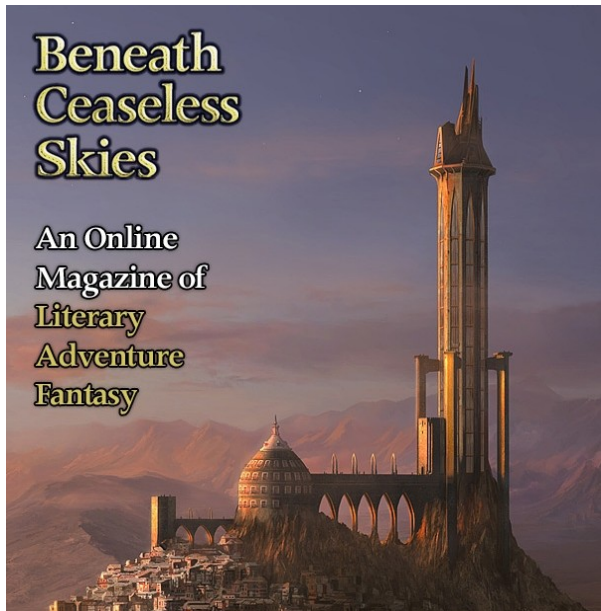


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[“Prashkina’s Fire,” by Vylar Kaftan](#)

[“The Shades of Morgana,” by Dean Wells](#)

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PRASHKINA'S FIRE

by Vylar Kaftan

The fisherman hadn't left the temple after all. I found him kneeling in the ruined hall near the altar, after I'd completed the blessings at the corners. To my amazement, he'd placed his offering in the giant stone brazier—his mud-spattered grass that he'd thought would honor Prashkina. He stacked the straw by handfuls in the sacred basin, like he was building a shrine in the rubble.

I leaned against a broken column, watching him. His lanky brown body reminded me of a grasshopper, paired with the shriveled face of a southern coast-dweller. The frayed hem of his dirty shirt brushed the floor. His hands trembled as he worked, and I felt sorry for him. I regretted my temper of a few minutes ago. It wasn't his fault there was a hole in my mind where my Goddess used to be, years ago. None of this was his fault.

I cleared my throat to get his attention. The dust turned my false cough into a real one. He turned when he heard me. My robe swished around my ankles as I walked over. I drew the two halves of my veil aside like curtains and tossed them over

my shoulders. He flinched at the sight of my ruined cheeks and forehead, but I didn't hide them. We had no need to be formal anymore, and perhaps seeing my face would help him understand. I envied him in some ways—his simple mind that held such true devotion. I had never enjoyed such simplicity.

"I'm sorry," I told him. "I was harsh in what I said."

"You were right, Mother," he said, looking down. "I'm a fool. I always have been. Even in my village they told me so."

Looking closer at him, I decided he was younger than I'd thought—perhaps half my age, just barely a man. I pictured him out in the bay, sitting on the tall stilts the fishermen used, waiting all morning for his catch. Sun and salt had dried him early. I said, "I wish you could have seen the temple in its full glory. There were a hundred different kinds of fish in the pond. And a wonderful statue of a doe."

He shrugged. "Prashkina doesn't need a temple."

"But the temple needs Prashkina," I said quietly, glancing at the gouges in the old stone floor. Thieves had looted the gold inlay years ago, leaving deer-shaped holes in the sacred spirals.

He scuffed a bare foot on the smooth granite. "When you said... what you said just now. About the gods. Did you mean all of them? Every one?"

“Yes.” Finally, I no longer cried when I remembered. The memory had dried out, just like his face. “They’re dead. All of them. It’s been seventeen years.”

He squinted at me. “But nothing kills a god.”

“They can kill each other,” I said. “And that’s what happened. They took sides in this awful war and died with their heroes. All the gods, and the goddesses, and the heroes they raised to divinity—they’re all dead.”

“Are you sure?”

My head ached with emptiness. “She was inside me. Now she’s not. And other priests and priestesses have said the same thing, no matter who they honored. Some of them went mad when their deity died.”

“Then why are you here?”

Perhaps because I’m mad. I looked across the straw-filled brazier to the open balcony. Prashkina had ruled love, beauty, and patience. Her temple had been beautiful once, and the breathtaking view remained—but marred with burnt-out jungle and a poisoned river. I had been beautiful once too. I said, “Because no one else is.”

He nodded as though this made perfect sense, though I doubted he truly understood. This fisherman had walked thirty days across a war-torn land just to bring my Goddess a dried fish. He’d come all this way—and he hadn’t even brought the

fish. On the way, he'd been tricked into trading it for a chipped arrowhead. Then the arrowhead for a coarse string, and the string for an armful of straw. A simpler man couldn't be found. But I liked him despite this, because of his devotion. No one else believed anymore, except in the backwater villages like the one he came from that didn't even know about the war.

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"Dishu of Rabbit's Ear, Mother."

"Don't call me Mother. That's finished. Now I'm just Sarayoura," I said. "What are you doing with the straw?"

His face brightened. "I thought if we relit the fires, Prashkina would live again."

I laughed. "You think it's that easy?"

"Well, maybe it is. We could try. I brought this straw. It makes a good fire."

I knew my Goddess was dead, just like I knew where my ribs were. But I saw no harm in letting the fisherman light the fires. I'd enjoy seeing them again. "All right. There's wood behind the temple, if you're willing to chop it." I turned away, closing my veil.

"Will you bless my work?"

I stopped. Was he truly so simple? Maybe he hadn't understood anything I'd said. But I didn't feel like trying to

explain again. “Yes, you have my blessing,” I said, looking back at him. “Be careful.”

He smiled broadly, his brown teeth pale against his face. “Thank you, Sarayoura,” he said. “I will build a good fire for Prashkina.”

I left him there, stacking dirty straw in the brazier to honor a dead goddess. I returned to my lonely hut down the familiar path, realizing the fisherman hadn’t asked me what happened to my face. It was just as well. He was so hopeful and innocent—I didn’t want to spoil that. Once again, I envied him.

* * *

Usually I visited the temple once a week, or once a month in the monsoons. I used to go at every fifth sunrise, but when the bandits caught me there—well, I started to vary my pattern. I know Prashkina would have understood.

The nightmares had mostly stopped now, and my face only ached on hot days. I never looked at myself in the stream, so I wasn’t sure what color the scars were, but my fingertips told me the skin was tough and dead. As for the rest, once I washed myself out with lemon juice, I just went on with my rituals, because someone had to. I tried not to remember. Not to let it rule me. But now that Dishu was at the temple, I felt a little safer. I decided to return the next day to see his firebuilding efforts.

When I got there, not only had Dishu built a large fire in the brazier, but he'd cleared most of the rubble away from the walls. Now the murals showed—chipped, grimy, and missing their inset jewels, but amazing nonetheless. Here was the tale of Zarukha the Wise, who gave the king seven sons born on the same night. And Molosri, the god of playful spirit, who spent a hundred years as a mahogany tree and forgot his true name. These tales, and the others now visible—Prashkina would have approved.

I smiled. "It's lovely, Dishu. Thank you."

"There's more to do," he said. "I'll keep working."

After years of living on my own in the hut, I was as strong as any village woman. "I'll help you," I said.

We worked together in silence for a while. He cleared the heavy rubble, and I washed the murals. The jewels were still gone, but at least the walls looked cleaner. The crackling fire felt perfect for this cooler day, and I hummed a prayer song as I worked. I'd cleaned a few things myself in the temple, but most of it seemed pointless without visitors. As Dishu said, Prashkina needed no temple. But it cheered me to do the work.

Dishu and I stopped at mid-day. I'd brought mangoes and rice with stewed lentils to share with him, but he shook his head. "I'm not hungry."

“Of course you are,” I said, pushing the lentil dish towards him. He shrugged and accepted it, though he ate very lightly.

As we finished our meal, he asked, “When did the gods die?”

“Seventeen years ago, at the Sundering.”

“All at once?”

“No. Some died long ago, of course. But most of them were killed in battles that year. A lot of them.”

“How many gods were there?”

“Well,” I said, smiling at my remembered role as teacher, “I wasn’t highly ranked enough to learn all their names. Some gods prefer to reveal themselves only to the most worthy devotees. At my ranking I honored fifty-four gods, thirty goddesses, and five hundred raised warriors. That must be nearly all of them, though I can’t be sure.”

He looked confused, and I wondered if he couldn’t count that high. “Many,” I clarified. “Lots of gods. Enough to battle each other to death.”

“Maybe they’re just sleeping.”

I tried not to wince. “Prashkina is gone. No force could break our bond except the death of my Goddess. When she died, I traveled to the capital to see if another god would bond with me. But every priest, every priestess I met—the same.”

He shook his head. “But gods are powerful. They’ve always been here. They must be here.”

Just like his village, where everything probably stayed as it had for centuries. I said, “Gods get their power because we believe in them. And without them, this land has changed. Starving bandits roam the jungles, thieves prey on villagers, and foreign pirates steal our people. No one has come here in three years besides you.”

“But maybe if everyone believed in them—”

I smiled and shook my head. “You can believe all you want that you’ll grow younger this year, but it won’t help. Some things even the gods can’t change.”

Dishu looked at the floor. “Don’t you have hope?”

I studied the blazing fire. “I have hope that each of us can make a small difference somewhere. Even if it’s only to one person. I think we each have the power to become more than we are.”

He looked at the fire with me and didn’t say anything. This time, I was fairly sure he understood.

Finally he said, “I’m just a fisherman. I’ve always been a fisherman.”

“Your father and grandfather too?”

He frowned. “I don’t know. I don’t remember them.”

“Don’t you have family to worry about you?”

“I don’t know.”

I looked at him, puzzled. “Doesn’t anyone wonder where you are?”

He shrugged sadly. “I have no wit, and everyone in my village knew it.”

My heart softened for this young man, who might never have heard kind words in his life. “Perhaps so. But I think there’s more to you than that. You’ve changed even since you arrived here. You’re happier somehow. I see it in the way you walk, the way you work.”

He smiled again. “It makes me happy to do this work.”

“You should eat more,” I said.

“I’m not hungry. I shouldn’t take your food.” But at my insistence, he accepted a mango and ate it. I watched him clean for a while, noticing the lightness in his feet as he swept sand into buckets and took it outdoors. I closed my eyes and hugged myself. He made me happier too. With Dishu here, I wasn’t afraid.

* * *

By the end of another week, we’d swept the floors and scrubbed the edges by the walls. We’d planted seeds in the garden and cleared debris from the pond. Dishu kept the fire burning in the brazier. It felt like home again.

As the temple returned to life, I nearly forgot about the bandits. They were from my past—something Dishu's presence banished, like demons at my door. But my body remembered. One morning while we worked, I felt queasy and I couldn't place why. Then I heard metal clanking outside. The Temple held almost no metal anymore. My body had known they were coming back, and they would destroy everything we'd done here. Someone shouted outside. My scars throbbed.

"Quick, come to me," I ordered, clutching my robe tightly.

Dishu obeyed, looking surprised. I took his sleeve and dragged him to the door. "The bandits are here," I said. "There's just enough time to get you out. Take the back path down the mountain. I'll slip out the other way. Good luck. Thank you for your help."

"What about the fire?" he asked.

"The fire? Oh, the temple. They've looted everything there is to find."

"No, the fire. It shouldn't go out."

"We can't worry about that now."

"We have to keep the fire burning." Dishu tugged loose and ran to the brazier. He scooped logs into his arms and threw them in.

I ran to him, grabbed his arm, and turned him around. I flung my veil open. "They did this. Last time. We have to go!"

He pulled away. Stubborn man! The bandits shouted to each other outside—already close to the doors. We had to hide. I dragged Dishu with me to the floor. “Hush!”

We crouched together behind the altar, which suddenly felt too small. Sweat soaked my robe. I held Dishu close, smelling the dirt in his hair.

Boots stomped on the stone. I didn’t dare look. It sounded like at least a dozen men talking among themselves. They swore with curse words I knew mixed with those of the North. They’d come here to steal, but nothing was left. The bandits had ignored the altar fires so far. Maybe they only sought wealth. Desperate hope filled my heart. *Please*, I prayed, knowing no one heard me, *please don’t let them hurt us*.

Dishu tore out of my arms and jumped like something had bitten him. He stared at me, eyes wide and mouth open. “Down!” I hissed. I pulled him to the floor, but too late—someone cried out. I tried to run, but the bandits raced around the altar and caught us. They pulled us apart. Dishu struggled and threw off his captor. A man grabbed my hair and threw me against the altar. I screamed. My veil fluttered near the fire. The Northerner grinned and said something to me that needed no translation. He licked his lips.

“Run!” I yelled. Dishu had to escape. Someone had to tend Prashkina’s fire, and this time I feared the bandits would kill me. I struggled and kicked, but couldn’t break free.

The Northerner drew a knife. I closed my eyes and went limp. This time, it wouldn’t be so bad. Dishu would keep my work alive. He’d walked thirty days to bring the Goddess some straw. He’d come back to her temple, even after my death. I knew he would.

The stench of burning flesh ripped through my nostrils. My captor shouted something incoherent and released me. I slid to the floor. Startled, I opened my eyes. Dishu hovered above the fire, floating in mid-air like a dragonfly. His skin crackled and charred. His bones crashed to the woodfire below. The flames rose higher, and my soul flared with passion—hope, hope like I’d nearly forgotten—

Some bandits ran. Others begged. Some crumpled to the ground, rocking on the floor like hurt children. Dishu burned with a white flame so bright I averted my eyes. I didn’t know what was happening. But I felt peace—the certainty that no matter what happened to me, the fire would continue.

A shy presence appeared in my mind, knocking gently as if I might be asleep. *Hello, Sarayoura.*

Hello, I said, my heart racing.

I'm sorry. I forgot who I was. I hid from the war when it started. But your prayer woke me. I heard you speak to me.

Who are you?

I'm Aradishu, called Hope. The last hope, once all other is lost. None can harm those who believe in me. But I'm still the fisherman too. Will you bond with me?

My answer surged without words. Hope entered my mind, and we bonded.

Now I knew Aradishu, the flaming dragonfly. I fell to my knees, weeping at my newfound fullness. The air smelled fresh, like childhood. I opened my eyes, ready to change my world.

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Vylar Kaftan writes speculative fiction of all genres, including science fiction, fantasy, horror, and slipstream. She's published stories in places such as Clarkesworld Magazine, Realms of Fantasy, and Lightspeed. She's chairing a new SF/F convention in San Francisco called FOGcon (fogcon.org). She lives with her husband Shannon in northern California and blogs at www.vylarkaftan.net.

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THE SHADES OF MORGANA

by Dean Wells

Ghosts and the midnight gales howled through Malagant's steep cobblestoned alleys like banshees jacked on dreamseed and stim. The storms never arrived before nightfall, never lingered after dawn. Such things happened in the City of Shadows. Dark things, inexplicable things. Sully Finn was living proof of that, if living was what you called it.

He stretched out on the library floor, fingers interlaced, eyes shut, his feet propped upon the warm hearthstones of a cavernous old fireplace. It was a dark room despite the firelight, heavy with wood-smoke and the lingering smells of roasted rath and toves from Broon's cookhouse above the larder.

Sully listened with a young man's intensity as the rain slammed into the mountains rising high above the City, heard the phantom warriors bellow and wail in the blast of the wind. Relived the cries of the lost souls he himself had destroyed.

He listened to everything but the demon inside his head.

Sabrina sauntered into the library, a steaming cup of mulled ghillie wine in her hands. Sabrina Cheng-Mallory, her

every movement provocative in ways he dared not begin to describe. Sully caught himself staring at her. He sat up and turned away.

Too late, of course. The worm had seen her as well. Sully felt it move, a cold liquid flutter deep in his gut, a tingling in his veins.

Oh, she's a pretty one, it whispered. The words dripped inside Sully's skull like rancid honey, thick and carnal. *You've been watching her, Sullivan. Indeed, indeed you have.*

In truth Sully was the intruder here, as was Sabrina, as were all who'd come to this Aspect poised at the very edge of the Aetherial Deep. The orb had many names, human and not, but to the Men who believed they could tame this wild place it was simply Morgana, the Phantom Queen, a realm of dark seas and storm-burnished skies.

Sully ignored the worm's taunt. He was a solitary man by necessity if not by choice, slender and pale, scarcely older than twenty-two. He smiled a quick hello as Sabrina set her mug to cool alongside a collection of manxome claws sheathed in time-blackened steel.

Doctor Rowan Mallory perched atop a ladder in the corner between two of the room's volume-laden walls, lost in the pages of centuries-old metaphysics. Amber gaslight reflected off the frames of his brass variable-loupe spectacles. Sabrina's

line-brother, the “Dark Apostle” as he was known in the Shadowlands—those hidden reaches upon Morgana where night lingered a bit too long.

“And what pray tell is troubling the beasties now?” Sully asked, careful not to look at her too closely.

“It was Emlyn. She’s fine.” Sabrina gathered her long skirts beneath her and sat opposite him before the fireplace.

“Nightmares or a sudden fear of barrow ghouls?”

Sabrina’s eyes twinkled. “Actually she wanted to know if she’s of an age to start having it off with boys. Trevor and Henry have announced they’re ready to begin their conquests of the fairer sex.”

Sully flinched. Safe in the bedchambers upstairs were a dozen young refugees from Myrddin’s End, runaways liberated from stimulant laboratories and families who’d already been lost to the shadows. “How old are they?” Sully asked. “Fourteen?” The edge to his voice could split industrial diamonds.

“Fourteen and three-quarters, as the months were measured on Great Albion.”

“Three-quarters?” Doctor Mallory’s subdued baritone drifted down from above. “That makes all the difference then.” He offered one of his enigmatic half-smiles as he turned a page

in the faded manuscript, its characters inscribed in blood by the long-dead Shadowmancers of the Invisible Reach.

“God’s wounds, Rowan, don’t be such a prig,” Sabrina said. “Try not to be so serious for once in your life.”

Mallory’s smile only broadened. “I can’t. Too many years spent in the company of militant academicians. Steel rulers. Prithee, don’t get me started.”

He committed the equation he’d been studying to memory, then folded his spectacles and placed the text back into its niche. He hopped off the ladder with a metallic rustle. His trappings were rugged if otherwise nondescript, but instead of trousers he wore a skirt of densely-scaled mesh, the native equivalent of chain mail, belted in gruhlish fashion but cut to human proportions.

“Right. We’ll stem the biological tide in the morning, Gods help us,” he said. “In the meanwhile I’ve got meditations to offer and defense hermetics to calculate.” He knelt and put a hand on Sully’s shoulder, gaslight glinting off the ancient metal bands that adorned his fingers and wrists. Sully flinched again. “Even a deaf man can hear the agitation in your voice. Are you alright?”

Sully feigned a smile, wiping cold perspiration from his face. He tapped his head. “The Garden is secure.”

Mallory nodded. "Cheers, then." He stood and gestured to Sabrina. "You be nice. Don't even think about going back to the college tonight." He kissed the top of her head. "The Powers guard and defend thee from Steel Fever and the Vivisector's Ravenous Daughters. Twilight Fire brighten thy passage, and Deep Sea guide thee home." He stopped at the doors to the entry hall. "And do try not to wake Broon. He's killed for less, and I'd rather not deal with the mess afterwards." He smiled again and left the library, closing the doors behind him.

Sabrina rolled her eyes. "God, he bores me to sobs."

"He's not joking, you know," Sully said. "Broon likes his shut-eye. All four of them." He relaxed a bit and leaned back, his quick dance with the devil sidestepped once again. "Are you sure your families are line-bonded? You don't really seem to be cut from the same bolt of cloth as he."

"I? Let's simply say that when Professor Astrid Mallory's favourite son followed her into Morgannic archaeology, the rest of us lowly mortals didn't seem to matter any longer."

"I don't believe that."

"Believe as you wish. The final laugh is on Mother anyway, now that Rowan's chucked it all to become the high bloody priest of a dead religion."

"The battle-faith isn't dead. He's giving it a voice."

"He can do so without wearing the dress."

“It’s a *bal’geTh*. Quite the rage amongst the mountain gruhls, or so I’m told.”

Sabrina merely shook her head.

The thing inside Sully Finn chortled to itself, though only Sully could hear. *So spirited, Sullivan. So rebellious. A prize worth waiting for.*

Sully could feel it leering at Sabrina through his own eyes, pleased with what it saw. Her features were those still referred to as “Oriental”—dark almond eyes, raven hair combed up and back—her clothing stylish with a smartly tailored blouse from the Royal School of Biological Sciences. An intern tending the runaways in her line-brother’s care, slumming in the ‘End. “She just needs discretion,” Mallory would say, too often swayed by a brother’s love to truly see how far she’d gone astray.

But Sully could see.

He cast his perception inward to the place where his soul was protected, the place Doctor Mallory had taught him to visualize. A maze of cold metaphysical walls, overgrown with tenets and equations and dark coiling vines of native rhiannon. A sealed tower anchored the heart of the maze. Mallory called it the Inner Garden. Sully called it a battlefield. He focused his thoughts upon the thing that lurked inside him.

You cannot have her, old monster. Leave us alone.

We have you, Sullivan, the worm taunted. And you're weak. So very weak.

I'm in control now. That's all that matters.

Your ascetic pretenses fool no one, dear boy, not even your meddlesome priest. He summons power that mortal Earthmen can neither comprehend nor control. Your desire betrays you, and his ministrations will fail.

You own my body, you twisted bastard. You do not own me.

All in good time. You will stumble. You will submit. You will offer unto us whomever we desire. The Gods of Razors and Metal will triumph in the end, and the woman will be ours.

Oh, go to Hell.

Silly child. We've already been there.

Sully stared into the cold dark stones of the tower wall. His cold reflection stared back, the idealized image of the Mind within him, perverted by the dark presence of the worm. He imagined a rock in his hand and threw it with all his might into his reflection's cold stone face. The parasite retreated.

Sully and Sabrina grew silent and listened to the storm now coming down harder, howling over ancient chimneys and rooftops. The Shadowmancers had been five hundred years dead when Men first surveyed the ruins of what would come to

be called Malagant, the Black Prince, greatest of Morgana's towering feudal strongholds. Within the confines of the fortress city, vast looming halls and manors stood crowded together, one atop the next, carved into the riverbanks and rising up the sides of the mountain itself. And everywhere, etched into stone walls and stone alleys and massive stone battlements, a blackened silhouette—one for every master and thrall, their very shadows burned into the rocks the instant they all died.

Wherever possible the brave expeditionists had rebuilt the original structures, modifying them for human use, christening them with earthly names. But the silhouettes remained.

Sabrina watched him from the corners of her eyes. He could practically feel her glance brushing along his skin like silky smooth lips. *It* could, more to the point, the thing inside him, exploiting his senses as if they were its own. She stood and stretched, then strolled to the doors of carved tulgey wood that opened into the mews outside. Sully caught her fragrance, the scent of her feminine places, a smell of spice and rich dark petals of bloodleaf.

“Sabrina? Don't get too close.”

Gaslamps flickered before windows of tinted glass. Sabrina stopped and looked down at him. “It's rain, Sully.”

“Perhaps, or not.” He paused. “The indigenes believe that forces of Nature are very much alive and possess Wills of their own. You want to risk slagging off a storm?”

“The indigenes believe the World is flat and we come from the wrong side.”

“Touché.” Sully pulled on a small runic cross dangling from his neck, his eyes roaming over the blackened relics displayed there in the library. Each one was a reminder that something awesome and horrifying had happened to this Aspect long before Men ever set foot upon it.

“Places of power exist throughout Creation,” he finally said, choosing his words with care. “Places of light, places of darkness. Sometimes it’s a mountain, or a circle of trees, or a star on the great brass arc of its rails. Sometimes it’s an entire World.”

“Sully....”

“The Shadowmancers were bound to this Aspect, this place of power. Thaumaturgical abilities the likes of which we’ve never seen. They were so powerful that, in the end, in the name of the battle-faith, the Armies of Starlight and Abyss annihilated one other in a single night of pyromantic flame, leaving behind the lesser races to fend for themselves.”

“Sully, I grew up with this shit. My mother teaches it....”

“She teaches only what the Directorate allows her to teach. The surviving peoples of Morgana, every one of them, believe the Shadowmancers are still here. Even in death their Will could not be destroyed. They live on in the Aspect itself, bound to this World’s collective unconscious. Sabrina, look at the wonders your brother is capable of.”

She seemed to sink in upon herself as her pretense of ignorance turned into something much more worrisome. “I can’t believe the Directors haven’t censured him by now. They do threaten often enough.”

“Science and thaumaturgy are one and the same on this orb,” Sully said. “The Directors know that, and it frightens the blazes out of them. So they focus instead on expanding Her Eternal Majesty’s Aetheric Possessions and pretend the dangers here are not real.”

Just as they did the night a heretical young scientist named Rowan Mallory found Sully in the gutter beneath Cathedral Hill, at the steps of New Saint Paul’s, a ragged predator barely out of adolescence. Rejected by family, consumed by a demon’s desire, stained by the blood and tears of the innocents he’d violated.

“There’s a darkness that clings to the heart of this City, Sabrina. It calls to the people who’ve been here too long. Doctor Mallory is trying to stop it.”

“Is this one of those barmy stories you tell the children, or personal exposition?”

He stared into the fire, his voice no more than a whisper.

“Both.”

“Really.” Sabrina leaned forward. “Are you a bad boy, Sully Finn?”

“Not intentionally....”

He knelt before the fire and tossed in more wood, sweet smelling logs of cerridwen and minstrel’s harp. Sabrina watched him, openly now, and didn’t attempt to hide it. She returned to her spot on the floor, a playful gleam dancing in her eyes.

She wants you! the worm hissed. *She wants you, sweet boy.* It twisted and roiled inside him, sliding around his organs like a mass of liquid snakes. *She initiates the ritual, the courting, the coupling. Our lady of passion, your guide into chaos—*

Be quiet, Sully thought. She doesn’t mean a thing—

But in the pit of his stomach, and the dark places even deeper, he knew he was wrong. He’d stood at this precipice too many times, knew the portents too well.

Welcome her into the family, Sullivan. A new host. A new plaything, your willing sister-bride.

Be quiet! Sweet Christ in Heaven....

Memories came quickly now: hot ragged breaths, naked hips slamming together, the taste of stolen passion on his tongue. And in the Garden, outside his psychological walls, something viscous and black began to seep through hairline cracks.

Can you feel her desire? Can you smell it? Glistening and wet. Passion calls to passion. Flesh calls to flesh, blood to blood. Stand with us in the centre of the fire. Release us.

Moisture collected under Sully's arms, down his back. His forbidden places throbbed. The worm siphoned off an oily portion of itself, flowing its seed into Sully's reproductive tract, pooling there, waiting for the violent spasms that would eject it from the old host and into the new—this woman, this Sabrina Cheng-Mallory. *Its* Sabrina Cheng-Mallory. The Enemy's flesh and blood. The demon wallowed in the sheer audacity of it all, and Sully was powerless to silence it.

Sabrina reached for her cup and sidled closer.

"There's a bathing tub next to the scullery. It looks big enough for six. What do you say we fire it up and listen to the rain? You can keep an ear open for wayward spooks if you like."

"It's not a bathing tub. It's Broon's stewpot."

Lightning strobed again, above the manse, over the river, thunder rolling like the turning of the World on its great

herculean gears. He reached for another log, but there were no more.

“Rowan—”

“—isn’t going to hear us, and Broon can sleep through a monsoon.” Sabrina rose to her knees.

Black ooze ate through his defenses like acid. Sabrina crept close, closer than anyone had been in a long time. He ached, it had been so long. He could not move, could not run, his pale arms frozen around his knees.

Worship her carnality, Sullivan. Release us! Kneel before the altar of her calescent flesh, share the sacrament of sweat and black seed. It’s been so long, so very long.

Her hand touched his leg, slid up the inside of his thigh.

Warm, yes! So very warm....

Sully recoiled at the feverish heat of her fingertips, searing like irons drawn across flesh as cold as the grave.

Yes, sweet lady, yes! So warm, so WARM!

And the last of Sully’s defenses ripped away.

The worm was free.

Insane laughter split his skull from the inside, ice-cold razors of pain ripping and tearing and ravaging his gut. He doubled over, pale hands pressed against the sides of his head.

“Shut it!” he said aloud. “Just shut it! Gods, leave me alone!”

Sabrina railed back. Sully snapped his head around and focused upon her, his eyes black and cold as night.

“GET AWAY!” he screamed.

Darkness assaulted him, casting him backward in Time, into the guise of a young boy no more than fourteen. A boy sneaking away from the belching black smokestacks of Engine Town, tramping along the waterfront to Malagant’s bustling North End.

Alone in the City of Shadows.

He just wanted to see the boats.

Fishing boats and taxis tied to the maze of wooden piers at Bankside. Merchant ships sailing through Blackwall Cove, out Victoria Bay to the mighty waters of the High New Thames rolling north of the city. Deep ocean vessels and dirigibles streaming west with the current, past Knightsgate Bridge and the Harrows to the Great Britannic Sea beyond the river’s end.

He ran in panic. He’d lost track of the hour, didn’t realize how late it was until streetlamps began to flick on one by one. Children didn’t roam the streets of Malagant after dark. The City became something *else*, after dark. Up the steep alleys of the Stonemarket Quarter to catch the aerostat back to Engine Town, the last shuttle of the day, certain that Da would already be barmy on dreamseed and ready to skin him alive. Into the

Shambles, past whores and bawdy houses hidden from gaslight and prying eyes. He turned a blind corner. The wrong one—

And two pale hands grabbed him in the dark, one by the shoulders, the other covering his mouth. Bony hands, of a man who smelled of sweat and dead bloodleaf. The boy was spent and mute with fear. He didn't say a word.

Jumbled images now: a stone-lined alley under the freight rails, a nest of old fishing nets, the stink of vorpalfin and bronwen. Evil thrusting inside him, endless streams of cold corrupt seed surging up through his vitals, coiling around his organs. Evil, and blood. So much blood, dark and sticky red.

"I'm sorry," the man wept. "I'm so sorry...."

The boy woke in the alley, his clothing damp from mist and vented steam, his body bruised and broken. Slicks of discharged ooze clung to the swollen flesh and downy new hairs on his thighs, still wet. The ooze was black. It was cold. It moved.

And inside his head, a ghastly chorus of voices laughed and taunted him for not fighting back.

A distant peal of bells rang above the alley, steam-driven chimes tolling high atop New Saint Paul's. No, not church bells. The mantle clock in Doctor Mallory's library, an heirloom from fabled Earth announcing hours that no longer had any meaning.

Sabrina, running for the door....

The thing that had been Sully Finn leapt with inhuman speed and grabbed the neck of her blouse one-handed, yanking her back as if she weighed nothing. The other hand snatched a *skrave* from the library's collection of executioner's blades and pressed the sharp edge to her throat.

"Are you a bad girl, Sabrina?" it said, throwing her words back at her. "Do you know what bad truly is?" The voice was Sully's but it was the demon who spoke. Sully was no more than an observer now, a voyeur trapped behind his own eyes. "Such a cockish young *grwdaTh'an*—so eager to risk, to debauch yourself for the thrill of the moment. Do you want it, *grwd'aQh*?" the worm teased. "Do you want it?"

Sabrina pulled back and slammed her knee into Sully's gut. The worm howled and dropped the *skrave*, and for an instant Sully regained control.

"Sabrina, get out of here!" he said, but he stood between her and the hallway doors and the demon wouldn't let her pass. He doubled over again as the thing inside lashed out at him.

"You can't have her, you bastard!" Sully said, his words hissing through clenched teeth. "You can't have her!"

The worm wrenched every organ in their shared body, flayed every nerve. It could not kill him—so fundamentally were they joined, host and parasite—but it could punish him.

Oh, how it could punish him. The ruination of this young woman was just the beginning. He launched himself at her—

And the room exploded in silver light. Something slammed into his back, electric and ice-cold.

“Cwrsallog! Face me.”

Lightning flashed. Bands of thaumic force wrapped around Sully’s chest like the fingers of a giant hand and pulled him away from her.

Doctor Mallory stood before the library doors. An aura of cold argent fire coursed around him, banishing every shadow. He locked his eyes onto Sully’s and with his right hand traced the glyph of the Fourfold Causality. Silver light trailed behind his fingertips like diamonds in a winter night’s sky.

“Warlords of Matter and Energy, Sovereigns of Space and Time. Granteth unto me thy righteous protection as I open my Mind to thee....”

“Rowan...,” Sabrina whispered.

The bands around Sully’s chest tightened.

“Sabrina!” Mallory said. “What in the Goddess’s Name happened?”

“Nothing! Nothing, I swear!” Locks of sweaty hair hung in her eyes. “Christ Jesus, don’t look at me like that! It’s not my fault your boy’s a bloody lunatic!”

“Queen of Phantoms save us. Back away, girl, now.”

Doctor Mallory narrowed his eyes. Sully railed as two serrated throwing blades rocketed off their wall mounts and flew past him as if shot from a cannon. The blades sank into power conduits bracketed on either side of the library doors.

Electricks from the great machines that powered the City flashed from the severed cables. Mallory caught the bolts and bridged them across the doors in a writhing stream of chained lightning.

“That arc will cut you in half, demon. You’re not leaving this room.”

Sully heard the words but they were meaningless. The demon’s rage became his own. It broke through Doctor Mallory’s psychic bonds and leapt at the figure bathed in silver fire.

The Enemy met him head-on. They slammed into each other, grappling before the doorway, but the Enemy, the Dark Apostle, would not yield. Sully fought all the more, compelled by unspeakable pain, his every move mirroring the struggle within him, human and nonhuman alike wrestling for control of the body that housed them both. Sabrina flew in and grabbed the straps of Sully’s bracers, but he slapped her back without thought or remorse.

About the Enemy’s person, his rings, buckles, circlets, and bands shone like great electrick arc lamps. The

Shadowmancers had finished their armour with psycho-reactive liquid crystal glazes. Caught in the fevered grip of battle frenzy, the ancient Armies of Starlight were blinding.

Doctor Mallory blazed like the lamp of the sun.

Space folded along either side of his hands and solidified into a line of material force—a staff, the mental manifestation of a horned stang bound in leather straps, its tines sheathed in illusory steel.

Doctor Mallory spun away and cracked Sully across the jaw with the staff. Sully whirled aside, pain and blood exploding red-hot, and crashed to the stone-and-timber floor.

“Hit him again!” Sabrina yelled. “Zap him! Turn him into a bug!”

Sully recoiled and faced Doctor Mallory, felt the muscles in his face twist upward into the malevolent travesty of a smile. Thunder crashed again, above them now, the sound of Heaven’s Engines splitting apart. He wiped black blood from his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Rowan Mallory,” the worm said. Its voice hissed and burbled. “We meet again.”

“You remember me, Cwrsallog. I’m impressed.” Energies coruscated up and down the length of the illusory stang in Doctor Mallory’s hands.

“Don’t be. You call down the forces of the Invisible Reach as if the power was yours to command. You’re no more than a pawn, a game piece for the Iron Confessors and She Who Strikes Fear. You are beneath our concern.”

“You didn’t think so the last time I beat you.”

“Your resources caught us unawares. That will not happen again.”

Sully’s arms lunged forward. A mass of black corruption surged from his mouth like blood jetting from a slashed artery.

“Bloody Hell!” Doctor Mallory’s staff vanished and Space again reshaped before him, bolstered by the elements of Energy and Time. The surge hit his shield and splattered, a serpentine miasma falling over the furnishings in cold bubbling pools.

Sabrina dove and rolled behind an apothecary’s bureau. “A worm?!” she cried. Ebony globes hit the floor and spat at her in thick ropey spurts. “He’s carrying a worm!”

Before Mallory could answer, the heavy stones beneath them lurched upward with a deep echoing thud. Again the room heaved. Display cases of weaponry toppled around them. Timbers snapped, gaslamps sputtered. A third crash, and a massive section of the floor swung upward on great clockwork hinges, propelled by a hulking red slab of muscle and black bone.

The Enemy's Servant.

"Villain!" roared Broonandag the Blunt. "I say thee nay."

"Broon—" said Doctor Mallory, but was silenced as black viscera slapped over his mouth and eyes. The puddles of ooze congealed and sprang, whipping around the two Mallorys' arms and legs. Tightening, anchoring them to the library's heavy fixtures, pulling them down to their knees.

"Ah, the hired help," the worm said. "Do see that the bed sheets are freshly laundered and tucked in—it's going to be a busy night."

Broon smiled. Locked in his grip was a gigantic cleaver that still bore traces of the evening meal. "Cwrsallog, thou slimiest of rascals. We would have words with thee." He slammed the trapdoor shut; neither Sully nor the parasite within was strong enough to lift it.

Broon was a monster of a gruhl even to other gruhls, and he towered over Sully by more than a metre. Red and mottled black, four dark eyes set in line above a heavy jaw, thick ogre-sized cords of muscle covering most of his torso and shoulders. He tossed the cleaver from one scarred hand to the other.

"Apologies, friend Sully. This will ache most painfully."

The worm retreated slowly, eyeing the heavy blade. "Addle-pated carbuncle. You cannot harm us without ravaging Sullivan's flesh and bones. Do you expect to stop us with that?"

“Nay.” Broon threw the cleaver straight up. Suspended on thick lengths of rope from the conduits above hung an enormous battle *hh’l*, a siege hammer of epic proportions. The cleaver bit through the ropes. The *hh’l* fell. Broon caught it easily.

“I expect to stop thee with this.”

Broon swung the great hammer. Sully leapt as it smashed into the floor. Broon swung again, and again hit the crumbling stones and joists with a force that could shatter continents. Sully slipped away every time, the worm controlling his movement with inhuman speed and fluidity. The *gruhl* roared.

“Hold thee still, honour-less *praQ!*”

Doctor Mallory continued to fight the demon’s foul discharge, scraping the coils from his mouth long enough to secure welcome gasps of breath. He was all but engulfed in them now, squeezing, forcing the air from his lungs. Sabrina’s state was no better as she struggled in futile desperation.

“Broon, that’s not Sully!” she yelled. “Stop pissing about and do something!”

“Bedevil not thine *uumlads* into a twist, my lady. I have me a plan.”

Broon dropped the *hh’l* with a thunderous crash, leapt, and slammed his colossal fists onto the broken stones. The concussion snapped the remaining joists along the arc of

Broon's hammer blows; the floor collapsed, pavers and scattered weapons dropping into the mechanical workings of the Downbelow before the parasite could force Sully to react. The drop was far enough to break his back, and into the darkness he fell.

"Sully!" Sabrina screamed.

Broon was at the edge of the breach faster than his great bulk would suggest. He caught the boy by the wrist and pulled him back. But the demon in Sully's gut heaved again and another black surge erupted from his mouth, hitting Broon square in the eyes. He howled.

"Villain! Thou shalt pay for thy cowardly blow!"

Sully dropped into a coiled stance, ready to launch himself again.

Broon blindly clawed at the mess in his eyes and tripped over the *hh'l*. Gruhls were hopelessly top-heavy; off balance, his massive upper body pulled him backward and slammed his head into a corner already compromised by the blows to the floor. Structural supports collapsed, and the Enemy's Servant was buried in cascading debris.

"Broon!" Silver light flared from Doctor Mallory's eyes. "Skull and Dagger! Boiling and Exultant Wave!"

Psychic energies, the forces of Mind, coursed through him as he called upon the ancient Shadowmancers by avatar and

name. The library came alive. Toppled bookcases and timbers slid across the room to barricade the gaping hole in the floor.

Mallory focused on a dozen vials of herbal solvents and altered the equation that defined their position in Space. The vials flew from their shelves, circling the room faster than thought, propelled by a second equation that accelerated Time.

He seized a third equation and the glass vessels exploded, raining solvents over the worm's vomited agents. The ejecta boiled away, black steam curling from his bonds as he and Sabrina were set free. With a shout she ran to Broon's aid and, piece by piece, dug him from the heavy rubble.

The demon's pain burned Sully as if it were his own. He grabbed the first weapon in reach—a *gruagach* backsword of unrefined detail—and swung it at the Enemy with mad agility.

Doctor Mallory whipped the *bal'geTh* from his waist and caught the fell blade, his hands protected by impenetrable gruhl mesh. Thaumaturgical might slapped Sully across the face and ripped the sword from his hands. It raised him off the floor and there suspended him, his feet dangling in a sustained burst of reversed gravity.

Doctor Mallory pulled a leather belt from the *bal'geTh* and buckled it around Sully's wrists, binding him mid-air, then cast a wide psychic net around the boy's mind.

“Sullivan Finn, the Powers be thy anchorage and avengement, the true Wisdom of godly and Celestial Law. Lo, they shall calleth down their righteousness as the Starlight, and their judgment as the noonday—”

The worm convulsed, Sully’s gut heaving. “Ha! We do not fear your pathetic light! You have no concept of the Glory that reigned when Shadowmancers walked the mighty isles of Morgana. But all fires die, pretender. Flames gutter out, light fades to black. In the end only the Great Deep is eternal. We shall reclaim this World, and through these mortal vessels the Gods shall reign once more.”

Mallory laughed bitterly. “You dare call *me* a pretender? You’re no more a God than am I. You’re a scavenger sniffing at the ruins the true Masters left behind.”

“The High Forces will fall, and the Armies of the Abyss shall rise in their place. Your damnable interference will be eliminated.”

“Presaging the future is not what I was called to do, you vile abomination. Safeguarding it is.”

Sully’s clothes ripped open. More vessels upended and bathed him in streams of botanical oils—aneurin and medrawt, maelgwn, taliesin and llyr—allergens lethal to the worm, whose body chemistry permeated Sully’s own.

His fleshed burned.

The creature existed as pure instinct now—beyond pain, beneath the façade of rationality. It caught the iron-rich tang of blood from the woman tending to the dazed brute in the corner, the heady intoxication of perspiration and blossoming maturity from the children.

The children—

He could smell them, creeping through the dark. There! On the stone staircase, just beyond the fire's light. The Enemy had not yet seen them. Tender pieces of flesh, so easily taken, so easily tainted and stained. Each one a cradle to warm cold black seed....

No, you can't! YOU CAN'T! Sully thought. Terror ripped into his heart like jagged claws of ice.

Of course we can, laughed the worm. *And yours is the tool. Think of it, Sullivan. The very innocents you pledged to save. Your destiny revealed, the Folding Circle complete. Oh, the irony is delicious.*

A scream, high and shrill, in the hall beyond the double doors. Emlyn. She stood frozen at the foot of the stairs, the other children piling up behind her—Graham, Fiona and Henry, Lilybet and Clare—clamouring to get through.

“Bugger, what’s all this then?”

“Holy *praQ*, it’s Sully and Doctor M!”

“Broon! What’s wrong with Broon?”

Mallory saw them, too late.

“Oh, dear Goddess. Sabrina!” His concentration faltered, hesitated the barest fraction of an instant.

A boy broke through. Henry, the eldest, fine red hair dusting the tip of his chin. He ran to the very edge of the deadly electrick stream. “Doctor M!”

Sabrina shouted. “Henry! No, poppet, stay back! Rowan!”

“Sabrina! Keep them away from the door!”

The worm felt the belt around Sully’s wrists loosen....

Lightning flashed again, multicoloured behind tinted glass. The rain pounded harder, louder, in frantic deliberate blows, drawn to the metaphysical fury inside the manse.

“Sabrina, move!”

Doctor Mallory’s concentration broke, and the worm slammed Sully’s head into the bridge of his nose. The Enemy staggered back, hot blood flowing down his face.

Sabrina bolted from the corner.

The demon pulled, muscles straining shoulder to wrist. The belt snapped, and the energies that suspended him vaporized in icy white light. Doctor Mallory was unprepared. The mental backlash shot through him like Heaven’s own thunderbolt, frying every nerve.

And without a focused Mind to sustain its equation, the electrick barrier collapsed in a flurry of hot blue sparks.

Sabrina raced for the children. The Enemy's sister, his one true weakness.

Sully fell to his feet and sprang, grabbed Sabrina by the waist of her skirts, and threw her into the fury of the midnight gales.

She hit a window, cracked her head on the frame. Thick bevelled glass showered her back, shards and wind and icy driving hail. And something else.

A consciousness, an elemental desire to wrest her body through the jagged glass. Sabrina grabbed the window frame but was no match for the draw of the wind. It closed around her shoulders, tore at the combs in her hair....

"Choose, Rowan Mallory!" the worm said. Foul threads of steam coiled from Sully's burnt flesh.

"Choose! Help Sullivan, save your three-penny whore of a sister, or protect the children. Choose one, and sacrifice the rest to Caustic Epiphany and the Brethren of Pestilent Torment."

Doctor Mallory staggered forward, struggling against the backlash of his own misdirected assault. "Fight it, Sully!" he said. "Fight it!"

He ran to his sister. Grabbed her, pulled her back inside with his left hand and whirled a great sweeping arc through the air with his right—the Projective Hand, the hand that rallied

focus for the World Mind. Shattered glass leapt off the floor and flew back into place, fusing whole again in a blinding quicksilver flash of reversed Time.

Doctor Mallory stumbled, weakened beyond the strength and limit of what the mortal frame could bear. “Get the children into the strongroom,” he said to Sabrina, cradling her bloody head. “The defense incantations will protect you—” But as she fell limp into his arms he collapsed as well, utterly spent.

The carnal scent of the children pulled the worm back to its feet. Sully’s pulse raced. His blood sang, a thousand sensations centred on the throbbing hammer that threatened to burst rock-hard through the needlework of his black canvas trousers. The parasite laughed.

Now doesn’t this look familiar, it said. But then, sweet boy, you were on the receiving end.

Sully screamed.

The worm lurched forward, turned on the children frozen there in the dark beneath the stairs—

—and illumination flared in the depths of Sully’s being. One final course still remained. His final sacrifice—for the children and Doctor Mallory, for his victims in the past and the innocents forever doomed to suffer because of the passions he could no longer control.

He cast himself into the Garden. The maze of stone walls buckled inward under the pressure of the irresistible black tide. Only the strength of Sully's own Will kept them from crumbling altogether.

It's finished, Cwrsallog. I'm done.

And Sully surrendered to the tide. The walls collapsed, psychic fortifications flying apart like snapping bands of Bessemer steel. The worm's essence surged in unchecked, and in the centre of the maze, on the ruins of the battlefield, the cold stone tower that held Sully Finn's soul burst open in transcendent light.

Come and get me, you twisted son of a bitch.

What are you doing? the demon roared. Darkness poured through the shattered walls and vaporized, caught in the wake of golden radiant glory. *WHAT ARE YOU DOING?*

I'm giving you my Mind, sirrah. It's what you've always wanted. Have at it then.

What—?

The light burned through the last of the walls, consuming every vestige of the battlefield. And still the darkness rushed in, an unstoppable flood pulling him into the firestorm.

But there's a catch, old monster. I'm betting the Body cannot live without the Will. I'm betting I cease to exist. I'm betting I *die*, you bastard. And I'm taking you with me.

His spirit blazed like the morningstar Gloriana, brilliance far beyond Morgana's dark skies, golden and incandescent in the tenebrous depths of the Aether. His spark of divinity, the Light of the World. The worm screamed and clawed as the parasitic union that bound them together burned in holy fire.

Greater love hath no Man than this—

Sully collapsed in unspeakable pain.

Let there be light.

Everything vanished in blinding Night—the sounds of the rain and the wind, the stink of his own burnt flesh, the silent screaming pain, and Sully too was swept into starlight. He feared death more than he'd ever feared the demon, and terror welled up inside him as the clockwork gates Beyond the Ninth Wave spun open to swallow him whole.

But then a man's voice called to him. Hands coalesced out of the night, cradled him, pulled him back, the voice chanting thaumic formulae and equations as his Mind channelled the great battle-surgeons of Morgana's past: Ice Blade and Thay'lun Sciencemaster, Blood-Raker and Wuhr'g the Atrocious.

Sully's burns mended, his flesh tingling as the ragged wounds knit themselves back together, the material potential within his tissues increasing, his healing factors redirected,

quickened by the ministrations of accelerated Time. Pain faded as the starlight dimmed to black.

He opened his eyes.

Doctor Mallory crouched above him. Purple bruises bloomed under his eyes and broken nose, sweat and blood matting his hair. Sabrina was on her feet as well, surrounded by the children. Not too close, but close enough. Broonandag the Blunt was still down, sitting on the floor with his back to the wall, a cold compress aside his bony head.

Sully tried to form words, but his lips and tongue were swollen and heavy with blood. All he could muster was an embarrassed “Heh.” He swallowed and tried again. “Sorry. I rather thought I’d be dead about now.”

“It was not yet your time,” Doctor Mallory said gently. “You still have a role to play in the War Without End.”

“Brilliant. I feel ever so much better.”

“Demons are what they are because of pride, Sully. It wasn’t prepared for you to best it with an act of humility.” He leaned forward and offered another of his half-smiles. “Eleven years I’ve travelled this Path and I’ve yet to see anything like it. I do believe the Shadowmancers themselves would have been impressed.”

Broon rumbled. “Could’ve attempted it sooner, if thou desirest my opinion.”

“It’s still inside me,” Sully said. He sat up slowly. He could feel the thing entwined around his organs, coursing through his blood, substance and shadow fused more immutably than ever—one being now, truly—but its Will, its vicious black soul, was no more. He’d won. Dark Night and Deep Sea, he had won.

“I can feel it, but its mind is gone. I’m in control now. For good, I think.” He shook his head. “I don’t know what that means.”

Doctor Mallory reached out and took his hand. “I know exactly what that means.”

And for the first time since he could not remember when, Sully didn’t pull away. He looked up at Sabrina and smiled once again.

“Sorry. I don’t terribly feel like snogging in the stewpot just now.”

“Damn thine eyes!” sputtered Broon. “*My* stewpot?!”

Sabrina laughed—a sob, really. She wiped her eyes and looked up at her brother. Only then did anyone realize that Doctor Mallory hadn’t retrieved the *bal’geTh*, still on the floor where he’d dropped it. Her smile was wickedly back in form.

“By my troth, dearest, you’d look a great deal more impressive if you weren’t standing there bare-arsed.”

Doctor Mallory adjusted his long shirttails and sighed.

“The next time I tell you to be nice....”

Outside, the storm weakened and began its slow march back to the sea, retreating as it always did before the coming dawn. Sully closed his eyes and listened. The dark chorus in his head was gone. The presence that invaded his every waking moment was gone. He was one of the Darkened now, as was Rowan Mallory, a soul bound to the shades of Morgana but not a slave of them. And the people nearest him would be safe. He could live with that.

If living was what you called it.

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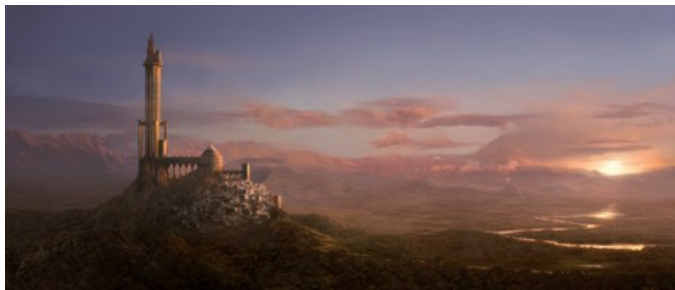
Dean Wells's short fiction has appeared in Ideomancer, Demensions, Eldritch Tales, ShadowKeep Magazine, and The Nocturnal Lyric.

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COVER ART

“Spring Sunset,” by Andreas Rocha



Andreas Rocha lives in Lisbon, Portugal, with his wife. He studied architecture, but after college his main occupation veered from architecture towards digital painting, something he had done during college as a hobby. He has been working freelance for three years now, doing conceptual and finished illustrations, matte paintings, and 3D architectural visualizations. See more of his work, including a movie version of “Spring Sunset,” at www.andreasrocha.com.

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