomdale. You’ve seen it work, so I won’t waste time with a demonstration. Fifteen silver per bottle.”

“We’ll take the lot.” The old man said.

“So’s any chance you could cut us a deal?”

“Certainly. Ten silver per bottle, on account of your problem, and need. I’ll also throw in a crate of Gnome powder as well, keeps the little blighters from ruining all the hops. A drunk gnome, is a deadly gnome.”

The old man glowed. He stuck out his good hand and Magpie shook it.

\*

Magpie did not have much trouble after that. The queues were phenomenal and the people kept buying. He was thinking about the day’s successes over an ale in the Peacock, when a young lad, he was sure he had sold a height extender to, ran in and shouted,

“A wizard’s arrived!”

*Damn!*

Magpie downed the ale and put down the tankard. He spied another drop in it, but regretfully left it behind.

*Last thing I need is them poking their nose into my business.*



Magpie left a coin on the bar and gingerly stepped out the back, where Scarab was stabled. He jumped onto the wagon and was just about to set off, when he heard a voice.

“Stop.”

Magpie pretended not to hear and stirred Scarab forward.

“I said, stop!” The voice boomed.

Scarab froze and Magpie lost sense of all his faculties. He tried to move his arms, but it was like lifting two mountains.

*Magic.*

He gave up and stared around, but the stables were too dark to see anything.

Magpie carried on moving his eyes back and forth, until he came face to face with a wizard. His hat was pointy, his staff was big, but his beard was bigger. Magpie could not help but stare and he saw food stuck to the white hairs. Then Magpie saw the eyes staring back at him.

*That’s not food, they’re fairies!*

“Didn’t anyone teach you to obey your superiors?” The wizard said.

The fairies shook with every word.

*Does he charge them rent?* Magpie wondered, considering a new business opportunity.

The wizard answered his own question, “No, I suppose you weren’t taught anything, except to run after the next coin. You’re just a cheap peddler.”

*Charming.*

“But you’ve been causing quite a stir around town. Scared away a troll, as I hear it, with some kind of *concoction*. Earned quite a pretty penny here too. Where is it?” The wizard demanded.

Magpie was able to feel his face again and rolled his tongue around his mouth.

“Hasn’t anyone taught you not to use magic on poor, defenceless people.” Magpie emphasised the word poor. “You ought to be ashamed. Studied seven years to scare the hibijbis out of good, honest folk, did you?”

The Wizard sighed and pounded his staff on the ground. Magpie felt the reverberations of magic in the air. Suddenly, he was hanging upside down with his shirt around his head. His hat dropped onto the wagon floor.

“They call you a hero, should I bring the villagers out here to see you now?”

“What do you think will happen, if they see you treating me like this?”

“Nothing. Not when I tell them you really sold them rose water.”

“You need to go back to school, finest alchemists made that Trollsbane.”

“No they didn’t. Stop lying.” The wizard said, raising Magpie even higher.

“Those bleeding alchemists! I’ll have their guts for garters. They cheated me.”

“I’m sure that’s what happened.”

“Let me down and I can get this all straightened out.”

“We can straighten it out now, where’s your coin?”

“Just who are you anyway?” Magpie fired the question at him.

“My name is Alfric the Seventh and you are?”

“Magpie, Murphy Magpie. Welcome to my emporium. I have delights and wonders, suiting all your magical needs. Glass vials, tomes and books for your new spells? How about the finest tabac in all of Bloomdale?” Magpie said, motioning with upside down arms.

“There is only one thing I am interested in, Magpie, and that is your gold.”

“Could you put me down please? Ow, that hurt.” Magpie said, orientating himself upwards again. He collected his hat, pulled down his shirt and jumped down from the wagon.

“I knew Wizard’s were rude, but robbery is another thing.”

“Magpie, I don’t have time for your cheap tricks. There is a dragon plaguing this area. I’m in Damsen to request their aid.”

“A mighty wizard, asking for help from farmers?” Magpie scoffed.

“I came for their money, magic isn’t cheap. But it turns out all their money is tied up in commodities and merchandise. Apparently, the only person around here who has money, is you. So, under the Seven Moons and the Seat of Gildmore, I am commandeering your profits. Hand them over now, before I do something you’ll regret.”

“This is an outrage, in all my years-”

Alfric lifted his staff.

“In the oak chest in the back.”

Alfric smiled and lowered his staff.

“Good choice.”

Alfric flicked his beard and the fairies flew out. Their buzzing was almost as irritable as their incessant chatter. They flew forward and searched the wagon, while Alfric followed behind. When Alfric turned his back Magpie shouted,

“Help!”

Alfric rounded on him and cast a spell of silence.

Magpie tried to scream from sealed lips. Instead of seeing his life flash before his eyes, he saw the inn’s backdoor slam open and a crowd of customers began to pour out towards him.

“Is a woman screaming out here?” The Innkeeper shouted.

More people flooded out of the Peacock and one spotted Magpie.

“It’s that wizard, and he’s robbing Magpie!”

“That ain’t right, he’s a hero.”

Murmurs bubbled among the brewing crowd.

“He saved Damsen from a troll!”

“Magpie’s a better man than this wizard, I bet he has a potion in there that will scare the dragon away.”

There were cheers from the crowd.

Alfric smiled.

“Good citizens, you’re right. I am sorry. I was only trying to do what I thought best. But, seen as though we have a *hero* in our midst, maybe he can slay the dragon.”

“Dragon? Dragons are a lot bigger than trolls, not really my area.” Magpie found himself saying.

“You can do it Magpie.”

“We believe in you!”

Alfric’s grin grew bigger.

“What do you say Magpie? If you can slay a dragon, I’ll let you keep your profits. If not, well, you won’t be needing them anyway.”

*Time to cut my loses. It’s been a good run, but I’m out of here.*

“Of course. Good people of Damsen, I’ll

slay this dragon, but wouldn’t you agree, dragon slaying is no easy feat. I say when I slay this dragon, this Wizard ought to double my profits, upfront, how about that?”

The crowd roared.

“Certainly, that only seems fair Magpie, except the upfront part. Payment on completion. But only on one condition, a magical pledge from you.”

“A magical what?”

“I want your word Magpie. Put your hands on the staff and repeat after me.”

“There’s no need for that I’m an hones-”

“-Your hands on the staff, or I will force them to it.”

Magpie gulped and put a hand on the staff.

“Both of them.”

*Fantastic.*

“Repeat after me. *Your gold I will keep, for as long as it takes. A dragon needs slaying, the task sits and waits. For the rest of your life, this deed you will endeavour, you and the dragon, will remain tied forever.*”

“-will remain tied forever.” Magpie said, the last word haunting his thoughts.

“Go then, *hero* of Damsen, a dragon waits for you.”

\*

*This feels wrong.*

Magpie had never been without his wagon, he felt like a snail without a shell. But he had no choice. He felt the magic forcing him on. Alfric had tied him to this beast and he felt the oath tugging him. He knew where to go.

*It was...disturbing.*

Scarab clopped onto Damsen’s ‘*bridge*’ and they climbed the hill in the moonlight. He cursed the air, the sky and the God’s for his loses.

*I would have cut and run, but no, those stupid villagers.*

Magpie screamed.

Dins’unk’s eyes were red in the night and his breath created mist in the air.

“You trying to run out on me?” Dins’unk barked.

“Certainly not.”

“So, where’s my money?”

“Our money’s been stolen! A bloody wizard came riding into town and he took it all. I have nothing, *we* have nothing.” Magpie corrected.

“I saw him on the way in. Nasty people wizards, but how’s this my problem. We had a deal.”

“I’m having a bad day first my- ”

Magpie felt himself being plucked from Scarab and the world turned upside down.

“I am not an animal to be hung and dried you know! I’m sick of people treating me like this.”

Dins’unk pushed Magpie towards his eyes and grinned. The teeth were enough to stop Magpie complaining.

“You owe me forty per-cent of the profits. That was the deal.”

“You’re right. I don’t know what I was thinking. Put me down and we can talk about this.”

Dins’unk dropped him on the floor.

*I have got to choose my words more carefully.*

Magpie snatched his hat from the ground and placed it on his head. It felt wet.

“Money’s nothing if you’re not alive to spend it.” Magpie began. “That wizard’s put a curse on me and roped me into a sordid deal. I have to slay a dragon to get the money back. You want *your* money, you want the partnership to be honoured? Looks like *we* have to go slay a dragon.”

“A dragon! This is ridiculous.” Dins’unk cried.

“I’ll make it worth your while. Sixty per-cent.”

“We’ll be killed.”

“Seventy.”

“It’s madness.”

“Ninety.”

“I’m in. Where’s this dragon?”

\*

*‘Will remain tied forever.’*

The words woke Magpie and he opened his eyes to darkness. It was hard enough to drift off with Dins’unk’s snoring.

*No wonder troll’s slept under bridges.*

Magpie looked across at his partner’s bed. Dins’unk had decided to knock two trees down so

they formed a crude bridge. The black mass was squirreled underneath the bark, but it did look more comfortable than Magpie’s bed of dirt. Magpie was used to the rough life, but this humiliation was new.

*I feel like a fly in a spider’s web.*

He was not used to doing something other than what he wanted. He frowned as he pictured that ugly looking wizard. This was the first time he was without his wagon, coin and something to sell. He hated it. He stared towards the sky. The sifted starlight broke through the trees and he wondered if he would ever get to see his emporium again.

*And just how on Earth am I meant to slay a dragon?*

\*

Magpie woke with bags under his eyes and was too tired to think about Dins’unk’s body odour. Instead he had to suffer the troll’s open mouthed chewing.

*Crunch.*

“Can you be any louder?” Magpie moaned, rubbing his head.

“You mean like your screaming last night?” Dins’unk laughed.

Magpie got up and kicked the charred remains of the fire.

“Suppose there’s nothing for me?” Magpie asked, as he watched Dins’unk tuck into a breakfast of raw rabbit.

“No.”

Magpie frowned and his stomach rumbled. It was a shame he did not have his wagon, he would have convinced Dins’unk he needed to season the rabbit.

“The sooner we get going, the sooner we can get rid of each other.”

“You got that right.” Dins’unk said, standing up.

Magpie jumped up onto Scarab.

“Explain to me how you know where to go again?” Dins’unk asked.

“Magic.” Magpie said, stifling a yawn.

They walked away from their camp and headed deeper into the forest.

“How much further do you think?”

“I don’t know.” Magpie grunted.

“But doesn’t the spell tell you?”

“It doesn’t work like that.”

They continued down a muddy path, crunching dry twigs underfoot. The *snaps* spooked Scarab, but Magpie brushed her head and comforted her. Dins’unk snorted with every neigh. Magpie looked up and tried to find the sun, but branches and leaves interweaved, creating a green web that captured the light. Magpie studied the surrounding greenery, appraising every bush and shrub they crossed paths with.

*There was profit to be made everywhere.*

Their breathing was the loudest sound in the forest. Every moment disturbed the natural sanctuary. Magpie looked over at Dins’unk and felt grateful, without him, he might fall prey to any kind of magical creature, before he reached the dragon.

*Before the dragon.*

Roots snaked on the ground in front of them and Magpie had to control Scarab’s pace. Magpie saw the river first and led Scarab slowly down towards it.

“What this place needs, is a bridge.”

Dins’unk thought aloud.

“Play your cards right and you’ll have enough money to buy more than one.”

Dins’unk smiled.

“You ever tried living under a bridge?”

Dins’unk asked.

“I’ve had to stop in many places in my time.”

“Like where?”

“Once, word got to me that some music boxes I had been selling, broke after the song finished. How’s a man meant to know? I wasn’t going to crank the handle on every single one. Anyway, the town was not happy. I had to spend the rest of the night in a cemetery.”

“Poor you.” Dins’unk said, throwing the rabbit carcass in the river.

“That’s not the best of it. I ended up barely escaping a banshee, after I *gifted* her a throat tonic and –”

“Who approaches this river glen?” A voice bubbled, below the water.

“Oh no, no *we* aren’t doing this.” Magpie shouted back. “I’ve had enough of magical folk for the time being.”

“Rude.” Dins’unk muttered. “Rivers have nymphs, you must have known that? That’s why I tend to stick to puddles, simpler. Here, I’ll handle this, have an affinity with them.”

Dins’unk cleared his throat. “Bridge planning commission, lady.”

“Oh no.” The nymph cried.

“That’s right. We’ve had a report that people have been drowning in unsafe attempts to cross this river.”

“We don’t need an ugly bridge here, it’ll block out the light.”

“We’ll be the judge of that. Me and my associate will be crossing and having a look at the other side.” Dins’unk said, wading into the river.

Magpie followed his lead and picked a shallow part to cross. He dared not look down and get dragged in by the nymph’s beauty.

Scarab was hesitant, but as she dropped in, the icy water forced her on. Magpie’s boots filled with water and he sucked in air, as the chill seeped into his ankles.

“Right,” Dins’unk said, “looks like a section twenty-four b. We’ll have to dig this up, put foundations in there, knock that bank down.”

“Please, no.” The nymph whispered.

“Got to be done lady. Do you want a safe river, or what?”

“It’ll drive the house prices down.” She cried.

“But the bridge will mean more travellers coming through here.”

Bubbles of silence filtered to the surface, as she considered the future drowning potential.

Dins’unk watched Magpie’s progress through the river and as soon as Scarab made it to the bank, they both ran for it. Scarab sprinted through the trees and Magpie ducked down to avoid the branches. Dins’unk became a dark blur against the greenery.

\*

It was a while before Magpie opened his eyes again. He did not know which was worse, the nymph, or the way Scarab had charged through the trees. Either way, he had his fill of near death experiences for one day. They broke through a clearing and he could sense the dragon was close. Mag-

pie studied the area and his focus fell onto a monstrous mountain which pierced the sky. The clearing was absent of all life and Magpie and Dins'unk's eyes were drawn to the gaping hole carved in the mountain. Light stopped there, unable to break into the pit. Scarab neighed and Magpie dug his knees into her ribs, but she would go no further. He dismounted and was shaken when a voice thundered,

"Who disturbs my slumber?"

Magpie watched as the grass bent under the power of the voice.

Scarab whinnied and Magpie reached out to sooth her.

Dins'unk was shaking, he was used to being the biggest creature for miles.

"Great to see you earning your share buddy." Magpie whispered to the troll.

*Like my father used to say, fake it, till you're home and dry.*

Magpie jumped off Scarab, handed the reins to Dins'unk and was plopping his dirty hat on his head.

"It's the bank." He shouted back, as he approached the cavern entrance.

"The bank?"

"Yes, Mr - "

"- Just call me Barthandarax."

"Yes, Barthandarax. Seems like you've taken up residence in this local lair and have avoided paying your rent for, how long have you been in there now?"

"It must be six months on Tuesday."

"Say's here on your record, eight, Barthandarax."

"I - "

"- No need to lie sir, we can get this all straightened out. But you have to work with me."

"I don't want any trouble, this is my home."

"Yes, I understand sir."

"People come and make sacrifices, it's already a bother with the address. They seem to get lost along the way, near the river, and I never end up with my virgins on time."

"We all have problems Barthandarax, but let's try to clear some of yours up for you."

"You're so kind."

"I have a troll here with me, he can rectify the river problem for you, as quick as you can burn a village. Isn't that right Dins'unk." Magpie said, turning back towards him.

Dins'unk could only nod.

"Splendid, what did you say your name was again?" Barthandarax asked.

"Murphy, Murphy Magpie, pleasure to help you - "

"- Magpie!" The dragon roared.

Magpie watched as the entrance to the cavern erupted with flames. He jumped to the ground and felt his hat fall from his head.

*I've never met a dragon before, have I?*

"You no good, lying piece of horse manure."

Magpie's smile faded.

"Why are you here Magpie?" Barthandarax bellowed.

"You'll never believe this," Magpie began, "the local village council has commissioned me as a consultant. We have a five point plan to provide you with more virgins, but it involves you not eating so many people. You see, the more people you eat, the less virgins can be produced."

"Don't give me these centaur droppings Magpie."

"You seem to have me at a disadvantage, have we met before?"

"Just get out of here, before I burn you alive!"

Fire streamed towards him and Magpie began to feel the heat.

"Truth is, I can't leave. We'll have to come to some sort of arrangement. So why don't you come out of there and we can talk it out."

The floor shook, as the dragon shifted inside the mountain. Dins'unk retreated with Scarab further into the treeline.

"No." Barthandarax said.

Magpie watched the troll flee and wished he could be with him.

"I've heard about overweight dragons."

"I'm not overweight."

"They grow so big from eating so many people - "

"- It has nothing to do with that."

"Body dysmorphia is a debilitating condi-

tion.”

“For the last time, it has nothing to do with my body image.”

“If you aren’t coming out... I’ll have to come in.” Magpie said, rising from the ground with newfound confidence.

“No, you can’t do that.”

“Here I come.” Magpie shouted.

“Don’t you dare!”

Dins’unk watched Magpie pick up his hat and with one deft spin, he placed it on his head. Mud dropped onto his face, but he ignored it.

*Where was his weapon? Dins’unk worried. How was he ever going to slay a dragon?*

Dins’unk watched Magpie with an open mouth.

Magpie walked towards the lair and then was engulfed by fire.

*How am I ever going to get my money back now!*

Dins’unk’s head dropped and he patted Scarab. At least he had a new friend who could keep him company back by the bridge.

*Even though he was a swindling bastard, he didn’t deserve this.*

Dins’unk frowned.

*Surely getting burnt to death was painful... so why hadn’t Magpie screamed?*

Dins’unk looked up and saw Magpie was gone.

\*

“Gus? Is that you?” Magpie shouted, squinting into the darkness.

“Go away.” A voice barked.

“You were always the best at illusions Gus. That fire, I almost believed it myself.”

“I don’t want to get involved with you again.”

Magpie walked deeper into the cavern. It smelt...good.

*Cinnamon, apple, vanilla?*

“I don’t know any dragons that bake Gus, do you.”

“Why do you have to come and ruin everything?”

Magpie jumped back, as the horny snout of a dragon pushed its way towards him.

Yellow eyes lit the cavern and he stared at black slits, as big as swords.

“Barthandarax, where did you come up with a name like that?” Magpie asked, reaching out to touch the shimmering scales.

“I’m warning you.” Barthandarax boomed.

“Come off it Gus, I can see right through you. Your birthmark’s right there, above your left eye.”

“Damn.” Gus said.

The eyes grew smaller and the dragon began to fade, it’s colours swirling. Barthandarax the dragon shrank, until he was the same size as Magpie, but a lot uglier.

“Barthandarax had me going there for a minute.” Magpie mused.

“I had something good here Magpie.”

“I can believe it.”

“I’ve been expecting a knight to show up any day now.”

“Lucky I got here, because it’s a wizard who’s arrived to save the day, and he isn’t a nice one. Names Alfric and I’m here because he’s forced me to slay you.”

“Slay me? How did you get tangled up in that?”

“Long story. Anyway Gus, you’ll have to do your dragon thing elsewhere, there’s money in it for you.”

“But I’ve just got this lair how I want it.”

“How’s seventy gold coins sound?”

“When can you help me move?”

\*

“Dins’unk this is Gus, Gus this is Dins’unk.” Magpie leaned down from atop of the dragon.

“Pleasure to meet you Dins’unk.” Gus said, smoke smouldering from his nostrils.

“You know each other?” Dins’unk asked.

“Don’t ask.” Gus said. “But seems like Magpie’s got us both into a bind, and I don’t mess with wizards, nasty people, one of them abducted my cousin! I won’t say no to a tidy profit either.”

“Excuse me, but how do you know a dragon Magpie?” Dins’unk asked.

“This isn’t a dragon, it’s Gus, an ogre. He can morph into anything he likes. Nice little trick,



it got us out of quite a few binds.”

“But how did you manage that with the fire Gus?” Dins’unk wondered aloud.

“It’s an old Ogre trick, we aren’t just shifters you know, we can change matter itself.”

Dins’unk nodded, not quite believing there was a dragon in front of him.

“You want to hop on for a ride? It’ll be quicker than walking back to Damsen.”

Dins’unk shook his head. “No thanks, us trolls have a fear of heights.”

“No worries.” Gus said, stretching out his wings and leaping into the air. “See you back in Damsen.”

“Take Scarab with you!” Magpie called down.

Dins’unk waved them off, his mouth still wide open.

\*

“I hate being ridden you know.” Gus moaned.

“Shut it, Scarab can’t talk, so you can’t either.” Magpie whispered.

They crossed Dins’unk’s wooden plank and made their way into Damsen.

There were cheers from the villagers.

“Magpie’s back!”

Magpie waved and cantered into Damsen. He did not stop to share pleasantries, he wanted Gus squirreled away, before the wizard had time to see him. They approached the Pretty Peacock and Magpie guided Gus to the back. He saw his wagon was untouched and stabled Gus.

“I’ll be back in a minute.” Magpie said.

“You better.” Gus groaned.

Magpie walked towards the pub and the door flew open.

“Back then, are you Magpie?” Alfric said.

“Yes, the dragon’s slayed, so give me back my money.”

Alfric frowned. “Slayed, you say?”

“That’s right.”

“How did you do it?”

“Let the bards immortalise it in song. My money. You also promised to double my earnings.”

“You wouldn’t be lying, would you Magpie?”

Magpie found himself being scrutinised by too many pairs of eyes, poking out of the wizard’s white beard.

“I’m just an honest merchant.”

“Because if you were lying, you’d have a very big problem.”

“Who would be stupid enough to lie to a wizard?” Magpie laughed.

“Nobody. But I didn’t mean to sound threatening. It’s just, if that dragon is still alive, your pledge is unfulfilled and you’ll never be able to leave Bloomdale, because you’re tied to that dragon forever.”

Magpie grew faint.

*Will remain tied forever.*

“I’ve slayed that dragon, you go look in it’s lair. You won’t find it.”

“Eat it as well did you?” Alfric smiled.

“This was my first dragon and even I didn’t expect it to turn to ash when it was slain. Now, my money?”

“I’ve never heard of that happening and I’m Gildmore’s senior Dragon researcher. Anyway, fairs fair.” Alfric said, waving his staff.

Magpie frowned, but Alfric pointed. Magpie looked and saw his wagon was piled with a few more chests.

*Gold.*

“Thanks, I’ll be on my way.” Magpie said, turning towards his wagon.

“Goodbye Magpie, and if I ever need a dragon slaying again, I know who to find.”

“Dragons, trolls...you name it, I can do it. Murphy Magpie, your knight in shining armour.” Magpie said, through a smile.

He strolled towards Gus and hitched the golden mare to the wagon.

As Magpie’s emporium rolled out of Damsen, Gus asked, “You got the gold?”

“Yes. But, we have a slight problem.”

“Not another one. It’s the troll isn’t it?” Gus groaned.

“No, it’s not the troll, we’ll have to stop and pay him, and get Scarab back. It’s something else. What would you say about going into business together?”

“I’d say, get on your horse.”

“You don’t have a choice.”

"I might be a horse now Magpie, but I can squish you as a giant."

"Gus, do you remember that pledge I was telling you about?"

"Yes...oh no."

"Oh yes." Magpie said. "Unless you want me to actually slay you?"

Gus reared and bolted, knocking Magpie from the wagon.

Magpie landed in Dins'unk's puddle with a splash.

"You won't get very far." Magpie shouted after him.

Dins'unk crawled through the bushes, retrieved Magpie's filthy hat and handed it to him.

"Where's he going, with *my* money?"

"Don't worry," Magpie said, brushing off his hat and standing up, "he won't get very far."

END

### All That Glitters, Can Be Sold!

By Jordan Kirton

Magpie's smile was as fake as the goods on the back of his wagon. He glanced at the tattered map beside him, squinted through his annotations and decided a hill should be coming up any minute. He lamented the loss of feeling in his backside as the wagon rolled over the bumps in the country lane.

*The pitfalls of being a travelling merchant.*

The wheels churned through the gravel and flicked up stones which made Magpie cringe. He cautiously assessed the damage to the wagon. Scratches had tarnished his freshly painted sign, "**Magpie's Emporium.**" The golden gilding was peeling, and he regretted not choosing the deluxe paint, but he knew a sales tactic when he saw one.

*"Ultra-deluxe, non-peeling paint, guaranteed for seven years".*

He nearly took the saleswoman in as an apprentice, but he had to get out of there fast, because a wizard had taken an interest in the area.

*Why?*

Magpie had not stuck around to find out, but he always knew when something was not right.

Wizards saw through his tricks anyway.

*Rotten luck, but at least it's not raining.*

He hated pulling into a new spot and having the tacky canvas wrapped around his wagon; the rain always dampened his revelry. He leaned forward, patting Scarab, his golden mare, and they trotted down the hill towards Damsen. He had a good feeling about this village. As it came into view he studied it: thatch roofs, wooden houses, blurry people. Then his eyes turned to the greenery littering the edges of the road. Thistle, Burdock, Dandelions, Hawthorne...

*A fine array to stock up on. Hopefully there are no blooming Wizards!*

As Magpie reached the bottom of the hill, the blurs of colours and shapes grew clearer. Then he saw the troll.

Scarab whinnied and Magpie patted her head, "Easy girl."

Magpie had a lot of valuable merchandise on board, and as the wagon inched closer, the troll seemed to be getting bigger, a lot bigger; it was built like a house. He tapped his foot on the driver's box. A soundless spring opened a compartment by his side and he reached down to grip his crossbow. He studied the scene and tried to find the bridge, it took him awhile, but then he saw it: a piece of rotten wood strewn across a dried-up puddle.

A watering can lay beside it and Magpie's eyes burnt into the troll; he was sure the troll's hairy cheeks grew red. Magpie took his hand off the crossbow and jumped down, tying Scarab to the nearest tree.

"Greetings fair traveller, I am Dins'unk, the troll of Damsen. I ask you for a --"

Magpie reached up as far as he could and brushed the top of the troll's elbow.

"-What are you doing?" The troll asked, pulling his arm back.

"You've got some leaves up their friend, probably from jumping out of those bushes and scaring my horse. I thought trolls lived *under* bridges?"

"Ahem, not all and I'm a big fella, there isn't enough room under there for me."

“So, I see.” Magpie said, kicking the sorry excuse for a bridge.

“Don’t do that!” The troll screamed. “Do you know how hard it is to maintain a good bridge? People would never be able to get into Damsen without me working hard day and night.”

“Call this a bridge? Now, if you’d be so kind as to let me pass –”

“- I’m an honest troll, doing honest work, I assure you friend, I –”

“- The day I meet an *honest* troll, is the day I’ll be riding a dragon. Shove off and jump back into the bushes.”

“The only shoving I’m gonna be doing, is to you and your cart, if you don’t pay the proper tax. Bridge upkeep aren’t easy, as I’ve said. So, if you’ll be so kind as to pay one gold coin, I’ll let you go about your business.”

“One gold coin? All my money is tied up in my merchandise.” Magpie began, but he stopped himself, as an idea came to him.

“Trolls have a hard life.” Magpie mused.

“You got that right.”

“Tiring, working, *slaving*, all day long, and for what? So, humans, and all the rest, can come along and demand the use of *your* bridge. The bridge you’ve spent so much time tending.”

The troll nodded.

“It’s too hard. One coin here, one coin there, it’s not a life, you aren’t living, only *existing*. Don’t you want more for yourself, for your family?”

“It’s just me at the moment.” The troll said.

Magpie shook his head, held his nose and walked closer to Dins’unk. He placed a hand on a body part and said, “Poor fellow, you haven’t got the time to raise a family, you do too much.”

“Nobody cares about us trolls.” Dins’unk cried.

“It’s terrible, it truly is. So let me help you, with a proposition.”

“What kind of proposition?”

“A partnership.”

“I’m not that kind of troll.” Dins’unk said, eyeing the bushes.

“A *business* partnership.”

“Go on.”

“You strike me as the kind of troll that deserves the finer things. Damsen is too small for the likes of you. In the back of my wagon, I have a potion you ought to be afraid of. One little spray and it’ll have you running for the hills.”

Dins’unk began stroking its chin, or at least, that is what Magpie thought it was.

“Human ingenuity, made by the finest alchemists in all of Bloomdale. If you help me with a little display, I’ll give you some of the profits I earn from selling it to the villagers.”

“Display?”

“That’s what I said.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“As I was saying, I have a potion here...”

“... That will have me running for the hills, why didn’t you just use it in the first place?” The troll asked.

“Because sometimes it takes more than one application, and besides, I don’t want to waste the merchandise.”

“Is that right?” The troll’s eyes narrowed.

“*That’s right*. So, if we have a deal, let’s pretend like I didn’t pay your toll.”

“I thought instead of the toll, you’d split the profits?”

“I will, but let’s put on a *per-for-mance*.” Magpie said slowly.

“My English is just fine thank-you, much better than your troll.”

Magpie glided over the issue and asked, “What would you do to someone who didn’t pay?”

“I’d chase them down, crush their puny little body and munch on their bones.”

“Sounds about right. Make sure the villagers can hear, and remember this. When I give you a spray of my potion, go off running into the woods. When I’ve finished with business in Damsen, I can give you a share of the profits.”

“Fifty per-cent.”

“Fifteen.”

“Fifteen! Fifty.”

“Alright, you twisted my arm, forty, but make it realistic.”

Dins’unk nodded, opened his mouth and roared.

Magpie started running back to his wagon

and wished he'd told him to be a little less realistic. Scarab was rearing up, afraid at the beast lunging towards her master. But Magpie deftly scampered to the back of the wagon and grabbed the nearest bottle. Magpie turned around and saw Dins'unk right behind him. The troll raised his arms and Magpie continued to back up against his wagon, until the wood dug into his spine. Before Dins'unk could strike a killing blow, Magpie threw the bottle down at his feet. Dins'unk screamed and stomped back into the bushes.

*Perfection.*

Magpie smiled and made sure to catch the villagers in his peripheral vision. But he did not need to be coy, he could hear the cheers from here.

*Maybe my luck is turning after all.*

The reception into the village was fit for a king. Magpie shot smiles like arrows and tipped his dapper hat to the more sombre gentlemen. Children ran after the wagon wheels, carrying laughter and joy, two commodities he could do with following him. He was a hero now, and heroes had influence. He carried on through the village, manoeuvring Scarab and his wagon through the parting crowd until he reached the inn, The Pretty Peacock. He patted Scarab one last time, jumped down from the wagon and spun his hat with the air of a magician, before placing it on his head, like a crown. Then he reached into his pocket for a packet of sweets and extended it to a group of children.

"No charge." He said with a smile.

They snatched the packet from his fingers and lost themselves in the growing crowd of villagers; but their laughter could be heard for miles.

*Good advertising and they'll be back for more.*

"Good morning, ladies, gentlemen and children! My name's Murphy Magpie and this here is my emporium. I'm a travelling merchant and have I got deals for you. You name it, I've got it. Tools, treats, toys and games; potions, lotions and everything in between. You mister," Magpie pointed to a thin, gawky teenager, "a piece of fine silver jewellery, for your beloved?"

The man blushed and Magpie caught his quick glance at another young man.

*Profit to be made from that one.*

"You there, good sir, that's a nasty scar, I'm sure the misses would want it gone?"

The man rubbed his weathered cheek.

"Don't worry, when the scar's gone, you'll still have your war stories."

Magpie moved on, spotting a woman who looked like Dins'unk.

*Maybe I should set them up?*

"I have travelled far and wide in this world, but madam, never have I gazed upon a prettier flower in all Bloomdale. But I've seen too many ladies fall prey to the devil which is old age."

Magpie took off his hat and held it sombrely over his heart. "How would you like to keep age at bay? Everyone's welcome in Magpie's Emporium. Best prices in Bloomdale!"

"Never mind all that nonsense." An old man shouted, using his cane to stab his way to the front of the crowd.

*There is always one.*

"We've been plagued by that troll for generations! I can remember him when I was a young man. He calls that thing near the hills a bridge. Bah! He stole that wooden shingle he calls a *bridge* from someone's roof. How did you make him run away like a scared chicken?"

"It doesn't matter now, you won't need any of that, the troll is gone. As long as I'm here, he won't bother you."

"But you ain't staying here, are you?" The old man accused, jabbing the air with his cane.

"Sir I -"

"-You's a travelling merchant, you said so yourself."

"That's right sir, I am-"

"-So it's only right, we is able to defend ourselves." The man said.

Agreement rustled through the crowd.

"I never thought of it like that sir. You have my apologies. I see you're a sharp man, one of the village elders, I presume?"

"S'right."

"Just a moment sir." Magpie said, strolling to the back of the wagon. He rummaged around and lifted out a glass bottle with a clear liquid.

"This is Trolls Bane. It is made by the finest alchemists in Bloomdale. You've seen it work, so I won't waste time with a demonstration. Fif-

teen silver per bottle.”

“We’ll take the lot.” The old man said.  
“So’s any chance you could cut us a deal?”

“Certainly. Ten silver per bottle, on account of your problem, and need. I’ll also throw in a crate of Gnome powder as well, keeps the little blighters from ruining all the hops. A drunk gnome, is a deadly gnome.”

The old man glowed. He stuck out his good hand and Magpie shook it.

\*

The queues were phenomenal, and the people kept buying until Magpie had practically run out of stock. He was thinking about the day’s successes over an ale in the Peacock, when a young lad, he was sure he had sold a height extender to, ran in and shouted,

“A wizard’s arrived!”

*Damn!*

Gossip bounced around the inn, like a man who had one too many. Magpie surreptitiously downed the last of his ale and quietly placed the tankard down on the table.

*Last thing I need is them poking their nose into my business.*

Magpie left a coin on the bar and gingerly stepped out the back door, where Scarab was stabled. He jumped onto the wagon seat and was just about to set off, when he heard a voice.

“Stop.” It commanded.

Magpie had no reason to stop. All his stock was gone, so he pretended not to hear and stirred Scarab forward.

“I said, *stop.*”

Scarab froze and Magpie lost sense of all his faculties.

*Magic.*

All Magpie could do was move his eyes and he looked everywhere to try and find the wizard, but the stables were too dark to see anything clearly. Then the wizard came into his field of vision. His hat was pointy, his staff was big, but his beard was bigger. Bits of food were stuck to the wizard’s beard, but as Magpie looked closer, he saw tiny eyes staring back at him.

*That’s not food, they’re fairies!*

“Didn’t anyone teach you to obey your

superiors?” The wizard asked.

The fairies wobbled with every word.

*Does he charge them rent?* Magpie wondered, considering a new business and fashion opportunity.

The wizard answered his own question, “No, I suppose all you were taught, was to run after the next coin. You’re just a cheap peddler.”

*Charming.*

“More and more of your kind keep popping up all over Bloomdale. Middle-men, swindlers – no good comen ripping people off for whatever they’ve got. But you’ve been causing quite a stir around here. Scared away a troll, as I hear it, with some kind of *concoction*. Earned quite a pretty penny too. Where is it?”

The feeling in Magpie’s face returned. Just to make sure, he rolled his tongue around in his mouth.

“Hasn’t anyone taught you not to use magic on poor, defenceless people.” Magpie said, emphasising the word poor. “Studied seven years to scare the hibijibis out of good, honest folk, did you? You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

The wizard sighed and pounded the ground with his staff. Magpie felt the reverberations of magic in the air. Suddenly, he was hanging upside down with his shirt around his head, while his hat dropped onto the wagon floor.

“They call you a hero, should I bring the villagers out here to see you now?”

Magpie gave the image some thought, retorting with his own question, “What do you think will happen, if they see you treating me like this?”

“Nothing. Not when I tell them you really sold them rose water.”

*Wizards!*

“You need to go back to school, finest alchemists made that Trolls Bane.”

The wizard rose Magpie higher and said, “Stop lying. We both know that no making, effort, or any *inkling* of trade went into it.”

“I didn’t know anything of the sort!” Magpie assured him. “You can’t trust anybody now adays, except of course, Magpie’s Emporium, I’ll have their alchemical guts for garters.”

“I’m sure that’s what happened.”

“Let me down and I can get this all straightened out.”

“We can straighten it out now, where’s your coin?”

*I don’t like those kinds of questions.*

Magpie fired a question of his own at him, “Just who are you anyway?”

“My name is Alfric the Seventh, and you are?”

“I’m Magpie, Murphy Magpie, welcome to my emporium. I have delights and wonders, suiting all your magical needs. Glass vials, tomes and books for your new spells? How about the finest tabac in all of Bloomdale?” Magpie said, motioning with upside down arms.

“There is only one thing I am interested in, Magpie, and that is your gold.”

“Could you put me down please? Ow, that hurt.” Magpie said, orientating himself upwards again. He collected his hat, pulled down his shirt and jumped down from the driver’s box. “I knew wizards were rude, but robbery is another thing.”

“Magpie, I don’t have time for your cheap tricks. There is a dragon plaguing this area. I’m in Damsen to request their aid.”

“A mighty wizard, asking for help from farmers?” Magpie scoffed.

“Magic isn’t cheap, the only thing they’re good for is their money. They only have little anyway, but it turns out it’s all tied up in commodities and merchandise. Apparently, the only person around here who has any real coin, is you. So, under the Seven Moons and the Seat of Gildmoore, I am commandeering your profits. Hand them over now, before I do something you’ll regret.”

“This is an outrage, in all my years-”

Alfric lifted his staff.

“In the oak chest in the back.”

Alfric smiled and lowered his staff.

“Good choice.”

Alfric flicked his beard and the fairies flew out. Their buzzing was almost as irritable as their incessant chatter. They flew forward and searched the wagon, while Alfric followed behind. When Alfric turned his back Magpie shouted,

“Help!”

Alfric rounded on him, casting a spell of

silence.

Magpie tried to scream from sealed lips, but instead of seeing his life flash before his eyes, he saw hope. The inn’s backdoor slammed open and a crowd of customers poured out towards him.

“What’s all the ruckus? Sounds like some woman screaming – anyone out there?” The Inn-keeper said, peering into the darkness.

Ruckus was not something which happened often in Damsen, so more patrons flowed out from the inn’s backdoor, all eager to see tomorrow’s gossip. Magpie tried to shout, but the magic held. Then, Brian Fickle, known for his village curtain twitching, spotted Magpie.

“It’s that wizard, and he’s robbing Magpie!” Brian said, elated to have got there first.

“That ain’t right, he’s a hero.” The Inn-keeper commented.

Murmurs bubbled through the brewing crowd.

“He saved Damsen from a troll!”

“Magpie’s a better man than this wizard, I bet he has a potion that will scare the dragon away for good.”

The crowd cheered.

Alfric smiled.

“Good citizens, you’re right. I am sorry. I was only trying to do what I thought was best. But, seen as though we have a *hero* in our midst, maybe he can slay the dragon.”

“F-” Magpie stopped himself, realising the spell had been lifted and he was no longer talking only in his own head. “Dragon? Dragons are a lot bigger than trolls, not really my area.”

“You can do it Magpie.”

“We believe in you!”

Alfric’s smile grew.

“What do you say Magpie? If you can slay a dragon, I’ll let you keep your profits. If not, well, you won’t be needing them anyway.”

*Time to cut my loses. It’s been a good run, but I’m out of here.*

“Ahem.” Magpie cleared his throat. “Good people of Damsen, I’ll slay this dragon, but wouldn’t you agree, dragon slaying is no easy feat. I say, when I slay this dragon, this wizard ought to double my profits, *upfront*, how about that?”

The crowd roared.

“Certainly, that seems fair Magpie, except the upfront part. Payment on *completion*. But only on one condition, a magical pledge from you.”

“A magical what?”

“I want your word Magpie. Something,” the wizard whispered, “I suspect you’ve never given to anyone. Now, put your hands on the staff and repeat after me.”

“There’s no need for that I’m an hones-”

“-Your hands on the staff, or I will force them to it.”

Magpie gulped and put a hand on the staff.

“Both of them.”

*Fantastic.*

“Repeat after me. *Your gold I will keep, for as long as it takes. A dragon needs slaying, the task sits and waits. For the rest of your life, this deed you will endeavour, or you and the dragon, will remain tied forever.*”

“-will remain tied forever.” Magpie said, the last word haunting his thoughts.

“Go then, *hero* of Damsen, a dragon waits for you.”

\*

*This feels wrong.*

Magpie had never been without his wagon, and he felt like a snail without a shell. But he had no choice. He felt the magic forcing him on. Alfric had tied him to this beast, and he felt the oath tugging him. He *knew* where to go.

*It was...disturbing.*

Scarab clopped onto Damsen’s ‘*bridge*’, and they climbed the hill in the moonlight. He cursed the air, the sky and the Gods for his loses.

*I would have cut and run, but no, those stupid villagers.*

Magpie screamed as two red eyes emerged from the bushes.

“You trying to run out on me?” Dins’unk barked.

“Certainly not.”

“No, why would I think that, when youse leaving under the cover of dark. So, partner, where’s my money?”

“Our money has been stolen! A blooming wizard came riding in and he took it all. I have

nothing, *we* have nothing.” Magpie corrected.

“I saw him on the way in. Nasty people wizards, but how’s this my problem? We had a deal.”

“I’m having a bad day, first my-”

Magpie felt himself being plucked from Scarab and the world turned upside down.

*Not again.*

“I’m sick of being treated like this. I am not an animal to be hung upside down and dried you know.”

Dins’unk pulled Magpie towards him and grinned. The teeth were enough to stop Magpie complaining.

“You owe me forty per-cent of the profits. That was the deal.”

“You’re right. I don’t know what I was thinking. Put me down and we can talk about this.”

Dins’unk dropped him to the floor.

*I have got to choose my words more carefully.*

Magpie snatched his hat from the ground and placed it on his head. It felt wet.

“Money’s nothing, if you’re not alive to spend it.” Magpie began. “That wizard’s put a curse on me and roped me into a sordid deal. I must slay a dragon to get the money back. You want *your* money, you want the partnership to be honoured? Looks like *we* must go and slay a dragon.”

“A dragon?” Dins’unk cried.

“I’ll make it worth your while. Sixty per-cent.”

“We’ll be killed.”

“Seventy.”

“It’s madness.”

“Ninety.”

“I’m in. How hard can it really be? I’ve seen puny human knights clopping up and down on their horses. Where’s this dragon?”

\*

*‘Will remain tied forever.’*

The words woke Magpie and he opened his eyes to darkness. It was hard enough to drift off with Dins’unk’s snoring.

*No wonder trolls slept under bridges.*

Magpie looked across at his partner’s bed.



Dins'unk had decided to knock two trees down, so they formed a crude bridge. He was squirreled underneath the bark and it looked more comfortable than Magpie's bed of dirt. Magpie was used to the rough life, but this humiliation was new.

*I feel like a fly in a spider's web.*

He was not used to doing something other than what he wanted. He frowned as he pictured that ugly looking wizard. This was the first time he was without his wagon, coin and something to sell. He hated it. He stared at the night sky. The sifted starlight broke through the trees, and he wondered if he would ever get to see his emporium again.

*And just how on Earth am I meant to slay a dragon?*

\*

Magpie woke with bags under his eyes and was too tired to think about Dins'unk's body odour. Instead, he had to suffer the Dins'unk's open mouthed chewing. *Crunch.*

"Can you be any louder?" Magpie moaned, rubbing his head.

"You mean, like your screaming last night?" Dins'unk laughed.

Magpie got up and kicked the charred remains of the fire.

"Suppose there's nothing for my breakfast?" Magpie asked, as he watched Dins'unk tuck into a breakfast of raw rabbit.

"No."

Magpie frowned and his stomach rumbled. It was a shame he did not have his wagon, he would have convinced Dins'unk he needed to season the rabbit.

"The sooner we get going, the sooner we can get rid of each other."

"You got that right." Dins'unk said, standing up.

Magpie jumped up onto Scarab.

"Explain to me how you know where to go again?" Dins'unk asked.

"Magic."

They walked away from their camp and headed deeper into the forest.

"How much further do you think?"

"I don't know." Magpie grunted.

"But doesn't the magic tell you?"

"It doesn't work like that."

They continued down a dirt path, crunching dry twigs. The *snaps* spooked Scarab, but Magpie brushed her head and comforted her. Dins'unk snorted with every neigh. Magpie looked up and tried to find the sun, but branches and leaves interweaved, creating a green web that captured the light. Magpie studied the surrounding greenery, appraising every bush and shrub they crossed paths with.

*There was profit to be made everywhere.*

Their breathing was the loudest sound in the forest. Every moment disturbed the natural serenity. Magpie looked over at Dins'unk and felt grateful for the companionship, despite the smell. Dins'unk was intimidating and without him, he might fall prey to any kind of magical creature, before he reached the dragon. Roots snaked on the ground in front of them and Magpie had to control Scarab's pace.

It was Magpie who spotted the river first and he led Scarab slowly down towards it.

"What this place needs, is a bridge."

Dins'unk thought aloud.

"Play your cards right and you'll have enough money to buy more than one."

Dins'unk smiled.

"You ever tried living under a bridge?"

Dins'unk asked.

"I've had to stop in many places in my time."

"Like where?"

"Once, word got to me that some music boxes I had been selling, broke after the song finished. How's a man meant to know? I wasn't going to crank the handle on every single one. Anyway, the town was not happy, so I had to spend the rest of the night in a cemetery."

"Poor you." Dins'unk said, throwing some rabbit bones into the river.

"That's not the best of it. I ended up barely escaping a banshee, after I *gifted* her a throat tonic and –"

"Who approaches this river glen?" A voice bubbled below the water.

"Oh no, no *we* aren't doing this." Magpie shouted back. "I've had enough of magical folk for

the time being, thank you.”

“Rude.” Dins’unk muttered. “Rivers have nymphs, you must have known that? That’s why I tend to stick to puddles, a lot simpler. Here, I’ll handle this, have an affinity with them.”

Dins’unk cleared his throat. “Bridge planning commission, lady.”

“Oh no.” The nymph cried.

“That’s right. We’ve had a report that people have been drowning in unsafe attempts to cross this river.”

“We don’t need an ugly bridge here, it’ll block out the light.”

“We’ll be the judge of that. Me and my associate will be crossing and having a look at the other side.” Dins’unk said, wading into the river.

Magpie followed his lead and picked a shallow part to cross. He dared not look down and get dragged in by the nymph’s beauty.

Scarab was hesitant, but as she dropped in, the icy water forced her on. Magpie’s boots filled with water, and he sucked in air, as the chill seeped into his ankles.

“Right,” Dins’unk said, “looks like a section twenty-four b. We’ll have to dig this up, put foundations in there, knock that bank down.”

“No, please.” The nymph whispered.

“Gotta be done lady. Do you want a safe river, or what?”

“It’ll drive the house prices down.” She cried.

“But the bridge will mean more travellers coming through here.”

Bubbles of silence filtered to the surface, as she considered the future drowning potential.

Dins’unk followed Magpie’s progress through the river and as soon as Scarab made it to the bank, they bolted. Scarab sprinted through the trees and Magpie ducked down to avoid the branches. Dins’unk became a dark blur against the greenery, they only stopped when the river could no longer be heard.

\*

It was a while before Magpie opened his eyes again. He did not know which was worse, the nymph, or the way Scarab had charged through the trees. Either way, he had his fill of near-death ex-

periences for one day. They broke through a clearing and he could sense the dragon was close. Magpie studied the area, and his focus fell onto a monstrous mountain which pierced the sky. The clearing was absent of all life and Magpie and Dins’unk’s eyes were drawn to the gaping hole carved in the mountain. Light stopped there, unable to break into the pit. Scarab neighed and Magpie dug his knees into her ribs, but she would go no further. He was shaken when a voice thundered, “Who disturbs my slumber?”

Magpie watched the grass bend under the voice’s strength.

Scarab whinnied and Magpie reached down to sooth her.

Dins’unk was shaking, he was used to being the biggest creature for miles.

“Great to see you earning your share buddy.” Magpie whispered to him, finishing with a sigh.

It was up to him to get himself out of this one.

*When had it ever been any other way?*

Magpie jumped off Scarab, handed the reins to Dins’unk and plopped his dirty hat on his head.

“It’s the bank.” He shouted back, as he walked towards the cave.

“The bank?”

“Yes, Mr – ”

“- Just call me Barthandarax.”

“Yes, Barthandarax. Seems like you’ve taken up residence in this local lair and have avoided paying your rent for, how long have you been in there now?”

“It must be six months on Tuesday.”

“Says here on your record, eight, Barthandarax.”

“I - ”

“- No need to lie sir, we can get this all straightened out. But you must work with me.”

“I don’t want any trouble, this is my home.”

“Yes, I understand sir.”

“People come and make sacrifices, it’s already a bother with the address. They seem to get lost near the river, and I never end up with my vir-

gins on time.”

“We all have problems Barthandarax, but we can try to clear some of yours up for you.”

“You’re so kind.”

“I have a troll here with me, he can rectify the river problem, as quick as you can burn a village. Isn’t that right Dins’unk?” Magpie said, turning back towards him.

Dins’unk could only nod.

“Splendid, what did you say your name was again?” Barthandarax asked.

“Murphy, Murphy Magpie, pleasure to help you – ”

“- Magpie!” The dragon roared.

Flames burst from the cave and Magpie jumped to the ground, his hat falling off his head.

*I’ve never met a dragon before, have I?*

“You no good, lying piece of horse manure.”

Magpie’s smile faded.

“Why are you here Magpie?” Barthandarax bellowed.

“You’ll never believe this,” Magpie began, “the local village council has commissioned me as a consultant. We have a five-point plan to provide you with more virgins, but it involves you not eating so many people. You see, the more people you eat, the less virgins can be produced.”

“Don’t give me these centaur droppings, Magpie.”

“You seem to have me at a disadvantage, have we met before?”

“Just get out of here, before I burn you alive!”

Fire streamed out of the cave, and onto the field. Magpie felt too hot for comfort.

“Truth is, I can’t leave. We’ll have to come to some sort of arrangement. So, why don’t you come out of there and we can talk it out.”

The floor shook, as the dragon shifted inside the mountain. Dins’unk retreated further into the treeline with Scarab.

“No.” Barthandarax said.

Magpie watched Dins’unk flee and wished that he could do the same. But then he noticed something about the grass near the cave entrance; it wasn’t burning.

“I’ve heard about overweight dragons.”

“I’m not overweight.”

“They grow so big, from eating so many people - ”

“- It has nothing to do with that.”

“Body dysmorphia is a debilitating condition.”

“For the last time, it has nothing to do with my body image.”

“If you aren’t coming out... I’ll have to come in.” Magpie said, rising from the ground with newfound confidence.

“No, you can’t do that.”

“Here I come.” Magpie shouted.

“Don’t you dare!”

Magpie ignored the dragon, and took a step closer to the cave, where he was immediately engulfed by flames.

\*

The fire didn’t hurt Magpie, in fact, it was his eyes he was most worried about. He closed them and began to slowly walk into the cave. His thoughts turned to Dins’unk and he wondered if he would be mourning the loss of his new partner, or, more likely, his profits. With the thought of profits came more ideas for sales opportunities.

*Maybe Dins’unk would be in the market for a fire-retardant herb, or powder?*

The glare from the flames faded and he felt the cold of the cave. He opened his eyes and blinked at the darkness.

“Gus?” Magpie shouted, his voice echoing down through the cave.

“Go away.” A voice barked back.

“You were always the best at illusions Gus. That fire, I almost believed it myself. Perhaps we can team up again, people might buy something which makes you fire-proof. I can see the knights queuing up now, we can have a sale all - ”

“- I don’t want to get involved with you again, not after last time!”

Magpie walked deeper into the mountain. It smelled less like a lair and more like a bakery.

*Cinnamon, apple...vanilla?*

“I don’t know many dragons who bake Gus, do you?”

“Why do you always have to come and ru-

in everything?" The dragon moaned.

Magpie jumped, as a horny snout forced him back.

Yellow eyes lit the cave and Magpie stared at black slits, as big as swords.

"Barthandarax, where did you come up with a name like that?" Magpie asked, reaching out to touch the shimmering scales.

"I'm warning you." Barthandarax boomed.

"Come off it Gus, I can see right through you. Your birthmark's right there, above your left eye."

"Damn."

The eyes grew smaller and the dragon began to fade, it's colours swirling. Barthandarax the dragon shrank, until he was the same size as Magpie, but a lot uglier.

"Barthandarax had me going there for a minute." Magpie mused.

"I had something good here Magpie."

"I can believe it."

"I've been expecting a knight to show up any day now."

"Lucky, I got here, because it's a wizard who has arrived to save the day, and he isn't a nice one. Name's Alfric and I'm here because he's forced me into slaying you."

"You, slay me? How did you get tangled up in that?"

"Long story. Anyway Gus, you'll have to do your dragon thing elsewhere, there's money in it for you."

"But I've just got this lair how I want it."

"How's seventy gold coins sound?"

"When can you help me move?"

\*

"Dins'unck this is Gus, Gus this is Dins'unck." Magpie leaned down from atop of the dragon.

"Pleasure to meet you Dins'unck." Gus said, smoke smouldering from his nostrils.

"You know each other?" Dins'unck asked.

"Don't ask." Gus said. "But seems like Magpie's got us both into a bind, and I don't mess with wizards, nasty people, one of them abducted my cousin! I won't say no to a tidy profit either."

"Excuse me, but how do you know a drag-

on Magpie?" Dins'unck asked.

"This isn't a dragon, it's Gus, an ogre. He can morph into anything he likes. Nice little trick, it got us out of quite a few binds."

"But how did you manage that with the fire, Gus?" Dins'unck wondered aloud.

"It's an old Ogre trick, we aren't just shifters you know, we can change matter itself."

Dins'unck nodded, not quite knowing what to believe.

"You want to hop on for a ride? It'll be quicker than walking back to Damsen."

Dins'unck shook his head. "No thanks, us trolls have a fear of heights."

"No worries." Gus said, stretching out his wings and leaping into the air. "See you back in Damsen."

"Take Scarab with you!" Magpie called down.

Dins'unck waved them off, his mouth still wide open.

\*

"I hate being ridden you know." Gus moaned.

"Stop whining. Scarab can't talk, so you can't either." Magpie whispered.

They crossed Dins'unck's wooden plank and made their way into Damsen.

There were cheers from the villagers.

"Magpie's back!"

Magpie waved and cantered into Damsen. He did not stop to share pleasantries, he wanted Gus squirreled away, before the wizard had time to see him. They approached The Pretty Peacock and Magpie guided Gus to the back. He noted his wagon was untouched and stabled Gus.

"I'll be back in a minute." Magpie said.

"You better." Gus groaned.

Magpie walked towards the inn and the door flew open.

"Alive and well Magpie? I must admit, that is a surprise." Alfric said.

"Yes, I'm full of surprises. The dragon has been slayed, so give me back my money."

Alfric frowned. "Slayed, you say?"

"That's right."

"How did you do it?"

“Let the bards immortalise it in song. My money. You also promised to double my earnings.”

“You wouldn’t be lying, would you Magpie?”

Magpie found himself being scrutinised by too many pairs of eyes, poking out of the wizard’s white beard.

“I’m just an honest merchant.”

“Because if you were lying, you’d have a very big problem.”

“Who would be stupid enough to lie to a wizard?” Magpie laughed.

“Nobody. But I didn’t mean to sound threatening. It’s just, if that dragon is still alive, your pledge is unfulfilled and you’ll never be able to leave Bloomdale, because you’d be tied to that dragon forever.”

Magpie grew faint.

*Will remain tied forever.*

“I’ve slayed that dragon, you go look in its lair. You won’t find it.”

“Eat it as well, did you?” Alfric smiled.

“This was my first dragon and even I didn’t expect it to turn to ash when...you know. Now, my money?”

“I’ve never heard of a dragon dying and turning into ash and I’m Gildmoore’s senior Dragon researcher. Anyway, fair is fair.” Alfric said, waving his staff.

Magpie frowned, but Alfric pointed. Magpie looked and saw his wagon was piled with a few more chests.

*Gold.*

“Thanks, I’ll be on my way.” Magpie said, turning towards his wagon.

“Goodbye Magpie, and if I ever need a dragon slaying again, I know who to find.”

“Dragons, trolls...you name it, I can do it. Murphy Magpie, your knight in shining armour.” Magpie said, through a smile.

He strolled towards Gus and hitched the golden mare to his wagon.

As Magpie’s emporium rolled out of Damsen, Gus asked, “You got the gold?”

“Yes. But, we have a slight problem.”

“Not another one. It’s the troll, isn’t it?”

Gus groaned.

“No, it’s not the troll, we’ll have to stop and pay him, and get Scarab back. It’s something else. What would you say about going into business together?”

“I’d say, get on your horse.”

“You don’t have a choice.”

“I might be a horse now Magpie, but I can squish you as a giant.”

“Gus, do you remember that pledge I was telling you about?”

“Yes...oh no.”

“Oh yes.” Magpie said. “Unless you want me to actually slay you?”

Gus reared and bolted, knocking Magpie from the wagon.

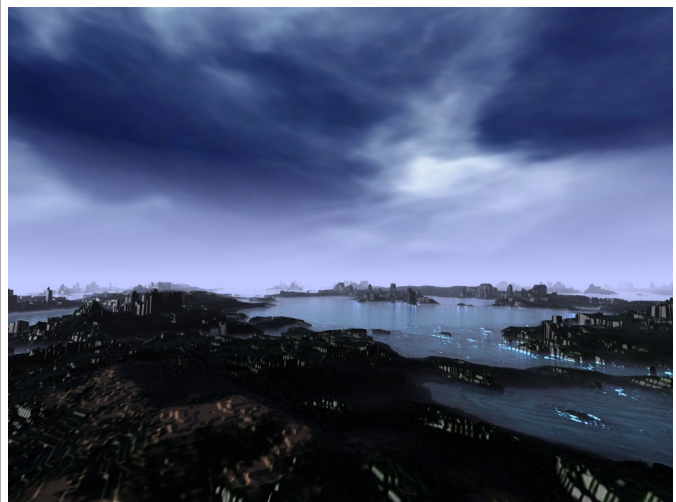
Magpie landed in Dins’unk’s puddle with a splash.

“You won’t get very far.” Magpie shouted after him.

Dins’unk crawled through the bushes, retrieved Magpie’s filthy hat and handed it to him.

“Where’s he going, with *my* money?”

“Don’t worry,” Magpie said, brushing off his hat and standing up, “he won’t get very far.”



Alien City by Tiffanie Gray

## Sigils

by P. N. Harrison

0-10. Winless. That has been the story for the Concord Lions football team for more than a decade. At this point, the goal of the games isn't so much to win, but to manage to put a few points on the board. We rarely do. But that's all going to change this year.

We're a small school, with only thirteen players on our team. The coaches are happy to take pretty much any warm body that will help them fill out their lineup. That's how I made the squad. I'm not the biggest guy on the team – I may even be the smallest – but I *am* the smartest. And that's what's going to make the difference for Concord.

I spend a lot of time on the internet. Recently, I've been poking around on the Dark Web. There's a lot of stuff about the occult, if you know where to look. Most of it is nonsense. But I've found something. Something raw. Something ancient.

I started by scratching one of the symbols I found on the bottom of my cleats with a nail. It was just for fun. I wasn't really expecting anything to happen. But, man, did it make me run. I wasn't any faster or anything, but I went the whole practice and didn't break a sweat. Even at the end, when the coach had us run wind sprints, my legs didn't get tired. It was great.

So, I got to the locker room early the next day and scribbled a different symbol into the inside of Sammy's gloves. He's one of our offensive linemen. He lined up against the blocking sled at the beginning of practice and...*wham!* I swear he knocked the thing two feet into the air. He said it's because of his new protein shake. I know better.

Patrick is our running back. I carved a sigil into his thigh pad. I've never seen anything like it. He's not a big guy, and Deidrick came up to tackle him during practice. Deidrick's over two hundred and fifty pounds, but Pat ran right over him and kept going. I think I'm going to draw something special onto Deidrick's shoulder pads before next practice; I'd feel terrible if he got hurt.

I saved the best for last. One morning, I snuck into the locker room and etched one of my special signs into the inside of Frank's helmet. He's our quarterback, and not a very good one, either. For the whole day, every pass was right on the money. After practice, he said that it was like he could see exactly where the receivers were going to run and how the ball was going to fly, like a glimpse into the future. He was grinning from ear to ear.

Yes, things are going to be different for the Concord Lions this year. Our first game is this Friday, and I can't wait to show everyone what we can do. After all, I may not be the biggest guy on the team, but I am the smartest.





Wolfoid by José Sánchez

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