

# ANDROMEDA'S OFFSPRING

## FEATURING

- New story by  
**Justina Robson**
- Reviews
- Interview with  
**Anne Lyle**
- Interview with  
**Jaine Fenn**

**JUNE 2012**

**ISSUE #4**



# ANDROMEDA'S OFFSPRING



informative interviews with some female writers working in the genre. We have an interview with Anne Lyle where she talks about her new novel and an interview with Jaine Fenn who waxes lyrical about convention life. Also in this issue, you'll find original artwork, con reports, book reviews and a brand new Lila Black story from Justina Robson! Enjoy

## Contents

### Cover Image (Jim Burns) Text (Chrissie Harper)

Welcome to what I hope will be a fun packed issue of Andromeda's Offspring. You'll note it's the summer edition - define irony! Nope, there isn't a hint of summer to be seen. Never mind, there's nothing I can do about that except to try to bring a bit of sunshine to your day with this fanzine. This issue has a couple of

Interview – Anne Lyle	Page 3
Letters of Comment	Page 5
Interview – Jaine Fenn	Page 8
Your Artwork	Page 10
Jo Fletcher	Page 12
The Russ Pledge	Page 13
Book Reviews	Page 14
Military SF – Some Thoughts	Page 19
Justina Robson –	Page 21
'Blood and Ink' New Story	Page 22

## INTERVIEW – ANNE LYLE

Anne Lyle's debut novel *The Alchemist of Souls* is an Elizabethan fantasy, which was released this spring by Angry Robot. I met Anne at Eastercon and exchanged details so I could ask her a few questions about the book, which I review in this issue.

**I asked Anne, ' *The Alchemist of Souls* - what is it all about?'**



It's the story of a down-on-his-luck swordsman, Mal Catlyn, who is plucked almost literally from the gutter and given a prestigious post as bodyguard to a skrayling, a non-human ambassador from the New World. Mal doesn't really want the job - like most Europeans, he's suspicious of the foreigners, who seem to possess powerful magicks - but he needs the money to support his mentally ill brother.

He makes the acquaintance of Coby Hendricks, an orphan Dutch girl who lives disguised as a boy, in order to learn more about the skraylings. However when the theatre company Coby works for comes under attack from a saboteur, she and Mal find themselves drawn into a web of conspiracy and dark magicks stretching from the sleazy underbelly of Elizabethan London to the upper reaches of government. A web from which they will be lucky to escape with their lives - and souls - intact.

**Where did the idea come from?**

I wanted to write a fantasy novel set in early modern Europe, as I'd grown bored with the endless pseudo-medieval worlds that abound in the genre. I've always been fascinated by the theatre as well, and by stories of gender-bending, cross-dressing and disguise, and Elizabethan London seemed the perfect setting in which to explore all these themes. For the fantasy element I

decided to eschew the usual Shakespearean fairies and instead take my inspiration from a mixture of Viking and Native American mythology, layered on top of some SFnal ideas I'd had for a non-human sentient species that could have evolved in the Americas.

**This fanzine (Andromeda's Offspring) aims to raise the awareness of women working in SF predominantly & fantasy. How has your experience of being a woman working in genre fiction been?**

To be honest, I don't think of myself as "a woman working in genre fiction". I've never felt constrained by gender-binary cultural expectations, even as a child, so I'm always slightly bemused by the notion that my physical sex has anything to do with my identity as a writer. Which is not to say I won't support and defend my sisters to the hilt - I'm of the opinion that if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem - but for me it hasn't been an issue so far, even though I'm writing in a sub-genre dominated by male authors. The vast majority of genre fans I've encountered are just looking for a good story, regardless of the name on the cover.

**How much has your social networking changed since getting your book deal?**

I was already pretty active online before my book deal (I'm a web developer in my day-job), so it wasn't a big leap for me. I make more of an effort to blog regularly, and I use Twitter a lot more, mainly to keep in touch with friends I've made at conventions, but apart from that it's business as usual.

**What is next on the agenda for you?**

I'm currently working on books 2 and 3 in the trilogy. The first of these, "The Merchant of Dreams", is undergoing revisions, and I'm also planning the final

volume, "The Prince of Lies". After that, who knows? More fantasy, I'm sure, but I have a number of different ideas I'm toying with.

### **What are your favourite genre books and why?**

I love stories of intrigue and swashbuckling (preferably with a dash of romance, though that's not essential), and strong but not over-elaborate worldbuilding. Themes of gender-bending and varied sexuality are a bonus!

My favourite authors include (in no particular order): Ellen Kushner, Daniel Abraham, Lynn Flewelling, Richard Morgan, Douglas Hulick, and Lois McMaster Bujold.

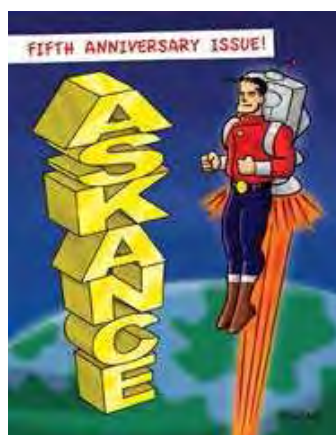
**Anne Lyle**

**See page for a review of The Alchemist of Souls. A copy has also been won for the letter received by Lloyd Penny. Lloyd, please contact me with your address.**

## **YOUR LETTERS**

Dear Theresa:

Many thanks for Andromeda's Offspring 3, and it looks like there's going to be a decent-sized letter coming out of it from me. Time to get with it, and flesh it out a little bit.

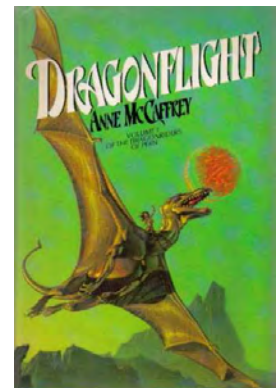


Glad you were able to see my positive review of this zine in Askance. I have formally shut down my review column in Askance, mostly because there wasn't much response to it, but also because I've had to devote more time to the job hunt. John definitely understands, although it will make his fine zine a little thinner.

Thank you for your kind words to me about my letter-writing...I've never been sure about writing articles, and I can barely draw a straight line, although John Purcell did print some of my cartoons in an earlier Askance, so the letter column has always been the place for me, and I've been there for about 30 years. It's always been fun, even though not all are happy to see me there.

My letter...a friend gave us a lot of books she was discarding to get more room in her apartment, and with what she gave us, I believe we now have a complete Joanna Russ library. I look forward to reading more of her works.

A shame to see Anne McCaffrey pass away, but time will march on. I may have said this before, but the only time I met Anne was on the plane that took her from Ireland to Winnipeg in 1994 for the Worldcon...she plane stopped at Toronto, and that's were we got on. To be honest, I've enjoyed her non-Pern novels more.



Hey, there's Jacq! Looks like her TAFF trip was everything everyone wanted, and more. Yvonne and I had thought to run for TAFF in 2014, but we have decided not to. There is the distinct possibility that we might not be able to go at all, and if we can, we want to go based on our own schedule.

I think Andromedacon is a great idea. Wiscon has been such a bonus for female writers and their supporters in the US , and I think Britain could use its own Wiscon. I am sure there's lots of people who will like that idea, and who will work with you on that.

Only a page, a little less than I thought I'd write, but still, some feedback is better than none. Thanks again, take care, see you with the next one.

Yours, Lloyd Penney.

**Thanks Lloyd, and don't forget to confirm your address for your copy of Anne Lyle's book.**

Dear Theresa

I've been looking for free ebooks of late and came across  
<http://www.feedbooks.com>.

Among their original line of material is a batch of stories/novels tagged as  
"gender switch"

<http://www.feedbooks.com/userbooks/tag/gender%20switch?lang=en>

Essentially these are old SF/Fantasy novels with the gender of the characters changed. I haven't read any of this yet so I don't know how thoroughly the material is rewritten. I'm not even sure if this is one or many writers since they use altered versions of the original writer's name (e.g. Edgar Rice Burroughs becomes Edna Rice Burroughs).

William McCabe



**Great Stuff William! Incidentally, William tells me they have translated Leigh Brackett. Erm . . .**

**William also responded about Andromedacon . . .**

I don't know how you're doing with your convention idea but this may or may not help.

Out beyond Selly Oak are a few small colleges that hire themselves out for small conferences and fairly low rates including rooms. The most likely point against is that these were set up by Quakers and are likely not to have a bar (let alone "real ale") although I believe some do. On the positive side, they're close to Bournville which means you could probably work a tour of Cadbury World into the programme and if you're trying to attract women you'll probably do better with chocolate than beer.

Here's a couple of examples of the colleges

<http://fircroft.ac.uk/conferencing/>

<http://www.woodbrooke.org.uk/index.php>

and the cadbury site

<http://www.cadburyworld.co.uk/CADBURYWORLD/Pages/Welcome.aspx>

This name showed up on the usual trawl through Birmingham Science Fiction.

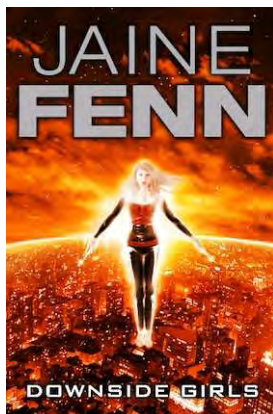
You'd have to expand Qualifications and Research interests to understand

why but this might be a guest speaker or an in with a university for their

facilities. <http://www.coventry.ac.uk/researchnet/cucv/Pages/Profile.aspx?profileID=267>

Let me know your thoughts.

## INTERVIEW – JAINE FENN



Jaine Fenn took time out of her busy writing schedule to answer a few questions for you . . .

**Q:** I can see from <http://www.jainefenn.com/> your website, that you enjoy getting out and about to meet fans and fellow writers. As well as attending Edge-Lit in July 2012 you are GoH at Novacon in Nov 2012. What is that you enjoy about conventions and other writerly events?

**A:** Conventions are social gatherings for people who don't necessarily enjoy social gatherings. We're all weird together, safe amongst other people from our own planet. Given that until I was 17 I'd never met anyone from my planet, conventions were a revelation to me. They're my kind of crazy.

Now I'm a pro writer I view them slightly differently, as I'm aware that some of the things I used to get up to at cons would be, ahem, unbecoming in a professional. Conventions are now part of the job, although a part I enjoy very much. To be honest, being on panels and giving workshops are both far easier than actual writing.



**Q: In a panel at Eastercon, you mentioned experiencing some pressure in the past to androgynise your writing name. Without specifying too much detail, what can you tell us about this?**

A: It was a bit of a shock to me. This was in 2009 and I had naively assumed that this battle was one that had been fought and won already. My main feeling at the time was disappointment, and some anger. I also wasn't sure how, or even if, I could fight the decision, which was taken by people I'd never met. In the end I managed to get my feelings across to my editor strongly enough that she convinced my publishers to change their mind. Several publishing professionals (mainly men) have told me, then and since, that I might have been damaging my sales by not disguising my gender. They may be right, but if everyone thought like that then we probably still wouldn't have the vote, would we?

**Q: Most writers are pretty avid readers too. What is your poison when it comes to reading?**

A: I wish I had more time to read! Limited time means I have to be selective so I'm not as adventurous as I'd like to be. The percentage split by genre comes out at about 80% SF, 5% Fantasy, 10% non-fiction and 5% other fiction (such as thrillers).

The more I learn about the art and craft of writing the less tolerant I am of 'bad' writing and the more I appreciate 'good' writing. The best books take me the longest to read because although I want to race through, carried along by the story, I frequently find myself stopping and re-reading particularly impressive pieces of writing. Two authors that currently do that for me are Ken McLeod and Tricia Sullivan.

**Q: What are you working on at the moment?**

A: I've just started on a Young Adult novel. It's at a very early stage so I can't say much other than that it is SF but explores areas and themes I've not covered in the Hidden Empire books so far.

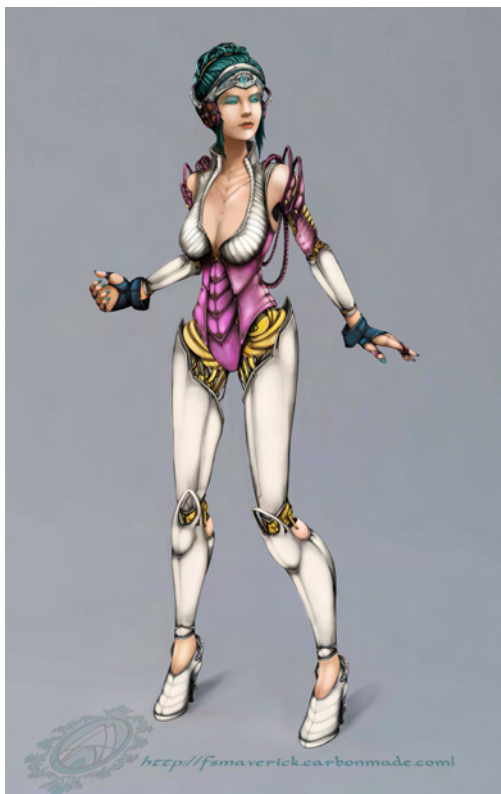
**Q: Do you have any fun stories about your years in fandom that you can share with us?**

A: Fun stories about fandom? Loads. Ones I'd like to admit to? Rather less.

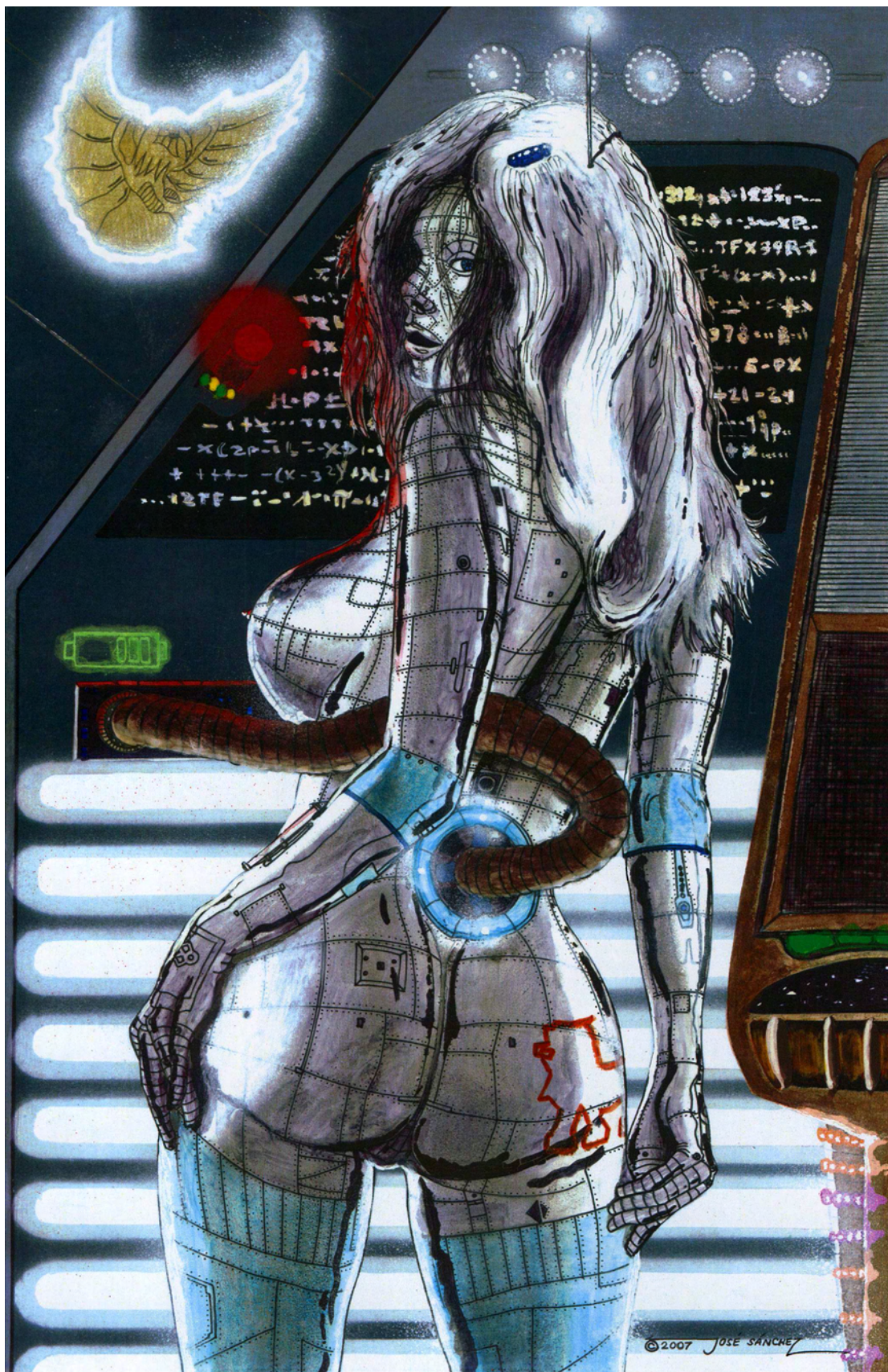
One fun fannish experience occurred at one of the conventions at the Liverpool Adelphi in the early 1990s. I ran an all-night game of Call of Cthulhu and after I had sent my poor, sanity-challenged players back to their beds found myself too hyped from running the game to sleep. I wandered into the hotel's fabulous lobby, intending to chill out there until the con started serving breakfast. I expected to be alone, but I wasn't: at a corner table sat Iain Banks, with a bunch of miscellaneous Scots, playing cards and drinking single malt. When I wandered over they were only too happy to deal me in, and provide a drink ... as long as I, like them, wore a badge proclaiming my name to be 'Dave'. Which, of course, I did. Like I say: my kind of crazy.

## **YOUR ARTWORK**

I am delighted to present to you some fan artwork, from Mavie Maverick and Jose Sanchez. I hope you enjoy it.



**Cyborg Girl by Mavie Maverick**



**Changing Batteries by Jose Sanchez**

## BSFG MEETING – JULY 2012 JO FLETCHER



Jo Fletcher Books is a specialist science fiction, fantasy and horror imprint, but as Jo's own personal tastes in fiction have always been so wonderfully eclectic, and as the field of imaginative literature is so incredibly wide, Jo Fletcher Books is going to be as broad a church as possibly, hopefully publishing something for everyone.

Take a look at

<http://www.jofletcherbooks.com/about/>

Jo came to visit the BSFG (Brum Group) on Friday 13<sup>th</sup> July. Despite the date, things went really well!

Jo previously worked for Gollancz, where she had a spectacular list, including a certain Charlaine Harris, well known for her Sookie Stackhouse series. Jo started going to conventions in the 1970s and her first convention was a Novacon, whilst her second convention was a Fantasycon. In the midst of her thriving career at Gollancz, where she worked on the SF Masterworks series, Jo received an offer she simply could not refuse; the chance to run Jo Fletcher books.#

This started in Jan 2011, and for the first six months, due to no seat, her imprint was operated from a pub around the corner on Bloomsbury Square! To get her list started, she took unsolicited submissions. Amongst the inevitable dross, she received some real gems, including a book by Alison Littlewood 'A Cold Season', which ended up on the Richard and Judy list. My review of this book follows in the review section. As well as talking about her imprint, Jo talked about how Waterstone's has been taken over by James Daunt and the way they buy books has changed. Each shop will be treated as independent, though books will be from backlists only. It was a great meeting and very informative. Well worth going.

## THE RUSS PLEDGE – BY HELENA BOWLES

What is the Russ Pledge?



The Russ Pledge grew out of two things that occurred in 2011. One was the death of SF writer and critic Joanna Russ. Russ was also well known as a feminist writer and commentator. One of her most famous books was, *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, an accessible, humorous but *biting* analysis of the social and economic forces that combine to create a culture where women's writing is either impossible or invisible.

The other was a *Guardian* poll asking people to vote for their favourite SF book. Out of 500, 482 (mostly white) men made the list. Only 18 women did.

The blogosphere erupted. It was revealed that the number of women SF writers who have contracts with mainstream British publishers was... 2. Actually worse than in the 1970s!

Nichola Griffith was a particularly insightful commentator who pointed out that it was down to us as Fans and readers to examine our own behaviour. This is the SF community: the writers, the editors, the critics, the booksellers and the bloggers are *US*. We can't blame The Establishment because we *are* The Establishment. She announced that she was taking "The Russ Pledge". She would make a conscious effort to pick up books by female writers, to review them, to talk about them – not books she wouldn't read generally, not to give poor writing a pass because of the author's gender, but just to try to remove the cloaking device that seems to have been set up over some of our most innovative writers.

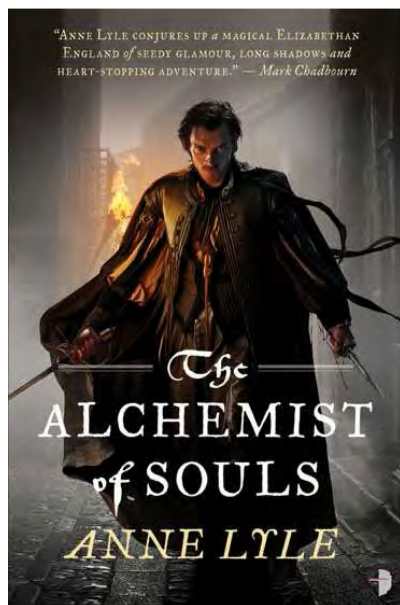
"But I'm gender blind when I read," is a common response. Hmm. Perhaps. The problem is that if books by women are simply less visible – fewer on the

shelves in book shops, fewer stories anthologised, fewer books by female authors reviewed on blogs and in zines, thus less conversation about them then, even if you are miraculously gender blind, you are still going to read fewer books by women and thus the cycle perpetuates.

Take The Russ Pledge. Read great SF book by a great (female) SF author today.

Helena Bowles

## BOOK REVIEWS



### The Alchemist of Souls

**Author:** Anne Lyle

**Publisher:** Angry Robot

**Page count/Size:** 480 pp

**Release date:** 5<sup>th</sup> April 2012

**Reviewer:** Theresa Derwin

Set in London during the Elizabethan period, this fantasy novel by Anne Lyle finds roguish Mal Catlyn hired by Walsingham to protect Kirren, a Skrayling ambassador.

The skraylings are a foreign nationality with their own culture and language, who look very much less than human. And Mal's history with the skraylings makes it one hell of a tricky assignment.

Next we meet Coby, a strong female character, posing as a boy working in the theatre in order to earn a living in the hostel environs of London. We also

meet Ned, Mal's best friend who is having a love affair with actor Gabriel Parrish.

As al tries to uncover treason and protect his skrayling companion, he finds himself inexplicably drawn to Kirren the ambassador and his views begin to change.

This alternate history is atmospheric, fun and boasts colloquial dialogue that moves the novel along at a swift pace. As well as being thoroughly researched, the novel uses vivid descriptions to add life and realism to the period setting. My favourite sentence simply has to be about the local pub, which "was as busy as a brothel mattress and twice as pungent". Brilliant!

Delivering on pace (even a game of tennis comes across exciting), Lyle also manages to examine xenophobia and homophobia particular of the time playing heavily with gender issues. The sights and scents of Elizabethan London are both vibrant and rich, and the plot delivers on plenty of twists and turns as well as political intrigue.

At the end of the book we have hints of a France bound sequel and Angry Robot have confirmed a second book in the Masques series. I don't know about you, but I can't wait to see what happens to Mal and Coby next.

### **Blackout/All Clear**

**Author:** Connie Willis

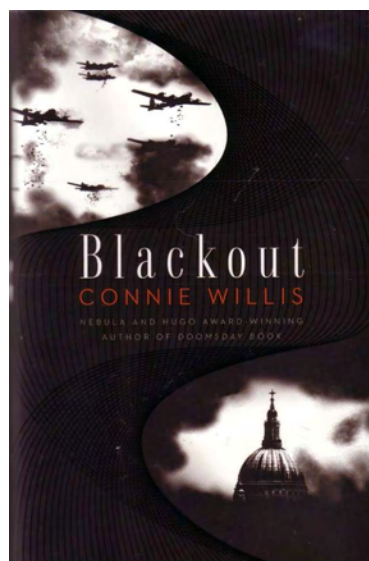
**Publisher:** Gollancz

**Page count/Size:** 610/800

**Release Date:** 2010

**Price:** £8.99/£9.99

**Reviewer:** Helena Bowles

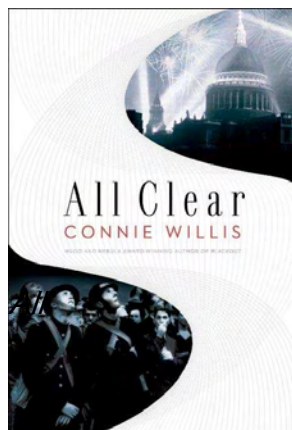


Six years is too long for a book from Connie Willis but at least two came along at once. Willis has returned to the fertile ground of her Oxford History Department time travel series and given us what is, in reality, one very long book.

*Blackout* opens with history student Polly Churchill wrestling with the University bureaucracy to get the right clothes for her assignment observing the lives of London shop girls. The height of the Blitz might sound risky but there are detailed records of where and when bombs fell so avoiding them is straightforward. At this point, readers of Willis's earlier Oxford time travel books will be shaking their heads. By now you'd think Mr Dunworthy would have learned to apply a bit of critical thought to his historical sources.

Willis's uses her ability to write both comedy and pathos at once in the opening sections where Polly, Merope (observing evacuees in the country) and Michael (interviewing "heroes" after Dunkirk) struggle to get their assignments sorted and scheduled, while poor teenager Colin struggles to get Polly to take his crush on her seriously. It's a gentle "I Love Lucy" comedy of errors where frustration serves to mask the fact that changes are being seen in the way that time travel is working.

The problems only begin when they all enter their assigned time period. Michael starts to question the nature of "heroism" and becomes overwhelmed with guilt when he believes he may have inadvertently set off a chain of events that culminates in disaster for all three of them – and even for the Oxford lab itself.

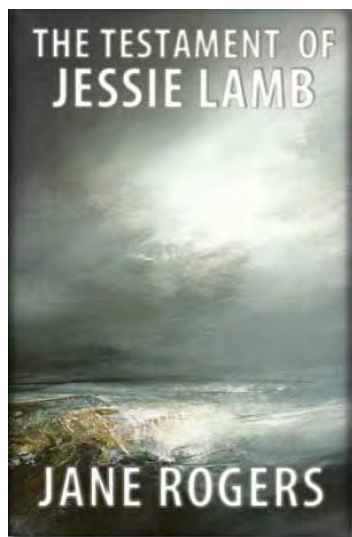


*All Clear* picks up when the three are at their lowest: isolated from their own time, caught in one of history's most dangerous periods that is becoming more and more unpredictable, their daily lives pulling them further and further from their planned assignments. Plus, one of the girls has a "deadline" – a second assignment in a slightly later period when it is known that a historian cannot exist in one time simultaneously.



All they can do is wait, try to contact any other historians they vaguely know to be present, and leave coded messages for the future, while all around them the bombs fall and the “contemps” live, work and die.

One of the strengths of this series is the way Willis brings the past so vividly to life through the “contemp” characters the historians encounter. From the amateur theatre troupe Polly joins, to help while away the hours of hiding in air raid shelters, to the delightfully appalling Hodbin evacuee twins who become such a large part of Merope/Eileen’s life, the pleasures and privations of their daily existence becomes more real than the somewhat archaic, comic depiction of Mr Dunworthy’s department. I once heard Willis’s books described as a, “ghastly historical mess.” I disagree. Willis is deliberately making the point that our best deductions about the past are very, very likely to be wrong. Sometimes this is flagged up by the historians noticing it, sometimes it is implicit in the background. This simply adds to their alienation. Of course, as the historians spend more time in the past this sense of being at one remove from events is inevitably eroded and all become participants rather than observers and, of course, this is the point at which they truly begin to learn about the “contemp’s” lives: by actually living them.



**The Testament of Jessie Lamb**

**Author:** Jane Rogers

**Publisher:** Sandstone Press

**Page count/Size:** 272pp

**Release date:** 25<sup>th</sup> Feb 2011

**Reviewer:** Theresa Derwin

*The Testament of Jessie Lamb*, last years' Arthur C Clarke Award winner, is a provocative and engaging book that is written from the perspective of 16 year-old Jessie.

All we know to start with, is that Jessie has been taken hostage by someone and has been left with a pen and paper to record her thoughts. The narrative becomes Jessie's testament.

Quite quickly, as the novel progresses, we learn more about Jessie's world and how she ended up in her current situation. MDS (Maternal Death Syndrome) is prevalent in this world and will swiftly kill any pregnant woman, turning their brain into 'Swiss cheese'. This bio-engineered virus attacks the foreign bodies in the womb, those bodies being the sperm and embryo, so any child lucky enough to survive birth carries the disease. There will be no more babies. However, some scientists have found a way to save embryos previously frozen prior to the out break, at the expense of the mother.

It is difficult to review this book without adding any more spoilers, so I will have to make do with simple observations. Did it deserve the award? Yes. It is a stunning and thought provoking novel in the vein of Joanna Russ, yet much more readable. This is a novel that any serious reader or genre fan must read. It simply has to be shared and absorbed. Fantastic.

## **A Cold Season**

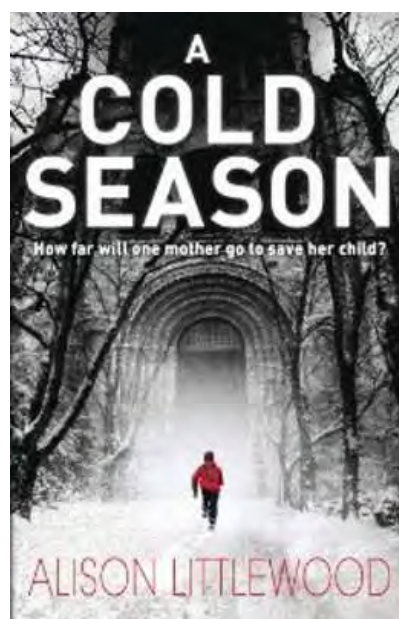
**Author:** Alison Littlewood

**Publisher:** Jo Fletcher Books

**Page count/Size:** 384pp

**Release date:** 5<sup>th</sup> Jan 2012

**Reviewer:** Theresa Derwin



Cass is building a new life for herself and her young son Ben after the death of her soldier husband Pete, returning to the village where she lived as a child. But their idyllic new home is not what she expected: the other flats are all empty, there's strange graffiti on the walls, and the villagers are a bit odd. And when an unexpectedly heavy snowstorm maroons the village, things get even harder.

Ben is changing, he's surly and aggressive and Cass's only confidant is the smooth, charming Theodore Remick, the stand-in headmaster. Not everyone approves of Cass's growing closeness to Mr Remick, and it soon becomes obvious he's not all he appears to be either. If she is to protect her beloved son, Cass is going to have to fight back. Cass realises this is not the first time her family have been targeted by Theodore Remick. But this time, the stakes are immeasurably higher...

Tension permeates the text from the outset, and the snowstorms throughout the novel aid the building up of this tension. With shades of *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Wicker Man*, this novel is an exercise in fear. Remick is sensual, compelling and frightening, and Ben's behaviour adds to the pressure. The reader is thrown into Cass' life, her experiences and her self-doubt as she fights what appears to be a losing battle against an unknown evil. To top up the fear factor, there are always a number of wonderfully gruesome scenes to keep the traditional horror fans happy. This is truly a great book.

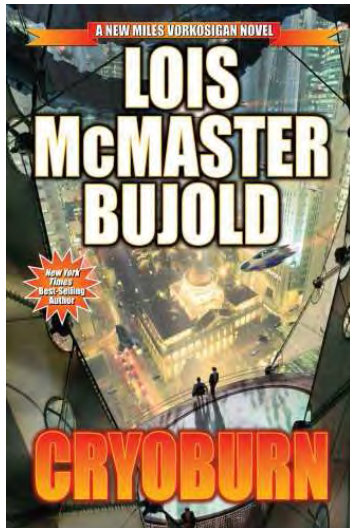
## **MILITARY SF – SOME THOUGHTS**

According to the Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, which is now an online resource, at <http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/war>, War and Future War are enduring sf themes.

The melodramatic excesses of Space Opera warfare faded with the pulps, although they were never to die out entirely. Complementing such extravagance, there grew up a more disciplined and more realistic notion of

the kind of armies which might fight interplanetary and interstellar wars, and the kinds of Weapons they might use.”

The reliable site (it should be with Mr Langford involved!) cites early examples such as Heinlein and Dickson. This probably brings to mind the assumption that Military SF is a male dominated sub-genre heavy on ‘old boy’s network’ characterisation. Well think again.



I remember as a teenager, being enticed by the sometimes gauche and lurid covers of books by a certain Lois McMaster Bujold. *What a strong and masculine name*, thought I. *What bold covers!* As an avid Heinlein fan, I assumed the ‘Lois’ was a typo and it was actually ‘Louis’. After all, every war film I’d ever see was heavily masculine starring such icons as John Wayne. So, colour me surprised when I discovered that Lois was indeed a female writer. That explained why I loved her so much!

So it was with great surprise that I soon found out that a large number of military SF novels were written by women; Elizabeth Bear, Tanya Huff, Elizabeth Moon, and that’s just for starters. As the Encyclopaedia notes, Women SF Writers contributed significantly to this sub-genre. The question I would ask is why? Is it that women as children were prevented from playing war games with the boys and this is a way of realising such wish fulfilment? Is it that female writers are adept at the necessary research? Who knows? I do not, but it is an interesting point that the genre does have a high percentage of female authors writing in it.

So, I put the question to you for the next issue of this fanzine due out autumn 2012. What do *you* think?

## JUSTINA ROBSON – BRAND NEW LILA BLACK

“Justina Robson was born in Leeds (11 June 1968<sup>[1]</sup>), and studied philosophy and linguistics at the University of York. She worked in a variety of jobs - including secretary, technical writer, and fitness instructor - until becoming a full-time writer.

Robson attended the Clarion West Writing Workshop and was first published in 1994 in the British small press magazine *The Third Alternative* but is best known as a novelist. Her debut novel *Silver Screen* was shortlisted for both the Arthur C Clarke Award and the BSFA Award in 2000. Her second novel, *Mappa Mundi*, was also shortlisted for the Arthur C Clarke Award in 2001. It won the 2000 Amazon.co.uk Writer's Bursary. In 2004, *Natural History*, Robson's third novel, was shortlisted for the BSFA Award, and came second in the John W Campbell Award.

Robson's novels have been noted for sharply-drawn characters, and an intelligent and deeply thought-out approach to the tropes of the genre. She has been described as "one of the very best of the new British hard SF writers" Wikipedia.

Justina has very kindly donated **a brand new free short story** featuring her character Lila Black, first seen in her novel *Keeping it Real*. To get you in the mood for this story and to explain a bit about Lila's world, I have included a brief review below from <http://www.pyrsf.com/keepingitreal.html>.

“The Quantum Bomb of 2015 changed everything. The fabric that kept the universe's different dimensions apart was torn and now, six years later, the people of earth exist in uneasy company with the inhabitants of, amongst others, the elfin, elemental, and demonic realms. Magic is real and can be even more dangerous than technology. Elves are exotic, erotic, dangerous, and really bored with the constant *Lord of the Rings* references. Elementals are a law unto themselves and demons are best left well to themselves.

Special agent Lila Black used to be pretty, but now she's not so sure. Her

body is more than half restless carbon and metal alloy machinery, a machine she's barely in control of. It goes into combat mode, enough weapons for a small army springing from within itself, at the merest provocation. As for her heart, well, ever since being drawn into a game by the elfin rockstar Zal (lead singer of The No Shows), who she's been assigned to protect, she's not even sure she can trust that any more either."

<http://www.pyrsf.com/keepingitreal.html>

Finally, here it is . . . no pretty pictures to break up the text. Just a brand new story of Lila Black, to savour and enjoy . . .

## **BLOOD AND INK by JUSTINA ROBSON**

### **Lila Black Story**

#### **Blood and Ink**

Lila sat with her feet up on Malachi's desk, looking across the top of it and its sea of cartons to the creature on the other side.

The incubus stared back at her from large, dark violet eyes. Only the eyes and brows were visible. Everything else was swathed in black and purple fabric, ninja style wrappings close under panelled robes, a hood and mask concealing the rest. A little goldwork on the mask was the only decoration.

On the rug, Malachi himself sprawled in beastly black suspicion, indolently upon one side, his eyes unflinching on the demon. He was in the form he most often took when not around humans: his natural faery form of a dark jungle cat crossed with a brutally primitive bear. The end of his long and heavy tail swayed like a furry king cobra, twitching with repressed ill feeling. Faeries and demons had many traditional interactions, none of them particularly easygoing. Behind Malachi the door of the yurt which was shielding them both from the sun and from the interested stares of other people at the agency, lifted and fell an inch or two with the cool breeze.

‘So,’ Lila said, attempting to summarise the demon’s tale, hands folded across her stomach. ‘You’re telling us there’s a killer on the loose. You know who it is. You *work* for them.’

‘Yes,’ the demon said. He had a husky, deep voice, as if dark chocolate could talk. Lila didn’t know what his name was. From now on, he was Chocolate.

‘And you’re here instead of at some other door because..?’

‘Only you can protect me, Miss Black.’ Chocolate said. ‘My employer is extremely dangerous. If they knew I was here they would kill me. The risk...’ he trailed off as if only now realising the extent of what he was doing.

Lila glanced at Malachi and the huge catbeast rolled his eloquent eyes – oh reaaallly...

She turned her attention back to Chocolate, giving him her best hardboiled face. ‘How do I know this isn’t just some drama queen scam looking for protection from someone you owe? You wouldn’t be the first. You won’t be the last.’

Malachi murr-growled assent at that from the carpet, his claws digging into the heavy kilim and tearing fresh holes – it was the second one they’d been through this month. Lila glared at him.

‘He thinks you smell suspicious,’ Lila translated for the demon, since Malachi had lost so much patience with their ‘*clients*’ lately that he refused even to shapeshift into his humanoid form or speak.

The demon turned on the crate that was acting as its chair and looked solemnly at Malachi.

‘He likes mysteries.’ This was a statement about Malachi, delivered as if it was an explanation.

Lila looked too. ‘So?’

‘He likes me to smell suspicious. So I do. I do whatever people want me to do. I am what they want me to be.’ The demon turned back to her, violet depths full of appeal...

*I wonder what I like,* she thought. *Chocolate box romances by the look of it. Oh GOD.*

'I need some kind of proof,' she said, shrugging and stating the bald fact of it. 'We've had more than thirty people through this door with special claims about this and that and all but three of them have been liars.' She didn't add that she was about up to her limit with the notion that her new job as interdimensional investigator was anything but a delaying bottleneck for nutters to be pushed through on their way to the deportation section.

The inky sat, hunched up. 'I am telling the truth.'

*Because she wanted him to be?* Because she needed a real challenge before she went insane?

'Did my husband send you?' a thought occurred to her.

'What? No. Neither of them. Oh no. I see what you're thinking. That maybe I am acting a role for you because that is my nature and perhaps they know that you are missing something I could give you. No. I am here for myself only. I promise you. I vow it on...my life.' In black gloves hands stretched out, palm up, helplessly, holding nothing. She saw claws pushing through the fabric where embroidered holes had been prettily made for their emergence. Steely, slicked with varnish.

*Romance with bite.* Lila groaned. 'Sorcha was never like this. She was always herself. You see how hard it will be to trust anything about you, given what you say?'

'With respect, Sorcha was indeed a constant creature to all who saw her, but fame secured her into a single form, into a...into who she was. People had an image of her. They expected to meet her as she was and so...they did. She had self actualised through fame.' The demon spoke more softly now, so gentle, as if his tone could reach through time and touch Sorcha's spirit with a deep respect. 'In that she achieved the nirvana of our kind.' Lila sensed only genuine feeling from him and a glance at Malachi told her he did too. He was sitting straight, frowning, his ears tilted forwards to listen.

'But most of us don't have fame,' Chocolate said. 'We are the opposite of that. We are constantly remade. Unique. Unsomeone. To each person, we appear as they wish. I know that most of the time to your race this is always interpreted as sexual, for the allure, but it isn't. It isn't. Desire is yes,



there, of course. But Eros, our sum and our god, is much more than that.' He sat upright, composing his hands.

'Just don't...just don't!' Lila said, glancing at him with irritation and scowling as she looked away to think. A hundred pits had just opened up before her, all fatal and full of...chocolate. 'What's your name?'

'I don't have one. We don't. You...that is the prey.. the client..'

'Oh shut up, I get it already,' she said with a groan, kicking her feet up off the desk and sitting forwards to glare at him. 'Chocolate.'

The demon bowed its head.

Malachi snorted and spoke, his voice a garbled growl from a mouth entirely unsuited to speech. 'Dat all we need. Choco-fucking-late.'

Lila's glare became pure steel. 'Well you're not calling him that. So what's your angle, pussycat?'

Malachi simply snarled, showing shocking sabre-teeth, and then got up with a surly languor and pushed his way out of the yurt.

Lila turned back. 'What my colleague means is we can't take you on.'

Chocolate looked at her with his violet eyes, sad and resigned and everything a demon shouldn't be, unless, in this case, she wanted him to be those things. 'It is worse than you know,' he said after a pause. She found she believed him even though he chose his words carefully, as if he was wandering a field and picking flowers for a posy to impress her.

'Since I don't know anything that won't be hard.' Lila checked the time. Funny how seconds passed so slowly and she wasn't even close to the speed of light.

'He uses me to kill them.'

Lila flicked her gaze back to the huge violet orbs. 'What?'

'I can't prove anything, Miss Black. Because it looks as though I am doing it. But I'm not.'

'So it's possession?'

'Yes. At the time, it is.'

Her mind boggled at the notion of investigating this – killer says he didn't do it, although he did it. She dragged herself back to practicalities. 'But now you're what, on your lunch break?'

The demon blinked, slowly, as if it pained him. 'I know when he is coming. There is... He's not here now. Or I wouldn't be here. He would make me kill myself if he knew.'

Lila leaned forward on her elbows, staring at him, it, whatever was under there. 'Could you make it any more depressingly gothic and beyond the reach of hard evidence?'

The demon blinked. 'No.'

She wanted to believe. She knew she couldn't afford to believe anything around him because he was a mirror for her fantasies and apparently she needed a hopelessly difficult case fit to tax her, fit to be important. A fresh hell lay down that road – she saw it from a distance – the entire thing her own fabrication. 'I need something,' she said. 'More than your word. I need a crime, a scene, a victim...'

'The previous killings that I..' he faltered, almost choked, '...have...done...are all inland. There are no bodies left. I can give you the identities of the dead. I can...I can give you the dead, Miss Black, if that will help?'

She found herself frowning. 'Give me the dead?'

The demon nodded. 'It is my nature to create imagos of my...of the people I interact with. They are the inspiration from which I draw myself in every encounter. In your terms I believe you would say these were like snapshots, of a person at the time I knew them. Memory records of who they were, what they desired, what they dreamed. I can give them to you as ghosts, by passing through the plane of the dead. You would then be able to forensically examine them. But then we would have to destroy them. I don't want to leave them untended in the world. That would be unkind.'

Lila stared at him/it, momentarily baffled by the notion of creating and killing ghosts on a whim. 'They could identify themselves, I mean, their bodies, their...who they were?'

Chocolate nodded once. 'They may remember me too.' It sounded sad. She couldn't take that as anything though.

'Let's just backtrack a moment,' she said, her AI supplying information at her in a blur. 'You say you are possessed periodically? I thought demons

are immune to possession. That's their nature, no? If we're going all nature on it.' She studied him so closely. She saw his eyes dilate – arousal or alarm, who could tell? In demons much the same thing.

'I know it sounds unbelievable. Especially to you. I know. But it is true. I – this is why I come to you and not some demon. They have demon investigators you know! But how could I admit such a thing to them? How? They would laugh or kill me themselves, or try it. Even you...stare at me as if you want to rip me apart. But it is true and because of that if nothing else you must take my case! I have no idea how it works. I don't know who it is...'

There was a faltering there and she sensed a lie, saw that the demon admitted it with the guilty flick of his eyelids. He knew something.

'I don't have to listen to bullshit,' she snapped confidently, then hesitated. Damn it. 'Actually I get paid to...ah, shit, I get paid to do that...but you know what I mean!' She wished Zal were there. She wished Teazole were. But it was pointless. She wasn't in Faery. Wishes had no force in Otopia, and no smell. Both the men were in Daemonia.

On the coathook behind her she felt the faery, Tatterdemalion, shiver. In the form of a long black ragged coat the faery was known only to a few. Her companionship with Lila had often been tempestuous, always silent. They knew each other through the only language they shared – clothing - but she knew the faery was never hers, was not any more really an object than she was. Their relationship of wearer and worn was convenient to them both. A friendship, of a kind, inarticulate and odd, but if she were pushed Lila would find it hard to find another being she trusted so implicitly.

She saw Chocolate glance at the coat, alarmed, then at her.

'It's nothing,' she said, flicking her hand dismissively. 'Go on. Tell me more of what you don't know.'

Chocolate sighed. 'I...it's so hard to explain it. There are ways to do this. Thanatic paths. I don't know the name of the killer. I know it's male.' He paused, biting back the words that were going to damn him more with resentment she could feel. Her heart went out to him but she wasn't prepared for it when he hung his head and confessed in a whisper of utter humiliation, 'And human.' The violet eyes stared into her now, like drowning pools that

would pour into her and smother her with their endless flow of overblown sorrow.

The faery coat sighed and its long threadbare folds made a susurrus. A smell of old, forgotten violets wafted from it over Lila. Lila turned and looked at it, 'You too huh?' Tatters hung there, mute concurrence in her faded black despond.

Lila put her head on the side and considered. Her AI conferred, tracked paths through the mysteries of the Otopian Clouds. 'A human who has learned how to control demons to do killing for him?'

Chocolate nodded eagerly, glad to be understood if nothing else.

'Yeah, starting to see your point now,' Lila said, immediately putting out copies of her AI into the Clouds to look for this information or anything like it, anywhere. Anything relevant. 'You came to the right place.' She wondered why it took so long for demons to say the important thing. It was like romance. You had to play the game and dance until the right moment for the advance.

She reminded herself of what he was. It wasn't his fault she wanted a dark, romantic adventure, though she didn't ever remember dreaming about murder. She reconsidered the position.

'I must go,' Chocolate whispered, doom bells in his every vowel. He moved from sitting to standing without any visible intermediate state. 'He can't find me here.'

'I haven't finished yet,' Lila objected but Chocolate was already heading to the door and the portal beyond it. She swore, got up, grabbed Tatters-the-coat and followed him.

Outside, Malachi the black man, adroit in a perfect dark blue suit was having a terse conversation with the portal faery.

The tiny portal faery was stuttering, clearly frightened of him. The woven arch of oak and willow she was touching wavered and warped as the shifting planes inside it juddered in an unstable way. The air and space in the garden they stood in seemed to wobble and yaw. It was nauseating. Lila had to put a hand out for balance and the Inky stopped before it, unable to

continue to his destination; in such a condition he could have ended up in six places or more at once and perfectly dead.

'It's been like this since he came in!' the faery protested, stabbing a long, twiggy finger at Chocolate. Her straw hair was all frazzled and steaming in the weak sunlight coming through the Bay City midmorning smog. 'He's jinxed it! He just came in without asking. He didn't do the protocols. And now it's all over the place.'

Lila looked at Chocolate, 'Is it true?'

'I had to get here fast and I must leave the same way,' he said, staring at the portal faery with dislike. 'She lies. She has fouled it up so she can get her own back on me.'

Lila looked at the faery, 'Todmorden, is this true?'

'I did not so!' the faery screeched but she put her hand on the wicker archway and within seconds the agitation began to resolve itself. 'You're just lucky I'm a great engineer,' she said sourly.

'I can get ten more just like you,' Malachi snarled, his beast voice emerging oddly from his man mouth so that he started and looked surprised himself. He shot his cuffs and pushed his shoulders back.

Chocolate waited only long enough for the portal to resolve itself fully to the Bathshebat hotel room he had chosen as his entry and exit point and then moved forward. Lila and Malachi were after him, almost shouldering each other out of the way to fit through the gate.

'I'll keep it open shall I?' screeched the faery. 'Don't mind me, just carry on. No instructions and no tea breaks. I shall just ASSUME...'

Lila's arrival in Bathshebat cut her voice off.

Chocolate turned as they all appeared, a crushed and resigned frown. 'Don't follow me out of here, I beg you. I will come back here, or to you, when I can. This room is mine. Don't be seen near it.' He was already at the door by the time he finished the sentence and then seemed to vanish through its heavy draped hangings without a sound or a movement.

Lila, frowning, glanced out the window and saw the canal layout, instantly able to place herself in the Crimson Veils, a palace that rented rooms

by the hour and metre. A lot of desire demons used it as a home. And a lot of killers. The fact that the city morgue was next door was no accident.

Malachi was snooping around the furnishings, sniffing, bristling with dislike of the place. 'It smells of so many people: demons, humans...many humans... What the hell would they be doing in here?'

Lila opened the window and leant out, looking over the canals towards her home. Zeppelins and gyrocopters flitted around, winged demons swooping between them in the daily aerial carnival that was Bathshebat's most commonplace sight. Over the Grand Drink the stutterburst of magical bolts and gunfire boasted a duel, but she didn't bother to zoom on it. For the sake of completeness she scanned the side of the building she was in. Its walls of red and gold glass were busy with polishing imps, tails lashing, suckered feet plinking slowly. The room had a single aethercatcher, half full, hanging outside. So, he'd used it to come through the portal, she figured, and that meant that like most inkies, he was able to transmute aether into whatever he needed it for. A power that other demons would kill to have, but kill as they might could never have, while inkies rarely used it for anything more savage or intent than party tricks, since their real power was drawn from the emotional energy states of others. She'd heard once of an entrepreneurial Inky who had risen to great significance through trading his aetheric alchemy skills but the vast majority considered that beneath them. Money and power were not motives that moved them much. Although it was always power, wasn't it, in the end?

'What do inkies crave the most?' she asked aloud, drawing her head and shoulders back inside.

'How the frack would I know?' Malachi's disgust had grown it seemed. He was looking at the room's incredible opulent clutter. There was not an inch of wall that did not hold a picture or painting, not a surface that wasn't covered in oddities and items from books to broken orrerrys, to fetishes and every kind of magical bric-a-brac. There was so much that wherever the eye paused there were at least five things to catch the attention, all unique, all peculiar, like a madman's antique warehouse. Nonetheless there were enough operational surfaces in order: a table, chairs, a sideboard covered in

bottles and crystal glasses, bookcases, scrolltowers, sofas, and of course a magnificently huge four poster bed, hung and draped around with cloth of gold and tapestries.

‘Got some kind of princess thing going on,’ Malachi said, looking at this with incredulous horror. He touched the edge of the tapestried curtains on which were pinned a sea of photographs and cartoons, some moving and some just still.

There were more than a hundred individuals in them, Lila noted after a scan – she sent an AI on an identification trail for that, and for all the objects as she catalogued them. ‘You think a mass murdering incubus would take us straight to his room?’

‘It’s Hell ain’t it?’ Malachi replied grimly. ‘Look at all this shit. It’s like a nightmare.’

Lila found the bathroom behind a silk hanging. In contrast to the main room it was immaculate and empty, white and brown marble, silver plumbing. Two crystal decanters of fancy soap were its only contents. She came back and was assaulted by the clutter again, and the darkness it caused, pressing on her. Results started to fall in: the inventory was too random to make sense of, and had no detectable pattern. It seemed he just liked to collect old stuff. She checked the walls and floor for blood. Of course there was some. She drew it through her skin to analyse it, but the splash patterns could have been accounted for by the water splashes from the several faucets and jets.

Her analysis returned almost immediately. It was all his blood. Nothing out of the ordinary there, for a demon’s home,. She’d fought enough heartfelt duels in Daemonia to know that if you weren’t bleeding very often you just weren’t trying.

‘If he tells the truth, then there will be nothing here to link him to this possessor,’ Malachi ventured, sniffing over the bed with an expression of preparatory alarm.

‘Demons being possessed – that’s not even possible,’ Lila said, voicing what bothered her most: the phrase was on repeat loop in her brain. ‘But say it is. Just for now. Why him? Why here? Why now?’

‘While you work on that one, I’ll take the other path. Say he is taking you for an Inky trip, for his own sick reasons. Why you? Why now?’ Malachi wrinkled his nose. ‘Nobody sleeps here but him I’d say. Other smells are all too faint, just carried here on his skin and hair or whatever he’s got.’

‘All right,’ Lila said and added, ‘partner,’ just to try it out.

Malachi grinned. ‘All right. I’m outta here. Sort out that portal faery and start looking through the murders and body listings over in Otopia.’

Lila nodded, ‘I’m staying here. I’ll check the morgue and the body counts, see if I can find some kind of grimoire or explanation for how it might be done. I’ll meet you back at the office in a few hours.’

Malachi nodded and headed out through the portal shimmer leaving it like a soft extra veil hanging where he’d been, transparent and gauzy. Hacking it must have been quite the work. And yet there were no items around you’d expect for rituals of that nature. She had her work cut out figuring this one.

She left things as they were and departed through the window. The imps looked up at her but on recognising her looked away again. If her own reputation was not sufficient her husbands’ surely were. Nobody here was picking fights and causing trouble with that, though she’d be lucky to get far without some upstart challenger. To discourage this once she had made her rocket-boot descent to street level she slipped the ragged faery coat on and threw the cowed hood up over her head. It covered her to the ankles, leaving only the massive structure of her metallised boots on show – and any demon could have worn that kind of thing. Her hands were black leathered, her silver eyes would flash if seen – she could have been any grubby necromancer of no particular note.

She went through the gaudy silver and gold doors of the Fine Fetish Emporium, or as it was in human terms, the morgue. Inside, displayed with the most ostentatious glitz, lay jewelled and dazzling racks of statues in varying sizes from monumental to Lego-figure, each one a perfect still stone replica of the demon it had once been in life. The larger ones also sometimes came in precious stone forms, or even gemstone forms. These were set high up and out of reach so nobody could chip bits off them. Lila studied them and



contemplated demon death: condemned to exist within the stone form until they were shattered. She was amused by the one who had decided to die as a smiling fat man, one hand raised and a smile on his chubby face. As a joke they had sprayed him gold and given him a special offer sign. Well that was one fate she wasn't going to face.

The bodies of murder victims were particularly prized. They had these in a room at the back. She went inside through the charm curtain and perused the long rows and their eye-watering price tags. Telltale imps watched her languidly from their shelf postings, murmuring the occasional, 'Bargains everywhere. No touching.' One of them unwound like a crabby, skinny cat, and dangled by his tail in front of her face, 'What ya want? I can help ya find it. Tragic lovers? Pacts? Drowners? Unwary Travellers hmm?'

'Where do you put human dead?' she asked.

The imp recoiled. 'Rotting useless things they are. In the basement. In the cold. Then they go out to feed the crocs if nobody come for 'em. Never do. So...don't keep 'em long. Makin' yourself a zombie eh?'

'Yes,' Lila said, pondering it briefly, but they were always more trouble than they were worth.

'Yeah, basement,' the imp said sadly.

Lila went there and a polite, subservient Mourning Deva showed her around, pulling frozen bodies out of deep frost for her, their faces locked in ice. She overheard an attendant call them peepsicles. The Mourning Deva sighed heavily from her grey robing and Lila almost started to cry herself.

'These are all the human dead we have recovered in the last month,' she explained in her sweet voice, carried off at the end of all its sentences as if onto a wind. Dry deserts and cold hells waited for that wind. Lila could feel her call it, make it. It was the oddest sensation. She had to shake herself to snap out of a deadening sense of pointlessness, realising only then that the Mourning Deva was making that too. 'Can you identify them? Do you know what happened to them?'

'All kinds of deaths,' the Deva said with rich appreciation. 'But...there is something – a dark thread – between some. I taste a bitter, dark, desired moment. Rich, decadent, satisfying, unexpectedly so. As if they longed for

death even as they longed to live, the death satisfaction, most unusual. It tastes...'

'Like chocolate?' Lila hazarded.

'Yes,' the Deva said as though this was a missing crossword answer she'd been searching for all morning. Her moment of pleasure dropped the room temperature three degrees. 'Chocolat Noir.'

'Show me and tell me.'

The Deva, much more helpful and lively now as if Lila's suggestion had been an effective bribe, moved around the reliquary, drawing up bodies from the swirling icy mist and lining them up for Lila to see. 'All girls. All young. These three here died of heart failure and these two on the end the same but the hearts have burst open and are not intact.'

The ice panels over their faces were absolutely transparent. Lila stared. 'Did they come in like this?' Every face was contorted, mouths open, eyes open or shut but in an expression of agony – no, after a few moments she amended that to blissful agony.

'Yes, locked into the Petit Mort, as you see. A pleasure beyond death, perhaps hmmm?' The Deva softly brushed the shells of her charges, with loving, tender care.

'Do you know who's responsible?'

'Surely an incubus,' the Deva said as if this were merely a formality.

Lila looked one more time at the faces. She thought that when she had to go, there could be worse ways. Then she looked up at the Deva, 'I need names, everything you've got on them.'

'You have come to reclaim them and take them home?'

'Nobody else has come?'

The Deva shook her head. 'Only about half are ever claimed. The rest..' she shrugged and a tumble of grey cloud billowed down off her shoulders.

'Yes, I have,' Lila said. 'Pack them up and send them to the Otopia Portal. Here's my card,' she passed across her business card to the Deva and watched as the demon's eyebrows lifted as she read.

‘Certainly, Madame.’ The Deva bowed to her and when she looked up her grey gaze was almost reverential. ‘You do great works, Mistress.’

Lila was startled, repulsed, but showed nothing on her face. She let her emotions become the aloof hauteur of the truly righteous and turned on her heel in dismissal to march out. Incubus killings...and he’d said there were no bodies. Doesn’t mean they were his of course. Didn’t mean they weren’t.

Back in Otopia she sent the bodies she’d recovered to the city morgue to await formal identification, hoping that was possible from the DNA scans. She was busy filing them as murder victims when Malachi came in carrying their take-out dinners. She stopped mid-sort and looked up at him. ‘Are these murder victims, Mal?’

‘Don’t know,’ he said. ‘That’s the trouble with it. What you go to an Inky for can kill you just as easy as if they did it themselves. Suckies too of course. Renegade desire demons, that’s nearly a contradiction of terminology right there.’ He sniffed and handed across her food, opening his own carton and digging in.

‘So, I’ll have to file them as Misadventures,’ she said, correcting it. ‘For now. Right, let’s go see your dead sucky.’

‘After I eat,’ he said firmly.

She opened her chow mein and began to eat it.

‘Dat’s forty degrees right there,’ he said, looking at her across his spoonful of Flumsy.

She paused and then blew on it a few times until he stopped staring at her.

‘Anyone in for the sucky murder?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘Was left in a flowerbed. Could have been there months.’

‘Nobody noticed her before that?’

‘Everyone thought someone else bought her. Shared garden.’

Lila nodded. ‘Grimoire Research?’

‘I’m going Under after we’re done here. I’ll do it then.’

It was late in the evening, long after Malachi had returned to the Fae Underworld, when the portal faery suddenly swore and started jabbering

outside. Lila guessed the reason even before she'd got her feet off the desk. In her hands the tiny statuette of the murdered succubus was easily slipped into her coat pocket. The marks of death on her looked like tiny scratches at that scale and she had washed her, because there was a strong smell of cat about her. It bothered her somewhat to know that the demon herself was still inside, a silent prisoner of her tomb, but there was nothing either of them could do about that.

She knew she was in trouble as soon as she got out of the yurt and emerged into the walled garden. The portal faery was silent now, but only because a huge treelike creature was holding her like a little rag doll. Heavy, fibrous roots were thrust down into the garden soil, anchoring it and drawing power from the elemental aspects of her weak Otopian grass and earth. Leaves, mosses and fungi coated its humanoid shape liberally. The branches of its arms were as wide as Lila's body and its fingers were twig extensions of many shapes. One of these was extended to the held faery and was growing over her, covering her in tiny herbs, flowering, sweetening as above her the belled head of an enormous lily gazed down at her, pouring out sickly sweet scent – a smell Lila only ever associated with funerals. Even as she ran the two steps to the portal control, standing on the root foot itself, the faery arched up in the creature's grip and expired with a long, ululating cry of terror and pleasure.

The incubus – for that's what it was she realised – tossed her body aside casually and in the same sweeping gesture batted Lila off her feet as if she were inconsequential and flung her six metres away. The power of the blow was itself an enormous shock. She twisted and landed in a crouch, springing back instantly with a thought only of ripping off that vulnerable white and pink lily head, but even in the second it took her to leap the gap the creature had changed completely and it was Chocolate who stood at the control panel, weakly stabbing at it with trembling fingers. She noticed in the last moment of their closing destiny that there was something very wrong with him. His violet and grey robes were covered in dark stains and he stank of blood. And his voice, when it came, was anything but charming – a raging snarl of frustration – as he began to slam the panel in hopelessness. He

glanced up and there was nothing in his indigo eyes that she recognised from before, only a cool, calculating inspection that was cut short when she landed with her flattened palm on his chest and her knees on his hips and drove the both of them down onto the ground, pinning him flat.

At first she thought she'd broken him. He was light and fragile. She heard a bone snap under the heavy pressure of her hand – she might be light for a cyborg but she was superheavyweight for a human. Braced for assault she didn't understand at first when he simply lay there. Tears welled in his eyes and his breath came with difficulty. His eyelids fluttered and rage and impatience surged in her so she wanted to punch him but then she realised with growing horror that the blood was still running, that it was his and that he was trying to speak to her. The thing before that had not been him was gone. This was Chocolate and all he had left, trying to get her attention. She leapt off him and bent closer to listen – his lips were moving but the sounds were incredibly quiet.

'He knows about you,' Chocolate whispered. 'I came here to stop him, bring him.' He paused to gasp for another ragged breath. 'He has .. bigger plans...'

'What plans?' Lila demanded, putting her hand on his chest, shaking lightly with determination.

'Moving up in the...world,' Chocolate replied faintly and she realised by the beat of his heart under her palm that he was nearly dead.

'Shit.' She did the only thing she could think of and started tearing off his clothes to look for the wounds. When she found them they were deep and precise, the arteries in his arms and inner thighs cut right across with wounds whose angles dictated self infliction. She opened the palm of her hand up, refolding herself by thought alone, to create forceps and clamps of delicate sizes in the ends of her fingers, moving in a blur of AI-enhanced speed to staple-gun him back together but the blood was only weak surges by then and she knew it was too late. She couldn't synthesise inky blood and there was none anywhere within several light years or a dimensional shift. A single glance confirmed that his earlier actions had effectively dismantled her portal. There was no hope of going anywhere immediately.

Chocolate smiled at her as she gave up on him. She looked down at the beauty of his body, the handsome, exceptional planes of his face. 'At least...' he murmured, so silent only she could have heard him, 'I got to die pretty –'

It took her several seconds to realise he was gone and then only because his eyes lost their sheen and his skin turned the exact colour of violets, hair a deep lamp black that no longer reflected any light. Then the familiar transformation took place – one she'd seen a hundred times but never got over the shock of witnessing: his body began to petrify. As it did so it shrank in size and changed its posture into one that typified and displayed the true powers it had held in life. When the process had finished she had before her a Barbie doll sized priapic incubus of exquisite beauty, standing on the toes of one foot in the posture of a fire dancer. On his face that same, sad, enigmatic smile remained unchanged in curious contrast to the blatant seduction of the rest of him.

Lila sat back on her heels overcome by a sense of defeat that filled her up like dry, grey dust. He'd come to get her help, and now he was dead and if he was telling the truth...if... She reached out and picked him up and addressed him, knowing he could hear her, he just couldn't do anything himself. 'Time we went to pay Death a visit.' It made her feel like it wasn't over at least.

He fitted quite neatly into the inner pocket of her coat. Then she went to see what was left of poor Todmorden.

In the weakly fluctuating light of the portal Tod was so unrecognisable that anyone who didn't know her would just have thought she was an old bird's nest lying on the ground. Lila carefully gathered her up – a double handful was all she was, and not in any form. With her death her form had disintegrated leaving only twigs and grass, dead flowerheads and drying leaves. The spirit that had animated the faery was gone without a trace.

'Good speed Back Under!' she said sadly to the remains, hoping some connection was left for Tod to hear her. Then she put all that was left of Tod on the compost heap. It was what she would have wanted. It still felt wrong to Lila, in a way, but that sense of discomfort and unease was so

commonplace to her now that she stood and let it pass. The ways of others were not human ways, she couldn't be expected to feel as they did.

Predictably human, her outrage and sadness and her sense of thwarted power soon refocused itself into the cold anger she preferred over all other feelings. Her demon husbands would have laughed at her – a cold passion was something demons never felt, all hot burning to the end. Cold calculation was a thing for corrupted aelfen and humans, for the machines to which they were curiously related and in which they found a satisfying expression of their desire to be free of fear. There was a machine dimension she had never been to, but it was part of her at every level now. And she knew what it was useful for. It ordered. It made exact. It accounted. It analysed and dissected. It reacted. It repeated. It killed. It felt no sadness. Felt no pain. It made everything neat, tidy and just. It was ideology and order made metal. It was unstoppable law.

At moments like these she felt consumed by the sense of her own massive power of precise and exacting destruction. She was everything the demons and aelfkin and faeries of the world hated. She was nothing but the devils' work even if she put the cold steel of her being to use for motives that, at least, felt good.

So, Chocolate had come here and he had brought his killer with him. Why?

The wounds that had finished him had been done by his own hand. The weapon was not here. Presumably it was where the portal transfer had originated. His room, by her guess, but she would have to verify that. She moved to do so immediately, slamming her finger into the control ports of the system at the controller's base to attune the portal to the origin point in Crimson Veils. After a minute of hard labour between her AI and its complex systems she got it within a metre and called that good enough. She logged a report with the rest of the Security Agency offices about what had happened before stepping through.

Blood covered the floor. She emerged standing in a puddle of it, already sticky and congealed into a dark purple mass, the aether deliquesced out of it. An ornate but otherwise ordinary filleting knife lay on the floor

nearby. She recorded everything as she looked around, then took an evidence bag out of her combat vest and retrieved the knife, slipping it into the coat's voluminous pocket on the other side to her statues. As she moved forwards she noticed a trail of footprints that were not the inky's. They led to the window in small, pattery leaps, onto the frame. The window itself was closed but unlatched. She searched back, and found scrape marks, missing blood. Someone had come in and taken the blood, while it was still liquid, maybe while he was still here.

That was something she could follow, but not alone. She logged into the Daemon Cloud and hired herself a Sanguinello. The small, agile red girl that arrived in a crimson toga was birdlike and delicate. She discreetly licked Chocolate's blood off the window frame and closed her eyes. Her face looked like a graveyard angel's, serene and contemplative of a divine purpose. Then her orange eyes flashed open and she beckoned, spreading her bat wings and diving out of the window and into the turbulent currents of a stormy Batheshebat night.

Lila followed her, close as she dared so she didn't lose her in the winds and the foolhardy traffic. She was led a merry dance as the girl followed the scent, the equivalent of uphill and down dale and all around the town with many pauses and circling and checks, the weather having destroyed nearly all traces. Eventually however, after two hours of struggling and a soaking by sudden rain, they landed on a bridge across a canal so minor it didn't have a name, between Locketgate and Switches in an area of Graffika, known for its master visual artists. The Sanguinello trotted easily along now before pausing at a junction and pointing down to a well lit tattoo studio; Needlepoint. Lila thanked her and paid her then waited until she had flown off before approaching the door.

She stayed away from the broad stripes of light on the road and moved through the darkness to the door. A familiar sense of frustration came over her as she saw the blood running down the inside of the glass window. She tried the door. It was open, and she went in.

The place was a wreck, utterly destroyed. Broken equipment and smashed ink bottles were everywhere, along with the remains of the artist and



at least one other demon who had been so thoroughly ripped apart and with such violence that droplets of blood and ink still filled the air and were splattered on every visible surface. It was fresh. Very. But the studio held the sullen silence of complete abandonment that seems to ring with the echo of final arguments. She had only just missed them.

She leaped out onto the street and recalled the Sanguinello. The girl hadn't got far and returned, licking her lips and fingers as she concluded a snack. This time the hunt led to a dead end and the clear aetheric remains of a decaying one-shot portal that would need a different and much more expensive kind of demon to forensically diagnose. Fortunately Lila herself was just sufficiently able to detect aether to do the job herself, but it would take time. She checked her clock and got on with it. The curious Sang girl watched her for a few minutes and then said,

'Why would you get a tattoo with Inky blood? Unicorn purple is a much better colour on a human skin.'

Lila looked up Daemonic tattoos while she tried to detect tachyon and graviton particles. She realised the location was Otopia. Home. They had gone home. But she could not find the exact location. She sat back on her heels. Suppose a human got a tattoo with Inky blood?

Nothing in her databases helped. She returned to the office and found Malachi already there. At first she couldn't place what was wrong and then realised that the yurt was immaculate and tidy. He'd been cleaning. Everything was much bigger than she remembered it.

'What gives, Cat?' she asked, leaving the flap open so the dawn and fresh air could come in.

He didn't even look up from the filthy, ragged, hardback book he was studying. '...let the summoner be cleaned with innocent blood and fumed with the inks of the ocean. Thence from the heart of they existence let them find those marks which describe and pin them to the world as the butterfly to the board and the Christ to the cross. What is in the skin shall always find the way home. Thus inscribe deeply the patterns of they faith with the blood of incubus and succubus in kind, that can reach out into the minds of others, into their souls. Be sure to choose a path there and back, and speak not they are

coming, only walk it and with the painted noose and lash contain the mark and draw they fate according.'

'Where did you get that?' Lila demanded.

'I had it stolen by the Wheredjago. It's mostly wiped out the research budget for the next month. It's not printed. It's written. One person's book. No names, no dates. Sketches.'

She sat down and put the succubus and Chocolate out on the desk. Malachi studied them sombrely. 'Ink.'

'Inks of the ocean?'

'Any squid or octopus, any tentacled fate-drawer.'

'So that was easy. Just the fish market. Innocent blood?'

'Pick a victim, always some to choose from. May not even be dead. Could get it from a blood bank.'

'Marks that pin them to the world?'

'Personal things.'

'Choose a path, there and back...painted noose and lash?'

'I guess those are inked on objects. Tattoos. All of them.'

'Okay so, he killed the sucky to get the inky. He killed the inky – who is a lot bigger – and Chocolate said he was moving up in the world. What next? Does it go on?'

Malachi read, '...blah...choose the victim according to the instrument they make, their song under they skin gives nothing to they body but the image to thy soul transfers its power. Carry only what you must. Walks in may walk out again, no matter the way.'

'So, a bigger victim gets a better weapon, kills a more powerful victim...but what for? The inky,' she glanced apologetically at Chocolate, 'was already a good killer. Why get another?'

'More to the point,' Malachi said. 'They had this book. It came from...wherever they are.'

Lila bit her lips, thinking hard. The Wheredjago was a faery able to locate objects and take them, wherever they were, whenever they were in present or past. 'Might have taken it before our guy got hold of it. But it's worth a try. Will he take you there?'

'It's against his principles.'

'There must be something he wants. Find it. Get him to take you. Ask him to re-find it if it doesn't get you anywhere. Whoever it is must be tired now...been out all night, had a hard time of it, lost the ...lost Chocolate...rushed the tattoo job and I'm guessing whoever he took over is the one who trashed the tattoo shop in Grafika. So they might still be together.' She thought for a moment and then rejected out of hand all the interesting but unhelpful routes. The origin of the book, the nature of the magic, none of that was important. She looked at Chocolate and the succubus. She considered the Agency's goal of justice, Otopia's code of conduct, her own, personal conviction. 'Whatever his goal is it doesn't matter. Stopping him matters. I have to find out who he's been killing. I need a Walker. No wait. A Medium.'

She thought a moment more and then looked at Malachi, 'Find his body. If he's in it or not. Find it. You trace the Wheredjago. I'll try figure out where he might go next.'

'And if I do find him?'

Lila looked at the book. 'Give it to me,' she said.

Malachi passed it over and she turned the pages from start to finish in a hummingbird blur of speed before handing it back. 'You're to use this to track only. After that, destroy it. If you find him and he's not there...wait. When he gets back make sure it's him, then kill him.'

'I'm sorry, *kill* him?' Malachi blinked a few times.

'Yeah. It says on page twenty nine that he has to return to his own body every four hours or he'll lose his connection with it and get sucked into Thanatopia on a one way ticket. Kill him the instant you're sure or he'll leap out again if he's prepared, and so far, he's been pretty prepared.'

'And if I ain't sure?'

'It's possible that the possessed one could switch with him. I don't know if that counts as a return or not. Say it does. Then we've got a demon in his pathetic little mundane Otopian form which is really not that hard to deal with. Arrest it.'

'Why don't I just kill him whatever?'

‘Because then he’ll just start it all over again in a new demon body.’

Malachi looked unhappy. ‘Won’t the Otopian constitution have us up for murder? I mean, you’re all for the trials and that stuff.’

‘Well, do you know how to contain him?’

‘Get rid of the tattoos.’

‘There won’t be time to take him to a clinic, Mal. By then he’ll have found something big to come back and kill us. Look at the size difference.’ She pointed to Chocolate, and to the unknown succubus before reaching out and putting them back in her pockets. ‘More than doubled. He could be up to things that die lifesize by now.’

They both looked up as the portal shivered, the light changing the dawn’s glow on the doorflap. Lila got up, reaching her feet as Malachi shifted forms in the blink of an eye, moving from human to cat and then into a shadow which dispersed almost instantly in contact with the darkneses of the room, sinking out of the world. She didn’t have that kind of option. She stood up and went out into the light.

Her husband Teazle the demon had several forms, like many demons of his kind, including a human one as white as a painted door, everything about him the same identical shade except for his blue eyes. It wasn’t unusual for him to use the portal or to visit the office, even at odd hours, but when he did so he was usually in his wolf form or his true form. This was one he employed relatively rarely. She was glad of the fact now. It made her suspicious, as did his smile and welcoming look. The real one would have pounced before she was clear of the door.

She smiled and walked up to kiss him, arms held out for a hug. It was the oddest thing to have him hug her back and she hoped that the chill she felt in suspecting the worst didn’t show on her face. Fortunately the silver surface of her eyes could not give too much away but as she felt his hands move up, cold and sure, towards her face, she began to wonder what she would do now. Against Teazle himself she was reasonably sure she stood no chance. Even with all her abilities and power, he was just better. The one thing she dreaded was losing her strength – when the day came she was no match for him she suspected he would dispatch her or at the least challenge

and defeat her before abandoning her as of no more use nor interest. It wouldn't be like a human abandonment for him. That would be a demon's form of mercy. For her though, it would be the start of an inevitable fall. She'd have to be clear of Daemonia by then and nurse her broken heart far from there. But now it looked like it wouldn't even come to that.

She turned, as if moving off naturally from a normal spousal greeting, the sort other people had, so casual and thoughtless, a moment of intimacy wanted by one ignored by the other for reasons they didn't want to talk about. She felt the grip around her neck tighten – well, that was like him at least.

'I'm curious,' she said. 'What made you come up with this idea?' And looked him in the eye, making no effort to escape any more.

'You did,' he said, awkwardly, and as his fingers closed around her throat, she knew.

She listened to his explanation with an eye on the clock, wondering if Malachi had a hope of finding the true form, looking into Teazole's blue, blue eyes, azure where Chocolate's had been indigo, sure that the birth of Chocolate's violet was in this blue right here; in the longing for Teazole's connection to her to be both the deadly competitive tension that it was and something more benign, that could buckle when it beheld its love – that would be her of course – and alter through the alchemy of that oddest of emotions into a creature that would defy its own nature and in her weakening old age remain true, turning from competitor to protector, saving her from himself and others even when there was no sane reason to do that, no pragmatic, no demonic reason. She wanted, longed for, the deadly romance to run on and become the violets and hearts of old age, the soft and sentimental things that would save her from the cold machine.

Realising this, her eyes filled with tears. In the background the prattled explanation, overheated and excited with the prospect of killing her, ran through its petty history of deaths, the discovery of the magic, the book itself a mysterious opportunity that went unquestioned but which was the only thing in the mundane tirade which struck her as at all interesting: to obtain such an item was no accident in this day and age. Some wicked hand had put it there and perhaps now lingered in an unknown spot, watching as events unfolded.

She could survive without breathing, but not with her neck crushed. The pain was fierce but it was nothing compared to the shock of realising Teazle could be compromised in this way, even for a second. But he had been, and she would not last four hours of this. She had not even had the chance to discover from Chocolate exactly what he knew of his murderer and puppeteer. She had nothing. It felt bitter and dark. In rage she changed suddenly moving from her human form to the machine's combat bladed armour. She grabbed Teazle's borrowed head and sought to crush it as his cold stone hands crushed her windpipe. He changed form too, the draconic monster suddenly beating its wings, skull implacable in her grip.

Over her back the coat surged suddenly, lace in fine patterns growing up across her hands and fingers and into his eyes and nostrils like choking vine. A smell of gin and dry roses, papery and dusty, clouded up from the heavy black fustian of the faery coat and whispers shivered through it, made by the rubbing of thread on thread, a posy of promises.

From Teazle's dragon mouth came the near incomprehensible garble of the murderer's reasoning, '...demons to kill demons...the perfected idea...get rid of them all, every one, every elf, every faery, every evil little speck of profanity on the face of the human world...'

*Oh, she thought as she grew spines of metal and punctured his body as the coat bound them tighter in its shroud – oh, you're one of those...a crusader, a purist, a machine believer though you think it is not the machine, you think it is a god. And like the demons you love killing. You love the feeling it gives you. I didn't know love was the fuel of the machine, love conquering fear...sometimes itself, sometimes with death...and it feels the same.*

Poison quills stuck into her, slowing her down. His hands were razors now, too big to avoid and in any case cutting her off because of the coat which also prevented him moving them much and grew and grew in endless wrappings, binding them closer and tighter and closer. Her final attack, which he could avoid only by teleport, was nearly ready. It relied rather on his not teleporting – a feature uncommon to any creature and one she prayed Teazle

had hidden from his controller. She herself would survive it, at least long enough to make a full disclosure for the records. She had her ways.

She thought of Zal, the elf, their other part, far away and ignorant. She was glad he was safe and spared this. She could not possibly allow a stupid jerk like that to run around inside this demon, having such a spree. She would not allow someone like that to have her beloved and violate him, not even for a minute more.

'Teazole,' she said, knowing she had run out of time. 'Take the path back. Find it. And take it back.' She murmured an apology to the coat, and to the demons with her, and then she blew them to pieces.

\*

It took a few days to reassemble satisfactorily. Bits of her kept becoming unstable and going missing. She had to rewrite herself from old memories, recalling selves from the Cloud to figure out and restore sections that didn't make sense. Of the actual final moment there was no memory, mercifully.

Beside her sat her husband in his human body, waiting patiently with her as the technicians worked slowly over him, erasing the tattoos that covered every inch of his skin. They had recovered a great deal of blood from the scene, both his and hers, and being unable to separate them out they used them together to re-ink him, drawing and writing in everything that pinned him to the world and to himself like a butterfly to a card or a Christ to the cross or a demon into a human body now his own.

Lila looked at him. 'You're no Chocolate.'

'I'm still your dog.'

She held out her hand and he took it. With him inside the man's young face didn't even look the same any more. Its average, slightly overweight complacency was transformed by the blazing, relentless vigour she knew so well into another face altogether, one even now showing more bone and line.

'Now what?'

'Go back, carry on!' he said and when she hesitated with all the unsaid things about how he had changed, how *he could not possibly*, he added. 'It's never about the body, Lila. It's only about who lives there. It only ever was.'

Then he added, with a hint of shyness, 'Do you think you can still love me like this?'

She looked at him and nodded, truthfully. 'Yes.'

'Then that's all that matters.' He closed his eyes in satisfaction.

She watched them finish him with colour and inks imported from Daemonia, with spells and magic and dust. She didn't say how much she missed him already in his old form, with all its horrors and danger. She understood the thrill of that was gone. The dragon wound around him now from, shoulder to foot. The wolf stood on his torso looking out at her, waiting, and beside it she saw herself standing as she'd been when he met her, a robot girl with red and black hair, wearing a dress made of blood. She held his hand as he slept and wept for how suddenly vulnerable he was because she was afraid.

Later she knew herself only lucky.