



Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 4 Number 8

Page 1 – THE TENTH PLAGUE by Daniel Gene Barlekamp. Mr. Barlekamp writes, “I work as an immigration paralegal and ESL instructor in Salem, Massachusetts, where I also serve as a nonfiction reader for *Soundings East*, the literary magazine of Salem State University. My children’s fiction has appeared in *Bumples Magazine*.”

Page 11 – THREE SHORT PIECES by Susan Cornford. Ms Cornford’s flash fiction has graced our electronic pages before (Freifaxi 2018) and writes, “I am a retired public servant, living in Perth, Western Australia, with pieces published or forthcoming in 365 tomorrows, *Akashic Books Fri Sci-fi*, *Antipodean Science Fiction*, *Corner Bar Magazine*, *Curating Alexandria*, *Speculative 66*, *Theme of Absence* and others.”

Page 14 – UNITY by Fin Sorrel. Mr. Sorrel is the author of *Caramel Floods* (pski porch, 2017). He is the founding editor at MANNEQUIN HAUS (infii2.weebly.com)

Page 16 – RAINMAKER by Cat Rycerz. Catherine ‘Cat’ Rycerz is a graduate of Carlow University, majoring in Early Childhood Education but completely head-over-heels for the literary lifestyle. She has worked on over fifty self-started projects, ranging from short stories to the ambitious dreams of fully-drafted novels. She has been lucky enough to have three of her pieces published before; ‘Truly Tulette’, a short story in her college’s literary magazine, ‘Quiet Moments’, a self-published poetry book, and ‘Rite of Passage’, a short story published on online magazine Pilcrow and Dagger. She’s ecstatic to learn that her genre of choice ranges from Speculative Fiction to Fantasy, and considers herself a competent Dungeon Master.



“THE TENTH PLAGUE”

by DANIEL GENE BARLEKAMP

The sky was heavy with the tears of dead children.

Tauret knew the sky would only continue to swell in the coming years. The thought made her shudder. Still, she wished some of those tears would fall from the sky and heal the dry, cracked earth. It hadn't rained in weeks, and the dust caked her throat and settled on the surfaces in the kitchen.

Tauret draped a piece of clean wash over the back of a chair. Then she looked into the steel bucket at her feet. It was filled with a dirty, sudsy liquid, the color of which was a darker gray than the sides of the bucket.

Water. Clean water.

They always needed clean water.

Tauret looked from the bucket at her feet to the crib at her side. Her baby slept restlessly inside, shifting his weight and grimacing at an unknown nightmare. Tauret brushed her knuckles delicately against her son's soft cheek. Then she rocked back on her heels and allowed her vision to unfocus. She was tired.

The sound of approaching steps brought her back. They were heavy, irregular, the sound of weary boots crunching against sand. It would be Madu, back from the pastures, if they could be called as

much. From the rhythm of Madu's steps, Tauret knew it had not been a good day. When had it ever been?

The door swung open, and Madu stepped inside. A shrieking whirlwind cast dust and sand across the earthen floor. Tauret rushed across the kitchen and shut the door against the wind so as not to wake the baby. Madu didn't look at her.

“How are they?” Tauret asked.

“Twelve dead,” Madu said. “All calves.”

“Was it disease?”

Madu said nothing. The wind cried outside.

“Will you watch him for a while?”

Tauret asked. “I need to fetch clean water.”

Madu grunted.

Tauret slipped back across the kitchen. With an effort she lifted the bucket and dumped the stinking water into a trough that ran the length of the room. They could still use it for bathing. Taking the empty bucket, she wrapped a kerchief tightly around her nose and mouth, pressed her shoulder to the door, and went out into the storm.

By the time she had taken ten steps from their house, Tauret knew Madu had left the baby unattended in the kitchen. She pushed the thought from her mind as she pushed farther into the desert.

Grains of sand blew through the air like hail and bit into Tauret's face until she thought she would bleed. Even with the kerchief covering her nose, Tauret could smell the bottomless odor of gasoline. It seemed to be always present, running just beneath her feet in subterranean rivers. An incessant whine filled the air as the engines that fed off the gasoline buzzed and hummed. The sound was constant now, like white noise, though Tauret thought it sounded louder tonight. The world was lit by a perpetual half-light that was never quite day, never quite night. In the far distance, floodlights outlined the miles of fences that separated Tauret's world from theirs.

Madu's was the first pasture beyond the town limits. They were lucky. Many of the men had to walk far into the desert to reach their land. Tauret set down the bucket and lay her elbows on the low fence to rest. Despite the sand that filled the air like millions of shards of glass, the air and the wind felt refreshing compared to the lifeless, unmoving air of the kitchen.

One of the cattle came to the fence to greet her. It was wasted, skinny. Tauret ran a hand along its forehead, feeling the ridges and valleys of the skull that protruded just under the thin layer of flesh. Other cattle wandered nearby. Still others slept, either standing up or in neatly folded heaps in the dust. Through the hazy partial light, Tauret saw a small beige mound: the carcasses of the twelve calves Madu had stacked up to rot or else be carried off by ground feeders.

Tauret sighed. She picked up the bucket and was about to move along when something caught her eye. There was movement in the fields—not the low, lazy movement of the cattle, but quick, upright motion. Tauret squinted against the yellow half-light. It was the movement of a person. Someone was in Madu's pasture. He appeared to be struggling with one of the calves.

Disease indeed, Tauret thought.

She didn't know what to do. By the time she ran back home to alert Madu, the culprit might be long gone. On the other hand, if she picked a fight with a criminal, she might end up dead, and there was the baby to consider.

The baby.

If she were to die, who would care for her son? Surely not Madu.

Even so, before she knew what she was doing, Tauret dropped the bucket and scrambled over the fence. Her legs became tangled in her skirt, and she went down hard. A moment later she was on her feet again, rushing across the pasture. Sand and dust burned her eyes.

Probably one of those thieves from the Other Side, she thought.

As Tauret got closer, she could see the figure more clearly. It hunched over one of the calves, its back to Tauret, a cowl covering its head. Tauret was startled.

A woman?

The woman couldn't hear the sound of Tauret's approaching steps over the din of the wind. Tauret clapped a hand to the woman's shoulder and breathed one word:



“Thief.”

Taken by surprise, the woman spun around to face Tauret. A dagger dropped to the ground and the calf fell dead at her feet, blood gushing from its slit throat and soaking into the sand. Tauret looked into the woman’s dark eyes and drew breath through her teeth.

“Fukayna!” she gasped.

This was no thief from the Other Side. This was Fukayna, who lived in the house next to Tauret’s with her husband and three children.

“Fukayna,” Tauret repeated, looking now at the small lifeless animal. “Our calf...”

“I’m sorry, Tauret,” Fukayna said. She spoke rapidly. “The hour grows late, and your pasture is nearest to town. Please forgive me.”

“I don’t understand,” Tauret said, struggling to be heard over the wind. “Late for what? You’ll be killed if one of the men finds you trespassing, and surely your own pasture has plenty of—”

“Haven’t you heard?” Fukayna asked.

“Heard what?”

“Bad tidings. Our suffering isn’t over yet. There is another plague to come.”

Tauret thought back over the last few years which had been so full of sickness, of filth, of death. Still, she didn’t understand how Fukayna could know what lay ahead, nor what gave her the right to murder one of the calves Madu had worked so hard to raise.

“Fukayna, please. Leave our pasture. I promise not to tell our husbands, but you

must—”

“But the blood,” Fukayna said, leaning forward in eagerness. “I need the blood, and so do you.”

For a moment, Tauret couldn’t make a sound. She was suddenly aware of the weight of her own dagger, suspended inside her cloak. She felt thankful for it. Fukayna had lost her mind.

“What do we—What do *you* need the blood for?” Tauret asked.

“He’s coming,” Fukayna said. “The Prophet. The Devil-Prophet from the Other Side. He’s coming for each family’s first-born. Men, women, children, young and old alike—he’ll take them all. Only those with the blood of the calf upon their doors will be spared.”

Tauret backed away, looking from Fukayna to the dead calf to the mound of carcasses and back to Fukayna.

“Take the blood,” Tauret said. “Take the blood and leave the corpse with the others. Then get out.”

Tauret turned and ran.

“You’ll need it too!” Fukayna cried after her. “Don’t let the curse visit your house!”

Tauret ignored her. She ran back to the fence, hoisted herself over without stumbling, picked up her bucket, and pushed on toward the well. Along the way, she worried. She thought of her son, at home and neglected by Madu as the world went insane. Again she pushed the worry away. There would be time for worry later. Right now, they needed water.

As Tauret walked, the houses behind

her receded from view. To her left and to her right, the pastures opened, stretching ahead for miles: fenced-in patches of sand dotted with cattle, one after another, right up to the point in the distance where the land of Tauret's people met the Other Side. It seemed to Tauret that the heavy hum of engines—which she hardly heard anymore—had changed somehow, shifted. She shook her head and listened. A new pitch, deep and rumbling, crept up from the lower limits of human hearing. To Tauret's surprise, this new sound wasn't entirely unwelcome. She found its baritone soothing.

After walking the lengths of several pastures, Tauret reached the well. She was far from home, close to the border. In the dusty, jaundiced light, Tauret had to squint to see her hand in front of her face, yet the tall fences that separated her world from Theirs were no longer silhouettes against the floodlights. In the powerful white glare that now shone only yards in front of her, Tauret could make out the links in the chain, the razor wire threaded across the top of the fence like a garland. She could see lights from the houses on the Other Side, and she wondered what Their homes looked like.

Tauret had no time for sightseeing. She hooked her bucket to the chain that would carry it down to the well. It would take a while. Water levels had sunk dangerously low over the last couple months. She grabbed the crank handle and began to turn. The muscles in her upper arm flexed easily against the strain. She was no stranger to this job.

As Tauret watched the bucket descend into darkness, she found herself replaying Fukayna's words in her mind:

...our firstborn... Don't let the curse visit your house!

The crank's resistance increased as the bucket filled with water. Tauret began to work the crank in the opposite direction, grunting with the effort. When the bucket was halfway up the well shaft, Tauret paused, her arms shaking. She looked over her shoulder, half expecting to find Fukayna behind her, bloody dagger clenched in one hand, dripping calf carcass cradled in her other arm.

There was no one there.

With a sigh, Tauret lifted the bucket over the edge of the well, draped a cloth over the opening to keep out the dirt, and began the long trek home. She listened to the silty water as it slopped against the sides of the bucket and imagined how refreshing it would feel for some of that water to trickle down her parched throat. Thirsty as she was, Tauret knew she couldn't give in to temptation. They needed this water to last.

As Tauret took step after heavy step, the deep rumbling sound she had heard grew louder. The growth was gradual at first, but then whatever was making the noise was right on top of her. A shadow crawled over Tauret and the ground in front of her like a big black beetle. It just as quickly passed, swimming up the road ahead of her.

Tauret looked up. A single-passenger aircraft cruised by at low altitude. It was like none Tauret had ever seen before, all

jutting gray angles and pockets of blue flame. The stench of burning fuel followed in its wake, choking her. It was heading for town.

A wave of terror washed over Tauret's body. This area had been a no-fly zone for years, and the aircraft didn't look like one of the planes from the Other Side.

Tauret quickened her pace, not noticing that the cover had blown off the bucket. Up ahead, the houses reappeared as Tauret and the aircraft approached town. The aircraft slowed, then dropped lightly out of the air like a leaf falling from a tree branch. Despite its delicate descent, the craft touched down with a deafening crash. Tauret thought it would sink right into the ground. All the blue flames were snuffed out at once, like candles in a sudden breeze. The deep rumbling stopped as the engines were cut. The craft had landed just beyond the town limits.

All was quiet save for the wind and the whine of distant engines. Tauret started forward, gripping the bucket with both hands. She hugged the fence of the nearest pasture and approached the aircraft, moving carefully, step by step. Her heart thudded in her ears. She hoped to slip by without attracting the attention of whatever was inside.

When Tauret had come within fifty feet, the aircraft sprang to life again. With a loud hiss the glass dome of the cockpit slid back like the visor of a helmet. Tauret froze against the fence. As she watched, one thick gloved hand appeared over the lip of the cockpit. With a single motion, the pilot

boosted himself from the cockpit and dropped to the ground, falling quickly under the weight of the heavy leather and dense fleece of his flight jacket. He landed on his feet, bending at the knees and touching the ground with one outstretched hand.

The pilot looked up slowly. For an instant, Tauret sensed that she and the pilot had locked eyes, but she couldn't see through the forest-green lenses of his goggles. The goggles joined at the bridge of the pilot's nose to an oxygen mask, which was connected by a long tube to an unseen pack somewhere on the pilot's body.

For a moment the pilot regarded Tauret. Then he turned and walked past his plane toward the houses, carrying an ancient-looking rifle by the stock, like a woodsman heading into the trees.

He marched straight to the first house on the edge of town as though he were a guest that had visited a hundred times before.

Just when Tauret thought the pilot would let himself into the house unannounced, he paused. He stood silently in front of the door, scanned it from top to bottom, ran a gloved finger over the splintered wood as though checking for dust. Then he brought the sole of his boot crashing against the door, shattering the frame in a dozen different places.

The pilot walked coolly into the house. A woman screamed. A baby wailed. A single gunshot rang out, deep and thunderous like the boom of a cannon. The wailing ceased as the mother's scream rose to a bro-

ken, manic pitch. The pilot emerged and walked toward the next house, leaving the empty shell of a home in his wake.

Tauret crept forward, unwilling to believe what her eyes had seen. As she passed the open door, she saw the woman inside, crumpled in front of a ruined crib, sobbing. Tauret approached the door that leaned half off the jamb, and her worst fear was confirmed.

No blood.

The pilot paused in front of the door of the next house, ran his finger along the surface, closely examined the tip of his finger, then moved on. Even from where she stood, Tauret could see the red smear on the door.

She thought of the mound of calf carcasses in Madu's pasture. She hadn't gotten close enough to notice their throats, but she knew they must have all been slit.

Fukayna was right, and she wasn't the only one. Others knew it, too.

All at once, the trancelike state in which Tauret had glided to the door of the house fell away. She dropped the bucket, the precious water spilling and absorbing into the dirt at her boots. Then she turned and ran in the direction of Madu's pasture, retracing the steps she had taken when she first left town. From Tauret's position on the outskirts, the pasture wasn't far. The pilot was moving slowly, taking his time. She could beat him.

A few moments later, Tauret stood in the middle of the pasture. Fukayna was gone. The cattle milled nervously about. Tauret approached the nearest calf. It

looked up at her, unmoving. Its mother watched from nearby. Tauret squatted on her heels and put her face close to the calf's, smelled its farmland smell. The mother grunted and snorted, took a few steps closer as Tauret gently placed one hand behind the calf's head. With her other hand she produced her dagger from her cloak. She looked into the calf's eyes, ran the tip of her finger along the edge of the dagger, wasn't sure she had the stomach to do what she needed to do.

When, in the distance, another mother screamed and another gunshot rocked the air, Tauret's hands took on a life of their own.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

Her fingers clutched a handful of hair at the back of the calf's neck while the other hand plunged the dagger into the soft meat of the calf's throat, turned, cut crosswise. The dagger worked its way easily through the young flesh. Hot blood poured down Tauret's forearm as burning tears poured down her cheeks.

Tauret grabbed the calf by the scruff of its neck, dragged it across the field, shoved it over the fence, and clambered after it. Back in the road, she hoisted the calf onto her shoulders. Its dead weight pressed into her shoulder blades like the scales of justice. Tauret tightened her grip on this new burden and headed for home.

As she entered town, Tauret saw that the pilot had made good progress. The doors of some houses, maybe a dozen, were shut tightly against the world, their red streaks standing out like runes protecting



the inhabitants from danger. Most houses, though, hadn't fared so well. At regular intervals, doors hung from their frames. Tauret saw the bodies of men, women, and children sprawled in impossible positions, each one destroyed by a blast from the pilot's rifle.

Up ahead, another shot. Tauret had dallied, lost in the dream of death that had swallowed the town. She broke into a half run, staggering under the weight of the calf, praying there was still time. Houses rushed past her on either side as gunshots peppered the air.

This house was secured, protected by blood.

A shot.

This next door was open, a man's legs splayed over the threshold at an unnatural angle.

Another shot.

The images of houses broken and unbroken swirled together in Tauret's mind, became one as she panted up the road. Finally, her house came into view. Tauret peered through the sweat in her eyes, trying to see if she was too late.

She wasn't.

Tauret flew to the door in a jagged line, knocked off balance by panic and exhaustion, and stumbled through the door. Her hair had shaken loose from her cowl and become plastered to her forehead in long, wet ropes. She must have looked like a madwoman, yet when Madu looked up from where he sat next to the crib, he didn't appear to notice her condition or the dead calf suspended from her shoul-

ders.

"See?" Madu said in a quiet voice, stroking the baby's head. "I haven't left him."

"Madu, thank God," Tauret said, allowing the calf to sag to the floor. She rushed to the crib, saw that her son was sleeping peacefully, then rushed back and knelt by the calf. "We have to get this blood on the door. There's a—"

Madu's hand fell on her shoulder. Tauret jumped. She hadn't heard him get up.

"No, we don't," he said.

"Are you crazy?" Tauret said. "I saw him in the street. He'll be here any minute."

"Yes, he's coming."

Tauret shook her head. She didn't understand.

"He is a prophet," Madu continued. "He is on a mission of deliverance, and we must not fight him. He will deliver Them from their bondage, just as he will deliver us from the sins of our people."

Madu walked back across the kitchen and resumed his seat next to the crib.

"It really is a small price to pay," he finished, stroking the baby's head as before. "There will be more like this one." His eyes crawled over Tauret's body from her head down to her feet.

Tauret stood there, stunned. Outside, the gunshots grew louder. She reached for the gash in the calf's throat.

"My love," Madu said from across the room, "if you touch one drop of that blood, I will kill you."

"Then I suppose you'll have to," Tauret

spat. She plunged both hands into the gaping wound and pulled them away, dripping. She rose to her feet just as she heard Madu's chair slide back. Without looking over her shoulder, Tauret dashed to the door.

As Tauret reached for the handle, the door crashed open, causing Tauret to stumble back. She tripped over her feet and fell to the floor. The baby woke up and started to cry. When Tauret tried to get up, Madu placed his boot just below her left shoulder and leaned with all his weight. Tauret screamed in pain and clawed at his leg, but he wouldn't budge.

Faintly, as though he were speaking from a great distance, Tauret heard Madu say, "Prophet, you are welcome in this house."

Slow, heavy footsteps plodded across the floor, passed closely by Tauret's right ear, approached the crib, paused. Though she couldn't see him, Tauret knew the pilot was readying his rifle. She sucked in her breath and cried, "WAIT!"

The kitchen fell silent except for the baby's cries.

"The name of my elder sister was Berenike. She has gone before us. Madu, what is the name of your eldest sibling?"

"I... I..." Madu stammered.

There was a dragging sound as the pilot turned on his heel to face Madu.

"No! Please!" Madu screamed.

Tauret squeezed her eyes shut. The blast was short and abrupt, replaced by a shrill ringing in her ears. She pursed her lips as her face was sprayed with blood,

dust, and bits of bone. The pressure lifted from Tauret's shoulder as Madu sank to the floor. Far away, her son cried. He was alive.

An unspoken communication passed then between Tauret and the pilot, in a silent language neither of them knew they understood. Without opening her eyes, Tauret heard the pilot walk across the kitchen, out the door, and on to his next act of deliverance.

Lying on the floor with Madu dead at her side, Tauret wondered how many families had escaped untouched. And as she listened to her son's cries, Tauret thanked God that his tears would not swell the already-heavy sky. ❖

THREE SHORT PIECES

by SUSAN CORNFORD

“Remnants”

Coorinna huddled in the undergrowth, her belly flat to the ground, hoping her long, stiff tail was not sticking out. The predators had come upon her because she had stayed out too long after daylight, following a wallaby she'd leapt on from ambush but only wounded.

Her mother had taught her and her litter-mates about the sight and sound and smell of the creatures to be avoided *at all costs*. But these ones hadn't seen her or heard her or smelt her, because they were still walking along, yip-yapping. Maybe it would still be safe.

If only they weren't walking in the direction of the hollow tree trunk where her joeys were waiting for her return. She must get back to them. Coorinna picked her way through the open woodlands. But she was too late! Her babies were outside their lair and the destroyers had seen them. No!

Coorinna reared upright on her hind legs, balancing on her tail, and growled until they saw her. She threat-yawned, opening her mouth eighty degrees and showing forty-eight teeth. She kangaroo-hopped away, then trotted stiffly, hearing them crash after her. She melted into the bush, dark stripes from her mid-back to her

tail blending with her surroundings.

When she no longer heard them, she came out, calling her joeys with low snufflings. She licked the soft, dense fur of all four and allowed them back into her pouch.

Throughout the world, the hikers' phone footage went viral: Tasmanian Tigers Still Alive!!!!

“Side Effect”

Tight! The old coat was just so tight and hard to get out of. Wiggling every muscle, finally he managed to slip free and feel the sunshine warming and drying him. It had been nice, he must admit, to spend all his time pigging out and then sleeping. But finally he'd decided that it was time for a change and now here he was.

Oh, yes, it felt good to stretch out and flex his limbs back and forth. In fact, he felt that he could even take off and fly!

Well, it was time to go look for some ladies and find out how much he could dazzle them with his good looks. As he launched himself into the air, he thought, “It's all David Attenborough's fault for



making us insects start thinking like humans!!!!”

“The Lost Hour”

Jenny muttered a spell to dismiss several guardian spiders, dragged the packing crate from the farthest corner of the attic and thrust her hands deep into her legacy. Her grandmother had told her many times that she might need what it contained. But until now she had managed to live without the use of old-fashioned magic that progress had superseded.

Her fingers felt crumbling, dry pieces of paper and fabric and ...“Ouch!” ...at least one still-sharp hatpin! Probing with more care, she found a smooth, round, cool surface that fit into her hand. She drew it out and held it to the dim light of the low-wattage bulb. The metal globe had a matte finish and looked seamless, but this was the container of the famous Lost Hour. It could be released, if need be, to save the world from destruction.

Going downstairs, Jenny glanced at the countdown on her TV screen that said the rift in the space-time continuum was due to reach Earth in twenty-three hours. So, all she had to do was remember the spell to open the container.

She cast her mind back in time to long, summer days she had spent with her grandmother while her parents were at work. Summoning fairies to dance in the garden

had been their favourite use of magic. But, every day, her grandmother had been careful to teach her one spell for serious use. Opening the globe was among them. It had to do with colour, Jenny remembered. Not a whole rainbow, fewer than that. She tried: “Open in the name of the blue sky and green grass and yellow sun!” The object in her hand didn’t open but it was lighter. So, she must be going in the right direction.

Through the rest of the day and night Jenny recited all the spells she could recall her grandmother teaching her, especially those referring to colours. None worked. Jenny stared at the countdown with bleary eyes and felt herself drifting off to sleep. It was like when her grandmother sang old lullabies to her at bedtime. Suddenly Jenny’s eyes sprang open and she began to sing about the girl whose name was almost like hers and had hair of light brown. The globe slowly opened, the Lost Hour re-emerged, the rift in the space-time continuum reached Earth and was healed from top to bottom.

Jenny reached out and took the metal globe from her now-sleeping granddaughter’s fingers. All was ready for the next generation. ❖

“UNITY”

by FIN SORREL

Channel six starts to feel boring for Ushan and her dress feels too tight, and her hair is coming out of the clip. A large man with a large red ruby in a paper lunch sack enters the hologram theater, he is dressed in some kind of a paper sun costume.

Ushan laughs as he wobbles past her, and examines his ruby, she gets a glimpse inside, at the overflow of red from the pockets of sunlight pour down his sleeves, the man is laughing, showing his white teeth, and she sees the cracking makeup, as he leans in, and whispers something that falls out of his mouth, like a flopping fish he just caught, and lands in an alleyway before her, the fish spasms on the concrete, scraping its scales, and gasping for air.

The man is also gasping for breath, as he scrambles to pick up the fish from the concrete, and he quickly, without hesitating, shoves the flopping pike back into his mouth and swallows it.

“Excuse me man, I...I couldn’t gather my words.” The man says, and walks away swiftly, confused, and befuddled, and embarrassed.

Glass and rabbits rise in “*the room*” on woven pulleys dangled over the crowds heads, some characters start playing with the golden threads as the rabbits and the

glass are jacked to the ceiling, the operation is loud, and the crowd begins to yawn, as the man up on stage wildly cranks the pulley lift, his makeup has gotten worse, he is laughing like a wild man, cranking and cranking. He seems to have something wrong with him, he is unstable, his laughter gets louder, he doesn’t seem to know, or comprehend, that he is the only person laughing at his own joke, he should stop laughing. Maybe he has a mental disorder or is disabled in some way. Ushan feels bad for the man. He is probably very sick. Our dawn, through electric wires, sent in (Morse code,) to the treehouse window of the kids make quick turns, you can see the electricity, blue swimming through the air. It looks like lightning bugs.

Eight people in a row notice the fiberoptic birds as they enter from the windows, they start freaking out the animals, chasing out donkeys, and sycamores, and willow trees with the children in the treehouses flying out of the room,

“Hold on!” one kid yells from an oak habitat. He clutches a pair of binoculars, and rope swinging toward Ushan, and barely missing her head with his feet.

Nine eyes close in over the edge of the blur that comes with a distance, in a magnified flower. Rolling into the stairway of a

geranium blossom – the whole crowd’s eyesight goes out at once, and the hologram turns to a horizon.

Ten ruining birds, sent laughing in the reflection of the galactic center, rummage across this neon room, causing a commotion, nothing else moves, everyone is still. Motion resumes, and everyone comes back to life slowly. The man on the stage pulling his levers continues to lift the glass and rabbits toward the ceiling.

Ushan holds up her hands to her party dress and sees the rusted alloy rose petals of the brooch – razor blades almost nicking at her skin, she delicately touches the edges of the metallic piece, and looks at her neck, to see if there is blood. ❖

“RAINMAKER”

by CAT RYCERZ

The only sound left on the battlefield was the delicate steps of women’s shoes. She carefully maneuvered around buzzing corpses and puddles of blood, one gloved hand holding up the hem of her black-laced bustle. Her pacing was even, diligent, a charcoal parasol settled between the crook of her neck. The woman in black kept her veiled gaze fixed on the horizon, rising sunlight glittering against mounds of unmoving armor. Each of her steps brought a heaviness to the air, an unspoken humidity emanating around her. It always started with one, then two, then a collection of rain droplets. And once the storm began, she always found who she was looking for.

He was only a boy in her eyes, armor encrusted in grime and cape smeared with mud. His rope-like hair had long since undone itself, stuck against a clean-shaven face from the oncoming downpour. His gaze remained downcast, seemingly ignoring the woman as he stared hard at his hands. They held the remains of a shattered, glittering sword, its hilt carved with curious symbols.

“Suppose it’s coming down now, isn’t it?” In one, sweeping motion, the woman’s parasol was opened and lifted delicately above her head. “Nothing like a little rain

to wash away our mistakes.”

The boy said nothing.

“Well, ‘little’ would be inaccurate.” The shadow of her face turned slightly, following pools of water that pulled across individual bodies. “This is a worldwide event, after all. It will take quite a bit to clean this up, but my rain has never had problems before.”

The boy made a noise in his throat, a mix between a choked scream and an anguished sob.

“You’ll have to speak up.” The woman tilted her parasol, the faintest outline of a mouth frowning. “It’s difficult to hear as is, and once the thunder begins—”

“Why?” The boy’s voice was hoarse, as if needing to be coaxed out of his throat. “Why me?”

The woman remained motionless, a single stream of multi-colors running down her parasol’s handle to the hem of her skirt. “Why not?” She asked. “It is not in my nature to over-analyze the parameters of a user’s request.”

“But this was not *my* request!”

She looked confused, as if she’d been speaking of something else completely.

“You were given the power to cease this baseless conflict, were you not?”

“Not like this.” The boy’s grip

tightened around the sword's hilt. "I wanted there to be peace between our lands; this is a complete massacre!" His fist pounded against the muddied ground, flecks of mud striking against the corner of the woman's chin. "Now, there is nothing."

The woman's free hand gently wiped the dirt away, her head at a tilt as she examined the smudge on the thumb of her glove. "Yes. The purpose was to be able to continue after this event. Our next attempt, then, will adhere to the statistics and results gathered from this attempt and set out to correctly proceed."

A shriek rang through the air as the boy suddenly lunged forward, sword hilt pulled behind his head and aimed at the woman's neck. A crack of lightning shot across the sky, striking the woman and causing an explosion of color. He staggered and fell, blinded by the sight. The same, unusual symbols on the sword's hilt danced across the air in an irregular pattern, but it only deterred him momentarily. "I would rather die than help create this atrocity again, *witch*." He spat.

The woman blankly stared ahead, colorful symbols crafting into harsh lines that ran around the hem of her dress. Her attention then went to the boy, rain falling much heavier against her than before. Puddles quickly became running streams, picking up loose chunks of earth and flesh as it rushed it all downhill.

Rushed it towards the woman, the boy realized too late.

The moment anything organic touched her skirt, it melted into the same, colorful

symbols, which ran up the seams of her dress before quickly fading, allowing the next line to feed into it. He struggled to stand, pushing the sword hilt into the ground before it suddenly disintegrated into the earth itself. "Wh-what are you doing?!"

The world began to spin, like water pulled to a drain, and he found himself drawing ever closer to the woman. The boy slid forward, hands flailing through the air to catch onto something, anything, to keep his balance. He grabbed hold of the woman's parasol, hoping to tear it free and attack; instead, the mysterious symbols shot down the handle and overtook his hand.

"Our existence is predetermined." The static in her voice infected his brain, blending his subconscious into the streams of light radiating from her face. "Like you, I have a set task that must be done." He had no body, no soul; he was simply part of the massive line of symbols streaming out from her. "I clean up when they are done." Finally, their eyes met, burning his out of his skull and consuming him completely into the anomaly.

"And to do this, the world must be *expunged*."

"Holy shit—!" Gwyneth nearly choked on a mouthful of chips as her MOTHERWORLD tab bleeped loudly. She quickly ran a salt-covered finger across her computer screen, swallowing noisily while her game's screen flashed, 'Save File



Deleted'. "Bev, you weren't kidding!" Gwyneth wiped her hands on her shirt as her fingers became a blur across the screen. "This new AI's crazy-fast."

"Right?" A smaller screen sat in the corner of the monitor, displaying another teen covered in sequins and boisterous makeup. "No more running the system ragged with an all-night download or twenty-four hour clean-sweeps."

"No kidding." One of Gwyneth's hands slunk back into her bag as her game's tab reverted to the home screen; a color-flashing planet with the logo written above in a bubbling font. The only options available were, **'New Game'**, **'Options'** and **'Quit'**, much to her delight. "No offense, girlfriend, but you tend to hype up a *lot* of these indie devs."

"I mean, yeah," Bev rolled her eyes and smirked. "But I do it out of love, Gwyneth-dear! It's practically a whole world at your fingertips, completely customizable in every aspect. That's worth some precious disk space."

"I dunno if half is the same as, 'some'." Gwyneth said.

"But totally worth it!" Bev smirked, adding afterwards. "And, I mean, it works better if you leave the base coding alone."

"Shut up!" Gwyneth's chip bag went flying off the desk as she sat up a little too fast.

"How long did you resist before you completely borked your file?" Bev asked innocently.

Gwyneth sat back in her chair, arms crossed over her chest as a tinge of red

covered her face. "Medieval stage."

"I'm genuinely impressed."

Gwyneth sighed, half-heartedly sweeping her chip bag and spilled crumbs into a nearby, nearly overflowing trash can. "I just want the magic path so bad! Do you know how *lucky* you have to be to unlock the Sword of Ilzabar?"

"Oh, golly," Bev's voice was dripping in sarcastic glee. "I just don't know who could *ever* be so lucky. It's such a conundrum you're experiencing."

"You're killing me over here!" Gwyneth cried. "Can't you just let me copy your file?"

"Whining isn't attractive on you, Gwyneth-Louise." Before she could let out a high-pitched moan, Bev quickly added, "Let's just co-op this time around. That's got a way higher chance of unlocking rarer Evolution Paths."

Gwyneth immediately sat up in her seat, expression curious. "I thought it was still local co-op only?"

Bev simply gestured to the desktop.

With an eyebrow raised, Gwyneth pulled up a folder marked, **'Recent Download'**. Double-tapping the umbrella icon, a flash of pixels quickly assembled into the makings of a vaguely-humanoid silhouette, entirely black with the outline of an umbrella above its head.

"Good afternoon, L@dyoftheL@ke." A voice droned apathetically, text bubble appearing over its head. "What can I assist with today?"

Gwyneth grimaced. "You said there was a way to change its voice, right?"

“Rainmaker’s still working on a mod-pack.” Bev shrugged.

“What can I assist with, L@dyoftheL@ke?” The program repeated.

Gwyneth rolled her eyes, reaching for a nearby bottle of soda on her desk. “Enable online multiplayer.” She said, popping the cap easily off before taking a swig. After ten seconds, she looked towards the program’s avatar, seemingly staring off into the corner of the table where the cap had rolled off. Unmoving.

Unresponsive.

She began to open her mouth, but suddenly, the program spoke. “Right away, L@dyoftheL@ke.” The umbrella on top of its head flashed an array of colors, ones and zeroes running across its body as a loading bar appeared below it.

Gwyneth grinned, taking one more swig before setting the bottle next to her.

“God, I love seeing a fast bar. You ready on your end, Bev?”

“Just about!” Bev giggled. “Gotta make sure I don’t *accidentally* load up my personal file. You know. The one with my magic empire?”

“You take great pleasure in torturing me, don’t you?” Still, Gwyneth found herself smiling, fingers positioned on the keyboard as she reached for another bag of chips.

“Connection established.” The program interrupted as the game’s home screen moved back into the main tab.

“Enjoy your experience with BeanieBaddie.”

“Let’s get me a sword!” Gwyneth cried triumphantly, her finger pressing ‘**New Game**’ without hesitation. ❖

END TRANSMISSION