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[“Sightwolf,” by Erin Hoffman](#)

[“The Moral Education of a Mad Bastard,” by Joe. L. Murr](#)

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SIGHTWOLF

by Erin Hoffman

In Astralar, middling flint-walled city pressed against the chill bosom of the Windsmouth Mountains, a woman will be banished for failure to pay taxes. There are no honest cities, but I won't bore you with my travail; the end of it is that on a cold spring morning when the tax man came and I had fallen short for two years running, the constables granted me what of my slim possessions I could carry and escorted me to the southern wall.

To go straight ahead from the southern wall of Astralar is to enter the Windsmouth. This is also suicide. The western option is not much better: Wicklight is a dark forest of evergreens and the occasional oak, a place where strange things nest. But the days were still cold, winter clinging like a leech, and the forest at least offered shelter, so in I went to die.

In this there was no uncertainty. The Astralarian merchant-princes console themselves with some illusion of justice, but in winter, the western road is death itself. The forest is the grey place, the place for those who deserve to die

and lack the stomach to carry it out. I would not last until the spring.

Despite my foolishness with regard to coin, I am not entirely stupid, and so before the tax season came 'round I had packed a burlap sack with basic tools as could be useful in the wild. I did not indicate I was so prepared, of course; contrarywise I made much of my predicament. I wept and carried on, even though it was cruel to punish those constables with tears; I was angry at a city that had taken so much life from me and rarely given anything back: Astralar, and its goddess-fearing taxpaying citizens.

Exile I might be, but the citizens of Astralar and I remained bound in our cowardice. Those grey-clad guards knew well as they turned me loose that a single sack of supplies against the dregs of winter in Wicklight Forest is merely a colorful variation on institutional murder.

On my first afternoon in the forest I built a shelter out of pine boughs tipped together into a rude arched roof. I lined the floor with tender new grass pulled from between gnarled pine roots, and spread canvas over the top to keep out some of the damp. There was only greenwood to be found, and after wasting a third of my precious cotton tinder, I climbed into the shelter, wrapped my single blanket around my shoulders, and

slept, hungry and without fire. It is the coldest I have ever been.

* * *

The following days improved, but barely. The forest hid a pocket of swamp whose dead trees hung heavy with branches that would burn if they weren't rotten. A cold stream surrendered up cattail roots and under-ripe woolberries; their furry skins caught in my throat, but they were edible in small portions. I ate them, and thought often of death and my failure in finding a noble exit to however ignominious a life. Perhaps grey Wicklight was what I deserved.

Towering red-fleshed trees between the swamp and the stream housed the darkest part of the forest. And the darkest part of the forest housed the woodmistress.

Once every three years or so a child of Astralar would die from woodmistress poisoning. She came in three varieties, all of which grew together and looked identical: the first kind was nourishing, the second produced visions, and the third was deadly.

Hunger clawed at me, first a ravenous thing that twisted my gut, but after the first day of sparse roots and berries settled into dull senses and a persistent ache. And yet the thought of death at the hands of the black witch reminded me that I was a coward.

I went back to the stream, ate too many woolberries, and spent the night wracked with sour-belly. But I woke the next morning.

* * *

By the twelfth day I had amassed a tidy pile of provisions and was beginning to feel something that was not hope, but neither was it misery. Regularity, perhaps. A mildly less ignoble end. But the ache in my head and body would not be banished by roots and leaves alone. My soft city body demanded meat.

I spent the afternoons building traps. The first fifteen were pitiful things. Half of them succeeded only in spending my meager larder on invisible woodland creatures, and the other half were never touched at all.

It didn't help that I had never seen a single other warm creature since arriving. There were distant birds, small ones; and once I startled something that might have been a chipmunk or a vole. In the mud by the stream I found the delicate slivered-moon prints of what must have been a large deer. Whatever owned those hooves was more a threat to me than I to it.

But I built the traps anyway, and I tried to be encouraged when I found them torn apart the next day, looted.

After several days of frustration I at last decided that I would see this creature I'd been feeding, one way or another. I went to the wild rose meadow where my traps had been most disrupted and set up five snares.

At the meadow's center was a strange, massive tree, the only one of its type I'd seen in the entire forest. It had spade-shaped leaves as big as my spread hand, a tender green of endless spring, and teardrop flowers of woodpecker-crest red. In the way of things in Wicklight, it was dangerous; it was covered in thorns that itched awfully if they broke skin, but they were spaced far enough apart that a careful climber could avoid them.

I planted myself in that tree, climbing high enough to see the entire meadow clearly, and settled in the intersection of three huge branches. And I waited.

The sun climbed across the sky, arcing high over the silent meadow. Birds came and went, and once, to my astonishment, one of the deer came to graze. She was alone, but where there was a doe there must have been more, and also a buck. And she was massive, bigger than any deer I had so much as heard of, taller than me by a head if we had been on even footing. Her pelt was a soft dove grey, marked with black at her points, and her head was broad, her eyes large and soulful. The buck that would pair such a creature must have been terrifying. I

watched, rapt and fearful, as she nibbled at the roses, delicately pulled up grass, and mercifully left my traps untouched.

After that brief excitement, the afternoon stretched long. Hunger scratched its familiar talons at my belly, rattling it, and I carefully pulled some fennel root from a pocket and ate it. Thoughts of my life in the city crept in, but I shoved them away. The quiet peace of the meadow pressed at reflection, but no memory of a loveless past would fill my aching ribs.

A lassitude settled over me at last as I sat cradled in the branches, warmed by rare sun—

Then the shadows were long, the sun drifted down below the treeline.

I thrashed with surprise, panicking. And I fell out of the tree.

Bony limbs bruised the whole way down, but my only thought was for the quarry. Rocks and barbed seedpods scratched my hands and knees as I pushed myself upright and staggered across the meadow.

Four of the traps were untouched, and gradually my blood began to settle. The panic had burned through energy I didn't have, and a wave of blackness danced across my vision. Thus it took several second glances to realize that my fifth trap was nowhere to be found.

The trap—my best, I had thought while building it—was gone, but there was a trail. Whatever had made its narrow escape was hindered; it had flailed through the grass, leaving a broken path that no hale creature would have tolerated.

Clear sight or thought had faded long ago. There was only the present instant, the musk of earth-loam against the back of my throat, the sharp, bright scent of evergreen needles. With the dulling of consciousness came a singular purpose: I had become hunger itself. And so with an animal's greed, and also its unthinking grace, I rushed down the trace, following it as a hound's nose follows its target. It twisted, dodged, wove, and I followed it, blade by bent green blade.

And then—sound.

Just ahead, I could see the twitch of the winter-dead grasses. It was a rabbit, a skinny one. My snare was wrapped around its midsection, still holding tight, twine bits vibrating like festival ribbons on a girl-child when it moved.

I would like to say that I paused then, that some percolation of human self returned to consider the small creature, its bird-bright eyes and coat of grey-flocked dun, to reflect on the similarities of its predicament to my own—but that would be a lie.

One hand crept around the bone-handled hunting knife belted to my side—the only truly valuable thing I still possessed

—and I leapt, moving even as I slipped off the knife's scabbard-catch and pulled it free. The rabbit looked up at me with one wide black eye, and then I cut its throat.

It died quickly, and I lay beside it on my back, knife cast aside, vision fading in and out. We were sorry things unpitied by the world; a stupid young rabbit not grown canny enough to flee a lumbering human, and a castoff of a cold society, worth less than a noose and pine box.

At length that peculiarly persistent will to live sent energy creeping back through my tired body, and I sat up, realizing that I now had the first meat I'd seen in weeks. Sorry meat it might be, but meat nonetheless.

The knife lay on the grass, and I cleaned it before sheathing it, then picked up the rabbit by its stubby ears. As I set off home, my feet quickened of their own accord, recklessly spending the energy of dwindling muscles, imagining the thin meat roasting over my swamp-wood fire.

Some instinct the young rabbit had lacked stopped me well outside the clearing. Was it a strange smell?

My stomach growled, protesting the delay, and when no doom descended to answer it I crept through the brush and into the camp, one hand clenched tight around the rabbit, the other on the hilt of the hunting knife.

Something, or several somethings, had been here. The rabbit fell from my hand with a soft thump. The larder was overturned, its stones scattered, all contents gone. My sleeping place was torn apart, the canvas rent and muddied. The small stack of dried wood had not been spared—most of it was gone, and what remained had been ripped to small shards.

There were no tracks, no indication of what had come and done this. I searched for any such sign until vision failed—not from fatigue, this time, but the swiftly advancing night. I realized too late that I should instead have been looking for my scattered supplies, on the off chance that the tinderbox remained.

In a stunned stupor I dragged what was left of my canvas and blanket up and into the branches of a spreading oak, the only tree I could climb nearby. I pressed my forehead to its rough trunk, managing two last thoughts before surrendering to the dark: could the marauders climb, and if they could, would it be mercy?

* * *

No mercy of any kind was forthcoming. Dawn woke me stiff, cold, and wet with dew. The rabbit, so painfully won, was now beyond salvaging, and I took time I did not have to bury it with apologies and dirt.

I had no energy left for more traps. My mind had retreated to some far place, awaiting annihilation, and my body marched to the swamp for more firewood. By sheerest chance I kicked the tinderbox, hidden in supple spring grass, and picked it up with numb fingers.

When I had gathered a scant armful of dry wood I heard the woodmistress's call and stumbled into that dark grove to kneel before the black patch. And try as I might, I could not get up again.

I sat in front of it as the sun crept across the sky that day. In the delirium of oncoming starvation the woodmistress became an obsession. It would become my last religion: staring into the dark fungi, memorizing every crevice and bulbous white-speckled protrusion. Seeking answers.

When the shadows advanced and my eyes strained I built a fire from the swamp wood and continued my commune. The flickering red light casting long shadows on the black-barked trees made me think of burning the entire forest down. It was a pleasant, if impossible, fantasy—the towers of needles going up like armies of mad fireflies, the pugnacious Astralarians who would come to watch the spectacle and ponder how it might affect the day's market. I would burn it all, an effigy to a life found beneath measure.

But that is not what I did. Wicklight's moldering damp drove me to a far greater madness.

Rage and delirium had melted the candle of my mind, hollowed my body, and so I would fill it with the woodmistress. I would eat the entire patch, and its one-in-three arithmetic would seal even such a despondency as mine.

The first bite was the hardest, and also the most exquisite. Bitterness bathed my tongue, followed by a wild surge of energy that lit the fire I so desired from heels to throat, from chin to elbow, from fingertips to eyes. I had six arms, like the snake-goddess of far Arith Rea, and all six carried more bulbous mistresses to the burning gullet beneath my eyes.

When the patch was gone, not even the little proto-spores left, there ceased to be a tomorrow, or a yesterday, or an I. There was only now, only we.

We rose, and the world rolled, undulating like the back of a courtesan beneath our feet. We swayed, and the forest rang like temple bells, jangling tolls that echoed through all existence. We breathed, and were beyond life and its trivialities.

We were at the threshold, about to let go, to become air and bell-song, when she called us back.

She had a very good reason, this maiden with wild brown hair like rabbit's-fur. The blinding white of her gown, which bared her shoulders but enshrouded her feet, made us look

away, and we lost our grip on forever-now. The red, rabbit's-blood red, that bloomed flowerlike at her abdomen made us look again, to loose our grip on transcendence. Come back, she said. Come back.

We would not have gone, we had urgent business to attend to off the coil of creation, but she had a deer with her, dead, a fat doe only half eaten. She sang to us of its deliciousness, how succulent its haunches and how swiftly it could be eaten. How it would fill the emptiness that she knew still lived within us.

And so we carried our fire between cupped hands, we stepped, and we were with her. We gave the fire to her dead deer, and we made it a part of us. We fell upon our fire, and lay our heads in the folds of her white, white gown, and we left.

* * *

Quite to my surprise, I woke again in the cold forest.

Birdsong reached my ears unusually loud and clear; the sun that crept through the pine boughs was brighter than I had ever known. A lightness filled my mind, an *awakeness*, glorious beyond consideration of my moldering joints.

Most of the scents were familiar—earth, pine, rock, dew—but another was not. It took me several euphoric moments to recognize it.

Death.

It was not the smell of distant death, decomposition, but the closer, more unsettling smell of death's advancing shadow, of injury past the point of no return.

She watched me silently, large golden eyes unblinking as she lay near the deer she had felled, so quiet that at first I thought her a lingering phantom of the woodmistress-sight. But her stillness was not a willing one; her folded legs could not completely conceal the deep wound in her abdomen, a scent of the wrong kind of blood, of dying.

At the sight of the deer, and the remnants of the fire beside it, the cleaned bones and half-eaten haunch that sat in the ashes, I realized the source of my euphoria. My stomach no longer clamored, turned in on itself. "Thank you," I started to say, the first I'd spoken in weeks—and then the puppies arrived.

I suppose properly they were wolf cubs, but with their large, ungainly paws and lolling tongues, pricked ears and delicate whiskers, I could only think of them as puppies, not unlike the ones my neighbor had raised, guard dogs for Astralar's merchant princes. Before he began the slow process of turning them hard and vicious.

There were four, and three of them were colored like their mother, little copies of her rabbit-brown with white-tipped

paws and tails. The fourth was charcoal and black, wavering from ash to midnight depending on where the light caught him.

“They’re beautiful,” I told her, and her ears swiveled toward me, large and thoughtful. She regarded me again in silence, just long enough for me to wonder whether she was an ordinary animal, and if I had stumbled out of the woodmistress haze only to be eaten by wolves—and then she came into my mind.

She did not use words, though I remembered her speaking clearly in the delirious vision. Instead she filled my mind with action, with knowledge. She showed me how to hunt, in her way—it was mostly theory, being as I lacked fast paws, a powerful jaw, sharp eyes. But she also showed me how to look for plants that could be dug up for yellow roots that were as good as meat, which berries and leaves to avoid, and which trees, when young and tender, could be eaten if their bark was stripped away.

Then she asked of me what any young mother, standing at her own life’s southern wall, would ask: please take care of my children.

And then she lay down her head and died.

* * *

I gave the mother wolf a better burial than I had given the rabbit, in a meadow near where I’d found her, though it was

considerably harder, not just because of her size. I thought of how she had led me through the woodmistress haze, how her pups gamboled around her, pulling at her tail, trying to wake her, and tears streamed down my face, turning to mud when I scrubbed a dirt-dusted forearm over my eyes. I stopped to rest often, having not much strength, and the burying took most of the day. Then I went into the forest to hunt down the roots and plants she had taught me, and the puppies followed like ducklings.

In my life I had birthed and raised five children, and one by one watched them leave Astralar for fairer cities to the north as any wise youths would do. Puppies are significantly easier to mind than babies, especially out in the wild. If they have grass to pull up and a reasonably fresh carcass to destroy, they will quite occupy themselves for hours on end and not stray far from where you sleep. When we came back to the clearing I rebuilt the fire and fed them roasted venison and vegetables, which, rather to my surprise, they seemed to enjoy equally.

When I slept, I dreamt of human children, one for each pup, and it stung how they reminded me of my own. Without thinking, because it is what you do with children, I taught them things over the following weeks: the basics of figuring, how to tend simple wounds, how to write in the Alorean common tongue. And so my nights were thoroughly occupied with this

gentle fantasy, which sheltered me from thinking overmuch about my poorly spent life or strange and dubious future.

* * *

The weeks stretched past counting, and I measured time by the growth of the pups. They had given me purpose, and their mother had given me the ability to survive in the forest. I suspected that they had been behind the destruction of my camp, but I did not know what had caused the mother's mortal injury. This was my only remaining anxiety—not for my own sake, but the pups', who could not yet survive unguarded.

I woke that morning as I had every morning for the past several weeks, surrounded by three balls of fur. The fourth perched between my shoulder blades. He was rapidly growing too big for this to be a good idea, but I hadn't the heart to convince him so.

We'd eaten well last night. My new traps had caught two rabbits, and one of the pups had brought down a third, more by chance than skill, but a kill nonetheless. And so the pups were stuffed to their necks and I woke before they did. I dared not stir—their late mornings were painfully rare—and at length slipped back into sleep.

The pups were not there when I woke again into dreams. Since that first day with the mother wolf, my dream life had taken on new sharpness, not just with fancies of children, but

in all other respects as well. The children's absence did not trouble me; they often went adventuring into dreams of their own.

I was exploring the Other Forest, the place I always went to in the strange steady dream world, when the father wolf found me.

The silver pool I had found, as things often were in the Other, was still as glass, and impossibly clear. I saw his reflection first.

Unlike the mother wolf, and the puppies, he was a wolf here as well as in the waking world. His coat was coal-black and silver-tipped, as the dark fourth pup would surely be when he was grown.

You are not supposed to be here, he said. *You are not*.

"What kind of greeting is that for one who raises your children?" I folded my arms, hands clenching.

The fur lifted on his neck and his mouth parted with surprise as he forayed into my mind and saw that I spoke the truth.

"Where were you?" I accused him. "Where were you when your cubs were born? Where were you when their mother died in the dirt?" A hot anger lit the air around me, a living red glow.

He took a step backward. *They say the gate has been opened*, he said. *They say the dawnsingers have returned*.

“You’re not talking sense.” His strange words took some of the heat out of my anger, replaced it with uneasiness.

I went to watch the Pack, he said, and the cloud of ideas around his last word told me several things about them. There were many, beyond counting, and they were frightening. And—

“They cast you out,” I said, now with the soft celadon light of sadness and unpleasant satisfaction.

I left, he said. *We left. My wife and I. We have no Pack. The Pack is mad. Humans—*

“But you have pups,” I interrupted. “And you have me now.” As if summoned, the children came, emerging from the forest. They gathered around me, and this time they flickered between wolf and human children, as if not quite sure what they should be.

You are not supposed to be here, he said again.

“Your name,” I said. I ruffled the fur of the dark grey pup, whose tail waved gently in answer. “What others call you.”

There are no others.

“What she called you. What your children call you.”

Without warning, he flooded my mind with images. *Birthsight*, he said, halfway through the storm. There was high sunlight, a great stone, black-trunked trees, climbing shelf fungus. And near the end, a feathery, yellow-flowered herb that I knew.

“Rue,” I said. He stood awkwardly near the pup-children, the tip of his tail twitching, as though he didn’t quite know what to do with them and wasn’t especially interested in finding out. The name seemed appropriate.

* * *

When I woke from that dream, the wolf was there and the pups were awake, warily sniffing him. As it had been with the lady-wolf, his mind was further from mine now, pushing me to wonder if the dreams had only been dreams. But the suspicion with which he regarded me was more intelligent than any mere animal could be, and when I said his name, his left ear twitched with recognition, and annoyance.

I reached out to him with my mind, not knowing quite how I was doing it, mimicking what the pups’ mother had done to me—and he danced away, his lip curling to bare a long yellow fang, but not before I had touched his thoughts.

His mind, like the minds of his children, was a sea of sensation, a titanic wave of scent and sound. Much diminished but present was sight—and I understood suddenly the disconnect between the waking and dreaming wolf-selves. He and the puppies were far too aware of the physical world while they were awake; in sleep, they could speak, figure, strategize—in sleep, deadened from sense, they were like me.

Front-mind, now-mind. That is the wolf. And it explained, perhaps, part of why I remembered so little from my days now. In my close contact with all of them I was becoming just a little less human, a little more like these wolves, who sensed by day and thought by night.

I went out to begin the day's hunting, and the puppies followed me, as they did every morning. The father lingered, his tail twitching, but at length he followed also, realizing—whether he liked it or not, I thought—that his destiny now lie with his children, and with me.

* * *

That night we ate well again, better than we ever had, with a young doe the father wolf brought down. It was partly my kill; I startled it, and its own ill luck made it bound practically into the jaws of the waiting wolf. And so it was that we all went to our dreams that night well-sated.

The Other Forest was dark. It had its own day and night, its own seasons, that came and went in no pattern I could identify, with no connection to the waking world.

Defying the dark, the children filled the wood with the sounds of their play. They were still intimidated by the presence of their father, but one at a time—eldest to youngest—they flickered into their human child selves and played, jostling with a loop and stick game I had taught them. Here in the

Other one's focused thoughts could summon simple objects, and the little female, the youngest, was particularly adept at this.

The father wolf watched them in silence for nearly an hour. When he spoke at last, I jumped. *Thank you for taking care of my family.* He never seemed to question that I might have been lying. For all I knew, lying might be impossible here, or for the wolves altogether.

"They are a joy. But there is a danger to them in these woods," I said. "Whatever killed their mother."

To his credit, when I showed him my memory of the mother wolf's injury, he drew back with a keen of sorrow. It was good to know that he had loved her. That he could.

The keen had been sorrow, sharp and pure like winter rain, but beneath it there was fear, and recognition.

"You have seen this kind of injury before."

He is the king of this forest, he said, uneasy at acknowledging his own inferiority, but matter-of-fact. *She should not have stood against him.*

"Maybe he threatened your children." The truth was neither of us knew, but I preferred to call her injury heroic, especially as it made Rue uncomfortable.

In spring, his antlers will have blood. He will be weak.

"Tomorrow, then," I said.

* * *

The notion of hunting the deer-king was not one I relished, but I liked much less the thought of sharing the forest with him, ever-fearful of his attack. We discussed the hunt throughout that night, and if anxiety pulled my eyelids open long before dawn, purpose filled my veins with warmth and energy.

I spent the morning lashing my hunting knife to an old ash branch I'd harvested for firewood and then saved, noting its unusual straightness. A rude thing, to be sure, but it stood me a greater chance of usefulness than trying to stab a creature twice my height with a blade the size of my palm.

We set out with morning still pale in the sky, heaping the puppies with distractions to keep them from following us. I emptied my recreated larder and taught them a new game—but very likely, the father-wolf's stern threat of doom should they follow was what kept them in the camp.

Rue threaded through the forest on soft, silent paws, and I followed as quietly as I could. We came first to the rose meadow, then bore northwest through the broadest side of the wood, places where I had never gone. Perhaps I had instinctively avoided the deeper territory of the deer-king, or perhaps I unconsciously attempted to remain close to Astralar, which the deer had learned to avoid.

He would attack with his hooves, Rue said, which was only very slightly less dangerous than if he should come after us with full bone antlers. And he would attack us alone, which was a small blessing, but a blessing nonetheless.

But we could not go after him alone. If we pursued only the buck, he would flee, compelled by instinct. We would have to threaten one of the does. And not just any doe—his queen.

At first the evidence of their domain was subtle: nibbled leaves, short-cropped grass, saplings stripped of their bark. Then less subtle—trails through the underbrush, piles of dung like small black berries, delicate half-moon tracks in the mud.

The first doe I saw was two wolf-lengths away from us, surprisingly close, her head bent to the soft spring grass. She was so silent I knew we must have passed one or two others without realizing. My heart picked up speed, and when my foot came down on a rock it turned my ankle. I managed to stop the yelp that wanted to fly from my throat, but the thud of my misstep reached the doe's twitching ears. Her glistening black nose flared, and then she turned, leaping through the brush.

The closer we drew, the more there were, their black eyes shining softly through the leaves, beautiful faces flat and haunting. They watched, only, despite the predator in their midst, as if they knew their numbers gave them the upper hand. If they all turned on us, we would surely die—a thought

that pulsed panic through my veins as I imagined the puppies left alone to starve.

I hadn't known how we would recognize the queen doe, but in the end it was obvious. She held court in a glade with the finest grass, selecting daintily which she should eat. She was also the single most beautiful creature I had ever seen in the waking world, tall and slim, each turn of bone and pelt a carefully considered perfection.

Rue felt no such admiration. He growled once, well back in his throat—ears turned from all directions toward us—and he leapt for her elegant throat.

The deer-queen screamed high and clear, like the rabbit had done but ten times as loud. She did not move, and Rue hurtled toward her—I cried out, sure he would find his target, suddenly heartbroken at the idea of destroying so beautiful a creature.

A shadow passed immediately over my head, massive, and struck Rue, knocking him away from the doe.

The deer-king screamed, a strange high-pitched cry, but for all its reedy thinness there was nothing of weakness in it. He stomped, tossing his head—brandishing antlers that, as Rue had predicted, were small still and covered with velvet.

The breath stopped in my throat as I marveled at his size, his majestic build. As we stood there, taken aback, the more

awe-inspiring he seemed to grow. Surely this was a creature built by the goddesses themselves. Who were we to think we could bring him down?

He stomped again, with both front hooves this time, daring us to charge. Rue snarled, a sound of nightmares and bloodlust, and advanced, snapping his jaws.

The doe fled, a flash of dove grey against the green, and the deer-king loomed large before us. Incredibly, as he reared, the wave of emotion that radiated from him matched Rue's—a terrible hunger, a thirst to destroy. I took in the contour of his muscles, the size of his hooves, and my grip on the spear slackened in fear.

Rue's ears dropped, only for a second, but I knew he felt it too. Then he rallied, snarling again, and his thoughts were so clear that they reached me without either of us intending it. Without words, he was imagining his mate being brought down by this buck, by his slashing hooves. The memory of it—my memory, reflected through the wolf-mind—filled him with rage.

The deer-king lowed again, deeper this time, and spun, lashing out with his hind hooves. And with his attack came a wave of fury that not only equaled but exceeded our own.

Rue gave a cry, and, without so much as being touched by the buck's flying hooves, fell to the ground. He moaned and

then whined, high, sharp, like one of the puppies when injured. The buck did not lunge, as I expected him to, but reared again and stomped, posturing. As he did, Rue's pain—his own rage, amplified, made crippling—doubled back over us.

The spear fell from my hand and I clutched at myself, broken down by despair. The buck's tempest-rage was like a storm around us. My despair doubled, amplified by the beast's contempt.

I fell upon the spear, and as I hit the ground, the impact struck twice—first my body, and then a second shock, echoing from the buck. And I realized his strange animal magic.

“He's mirroring us!” I shouted, and even as I did so the wave of my anger bounced back at me, pounding in my throat, obliterating thought.

And Rue continued to writhe, uncomprehending. His wolf-mind, consumed with the sensations around him—his own, and those that emanated from the king-buck—could not make sense of my words.

Now the buck was bearing down on him, razor hooves flashing high, preparing a stomp that would end Rue's life. Fear sizzled through me—first my own, then again—and I fought to force my unwilling hands around the haft of the spear.

I rolled, and as I pushed myself to a kneel I wrapped all the will I yet possessed around my quivering, faltering mind. I

seized myself, dug deep for the core that had carried me through, pitiful though my life had been. I had been born unwanted, had grown an orphan, had married, had been abandoned. I had survived. My children had survived. And I seized now on that survivor's gut, and I willed strength at the monster. I willed vengeance. I willed protection.

Rue rolled and leapt to his feet, jaws wide. His anger flared back, roaring up like a flame that has found new fuel, and I fought again to keep my will dominant over his in the buck's mind. I drowned Rue's ferocity with my surety.

Wolf jaws snapped around the buck's tender neck, dragged him down—and as his hooves touched the ground I lunged, driving the spear between his ribs, aiming for his heart. He bellowed, a choking sound as Rue's jaws clenched harder, and then he fell, yanking the spear-shaft from my hands.

I scrambled out of the way, and Rue's jaws closed completely, tearing flesh with a sickening sound. The deer-king's blood flowed around us, still hot, and I fought to keep down the gorge that bubbled up my throat.

As I lay on the ground, gasping, wracked with the aftermath of near-death, Rue paced around the clearing, snarling, snapping, barking at the remainder of the herd. They'd gathered around us, and cried out as the deer-king fell—but now they dispersed, turning, white tails high as they fled.

When they were all gone, and long minutes had passed while I lay there thanking the goddesses for my survival against all seeming reason, Rue's growls subsided, and he panted, sitting back on his haunches. Later, we would drag the buck's carcass to the puppies, and feed—but for now there was only life, only gratitude.

Rue's dark eyes turned toward me, the hunt faded from them. *Change*, he said, and I started, not realizing he could speak at all in the waking world. *Change coming. You. The Pack.* There was exhilaration in his bearing, a kind of welcome he had not given me before this moment.

Some part of me that remained human mourned that it came at the cost of such an animal as the deer-king, even as I knew he'd been a danger, even an inevitable destroyer, of our small family. There would be another deer-king—the herd was hardly thinned—but that day was far away.

I thought of the puppies, and I sent my thoughts to Rue, who chuffed with agreement. Perhaps I would see his Pack one day. But for now, there were children to raise and teach. There was a life to live.

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THE MORAL EDUCATION OF A MAD BASTARD

by Joe L. Murr

I was twelve when I, like my father before me, was sentenced to transportation to Sutterland. My crime was the theft of a leg of lamb. I stole to feed myself and, if Governor Bidwell was to be believed, because I could not do otherwise.

I was greatly impressed by the governor's demonstration of how a man's character can be read from the structure of his skull. He examined all us new arrivals of the Thirty-fourth Fleet at Botany Bay, not out of concern for our health after our six-month passage but to pursue his amateur studies in the new science of criminal anthropology.

“Observe the thick lips and distorted nose, clear indications of a brutal nature,” he said, prodding my face with perfumed fingers. “The pronounced slope of the boy's forehead shows negative benevolence, and you'll note the convexity of the area above the ears, signs of an overly developed organ of destructiveness.”

His own features were leonine. He looked like there should be a statue somewhere in his honor.

“The records state,” his assistant said, “that his father was transported three years ago. He comes of criminal stock.”

“My pa is no criminal, sir,” I said, voice quivering.

“That is for the law to decide.” The governor kept poking my head. “Where are you from, boy?”

“Liddonfield, sir.”

“An industrial town, is it not?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And I shall venture to guess that you lived in the immediate proximity of a factory, yes?”

“Just down the street from the McIver Engine Works, that’s where my pa worked before—”

“Ah, I see, an engine works,” he said, glancing back at his assistant. “The poor child never had a chance.”

“Sir?” I said.

He turned back to me and said, “It’s all here, under your scalp. These protrusions and concavities are the map of your character. I’ve noted a clear statistical tendency towards greater abnormality in those raised in the proximity of industrial facilities. Or, to put it in terms you’ll understand, factories breed mad bastards.”

“It’s not my fault I am what I am, then, is it, sir?”

“Your nature is inborn.”

It was a terrifying thought.

“Sir,” I whispered, and God help me if I wasn’t earnest, “is there nothing that can be done? To make me become like you are, sir.”

He leaned back, his gaze searing me to the core. “You impudent pup, you can’t rise above your station. The only cure for your criminal tendencies is piety and hard labor.”

He dismissed me with a cuff on the ear.

* * *

We convicts were dispatched to labor camps across this great continent. I ended up at Harlot’s Bush, an open-pit mine in the foothills at the edge of the McCallum Desert.

Hundreds of us, covered in crimson dust like so many devils, extracted redrock from the earth with pick and shovel. Veins of it pulsed with strange energy. This was the stuff that powered industry back in the mother country.

It was dangerous work, make no mistake. None of us were unaffected by exposure to redrock. The side effects were unpredictable. Some poor souls succumbed to the red horrors—the power of the damned stuff drove them insane. Others saw their bodies rebel against them, becoming monstrous, and they were taken out at night and put out of their misery.

Only a lucky few benefited, I among them. One night I awoke and thought it must be dawn. I saw the world as through a tinted glass, dimmer than in the day yet bright enough.

Everything had a flat luminosity. I looked out, saw only a sliver of moon, and knew it should be pitch dark—yet I could see clearly. The effect persisted momentarily when I closed my eyes. Over the weeks, my blindsight improved and I amused myself by watching my fingers through my closed eyelids. I kept my new talent to myself.

As we toiled, we sang of the day when we would be handed our Freedom Papers. Ten years and I would be released—too late, much too late, I'd be broken by then. But escape seemed futile. Every week, the screws read out the names of convicts who had tried and failed. The ones who didn't die in the outback were captured and either flogged or hanged.

Two years into my servitude, the screws lined us up in orderly rows to hear the latest list of shame. The warden gave his customary speech about the wages of sin. I paid little attention until he said my father's name. He had escaped six months earlier from Sweatfoot in the northeastern territories. And now he was dead.

Better dead than a slave, he must've thought. My father had always been a proud man. That's why he was sent here. One day the owner of the McIver Engine Works came to inspect the premises and my pa stepped up to him and complained about the unsafe working conditions. That very month there had been two fatalities and nine men wounded.

The boss told him to step aside, but pa would not have any of it. They shoved him to the floor. He picked himself up and with a piece of pipe gave his boss a lesson in work safety.

At the trial, when he was asked if he was sorry for what he had done, he said he wasn't.

* * *

I resolved I would be worthy of being called my father's son.

I slipped under the barbwire fence, equipped only with a flask of water, matches, and several lumps of redrock. There was no moon but the pitch darkness didn't slow me down. I ventured into the outback, nerves raw with terror and exhilaration.

At dawn, I headed to higher ground through stands of trees pungent with eucalyptus. From the edge of a bluff, I saw Harlot's Bush some six miles behind me, nestled in the curve of the foothills that rose to the Eastern Range. I felt like the master of all I surveyed.

When the sun was high overhead, I heard my pursuers. Birds took flight, cawing in alarm, as the screws rode through the brush, slowed by the thick trees. Since I had little knowledge of bushcraft, the tracks I left must've been as easy to read as a broadsheet.

I didn't have much time. My plan was desperate—I set fire to the undergrowth. Fueled by the redrock, the flames spread with alarming speed and soon engulfed the dry trees.

I heard men shouting, “Bushfire! Turn back!”

I hoped I could outrun it. Fire leapt from branch to branch, always slightly ahead of me. Burning leaves spun in the acrid air. Behind me I heard the roar of an inferno.

For miles I ran. My lungs were needled with quicksilver pain and the taste of smoke and blood was in my mouth. I began to see through a red filter, but I kept up my pace until at last I came to the edge of the forest.

A great plateau stretched out before me, nothing but rocks and sand where fire could not take hold, and I have never been so happy to see such a desolate place.

* * *

The next morning, in a shady copse where I'd collapsed after trudging across the plateau, I woke to the sight of a young man in a safari suit staring down at me with a supercilious sneer. He was a gentleman of means, from the looks of him. A lady in a riding outfit and a pith helmet leaned against a tree, toying with a shiny brass instrument.

“What say we play blindman's run?” he said.

“Let's,” she said. “I wager ten pounds he won't last more than half a minute.”

“I accept. He seems an agile little monkey.” The gentleman kicked me in the belly. “It’s time to rise.”

I curled up around the pain. “Please, sir.”

He hauled me up and tied my hands behind my back and put a burlap sack on my head.

“Now we shall have some sport,” he said. “On my command, run through the trees as fast as you can. If you slow down or stop, you’ll find I’m a crack shot. Now—*run!*”

I charged off, blind as the proverbial. Low branches raked my head. At any moment I could’ve tripped on a root or run straight into a tree.

I let my instincts take over. The space around me revealed itself to me. I could visualize the forest, each root and fallen tree, all the colors strange and smeared. Weaving through the trunks at full tilt, I believed that I might escape after all. I heard muted cries and pistol shots, and my blindsight revealed the trajectories of the bullets.

My hot breath washed over my face. I could’ve kept running forever but the burlap around my head didn’t let in enough air. Still I kept running until I was out of breath and collapsed gasping onto the ground.

Rough fingers untied the bag.

“Damn your eyes, boy, you led us on a merry chase—how did you do that?”

I whispered, “Redrock.”

They exchanged glances. The woman placed her hands behind her back. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

With my eyes closed, I could see them clearly. “Four.”

She tried that a few more times and I got it right every time.

“It’s uncanny,” he said.

She examined me from head to toe. “He would pass for a proper little gypsy.”

“You’re thinking what I’m thinking, then?” he said.

“It would be *most* amusing.”

“Good, it’s decided then. He’ll be a sensation, I’m sure.” He tapped my cheeks. “Won’t you, little gypsy?”

I nodded—whatever they had in mind would be better than being forced to return to Harlot’s Bush. He hauled me to my feet and untied the rope around my wrists.

“How many years do you still owe His Majesty’s Government?” he said. “Don’t lie, lad. I’ll check.”

“Eight.”

“*Sir.*”

“Eight, sir.”

“Then you’ll serve out the rest of your sentence with us.”

I glared at them with suspicion. “And then you’ll let me go?”

“You have my word.”

“What was your name?” the lady asked.

“Ma’am, my name’s Jack Cunningham.”

“Was, lad. Jack is dead now. Eaten by a beast, perhaps.”

She ruffled my hair. “Let’s think of a more colorful name for you, eh?”

* * *

Stiff in a starched tuxedo, I stepped through velvet curtains into a drawing room. Some thirty men and women in eveningwear watched me with expressions of mild interest. I bowed to them and said, in an outrageously thick accent, “Good evening. I am Radu Malik. Please may I have volunteer?”

“I shall outfox the pikey, just you wait and see,” someone whispered—a tall young twit, his thin cheeks ruddy from drink. He made a show of patting his pockets and said to one and all, “I still have my pocketbook and watch on my person. Not for long, I venture.”

There was muted laughter.

“Please come to stage, sir.”

“Right ho. Well, then, show us your gypsy wiles.”

I handed him a blindfold. “Please tie around my head.”

“Nonsense. That’s the oldest trick in the book.” From his pocket, the twit produced two handkerchiefs, which he then folded into squares. “In the Seventh Regiment, when

blindfolding a man we first place pads on his eyes to ensure the sneaky blighter can't sneak a peek, what."

"Very well, sir." I refrained from quipping that I hoped his handkerchiefs weren't used.

Once he had tied the blindfold, I said, "Now we start with simple trick. Please take this pack of cards, choose a card, and hold it up."

"Oh I shall, once you're facing the other way," he said, and turned me around.

I saw him clearly behind me. He drew a card and I said, "Ten, sir. The ten of hearts."

This produced applause. I smiled, knowing I had them now.

"Once more, sir."

Again I answered with the correct card. He grunted and flexed his fingers restlessly, then drew two cards.

"Would sir please decide which he would prefer, the queen or the jack," I said, to much laughter, and the twit wheeled on his heels and returned grumbling to his seat.

At the back of the room, my new masters looked on with amusement at my first performance. They were Terrence and Jane Groves, aristocrats of leisure and amateur bounty hunters.

"We try harder tricks now, ladies and gentlemen."

The hardest trick of all would have been to escape. Trying to run away from them would have ended badly for me. Without money and identification, I could never leave Sutterland—and in this blasted country, a fugitive was never safe.

In the months that followed, I performed for army officers, diplomats and wealthy merchants in all the civilized outposts of this godforsaken land, and never broke character in public.

When I was not Radu Malik, I did menial chores for Anthony, the Groves' manservant. He taught me to read—and from him, I learned about the speech and ways of gentlemen, knowledge that I knew would serve me well when I was a free man.

* * *

After I turned fifteen, things changed.

One evening, my masters summoned me to the smoking room. Terrence said, "Little gypsy, you're a useful wee beastie."

Jane puffed on a most unladylike cigar, leaned back in her leather chair, and said, "We believe we might have further uses for you."

"An adventure, if you like," Terrence said. "Are you a horseman?"

"I've ridden a nag, sir."

“Good. Anthony will instruct you further. Next month, you’ll join us on the hunt.”

“Sir?”

“I think you’ll enjoy it. Now run along, there’s a good lad.”

* * *

We set out at dawn from Agatha’s Misfortune, a labor camp in the southern coastal forests. Red light filtered through the trees as Anthony and I rode at a respectful distance behind Terrence and Jane. They hardly glanced at the spoor—two days ago, in their pursuit of the escaped convict, the screws had left a trail so clear that even a novice like me could follow it.

We headed deeper into the woods until we came to a wide brown river. The water squirmed with vicious snakelike creatures as thick as a man and twice as long. This is where the screws had turned back.

“Chances are that our escapee has long since been digested and his bones spat out,” Jane said. She dismounted and examined the ground through a brass instrument. “Or perhaps not!”

She led us northward and away from the river until the light faded.

Jane called me to the front and said, “What do you see?”

“Shadows, ma’am.”

“Can you detect his trail?”

I closed my eyes. At first, I saw nothing but the forest. Then I picked up on evidence—a broken twig here, the faintest impression of a footprint there.

I nodded.

“Right then,” she said, “we shall have our supper and a nap.”

It was full dark when we resumed the hunt. With me at the lead, we made slow but steady progress. My masters and Anthony followed behind with the horses, illuminating their way with hooded redrock lamps. All through the night I tracked the convict, predatory excitement mounting, a steady thrum of bloodlust. I could understand why my masters were as addicted to the hunt as an opium fiend to his pipe. God help me, if I had come upon the poor soul in that darkness I would’ve tried to kill him myself.

Dawn flooded the forest with golden light. Jane picked up on the spoor and led us on.

“Good little gypsy,” she said. “We’ve gained on him.”

At around noon, we emerged from the forest onto grassland. Further off, a lake shimmered and on its rocky shore sat a lone human figure. We closed the distance at a furious gallop.

The escapee took to his heels, but it would’ve been better for him to stay where he was. A predator that sees fleeing prey

is consumed by a single thought—to kill. The man's back was an irresistible target for Terrence's polo mallet. The escapee sprawled, and in moments my masters had dismounted and were on him, kicking in his head and ribs. They laughed as they hauled him up and Jane slipped a noose around his waist and tied the other end to Terrence's saddle and I too grinned with delight. Terrence mounted and spurred his horse on, the man screaming as the rocky ground tore him.

Anthony met my eyes for the briefest moment, moved by a rare flicker of emotion, then rode to the edge of the lake. There he watched the water until our masters had finished with their fun.

It took the escapee an hour to die.

* * *

On the way back, we set up camp for the night.

During my watch, I listened to my masters snore and thought about how they had killed the convict, all pretence of civilized behavior gone.

We had hung the man's body by the feet from a tree to keep it safe from carrion beasts. I had not seen his face clearly before my masters turned him into something unrecognizable, less than human. It disturbed me now that I had helped kill him, but I couldn't even say what he looked like in life.

I walked to the edge of the firelight where the body was suspended. His face was nothing but meat and bone, but the shape of his skull revealed itself to my blindsight. I recalled my encounter with Governor Bidwell, the amateur criminal anthropologist. If he had been there, he would certainly have said that these concavities and bumps were a map of a defective nature.

On impulse, I attuned my eyes to my masters' tent—I had never before dared to examine them, under the skin. Their skulls were finely sculpted, model specimens of superior humanity. We could not have been more unlike. Yet I saw myself in them and them in me, for now I understood that if factories breed mad bastards, so does privilege.

Terrence coughed once, then crawled out of the tent.

“Something the matter, little gypsy?”

“No, sir.”

“I felt something pass over me. A chill of sorts.” He came over to the fire in his long johns and sat down, then took a sip from a silver flask and passed it to me. I savored the whisky, and for a long time neither of us spoke.

He looked into the fire, his eyes like oil. “What did you think of the hunt?”

“Most exciting, sir.”

“That it was. But there’s a curious emptiness that follows. A sense of futility.” He drank long and deep. “I wonder, was that how you felt when we captured you?”

“Sir ...”

“You may speak freely.”

“Yes, sir. I longed for freedom—but I was relieved to hear that I wouldn’t be sent back to that hellhole, sir.”

He gestured toward the dead escapee. “It’s an act of mercy to bring them back dead. Those places aren’t fit for beasts.” As if reconsidering his words, he shook his head. “Then again, many of these buggers are worse than animals.”

“But not all, sir.”

“No, not all. When your time with us is over, you’ll be able to start afresh, with a new identity. Not many men have that opportunity.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Make the most of it, lad.” He had one last drink and went back to sleep.

With the taste of fine whisky still on my tongue, I remembered Governor Bidwell’s words to me—*“You impudent pup, you can’t rise above your station.”*

I’d prove him wrong.

* * *

At the end of the year, I walked through an exhibition of the latest mechanical innovations of the Empire—artificial dancers and musicians, their clockwork gears exposed, and a machine that snorted steam to form the image of a woman in the air. None of them were of much interest to me—toys for the rich and idle.

Next to the machines was a zoo intended to present the exotic fauna of Sutterland to visiting dignitaries. Here was a blackfellow in a cage, his skin painted with the secret symbols of his people. He stared out in mute stoicism at the tribe that had overrun his country.

How strange we must have looked to him. Beyond the zoo were festive tents and our betters in finery. Gentlemen sipped drinks and discussed sports. Ladies shielded themselves from the sun, pale skins gray under the shade of their parasols. Young men my age comported themselves with cocksure gravitas, so unlike the rough and tumble youths I'd known back home. Clothing makes the man, it's said, but even if I'd looked the part, it wouldn't have been easy for me to blend in. All these people knew each other. Their bloodlines and business interests had been intertwined for centuries. I would immediately be recognized as a stranger in their midst.

This was the Governor's Grand Annual Gala, a weekend event at his estate attended by all persons of note in Sutterland. I was not here to mingle with them but to entertain them.

I stepped onto a stage, took out my blindfold, showed it to the waiting audience, and in my thickest accent said, "Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I am Radu Malik. Please may I have volunteer?"

The crowd parted for Governor Bidwell himself.

"They say your magic is not merely an illusion," he said, joining me on stage. He took the blindfold and ran his fingers over the cloth, looking for evidence of trickery.

"Sir, I have gift to see things other men cannot."

He cocked an eyebrow. As he looked at me, I wondered if he remembered me—but of course he didn't. He must've examined thousands of convicts over the years. "I would like to witness it up close. Shall we dispense with the card tricks and all that, and proceed to the showstopper."

"As you wish, sir."

He tied the cloth around my head.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I said, "I shall need volunteer."

A young man joined us on stage with a hearty what-ho. The governor paced around us, watching intently. I shan't deny that he made me nervous.

“We start with one of most difficult tricks in world!” I proclaimed, spreading my arms.

The young lad gave a wink to his friends.

“I, the mystic Radu Malik, shall reveal facts about you known only to yourself and closest associates! Sir, you may choose to leave stage if you would not be comfortable bringing such secrets to light. I assure you I shall reveal nothing scandalous—there are ladies present.”

“Do your worst,” he said, grinning.

I waved my hands in the air in arcane patterns. “In your pocket, you have book of matches and cigarette case, do you not?”

He nodded. “I do indeed.”

“Case is monogrammed A.R. Cigarettes are stamped with crest—I recognize it—Raleigh family crest.”

“That’s correct! Astonishing.”

“Please show items to audience, sir.”

He did so and then I went deeper. I saw him as he was. I saw beyond the threads that covered him and under the skin and flesh. I saw fractured bone and semen stains and pathological evidence.

“You broke your leg, sir? I see healed fracture in your left tibia.”

He gaped at me. “A riding accident.”

I could always count on them to fill in a detail or two, making my revelations seem that much more astonishing.

“And year ago—it is hard to tell exact—you visited Western Colonies and contracted malaria.” I could see the malarial parasites in his bloodstream.

“How could you know that?”

“I am Radu Malik.”

He looked at me with an expression I had seen many times by now—utter and total belief. Sometimes at this point they would start asking me questions about the future, as if I were some sort of oracle.

Before he could speak, I said, “Thank you, sir.”

Applause accompanied him off the stage.

Governor Bidwell said, “Come to my study after the show. I should like to speak with you. You may now proceed.”

As he left, all I could think of was that it never bodes well when a politician takes an interest in you. The thought filled me with dread, but the show had to go on.

“Ladies and gentlemen, now we see what is on the cards!” I said, and took out my pack.

* * *

“Radu Malik,” Governor Bidwell said. While I stood at attention, he leaned back behind his desk, rolling a lit cigar in

his fingers. "You're in the employ of the Groves. Wherever did they find you?"

I decided to brazen it out. "I am orphan. One day I took ship to Sutterland to search for my fortune. Alas, I had misfortune, but the Groves, they took me under their wing."

"You're barely old enough to shave. How young you must have been then! Well, it's said that cunning and tenacity are the most admirable qualities of your race." He nodded to himself, then got to the point. "It's a most unusual gift you have."

"Yes, sir."

"You maintain that these are no conjuror's tricks? You must tell me the truth."

I had a feeling that it would be prudent to have him think I was an illusionist. "Sir, on stage, of course I must stay in role, but in confidence I can tell they are tricks."

"I've never seen a magician do what you did. Tell me how you do it."

"Trade secrets, sir."

"No, I believe you really do have a rare talent. Tell me what I have in this box on my desk."

"Sir ..."

"Come on then." He stood up, a cane in hand. Before I'd realized what he was about to do, he gave me a whack on the shoulder, then struck my shin with full force.

I tried not to cry out.

“I’ll beat you within an inch of your life if you don’t.” He emphasized the threat by striking my ribs.

“Sir, is just tricks.”

“Hogwash.”

The next blow felled me. I knew that he’d keep going until either I was a bloody mess or I’d told him what he wanted to hear. I’d endured worse.

He loomed over me and prodded me with the tip of the cane. In a matter-of-fact tone, he said, “I think you are under the misconception that your masters can protect you. They can’t.”

He struck me again and I bit back my pain.

“Cooperate, or it’s off to the labor camps with you.”

No—anything but that. I could’ve taken a beating, but this threat broke my resolve. “There’s a syringe and three vials. I do not recognize the liquid but I suspect it is a narcotic.” I felt my accent slip away and overcorrected. “And also several prophylactics.”

“That wasn’t so hard, was it?” He gave me a broad grin and helped me up. Now that he had gotten what he wanted, his manner was almost avuncular. “How do you do it, lad?”

“I not know. Is gift I have since I was child.”

“I am an amateur scientist. My interest is in the field of criminal anthropology and phrenology. I would very much like to study you.”

He put his perfumed hands on my head. I forced myself to stand still and subject myself to his loathsome touch. All I could think of was how good it would feel to take that cane from him and beat the living daylights out of him. My life would then be measured in hours at most—but it would almost be worth it.

“Your lips are prominent, a sign of sensuality, which does in some cases reflect extrasensory abilities. Likewise, your flared nostrils and large eyes. It’s as if your senses are unusually open to stimuli. Your forehead is sloped, indicating primitivism. These characteristics are the key to the protrusions of your skull. Here, I note several concavities that denote experience, and the pronounced convexity above your ears shows highly developed preternatural tendencies. It’s most fascinating and proof that the gypsies are closer to the spiritual world. Also, there are indications of criminal tendencies, as is typical of your race, but you’ve been a good boy, haven’t you, Radu?”

To think that I had once believed his nonsense. I wanted to laugh in his face and tell him how utterly different this reading was from his first. “Yes, sir.”

He patted my head. “We’ll be sure to keep you on the straight and narrow. All right then, off you go.”

“Sir.” I bowed and once I was out in the corridor I had to cover my mouth to stifle my anger.

I had to be by myself for a while. My masters trusted me enough to leave me unsupervised, so I left the palace grounds and vented my rage in the countryside. Once I was free, I would never again tolerate this sort of treatment.

When I returned to the servants’ quarters, I found Anthony waiting for me.

“You’ll be joining the governor’s staff,” he said. “Tomorrow morning, I’m to take you to the garrison in town.”

I bit back a profanity. Bidwell, that bastard.

“I’m sorry, we were given no choice in the matter. You are now officially Radu Malik, a gypsy in the service of His Majesty’s Government. That skill of yours would be a formidable secret weapon for an ambitious politician.”

“He’ll never give me my freedom.”

“No, you’ll be his creature for as long as he finds you useful.” He placed his hand on my shoulder and whispered, lest anyone overhear us, “The master and mistress were not pleased with this turn of events.”

He handed me an envelope containing forty pounds, more than my father had earned in a year, and false identification

papers made out to an Alan Walderwick. With this, I could escape Sutterland.

Mistrust was my immediate reaction. “Why would they do this?”

“In truth? They hate it when their toys are taken away from them. In any case, they gave you their word that you would go free. If you’re caught, they’ll deny helping you.”

“Thank them for me, Anthony.”

We shook hands.

“Good luck, lad—and make something of yourself.”

* * *

With my eyes closed, I rode through the brilliant darkness, nerves alive. In the morning, the governor’s men would be on my trail, but I had learned enough from my former masters to make it hard for them. All I could hope was that the Groves would keep their word and not come after me—they, I could not elude.

I made my way to the Botany Bay railway station and hid in the cargo carriage of a northbound train. Once the train was on the move, I rummaged through travel trunks and found new clothes, immaculately tailored and an almost perfect fit. No doubt they belonged to a young gentleman traveling in first class. Resolving that one day I would have all that he had, I filled a valise with his garments.

When the train stopped at the coastal town of Fort Hood, I disembarked and headed to the harbor. I looked and sounded like a toff, and didn't expect to be challenged. Under my breath, I repeated my new name, drilling it into my memory. Alan. Alan Walderwick.

A chain gang passed by me, overseen by mounted soldiers. The stink of redrock filled my nostrils. I glanced at the poor devils, all these broken men. Perhaps Governor Bidwell had examined all their skulls on their arrival to this godforsaken place and concluded that this was the best they were capable of—as he had done with me. I wanted to reach out to them and tell them that this was not their destiny, that they too could escape, but none met my eyes, cowed by the presence of a gentleman and all that he represented.

Massive clouds of steam rolled over the harbor. I found a ticket office and in a matter of minutes had procured a cabin class ticket to the East Colonies. Twenty-five pounds it cost me, but for the sake of appearances I could not afford to travel in steerage.

Heart pounding, I walked up the gangway and hid in my cabin, afraid that at any moment bounty hunters might break in the door and drag me away. Sweaty and shaking, I must've looked like a malarial patient.

At last the ship unmoored. I ran out onto the aft deck and watched the coast until it was but a line on the horizon.

“Rot in hell, Governor,” I whispered, and turned away from Sutterland, hoping never to see the place again.

In the afternoon, I went to the bar for a drink. There I found gentlemen playing cards for money, as I’d hoped I would. It was time to put my skills to work, start earning my living as a gentleman among gentlemen. I approached them and said, “May I join?”

“Please do,” they said.

“Thank you. I feel lucky today.”

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Joe L. Murr has lived on every continent except Antarctica. He currently divides his time between Finland and the Netherlands. His fiction has been published or is forthcoming in ChiZine, Dark Recesses, Dark Pages Volume 1, Phantom Drift: New Fabulism, and other publications.

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COVER ART

“Fly High,” by Tina Marie Lane



Tina Marie Lane is a Environment Designer and 3D Artist with eleven years of professional experience in designing architecture and retail environments. Her freelance work delves into these areas as well as fantasy environments for games and literature. Recently her work has appeared in 3D Artist Magazine and can also be found at her website www.toyrocket3d.com. She fashions her worlds, both real and imagined, from Dallas, Texas.

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