Hell Itself

October 2025

Laurence Raphael Brothers
Deborah L. Davitt
Nicholas De Marino
Toshiya Kamei
KT Wagner

Hell Itself

Editor-in-Chief: Arthur Robert Tracy IV
Publishers: Jim Keller & Chris Boltz

What We Do Here:

There's a bit of advice we give to writers: "Keep submitting your story until hell itself won't have it." The unfortunate truth is that there are more humans out there producing great short stories than there are venues to publish them.

And, thus, *Hell Itself* was born.

Most editors will tell you that they reject far more good material than they accept. A great story may simply not be a good fit for the current issue. Or it could be great but the wrong choice for the publication's tone and style. It might be about something that the venue's core readers wouldn't like to read about. Or there may just not be enough slots in the magazine to take everything the editor loved.

Well, sometimes those great stories can rack up a lot of rejections, leaving the author feeling like hell itself won't take it.

We wanted to let go of those reasons why great stories don't get published. We don't have a fixed number of stories we can take, a proscribed tone or style for the magazine, or a core readership we need to keep happy. If it's a great story that no one else would take, we want it.

Welcome to *Hell Itself*.

https://hellitself.com

Lightning Cellar Publications

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On the Rainy Side of the Mountain They Grow Columbine, Nightshade, and Stinging Nettle

by KT Wagner

Decades past, a hamlet sprang up inside the outer boundary of a vast metropolitan area. Years later, the city map rather arbitrarily and unfairly, according to the residents, annexed the community.

As the crow flies, it wasn't far, but a lake separated the neighbourhood from the densely populated city. A meandering, neglected road provided the only land access. A mountain range jutted to the north. The hamlet was isolated, and the residents liked it that way.

For as long as anyone could remember, Nora owned a café on one corner of the only crossroad with a stop sign. More recently she added a plant and trinket shop, with many residents referring to the addition as *that modern newfangled place*. Her customers didn't like the change until Nora explained the language of flowers.

The residents had gathered in Nora's café. They were fed up with rules and restrictions designed by and for the big city. They felt ignored — except at tax collection time — and decided to unilaterally declare their village autonomous.

Nora offered to write the city a letter on purple, scented notepaper. She enclosed pressed cyclamen and yellow carnations. Empathy and rejection. Three months later, the city responded by dispatching the alderman assigned to their ward. Over coffee and muffins at Nora's café, he informed the residents they weren't allowed to separate. He hinted the city might, someday, build a bridge.

"No thanks," the people of the hamlet responded. "We didn't vote for you. Everyone wrote in Nora's name."

Nora presented the Alderman with a bouquet of dogwood flowers, white poppies, and blue salvia. She urged him to share it with city council. "Look here," she said. "I've divided the stems into two dozen mini bouquets. Hand them out." Her voice took on a ring of authority the residents knew well. "Forget my gift. Forget this place. Think only

of how they will react to your thoughtfulness."

The city forgot about the hamlet, and the residents christened their emancipated town Drizzle.

The world moved at a faster rate on the outside. The citizens of Drizzle didn't like change, and used words like quaint, rustic, and timeless, to describe themselves.

Almost thirty years passed.

Progress leaked in. Mostly in drabs, sometimes in dribs, like the cellular tower a big company — or perhaps another interfering level of government — erected up the mountain. In Drizzle the paranoia was palpable.

Nora sprinkled butterfly weed seeds around the base of the tower. "A warning they best take seriously," she told those gathered at the café.

The tower was switched on. Soon, the townspeople reluctantly acknowledged that cell access and internet were occasionally handy.

"Don't forget, if we listen in on the world, the world listens in on us." Jake — a pluviophile from the city who'd moved to Drizzle decades back — bombastically observed one Sunday from the veranda of the movie theatre that also served as a multi-denominational church.

The church wasn't popular, even among the religious. Residents worried it might spoil them for movie watching in the same building. However, word of Jake's proclamation spread quickly as not much else was going on.

For once, Jake was right. Sort of. The problem proved to be more immediate and closer at hand.

Real estate prices had risen a fair bit that year, and a few locals were happy to part with land for much-needed cash. Initially, the influx of newcomers into Drizzle's outskirts didn't cause much of a stir.

However, the day following the Harvest Moon, two customers at Nora's café complained their pets had gone missing. Nora promised to create flyers and baked clove-spiced scones as a fundraiser to cover printing costs.

The next month, late in the evening of the Hunter Moon, Bob, the gas station owner, interrupted a customer at the self-serve pump.

"He tried to cover it up," he told Nora the next day. "But I caught a glimpse of canine teeth, and his eyes glowed red for a moment. I googled the signs. There's no doubt… " Bob raised his voice to announce the verdict, though he needn't have bothered. The half-dozen villagers sipping coffee were already hanging on his every word.

"Werewolves in our town!" Nora gasped. "I'm calling an old-timer meeting for after closing."

Old-timer was code for anyone who could trace their Drizzle family history at least one generation back.

Folk at the meeting claimed to have learned, via Google, that supernatural creatures could hear a whispered conversation across a crowded room, but Luke from the eight-plex on First Street discovered a *scientific* article, and now they knew werewolves could hear conversations miles away and through up to four walls!

For safety, they developed a system of written notes and simple hand signals.

Nora suggested they refresh their knowledge of the language of flowers. She spoke to Gladys, her head waitress, about adding edible flowers to the menu. "Let's see what customers pick," Nora whispered. "We'll watch for concerning patterns. Even folk we've known for years might be hiding something."

Nora inventoried her garden for edible flowers with hidden meanings. Snapdragons for deception. Pansies for loving thoughts. Nasturtium for conquest. And chive blossoms for courage.

Nora found a Pinterest board with many suggestions for edible flowers. There she discovered how pretty and versatile deviled eggs could be and added them to the menu.

Two days later, Gladys uncovered the vampires. There'd been a surge in the population of bats near her property and she'd been grateful for the mosquitoes they ate. However, when two neighbour couples turned down garlic-mashed potatoes in favour of French fries and then visibly recoiled when she garnished their plates with garlic chive blossoms—

Plus, she couldn't recall ever seeing those newcomers in the café during daylight hours.

The next week, Jake dropped by. They'd been discussing things at church and Luke had done more internet research. "We have concerns about witches casting spells and hexing people. But apparently marigolds protect against witchcraft."

He asked Nora why she didn't sell marigolds or marigold seeds at her shop? "Also, deviled eggs seemed an odd thing to suddenly add to the menu and Luke reports that they are often referred to as funeral food, especially in the south."

"Good thing we're in the north," Nora replied.

Jake's eyes narrowed, and immediately she regretted being flippant. The talk turning to witches made her skittish. She'd never worried about openly owning a black cat, and the gnomes in her garden were cute and harmless.

Nora popped a warm apple muffin into a paper bag and quickly prepared a to-go cup of Jake's favourite, hot chocolate. She pressed them into his hands. "Here you go. I'd love to invite everyone for a special dinner tonight. My way of giving back."

Nobody showed up, but a basket of lavender was left at the door.

No note. Nora pressed a hand against her stomach. She didn't need to look up the sweetly scented flower to know they meant distrust.

Drizzle no longer felt welcoming and quaint, only superstitious and rustic.

KT Wagner tells us that this was rejected at least 11 times at paying markets, being too speculative for the literary magazines but not comfortably a fantasy story. KT writes speculative fiction and poetry in the garden of her home on the west coast of Canada. She loves to knit and collects strange plants, weird trivia, and obscure tomes. KT can be found online at www.ktwagner.com and https://bsky.app/profile/ktwagner.bsky.social

Munitions Release

by Laurence Raphael Brothers

Whenever she closed her eyes, Captain Maria Hernández, USAF, ret., fell into the dream. Always the same. Always unbearable. She had a supply of Modafinil left over from duty ops, but the drug could only go so far in keeping her awake. Her pulse was 150 at rest. Her chest hurt all the time. At last, desperate for release from her torment, she checked herself into the PTSD unit at the Veterans Affairs hospital for memory erasure therapy.

Now she was wired into a treatment system, a superconducting mask over her face, a psychoactive drug drip in her arm.

"About to enter trance." The therapist's voice was cheerful. "Captain Hernández, your stress dream should emerge shortly. We're going to have to run through the whole thing once to calibrate before we can break the loop. I apologize for putting you through this, but I'm sure we'll be able to help you."

The captain didn't reply. She was already deep into the dream. Two user interface tiles floated before her eyes overlaid on top of video imagery: **Munitions Release** and **Mission Cancel**.

She was back at her old drone controller's workstation at Creech Air Force Base. A virtual reality helmet was on her head instead of the therapy mask, and she was seeing through the camera eye of a heavily armed drone. There it was. The concrete building with the corrugated steel roof, grainy due to the magnification of the drone's optics. Intel markup glyphs hovered around the target, detailing its coordinates, hardness rating, and military value: an ad-hoc enemy headquarters. A building in a rural village on the opposite side of the world from her Nevada base. Everything was nominal. No sign of civilians, no indication of any error in target designation.

She tapped the tile labeled **Munitions Release**. At this stage, it never occurred to her to cancel.

In her dream, Captain Hernández became the Hellfire missile streaking towards the target. The concrete building swelled rapidly before her virtual eyes. But before impact she slowed down. Instead of striking the roof of the building she came to a halt just outside the front door. She felt a rising horror and tried to turn away, but she was unable to alter the course of the dream. The door opened and she advanced into the building, hovering in the air as if she were a quadcopter toy instead of a drone-launched missile.

The captain floated into a classroom full of eight-year-olds. She

saw a blackboard with words in English and Arabic. A rainbow drawn in colored chalk. No sign of the enemy. The whole class turned to look at her, but no one spoke. They behaved like she was expected. She saw no fear in the children's placid faces. She wanted to apologize to them, to beg their forgiveness; but she was a missile. She couldn't speak. There was only one thing she could do.

Detonate.

At that moment she wanted to do it. Blowing up would end her; and she knew she deserved it. She needed it. The civilians didn't matter. They died every day, one way or another. She willed it and the explosion came. And with it the pain in her chest intensified. A fireball filled the room in slow motion. She saw children's bodies flying through the air, swirling around her like rag-tag bits of trash caught in a dust devil, and then the scene went black. It was a gratifying darkness, quiet and still. But it didn't last.

• • •

The therapist looked up at the dream-screen mounted above her patient's recumbent body. That was a bad one, she thought. She tapped the **End Trance** tile on her tablet.

"Wake up, Captain. You did well. Next session we'll clear the trauma nexus. I'm sure of it."

There was no response. She tapped the tile again.

"Captain Hernández!"

Still nothing. It was only then that she noticed that her patient had stopped breathing.

• • •

Emerging from blackness, Captain Hernández clicked **Munitions Release**.

She rocketed towards the building, slowing to a halt outside the front door. The classroom again. The children. Their silent stare. Their calmness. Their acceptance. Fireball. Fade to black.

Munitions Release

The missile raced once more towards its fiery immolation in a classroom full of innocent children. She experienced it over and over. Each time with a growing sense of horror and dismay culminating in the revelation of the classroom; but each time at the critical moment she committed to the detonation. Voluntarily. Eagerly, even. She wanted the fade to black and the descent into oblivion. But then it began again. And again. And again.

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A team of medics had come and gone, taking Captain Hernández's body with them. The therapist was alone in the empty room. Her dead patient's dream cycled on the screen above the vacant chair, looping. She reached out to her tablet, hesitated. Her finger hovered over a

tile on the UI labeled **Cortical Stimulus**. The button she would have pressed to administer therapy. She stabbed her finger down.

• • •

The captain tapped **Munitions Release**. There was no other choice. When the Hernández-missile launched, she dived as usual toward the schoolhouse. But this time she felt a spark of volition. She knew what was going to happen next, and more than that she knew she couldn't stand having it happen again.

She pulled back into a screaming half-loop, her rocket engines vectoring into a high-*g* turn. Far overhead, she saw a tiny speck, the drone that had launched her already returning to overlook mode, scanning for new targets. She blinked virtual eyes, and a targeting reticle appeared over the speck. A tone sounded. Lock-on. And now the speck became a dot; now a tiny flying cross; and now she saw it clearly, a General Atomics Reaper-II silhouetted against the bright blue vault of the heavens. Her last sight was the USAF stars-and-bars roundel, red, white and blue against the gray fuselage of the drone. Maria hit it square: dead on.

• • •

The therapist stared at the dream-screen above the empty therapy unit, disbelieving. A bloom of fire appeared high in the sky over the schoolhouse. Text scrolled over the display. **Mission Canceled**, it read.

Laurence Raphael Brothers tells us he tried a whopping 70 other markets before sending this unusual story our way. Laurence Raphael Brothers is a writer and a technologist. He has published over 50 short stories in such magazines as Nature, Galaxy's Edge, and The New Haven Review. Check out his books and stories at http://laurencebrothers.com/bibliography and follow him on bluesky at @lrb.bsky.social. Pronouns: he/him.

Matt's Baby

by Toshiya Kamei

"Congratulations!" The doctor leans forward on her swivel chair. Her smile reveals teeth as pearly as her lab coat. The name tag on her ample chest reads Dr. Heather Treviño — with a little squiggly line over the "n" — but I refuse to say her name like the Latinos do.

"Excuse me?" I beam like the great senator that I am. After fifteen years of hobnobbing with filthy-rich donors, I work wonders with my smile.

"You're pregnant."

My grin freezes, and I almost fall off the examination table.

"Is this a joke?"

"I'm serious." A trace of a smile still lingers on her lips.

"But how?" I throw up my hands. "I'm a man. I mean, I'm a person with sperms — like y'all like to say."

Come to think of it, I did throw up a few days ago when my girlfriend was cowgirling me. To my chagrin, Karen made fun of my "morning sickness." I yelled when she touched my tender man boobs. I also craved raw meat like the young wife in *Rosemary's Baby.*

"Don't worry, Congressman Matthews." Dr. Trevino leans closer. Her floral scent tickles my nose. When she touches my trembling hand, I jerk back.

"I'm your senator, not your congress—"

"You won't be the first, Matt. Cisgender men can become pregnant on rare occasions."

I don't listen to the rest. I grab my coat and storm out of the clinic. As the chilly evening air hits my face, I pull out my phone and push speed dial. While waiting for my wife, Meagan, I touch the filigree ball on a silver chain under my shirt. A gift from her for our twentieth anniversary, it resembles the Tannis-root pendant given to Rosemary by her haggish neighbor in *Rosemary's Baby*. Fitting, indeed. Politicians and Satan make fantastic bedfellows.

"What is it, honey?" Meagan answers my call.

"They say I'm pregnant!" I yell, my voice echoing across the dark parking garage. "A fifty-year-old man, pregnant!"

"That's great!" she chirps, no trace of irony in her voice. "The girls will be thrilled—"

"Cut it out!" I shout louder than before.

"The girls miss you," Meagan says.

That's a goddamn lie. My daughters hate me. They both follow AOC on Instagram, and my youngest came out as queer last year.

"I'm swamped with work and need to go," I lie, hanging up before she can say anything else. Fighting the urge to smash my phone against the pavement, I climb into my Range Rover.

If this is a joke, it's getting out of hand. If I'm pregnant, on the other hand, I need to end it. Alas, abortion has been illegal in Texas for the last several years.

Don't get me wrong. I'm proud to have played no small part in overturning *Roe v. Wade*. I have nothing against abortion, mind you, but a national ban is our boss's long-term pet project. Besides, catering to our evangelical base doesn't hurt.

Jammed bumper-to-bumper on the I-35, I order Karen, my AI assistant, to speed-dial her namesake. Karen Montenegro is the State Congresswoman from District 9. Contrary to how mainstream media portrays her, there's nothing Karen-esque about her.

"I know you're there!" I yell. "Pick up. It's an emergency."

After five rings, however, the call goes straight to voicemail.

"Howdy, I'm Karen," her prerecorded message plays. "I'll be your server today. What can I get you to drink?"

Despite myself, her inside joke never fails to arouse me.

She was my server every time I dined at the steakhouse downtown. My dick springs up like Pavlov's dog as I imagine ripping off her waitress uniform. To think that only a few years ago a rising star of state politics blew me in a toilet stall between her shifts.

For the record, I have a perfect excuse for my infidelity. My wife refuses to put on a strap-on and satisfy my anal needs. Once, Meagan bitch-slapped me when she caught me wearing her wedding dress, threatening to annul our marriage. In contrast, Karen lets me try on all her clothes. I adore her thongs. The only problem is that I keep tearing apart those itsy-bitsy panties.

A pickup truck speeds up to cut me off, and I click my tongue. Great. Now I'm forced to stare at pink bull's nuts for a while.

Damn it, why is she not answering? Maybe she's with someone. Funny, she and her hubby of eighteen years are in Splitsville following his arrest for exposing himself to multiple teenagers. Nasty business. She and Andy had been virgins and high school sweethearts, always true to each other. At sixteen, she walked down the aisle with a bun in the oven. "Happily Ever After" is only make-believe. She and I, on the other hand, were never exclusive. Even so, jealousy raises its ugly head.

Karen was my Vivian Ward, or Eliza Doolittle for boomers out

there. Under my tutelage, she quickly learned to tone down her trailer-trash demeanor.

I take exit 233, flipping the bird to some redneck who swerves into my lane without warning. After a few blocks, my building comes into view.

I leave the scorching parking garage and run up to my AC-chilled office. I briefly consider calling a local escort, but I opt to sniff alone. Gen-Zers are too greedy for my taste. If I let them, they'll finish my coke in no time.

I grab a straw and kneel before the glass coffee table. As I snort one line, *Rosemary's Baby* comes on TV.

"Wanna line?" I ask my reflection.

"Don't mind if I do," I say as I take second snort.

In a dreamlike sequence, the young bride fantasizes about being raped by Satan while her husband and her neighbors watch in the buff. That's my wet dream right there.

My phone beeps with an incoming call. It's Karen.

"What's up, Matt?" She draws out her vowels as if she's waking up from a nap. I hear her shifting in bed, accompanied by a man's low groan in the background. Something about that makes me horny.

"Pass me the number of your doctor."

"Which one?"

The gal is a sweetheart. Her heartless opponent alleged that her Cuban-born granddaddy was involved in the JFK assassination, but not even Sherlock could find any evidence to link him to the murder.

"Your abortionist."

"Wait. I'm not wearing my glasses."

"What do you need them for?" I scoff.

My dear Karen excels at playing pretend.

Despite her career change, she still wears a uniform: she puts on glasses to make it seem like she can read and carries a loaded Glock to her office in the Capitol. She charms her way past security guards every day.

When she agreed to wear a strap-on, one thing led to another, and I knocked Karen up a couple of times. It wasn't entirely my fault. She'd led me to believe she was on the pill.

A while ago, our local Lisa Ling-look-alike named Cecilia Kurosawa sniffed around, bothering Karen's neighbors. Bless her heart, Cecilia thought Karen's youngest bore an uncanny resemblance to me. A receipt from Planned Parenthood would've proved my innocence—although that would've exposed my hypocrisy. So, Cecilia had to go. Despite my role in her untimely demise, I teared up when I read about her "suicide" on my newsfeed.

"Is your wife pregnant again?"

"Hell no!"

"Oh, gosh. Don't tell me it's one of your girls."

"Cut out the nonsense," I bark. "Just give me the number."

She does. I hang up, call the number Karen gave me, and make an appointment for the next morning. I snort a few more lines before collapsing on the couch.

• • •

At dawn, I head toward to Galveston, barely beating the morning traffic. I take the HOV lane; I'm with a child, after all. I go ninety on State Highway 71, but even if I get caught, Lt. Col. Brown, chief of Highway Patrol, will cut me some slack. We're good buddies. In a couple of hours, I reach my destination.

With the damp, salty wind in my face, I step onto a motor boat operated by a hooded man who refuses to talk. We soon reach a luxury yacht that doubles as an offshore floating clinic. The Gulf of America, its God-given name echoing through the waters, became a beacon of a different kind after abortion was criminalized nationally. Clinics of this kind popped up all along the Texas coast, yet firmly planted on international waters. Medical providers, sailing beyond the reach of U.S. restrictions, found a way to continue their services in this maritime haven. Thank God for the modern-day Margaret Sangers' courage, ingenuity, and dedication. Without them, I'd have to go to Juárez for a back-alley abortion like a young mother in a Lucia Berlin story.

The clinic reeks of antiseptic and sterile linen. I sit alone in the waiting room adjacent to an abandoned playroom with children's toys scattered on the floor. Thank goodness, I'm an Ivy-League educated man and not one of those working poor with no way to pay for childcare.

I spot a Latina cover girl smiling at me from the magazine rack. It's *People en Español*, one of the last print editions before it went digital a few years ago. I grab the magazine and flip through the tattered pages.

"Matthew Matthews," a male voice says in a sing-song tone. The door swings open and a copper-skinned young man sweeps in. I stand as he nods at me. He wears baby-blue nurse's garb.

"I'm Cassio," he says as he leads me to an exam room. He smiles behind his mask, and I fight the urge to rip it off his face.

He closes the flimsy curtain in front of an exam table and hands me a hospital gown.

I change in front of Cassio; I want him to see me naked. I keep my pendant on for good luck.

To my surprise, my man boobs are larger than before. My bloated stomach hides my flaccid penis. I climb onto the table, not minding if something extra is exposed.

I lie still, shutting my mind off to everything, while he pokes and prods me with his gloved hands, presumably to make sure I'm pregnant.

"Give me a pill and be done with it," I say, irritated.

"Unfortunately, abortion pills don't work on male patients."

"Why not?" I glare at him. "Never mind. Surgery, then."

"We're still required to explain the risks—"

"Stop." I raise my hand. "There's no way I'm having this baby."

"I understand, sir." The nurse averts his eyes. "Matt. May I call you Matt?"

"No, you may not."

"Most patients choose local anesthesia," he says.

"Whatever you do, Cassio," I say, wagging my finger, "you make sure it won't hurt. Put me to sleep before you do anything to me."

Cassio nods and hands me a document. I sign it after giving it a cursory glance and hand it back.

The anesthesiologist comes in and passes me a hissing mask connected to plastic tubing. The world goes dark as the anesthesia kicks in.

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I wake with a searing pain rippling through my stomach. The stale air smothers all color and sound. Harsh fluorescent lights overhead assault my eyes. I lie on a gurney. My hands and feet are bound to the railings with plastic straps.

Cassio walks in.

"How are you doing?"

What did you do to me? I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. I want something to drink. My throat hurts.

"I didn't know you'd be such a screamer, Matt," Cassio purrs. "Don't worry, honey. We gave you some medicine, so you can't scream anymore."

I must be dreaming. How can I wake from this nightmare?

"You're wide awake, honey."

Cassio places his hand on my stomach.

I scowl as something kicks me from the inside.

"Yours is such a kicker," he says with a smile. "We have accelerated the baby's development. You won't have to carry it for nine months anymore. This one will pop out sometime next week."

Impossible.

"Oh, it's quite possible," a familiar female voice says. It's Karen. Her scent wafts up to me, and I inhale the floral undertone.

"How are you, darling?"

When she touches my stomach, I flinch.

What are you doing here?

"I'm checking in on your baby." Karen wears a pink pantsuit and a yellow scarf around her neck. My old gal has outdone her idol, Kari Lake. She must have spent extra time on her makeup, looking sensual as ever with smoky eyeshadow and thick eyeliner.

What do you want?

"Next time, you'll be impregnated with twins," Karen says. "How does that sound?"

Let me out of here! My scream echoes inside me.

I sit up with force. My right wrist snaps free, and I reach toward Karen. I yell, but nothing comes out. Cassio injects something in my IV line. When I try to grab him, Karen shoves me down. Drowsiness overtakes me. I lose consciousness.

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The following morning, I wake to a woman holding a phallic microphone. She's here to "catch the last gurgles and the red swallowed tongues," to quote my dear Norma from *Sunset Boulevard*. She's followed by a young man carrying a handheld camera. The woman is Cecilia Kurosawa.

"Surprise!" she chirps. "You didn't expect to see me again, did you?" She turns and signals for her cameraman to start filming.

I try to scream, but it's still in vain. I want to spit at the cameraman, but my mouth is dry. All I can do is grimace. Tears roll down the sides of my face and fill my ears.

"Let's set up a stationary camera right here," she says. "We don't want to miss the big moment."

Over the next few days, I drift between delirium and dreamland.

Senator Matthews Is Pregnant. In my nightmares, salacious headlines splash across all forms of media. Late-night talk show hosts relish making me the butt of jokes. Mocking me over my virility or lack thereof becomes America's new national pastime.

Every time I close my eyes, a pristine beach stretches before me. Cancun. I sip my margarita while ogling half-naked bodies from my lounge chair. I'll go back there as soon as I get out of here. Cancun is a fantastic place to plot a comeback. I may be a Norma Desmond, but I aspire to be a Gloria Swanson.

I slowly come to my senses, and I find myself strapped on a metal bed. My private parts are exposed to chilly air. Familiar voices chuckle, penetrating my delirium.

"I'll divorce him when this is over," Meagan says. "The girls want to stay with me. He can keep his Range Rover."

A sharp pain pierces my abdomen, and I almost pass out.

The creature inside me rips open my stomach and sticks out its head. I scream again in silence. The chuckles around my bedside turn to cheers.

It's as large as a six-month-old. *All right, Ms. Kurosawa, I'm ready for my close-up.* It growls and bares its canines, flashing me a blood-stained smile as I tremble. The creature crawls forward, looking for breast milk.

Toshiya Kamei (she/they) is a queer Asian writer who takes inspiration from fairy tales, folklore, and mythology. This story was rejected 35 times before making its way to us.

On the Ropes

by Nicholas De Marino

Maybe the naked laser demons and melting skulls are too much for Jimmy. I'll never forgive myself if he screams through Colonizer #7000's whole entrance. Silly me, I try and turn down his 4D visor and my hand passes right through his see-through head.

"Sorry, honey," I tell my special little guy — we don't say "ghost" in our household, no sirree.

BOM BA-BOM BUH, BOM BA-BOM BUH.

"Jimmy, honey, look," I say as her theme music booms. "There's Colonizer #7000! Over there!"

"*¡Wepa!*" roars the crowd, which is Spanish for "weapon," I think. Our hero swaggers onto the stage in her classic outfit: a white and gold luchadora mask and a robe over matching shorts and pleather vest, feathers and sequins everywhere. A total hottie with a body. But don't let that fool you, she's a no-nonsense tough girl. Colonizer #7000 always wins.

The giant screen behind her strobes scenes of her kicking booty and taking names in the cubed sphere. There's her making Dwight "The Black Hole" Peterson tap out. And there's her beating up Turbo Sasquatch in a trans-dimensional portal match. Jimmy watches her intro vid four times a day. Maybe more since his dad left. Some low-lifes can't live up to their responsibility as the parent of a deceased child.

"Over here!" I yell as Colonizer #7000 saunters toward the ring. I wave for Jimmy to reach past the barricade with all the other hands, cyborg limbs, and claws and antennae, but he's too shy. Did you — did you see that? She made eye contact! Colonizer #7000 can see I'm a strong woman just like her and that I'm a good mom showing my son strong female role models, even though he's no longer corporeal. That can't just be the visor's enhancement.

Our hero strikes a power stance. I swipe away the HoloFans pop-ups. Hey, a girl's got to put food on the table, right? Colonizer #7000 leaps into the ring — a rotating flashy, cubey thing, each side with its own gravity — and tumbles across the floor, walls, and ceiling. A total boss.

"See, Jimmy, see?" I say.

"Ladies and gentlemen, clones, symbiotic lifeforms, and polypods, this is it!" shouts Announcer Bot 23 over everyone's telepathy chips. "Defending the Wormhole Wide Entertainment Intergalactic Championship! The Masked Wo-Menace! Col-luh-nize-er Num-bur Seh-ven Thou-sand!"

Our hero pops out of each of the eight corners and holds up her title belt. It trumpets neon sparks and the crowd goes nutso.

"C'mon, already! Get on with it!" shouts Announcer Bot 37, who's a total jerk and doesn't respect women in positions of power. "Who does she think she is?"

Everything goes black. It's quiet for a femtosecond before terrified screams fill the air. Then I remember to be strong for my special little guy and shut my mouth.

"*ALL SHALL CURTSY BEFORE XANDRIFF THE UNSOPHISTICATED*," blares a voice that's in front of us and beside us and everywhere. "*RESISTALENCE IS FUTILITY*."

"It's okay, honey. Cuddle up to Mama," I tell my special little guy. "Not that close. Remember what Mama said about personal hoops?"

The lights pop back on and Xandriff is floating in the center of the ring.

"Where did he come from?" shouts Announcer Bot 37.

"Xandriff the Unsophisticated comes from the far side of 55 Cancri e!" shouts Announcer Bot 23, who's glitchier than usual tonight.

The heel's diamond-shaped head spins the opposite direction of his diamond-shaped body as seven noodly tentacles flail from places that spit in the face of bilateral symmetry. Snake birds and busty rock people zip around the arena as warm bass farts his theme music and even I have to turn down my visor because too much is too much.

A droid with knobby joints and a zebra-striped shirt shuffles into the ring while Colonizer #7000 flexes and Xandriff flips off the crowd.

"¡Lárgate d'aquí, cabrón!" yells a guy behind us. That means, "Go away, bird!" I think.

"Boo! You suck!" yells my special little guy, who must've learned that naughty word from Xandriff the Unsophisticated. He's the worst *rudo* — "rude" — who's ever wrestled. Way worse that FlairFlairFlair

or Matilda the Hun.

DING!

"Look, Jimmy, there's Colonizer #7000 up there!" I say. "See?"

Our hero leaps and bounces around the ring. Xandriff just sits there and flails.

"Colonizer #7000 with a clothesline! She misses!" shouts Announcer Bot 23. "Here she comes again! Another miss! Xandriff capitalizes with a tentacle grab!"

"He's gonna fustigate her into mincemeat!" shouts Announcer Bot 37.

Xandriff holds Colonizer #7000 in place with five tentacles and slaps her with the other two.

"*SUMBIT OR PERISH, EARTH EXCREMENT*,"blares his awful voice. *"THE END IS TEMPORALLY ADJACENT*."

"Never!" yells our hero. She tries to counter, but she can't get any leverage. The microgravity around Xandriff is a real witch with a B.

"I can't watch!" shouts Announcer Bot 37. "This is a massacre!"

"A massacre implies a large number of people!" shouts Announcer Bot 23.

"Oh, shut up!" shouts Announcer Bot 37.

"Mama?" Jimmy asks. He looks up with puppy dog eyes — the same ones his deadbeat dad and I had installed two weeks before the accident. "She's gonna lose?"

"No way, honey, I promise," I say. "Colonizer #7000 always wins."

BAM! SMACK! FLIBBIT!

"Woo! You go, girl!" I yell as our hero kicks off Xandriff's body and escapes. She bounces off the ropes and whizzes past tentacles. She punches and kicks. She tumbles and turns and leaves a pop-up ad for Cyber Skittles.

"See, Jimmy, see?" I tell my special little guy. "See how she's fighting the patriarchy?"

Colonizer #7000 hits a leg drop that launches Xandriff downward. The angle is off, though. He slingshots off the ropes back at our hero, bouncing her into a corner. The villain grips the ropes with his tentacles and slams his glittery bulk into her.

"She's gotta be bleeding internally!" shouts Announcer Bot 23. "This is inhuman!"

"You can say that again!" shouts Announcer Bot 37.

"She's gotta be bleeding internally!" shouts Announcer Bot 23. "This is inhuman!"

Handmade signs and padlocks sail into the ring. A cup clips the ref droid, who sputters and sparks. Meanwhile, Xandriff the Unsophisticated whales away on Colonizer #7000.

Look, I know all of this is fake. Kayfabe, whatever. Xandriff's real

name is Tony Peña and most of those tentacles were grafted on. Colonizer #7000 is actually Emma González. She's just another roided-out actress chasing a Cinderella story. But, gosh darnit, this is important to my special little guy. He needs good to triumph over evil.

"¡Dale! ¡Dale!" yells the crowd, which is some ancient meme, I guess. Our hero ducks out of the way and Xandriff crashes into the turnbuckle. Then Colonizer #7000 pool sharks a three-plane bounce for an attack.

"Watch, honey," I say. "Here it comes."

"It's the Somersault Assault!" shouts Announcer Bot 23, and he's right. She lands her signature double leg drop onto Xandriff's big, stupid face.

"I don't care what your anatomy is, that's gotta hurt!" shouts Announcer Bot 37.

The visor replays it twice, plus an ad for gum.

"Woo! You go, girl!" yells Jimmy and, for one perfect moment, I couldn't be more proud.

But then I remember what's supposed to happen next.

Xandriff gets back up.

"He's still standing!" shouts Announcer Bot 37. "I don't believe what I'm seeing!"

"Perhaps you should run a check on your ocular subroutines!" shouts Announcer Bot 23.

"Oh, shut up!" shouts Announcer Bot 37.

I read about this on an online message board for single moms with special little guys. Someone who works at Wormhole Wide Entertainment leaked it. Colonizer #7000 loses the title belt tonight**.**

"¡No!" wails the crowd as Xandriff spins in place. His tentacles blur as our hero sways, mesmerized.

"¡Vamos, mija!" yells someone.

"Git outta thur, missy!" yells someone else.

Xandriff blurs into a blinding ball with little cartoon lightning bolts whizzing everywhere.

"Is it—? Could it be—? Oh no!" shouts Announcer Bot 23.

"A Cosmic Mutilator!" shouts Announcer Bot 37. "No one's ever come back from a Cosmic Mutilator!"

Jimmy screams and screams.

"It's going to be okay," I tell him, and I'm no liar.

Xandriff slams into Colonizer #7000. He smacks her every which way and she spins like a gyroscope. Then a Super Slap sends her crashing into the floor.

Colonizer #7000 always wins. But she's not getting up. Not after that.

"¡Arriba! ¡Arriba!" yells the crowd.

My special little guy deserves better.

The ref droid gets into position to start the count.

I tear off my visor.

"This is the end, folks!" shouts Announcer Bot 23.

I pull on my pink and gold luchadora mask. "Wait here, Jimmy," I say. "Mama will be right back."

Nicholas De Marino tells us that one of the 26 markets that rejected this story commented, "I couldn't figure out what kind of market, if any, would take such a story." The answer is Hell Itself. A former journalist, neurodivergent poet, and published crackpot, De Marino enjoys petting spiders and watching cats. SFPA and Codex, too. More at nicholasdemarino.blogspot.com.

The Great Old One Myrowl-Shu

by Deborah L. Davitt

Oh, you're here, are you? Well, so am I, so there's that. Mind if I get comfortable in your lap?

Oh, you're *allergic*. That's cute. I know someone else who was allergic, but he got better. I helped. I didn't particularly want to help, mind you — I just sort of got caught up in events. And I got to be a god for a while. Not that I'm not already pretty well divine, if I do say so myself. But this just put some underlining and exclamation marks on it.

Now that I've got your attention — my claws kneading into your leg will do that — let's start with the business of names. My humans, being more sensible than most, have graced me with the name of Myrowl, which entirely suits me. You've already noticed my soft white fur all over your black pants; you can't smell the rest of my introduction, since your nose is pretty feeble, so my name alone will simply have to do.

My story begins on Halloween, the night on which doors between worlds open wide. Wider, when they're forced open by inept magic and botched spells, I might add, but I'm getting ahead of myself. The adult humans were out at a business party, leaving Ki, their daughter, Seong, her brother, and two of Ki's schoolmates at home alone for homework purposes. Ben's the allergic one I mentioned before. Angela's the feisty one with the flute. I mention that because it's important. Just because the sound of it makes my ears lay flat against my neck doesn't mean that it's not music, I suppose. And music has magic in it.

The three older children were doing more talking than studying. Marching band gossip from Angela. Skateboard talk from Ben — I made sure to brush up against him repeatedly, in the hopes that *this* time, he'd drop down and scratch behind my ears. He finally complied — he has good fingers, so I started to purr as I continued to listen, vaguely, to their endless talk.

Finally Ki cut in, and her voice was so upset that I *had* to listen.

"It's so unfair," she whispered, as if afraid to voice the thought. "My parents keep insisting that I go pre-med. I don't want to be a doctor. I want to be a translator for the U.N. Something. Anything that gets me away from here."

"Wow," Angela replied softly, looking around as if the adults were about to walk in at any moment. "What brought this on?"

Ki's face crumbled. Even I noticed it. "My Chinese grandmother sent me a birthday gift. My father saw it and pitched a fit."

"Why would he do that?" Ben asked, and I took the opportunity to leap up into his lap when he wasn't sufficiently on guard.

"I don't know!" Ki wailed. "He went on and on about how he wasn't going to *encourage* me."

"Well, what was the gift?" Angela asked practically. A girl after my own heart.

"I'll go get it. They put it in their closet, but … it's *mine*," Ki said, raising her head with shaky defiance.

She hastened off, returning with a box. Inside nestled a pair of serious antiques. A scroll so old that it smelled musty, making me sneeze. And a bronze mirror, shiny on one side, elaborately carved with fish and dragons at the back.

"Whoa," Ben said, then amended lamely, "That's pretty awesome." *Articulate,* I thought. *Maybe you could throw in a <u>righteous</u> in with that?* Still, I could smell awe on him, which was the proper respect for something that old, so I purred in his lap and kneaded without drawing blood.

At that point, Seong, Ki's younger brother, stuck his head in the room. "I'm telling," he announced. "Dad said you weren't supposed to have that."

"Go put on your costume," Ki snapped. "I'm supposed to take him door-to-door when we're done studying," she told her friends apologetically. "Though I might *not*, if he tattles."

"Then you'll be in trouble twice," Seong told her loftily, clearly having figured out how the household worked long ago. "Once for having opened the box while Mom and Dad are at that hospital party, and again for not doing what they told you—"

Ki unrolled the scroll, deliberately turning her back on her brother. "Go put on your costume, or we're not going," she warned, examining the scroll. "Oh, wow, this is *really* old. I don't recognize half of these characters."

"What does it *say*?" Angela asked impatiently.

Ki began to read aloud in Mandarin. I understood it perfectly, of course, but she had to translate it for her poor human friends. "To open the gates," she said, "on a propitious night, between here and the lands of the mirror? That can't be right."

Angela picked up the mirror and looked into its depths. "Nothing here," she reported, laughing.

Which was when a giant floating *fish* emerged from the mirror, even as Angela dropped the bronze implement from nerveless fingers. It was the biggest golden koi I'd ever seen, by far larger than the ones in the backyard pond. It was partially translucent and it *unfolded*. Like origami made from multidimensional phase-space, but with dull, lifeless eyes the size of dinner plates.

I hissed and tried to *get at it.* This magical interloper was in *my territory*, without invitation, and I was going to gut it for its temerity.

Unfortunately, I was still in Ben's arms, so I raked his forearms bloody trying to get to the fish. Stupid human wouldn't put me down. I could have prevented the whole rest of the incident if he'd just *complied.*

Seong, standing in the doorway, shrieked as the fish cruised towards him, flicking its fins idly. The boy turned to run and *bloop*, the fish sucked him in, like a crumb tossed in a pond.

"Stop!" Ki screamed, grabbing a tiny end table, and hit the fish in the gills with it. I heard the wood crack. "Give him back! Give me back my brother!"

I have to give Ben full marks for courage. He dropped me and grabbed the fish. Seized its slick, scaly body, and held on. His heels skidded along the plush carpet towards the door, and he kicked up to plant his sneakers on the wall. "Can't hold him!" Ben shouted. "What do I do, give him a Heimlich?"

Then the tail slipped through the circle of his arms, and he fell to the ground heavily.

I ran past him, trying to follow the ever-growing koi, hearing Ki sob behind me. "Oh my god, he's d-dead, it's my fault, m-my … parents are going to kill me…"

Angela's voice now: "Try reading some more! Maybe you can fix this if you say it *right*."

"Or I could mess it up worse!" Ki wailed.

I had no time for this. I leaped for the koi, scrabbling to get any kind of hold on it. If I could just scratch through its scales to the soft underbelly—

—and then it went *through* the front door, as if solidity were simply elective for it. I dropped to the floor and headed to my window beside the door, scrabbling at it with my paws in my urgency to *get out* and deal with this intruder, who'd taken one of *my* humans…

Then Ben was there, looking out my window, above me. The fuchsia bushes that lined the street writhed with tentacles that extended menacingly at some child dressed up like a cartoon character — potato-shaped body, yellow skin, little stubby legs. The potato-toddler fled,

shrieking in terror as an adult beat back the tentacles with a flashlight.

"How?" Ki blurted in horror, joining us. "The mirror's in here!"

"It's spreading," Angela said, pointing. "Look! The side mirrors of that parked car — are those *monkeys* jumping out of them?" She sounded dazed. "Are we all hallucinating? Am I just dreaming that you guys are here with me?" She grabbed Ben's arm.

"Oh, god," Ben muttered. Clearly, he'd seen what I had. Next door, plastic lawn flamingos uncoiled from around a fashionable reflecting pond, inflating into large, vicious birds with wiry metallic legs. "Your neighbors are going to be pissed," he said blankly.

"The Vermillion Birds," Ki whispered as the towering birds leaped over the hedge into the street, pecking and kicking at anyone in range. "From Chinese legends."

"Any other critters we should know about?" Ben asked.

"The Black Tortoise—"

"You mean like a Japanese *kappa*?" Angela asked sharply.

"No, he's … why?"

Angela pointed shakily. I saw at once what they were talking about.

"I thought that was someone dressed up as Raphael from *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*," Ben said, his voice wavering. "Hey, um, weren't *kappas* the ones that, like, take control of your body by giving you an enema?"

"Sometimes," Angela replied, sounding horrified.

Whatever the creature was, it looked tall. Bipedal. Turtle shell, check … but now it lifted a costumed child over its head, as another adult beat on it with a flashlight. Then the kid hit the ground, shrieking, and the adult kicked the turtle-creature solidly away before picking up the child and running away.

"You're the one who's into anime," Ben told Angela, as the not-a-kappa turned its head slowly to regard the house. "Anything we can do? Anything that works on it like garlic on vampires?"

"Cucumber!" Angela yelped. "They like cucumber!"

"Great, I'll make it a *salad."*

I couldn't take my eyes off the turtle creature. I'd failed against the koi. I couldn't let this thing enter my territory. If the humans would just open the door, I could take care of this! I yowled to get their attention, but failed in that, too.

"This is my fault," Ki whispered. "I have to … I have to fix this. Angela, did you bring the mirror?"

"Well, yeah," Angela replied dubiously, hefting it. "You going to try reading again?"

"Yes. Somehow, creatures from the mirror-lands have come

through. It's the only explanation. Maybe if we reflect them again, they'll be sucked back through—"

"Whatever you do, do it fast. That tortoise guy can't run, but I bet he can phase through the door. Just like the fish," Ben added, ignoring the swords on the walls and grabbing his skateboard instead. Some weapon he chose. But, I suppose the one you're most familiar with is the one to pick in battle. And we were all in for battle together, it seemed.

Angela and Ki set up beside my window, while he stood in front of it, watching the not-a-kappa lumber closer. "That turtle has teeth," Ben pointed out uneasily as Angela brandished the mirror at the window and Ki began to read.

"*Shu*, that's a book, probably this one, um … read the book, unlock the doors, read the book, bar the gates—" the hasty translation shifted into Mandarin.

And at the last moment, I realized, *Wait, they're pointing the mirror at glass. What happens when you point a mirror at a mirror — infinity—*

Ben must have realized it at the same moment. "Wait, stop!" he yelped, just as I, trying to get their bloody-minded attention, leaped off the ledge, right onto his shoulder, latching on, claws drawing blood—

—and then something went off like a bomb somewhere behind my eyes, and reality twisted and distorted. Something old and powerful grabbed onto my consciousness and squeezed, pouring through from someplace *else* and into me.

I could hear Ben's panicked, gibbering thoughts and I have to admit, shamefully, that I shared them: *I didn't ask for this, there's no room in me — look, do whatever you want to me, but leave my friends alone—*

An odd gentleness in the mental touch. Like a fellow cat grooming my fur. *Peace, young ones. I'm rarely invoked when there isn't trouble, but this smells worse than usual. How did you tear so wide an opening to the realm of the gods?*

What? Ben thought, numb.

I recovered my sang-froid. *The other young one read from an ancient scroll, invoking power through a mirror*, I supplied in the liminal space in which I currently floated with the other two awarenesses. I could feel Ben's astonishment that there were *two* consciousnesses in his mind with him, and I purred reassuringly. I had no intention of doing him any harm. He was a kitten by the standards of his species, not an adult, and I was quite literally in *his* territory at the moment.

Strange smells filled his — our — nostrils, warm and primeval, like a great beast's hide. Sun baking hot sand. Myrrh and incense rising in a temple, the smoke rising in lazy tendrils towards the sun that

slanted in through narrow windows. Worshippers calling out a single name, over and over, and it was *his* name, but it wasn't his name at all: *Shu, Shu, Shu, wise and powerful…*

Benjamin and I hit the ground, feeling as if he — no, *we* — were riding his body as if it were a horse. I disliked the sensation of only having two legs immensely, but the situation wasn't under my control. At least, not entirely. In the darkened window, we caught a hazy glimpse of ourselves as we staggered back upright. *No. That's not me. My hair isn't white!*

Mine is, but is that a mane ? Am I a lion now?

And then the door burst in on its hinges as the tortoise-man made its entrance, ducking down to pass under the lintel. Ki leaped for one of the swords attached to the wall and yanked it down. "Go away!" the girl wailed. "I did not invite you into my home! You're *rude!*"

The tortoise laughed. Ki brought the old sword down at the creature's arm, shouting, "Give me back my brother!"

The sword *shattered*, like glass. "Stupid kid, with your shiny, reflective blade," the tortoise replied in English. *How odd,* Ben thought distantly. *You'd think he'd speak Mandarin, but he sounds like he's from South Jersey…*

And then the *other* voice spoke in our head again. *It's speaking its own language, young one. I understand it, so you understand it. We're effectively one being at the moment, which is not the way I normally manifest myself in your world when I've been invoked.* A hint of annoyance in the voice. *The cat helped bridge us, I suspect, but the malformed use of my Name probably did the most damage.*

I have a name as well, I pointed out crisply. *Myrowl. Nice to meet you, Shu.*

No time for pleasantries! the god replied as the tortoise-man lifted Ki off the ground by the throat, shaking her.

Angela sailed in from his left, a jade bookend in her hand, taunting, "Hey! Mr. Turtle! Over here! Can I interest you in something better to eat? Like … cucumber?"

The tortoise turned to sneer, "Like tea-party sandwiches, little girl?"

"Sure, can I take your order? You want mustard and mayo with that?" She swung the heavy jade, and the creature's scales crunched. "Let go of her!"

The tortoise dropped Ki, seizing Angela instead. Stonelike talons crushed her throat. "Non … reflective …" she choked out.

We should probably intervene at this point, don't you think?

Oh, yeah, right. I mean, how do I — how do we—

Act now, before my human of the soft lap and gentle hands dies!

Right.

We leapt for the tortoise, Ben noting absently that he seemed to be a *lot* stronger all of a sudden. We landed just behind it in a crouch, and then lifted our shoulder up and into the lowest quarter of its shell.

The tortoise went *flying*. It flipped ass over teakettle and landed against a bookcase, which promptly toppled, landing atop it. Then the bookcase lifted as the tortoise stood. It *threw* the bookcase at us.

We dropped to the floor, over the top of Angela, who was still gasping for breath. We let the wood fly overhead, allowed random books smack us in the head, rather let them fall on her.

We heard Ki scream behind us, but launched ourselves again — through the fallen shelves — with an earth-shaking roar tearing its way out of our throat. I gloried in this, of course. My own roar sounds more like a yowl of defiance on its best day.

We reached out a hand that Ben dimly realized looked a good deal more like a paw, complete with talons, and a sword-hilt *smacked* into his palm. We and the tortoise met at the center of the hall, and we dodged the tortoise's lumbering charge at the last minute. Swept behind the creature, swung the verdigrised bronze blade in our paw — *no reflection, nice!* — removing the tortoise's head from its shoulders.

The head flew down the hall, bouncing and rolling and finally coming to a halt in Angela's lap. She'd only just now managed to sit up. And now she yelped, scrambling away from the head and waving her hands as if it were a cockroach.

I couldn't help but snicker at the back of our conjoined mind.

Ki emerged from a room off the hallway, stepping over the wreckage of the bookshelf, her mouth hanging open. "The White Tiger," she murmured, and gave a haphazard little bow. Angela's eyes just showed white all the way around. *Oh, god. I don't want them looking like that at me*, Ben thought.

And why not? I replied.

Since when do men not court awe? Shu sniffed in his mind.

We're not supposed … I mean, it's not considered … I mean—

You don't want them to pet us?

A moment of panicked reflection. I snickered again. *Yes — no — wait, was that from the damn cat who's also stuck inside of us?*

Very well. Shu sighed. *Be as modest and humble as your society requires you to be. Let them think that you had nothing at all to do with events. Take neither credit nor responsibility.*

All that passed in a flash. Externally, Shu was now responding to Ki. "Tiger? No. Lion, thank you. You're the one who summoned me, young magician?"

"Summoned," Angela repeated slowly, her eyes still locked on us. Glancing down, we decided it was the blood sprayed over our chest. "How'd we summon you? Who are you?"

"I distinctly heard someone call my Name. Shu." Behind us, our tail twitched as we noticed, *That's not fear. She smells like she likes what she sees.*

—<u>It's been awhile since I've experienced direct adoration</u>.—

—oh, god, which of us thought that? We're — I'm not supposed to notice things like that—

You spend a great deal of time worrying about what we should and shouldn't do, notice, or feel. It must be annoying to be you, I put in.

"Like, go away, 'shoo'?" Angela asked, her voice distant now. "You look like some ancient Egyptian god, and we're in the middle of some kind of Chinese voodoo…"

"Voodoo?" Ki sounded affronted.

Don't let them think it's me. It's not me. I'm not this much of a jerk!

"I am Shu, brother of Sekhmet." Our ears twitched. "You're not prostrating yourselves."

Angela's mouth opened. Closed.

Ki suddenly slapped a hand over her mouth. "*Shu*. The Mandarin word for book. I used the wrong vowel tone!" She sounded embarrassed. "And summoned an ancient Egyptian god?"

"Why would that make any less sense than summoning giant koi and tortoise monsters?" Angela pointed out.

Ki nodded rapidly. "Um, Shu? We need help, please. These creatures took my brother…" she waved at the world outside, "and they're hurting people. Please. Help us."

We sauntered towards the window to appraise the situation. When we stopped and put a taloned hand on the glass, we heard Angela ask behind him, "Hey, where's Myrowl — heck, where's Ben?" A pause. "Oh, no," Angela wailed, and then dashed towards him to touch our elbow gingerly. "Er, Shu? Do we, um … get our friend back after all this?"

"I am not in the habit of stealing bodies," Shu informed her haughtily.

Ben wasn't particularly pleased with rating below me in her litany of concern, but *I* was very pleased that she'd noted my absence first. "However, due to the malformed nature of the incantation that summoned me, I'm not entirely sure I can remove my essence from this particular, ah, vessel. Though I will attempt to do so after the current crisis has been averted."

"Vessel—oh … you're in Ben … ?"

He gestured out the window. "I haven't seen such a mess since the last time someone loosed Apep."

"Apep?" Angela asked, sounding lost.

"The serpent of darkness. I'm a sun-god. Fighting darkness is my job." He groomed his whiskers neatly. "However, there are more crea-

tures out there than even I can fight at once."

Modest, aren't we? Ben snarled inside.

Ki approached, throwing up her hands. "So you won't help?"

"I didn't say that. However, I'll require your assistance with stratagems. Most of these creatures should be drawn to rhythmic sound."

"Like music? So turn Pandora to a dubstep station?"

We smiled. "They wouldn't recognize it as music. Your flute, however, should attract them."

"You … you remember that I play. Ben *is* in there." Angela's smile lit up her face, and then faded. "You want me to lure them back."

We nodded. "Yes, fetch your flute, please. And you, young one," — we looked at Ki, all three of us feeling grim — "must read your incantations clearly when the enemy is close, so that the mirror can catch them once more."

"But if we banish them … with my brother still inside the fish … he'll go into the mirror-lands with the fish," Ki objected, her voice just above a whisper.

Shu grinned with our face. But it was *my* words that were spoken next. "Trust me to know how to gut a fish without harming a hair on your brother's head." We flexed our long, yellow claws, studying them. "Just like the koi in the backyard that your father scolded me for last week."

"I might throw in some sunlight to dazzle their eyes," Shu added. "Be wary."

We could smell their fear, but they covered it well. We didn't want to make them any more nervous by taking note of it. But we could hear them talking. Trying to reassure each other. And the part of us that had once watched chariots rattle off to war smiled at how similar they sounded to young soldiers in any era.

"It's okay," Ki whispered. "We'll … get through this. And my brother will be all right, and…"

"Your parents won't notice the kappa bloodstains on the carpet or the broken bookcase…"

Ki laughed shakily. "Don't worry about my parents. Just … concentrate on what you need to do. And I'm going to get my cellphone to read this by—"

"No! The screen will reflect—"

"Oh, crud. Right. Even a flashlight has a lens. A candle it is." She stumbled off, and we heard the sound of matches being struck.

And then we heard the hollow, unearthly calls of the plastic flamingoes. The *scritch, scritch, scritch* of their metal legs approaching, attracted by the light in the door and windows.

"Play!" Shu hissed. "We need to pull all of them to us."

Angela settled her lips in place and did so. Haltingly at first, and

then with gusto.

And then the terrorbirds hopped through the shattered front door, heads swaying as they searched for fresh prey. Angela looked alone and exposed in the hallway, her fingers dipping over the flute's stops.

The first of them ululated and began to charge towards her, and we leaped, pouncing on the avian. We hit the ground, rolling, and the bird screamed as our massive jaws closed over its slender throat. A hot burst of blood to the back of our mouth, feel of tearing flesh—

—and yet we could hear her still playing determinedly, the notes only wavering a little. But there were five of the terrorbirds and only one of us, and we heard their metal limbs scritch the floor as they approached us. Felt the first razory beak hit our shoulder as we uncoiled from our dying prey and rolled to our feet, sword back in hand to take the head off the second bird. Then a confused impression of bobbing, weaving heads and cold, alien eyes, and pain as their beaks and talons sank home—

—which was when Ki emerged from the kitchen behind us, setting her candle on the table. She held up the mirror and began to read in clear, steady Mandarin.

Hurry, hurry, hurry!

"Shu, get out of the line of the mirror!" Angela shouted as the flute music died. We rolled away just as a gentle golden light emanated from the mirror to bathe the three remaining birds, and they clattered to the floor, inanimate once more.

"Well done!" Shu called, grooming the blood off our lips with the back of our paw. "We have our … proof of concept. Now we just need to repeat it until all the creatures loosed tonight are back where they belong."

Angela looked wanly at the door. The Ben part of us hated to ask her to do this again. To put herself at risk as the bait. But to suggest otherwise would dishonor what she'd accomplished so far. So, we contented ourselves with putting a paw on her shoulder to try to show solidarity — and then removed it politely when she jumped at our touch.

Steadily, the call of flute and mirror radiated out over the neighborhood, drawing the dark things back. The last to reappear was the first they'd seen — the koi. "He's dead," Ki whispered, her face ashen in the candle's light. "My brother must have suffocated."

"You have very little faith in yourself," Shu chided her as Ben and I faded under the god's will, overcome by a sense of terrible responsibility. *We weren't in time. This is my fault. Should have been faster, better…*"Surely someone who wishes to speak on behalf of kings should be more certain of the power that words possess." He sank one clawed hand casually into the fish's gills and used his hooked sword to rake open its belly. Glistening roe spilled out, and then Seong's limp body.

Ki ran to her brother. Cradled him to her. “I love you,” she told him. “Don’t be dead. Breathe.”

“Needs more will behind it,” Shu recommended, licking his sword clean of fish eggs as the koi flopped in its death-throes, mid-air. “Give it another try.”

“How can you be so calm?” Angela demanded. “It’s her brother. Don’t you feel anything?”

Ben fought to say. *I care! I care a lot—*

“I’d lick him clean to stimulate his bloodflow, but humans tend to take that sort of thing amiss,” I managed to reply.

Then Shu cut in. “Ki has the power she needs to restore her brother within her. She just needs to speak the words. And make them mean something.”

Angela turned to stare as Ki lowered her head and whispered something into her brother’s ear. As the boy’s eyes opened, light filled the room, dazzlingly, as if the sun had just come up.

And maybe a little help from a sun-god accustomed to the idea of being reborn every day out of night.

Yeah, but don’t take credit for it—

Your humility and modesty overwhelm me.

Are you going to leave now? I asked. While I despised having only two legs, I’d enjoyed the raw power of being a god, and being able to speak in a fashion that humans could actually understand.

I’m trying. I don’t particularly want to be confined to a mortal body, fated to die when you do. A puzzled pause from the god. *And yet, I can’t get out*.

Panic. Full-bore panic, even from me as I understood that I might never be a *cat* again—*no, I think we can eject you; we can work on the rest of the entanglements later, maybe once Ki’s better with her magic—*

—fine, do it, and make me look like me again. Anything else, and we’ll wind up in a hospital being dissected—

That, I can manage.

With a dizzying whirl, I found myself six feet in the air, and went limp to absorb the shock as I dropped to the ground. I looked up at Ben — who looked solely like Ben again, but who smelled like a lion — and he slowly winked at me.

The two girls barely even noticed, so wrapped up in the resuscitation of Seong as they were.

Oh, there were consequences. Humans scurried all over the street for the next several days, positing explanations ranging from a gas leak to hallucinations caused by the explosion of a meth lab. We all knew the truth, of course, but even the humans were too wise to speak it.

Ever since, when Ben-Shu comes over to study, he’s not allergic to

me anymore. Exposure therapy, or a little help from a god. And every now and again, I'm not entirely sure that the god's entirely left me, either.

After all, how else am I able to tell you this story, sinking the words directly into your mind?

Deborah L. Davitt tells us that this story was written in 2017 as part of a writing challenge for an online writing community she's part of, and that it has racked up 28 rejections at other markets. For more about her poetry and prose, see www.deborahldavitt.com.