

NEW BIZARRO AUTHOR SERIES

HER FINGERS

Tamara Romero



THE NEW BIZARRO AUTHOR SERIES

PRESENTS

Her Fingers

TAMARA ROMERO

Eraserhead Press
Portland, OR

THE NEW BIZARRO AUTHOR SERIES
An Imprint of Eraserhead Press



ERASERHEAD PRESS

205 NE BRYANT

PORTLAND, OR 97211

WWW.ERASERHEADPRESS.COM

ISBN: 1-62105-066-1

Copyright © 2012 by Tamara Romero

Cover art copyright © 2012 by Alfonso Casas

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written consent of the publisher, except where permitted by law.

Printed in the USA.

Editor's Note

When Tamara pitched this book, I was instantly interested. I like female writers. It's probably from growing up reading fabulous stories from authors like Anne McCaffrey, Ursula K. LeGuin, Pamela Sargent, Mary Shelley, and Madeleine L'Engle, as well as being around the excellent female writers that I know today. I like the way they tell things. Beyond that, Tamara's book is golden. When I read it, I was reminded of favorites from my childhood heroes above.

Her Fingers isn't a fairy tale. But it's like one. It's magical, mystical, and inter-dimensional. I love the telling of this story—precise words that immediately transported me into its weird, fragile, beautiful world. Tamara first wrote this book in Spanish and then translated it for us. I'm sure this has something to do with its lyrical qualities, but I think the author might just have some serious magick. See for yourself.

I'm happy to present Tamara Romero's book as part of the New Bizarro Author Series. The NBAS strives to bring new voices in bizarro fiction to our readers. It serves as an opportunity to introduce you to new writers, and introduce them into the world of being an author. Eraserhead Press is happy to bring new, weird voices to you in the hopes that these authors will prove themselves to be strong members of the bizarro community and continue to entertain you for years to come. The publishing of this book marks the beginning of a one year proving period. Please help support our NBAS writers in their endeavors by telling your friends about their cool new books. The book you hold is only one of several hundred that must be sold in order for this author to continue on her path. We hope you help her along as best as you can. Thank you.

~~Kevin Shamel

Author's Note

My sincere gratitude to: Sveinung Mikkelsen for his essential help with the manuscript, Encarna Castillo for her encouraging words over drinks, Gemma Moliner for feeding my dinosaurs, Alfonso Casas for drawing Misadora, Kevin Shamel for the enthusiastic emails and attention, and all at Eraserhead Press for trusting this little stoned witches story.

1. She Lay Among the Reeds

VOLATILE

The black box lay in the hole. I grabbed a handful of dirt and let it slip to the bottom, onto the black and shiny wooden lid. I felt the sand flow through my fingers, like an ocean current combing a coral reef.

The sand had now completely covered the box, and the hole started shrinking until I was almost convinced that it had never existed before. I stood up and shuffled more sand onto it with my boots. I pressed my sole on earth, stomping the fresh mound into haggard soil. I gave the ground a last glance, looking for evidence of anything alien to the ecosystem. Nothing.

I found a stone the size of a hare and placed it on top. I stood up again, about to go back to the cabin, when a silvery glint from the riverbank caught my eye. I calmly regarded the different elements; metal flashes, red hair like lava dying in the water, a white dress forming moist clouds above the weeds. Suddenly, with the shock of a door slamming, these floating images were united in my consciousness and I realized: *It was her.*

She lay among the reeds, a terrible apparition. After a moment of fright, I came round, not knowing what to do. She was a young woman, with white skin and hair of fire, darkened by the river flow. She was unconscious. Or dead. Her lips were purple.

She had been dragged by the Adrenaline river current up to me. I tightened my right leather glove and reached for her. I grabbed her shoulders and pulled her to the shore. A lock of her red hair tangled with a reed. I fiercely tore the plant up the root and dragged her to dry ground.

I took her chin between my fingers. I opened her mouth and listened. She wasn't breathing. But my Ophelia was not dead; a pendulum of pulse weakly rippled from her neck, hitting my fingertips still covered with mud. I spread her lips again and I breathed into her throat firmly. Two. Three. On the fourth breath of life she woke up, spewing water and uttering a cry of agony that went through my bowels like a lightning bolt wrecking the woods.

I'd heard that cry before.

I helped her stand up. She staggered like a wet, helpless animal. She grabbed my arm with cold fingers that I slowly came to realize were made of actual, frigid metal—four articulated prosthetic digits indenting my skin, almost puncturing it.

“Can you talk?” I asked. I needed to know why this woman had been returned to me, brought almost right up to the door of my cabin by the icy currents of the Adrenaline, like a steadfast tin soldier, half metal, half human. “What's happened?”

She didn't answer. She just looked at me and grabbed my arm again with her tiny steel claws.

“Come on, let's get you inside. You need to dry off and rest.” I passed her arm around my neck.

Shades, my articulated pottery robot doll, walked from the cabin to catch us. She'd seen from the window how I rescued the white woman. I hadn't had any company at

the cabin since I bought Shades to help me at home. She was almost three feet tall, shy and silent. The little doll probably hadn't seen any human female since her activation.

I never took her to the city, and for the longest time, Isaac's boy was the only visitor I had, when he brought me the shark's milk I needed for my treatment. Many other men brought their dolls around with them, but I always preferred to leave her at home.

Shades also looked concerned. She shot me a questioning look before leading us back to the cabin, holding her dangling, synthetic curls back from her face, while hopping from stone to stone along the path.

Once indoors, I stoked the fire, while Shades was moving around the kitchen, preparing a teapot. I sat at the table on a chair nearby, giving the soaking woman a dry blanket. She was getting her breath back. "What are your coordinates?" I asked her, trying to confirm my suspicions.

"Ruva, 27 18. Thanks for getting me out of the river. Had you not been there, I would be dead."

"Ruva?" I asked.

Ruva was the largest witches' forest in the region. Shades came up with a steaming mug of tea, placing it into the girl's hands, then administering a comforting pinch on her shoulders above the blanket, before turning to the table and sitting with us on the chair in front of me and to the right of our guest.

"You have a great doll," she said, smiling wistfully. "Mine is rebellious and wayward, and I never find it when I need it. She gets lost in the woods and disappears for a few days. Maybe someday you could help me to get one like this."

She looked at me while awkwardly negotiating her metal fingers around the handle of the mug, lifting it to her mouth and sipping the almond tea.

When she moved her gaze towards the walls, seemingly mapping out her new surroundings, I reframed the issue she had avoided addressing before. "Witches don't own dolls. 'Cause you're a witch, aren't you? I thought there weren't witches any longer in that area. As you can imagine, not many of them come to my place floating down the Adrenaline."

She stared at me. "I know what you're thinking. You think that I tried to kill myself jumping into the river, and you also think that when I thanked you I wasn't sincere at all, because you thwarted my ultimate goal."

Her defensive and biting response irritated me.

"But it's nothing like that. The truth is: I can't remember what happened, or how I got here. I was looking for some spawn on the riverbank. And the next thing I remember is waking up beside you," she said.

She was probably lying.

"What's your name for this encounter?" I asked.

"Misadora, Lex and Ethereal. Call me Misadora. What's your name?"

"For this encounter, you can call me Volatile. And this is Shades." The small white robot smiled and rested her chin on her marmoreal arms. I asked: "Do you know where you are?"

She shook her head. Misadora's red hair was starting to perk like embers cracked in the fireplace. She started tapping the mug with her metal fingers, steadily depleting my patience. "No," she said.

"You're in Aletheia, 34 56. That's almost three hours away from Ruva, bordering

the river. So you've sailed a lot to get here. Have you been unconscious all that time?"

"I told you: I don't remember anything," she replied.

My eyes were diverted to the metallic sheen of her hands and she noticed instantly.

"Do you like my steel fingers?" she asked, extending her hand on the table.

"What happened?" It was an automatic question, I didn't really need her answer.

"I got them cut two days ago. I had an Amalis ring. Since you're so sure that I'm a witch ... I won't hide it. Take my sincerity as a thankful gesture for getting me out of the river. I refused to take the ring off, and they stretched and stretched, but they couldn't remove it. They grabbed my arm on a stump in a forest and they chopped my fingers, and the ring, obviously. But I managed to escape."

Misadora leaned back in her chair and drank the infusion that my little white robot had brought. She looked more helpless wrapped in the blanket. She stared at the doll, still not trusting us.



They called them witches, but no one knew exactly what they were. A lot of them came to Aletheia, luring other women with them from the city to the forests. Not only in Aletheia, but in cities all over Yimla, the number of females had dwindled.

The witches also infiltrated city brothels, which were now attracting lots of business from newly single men. And many a man would pay extra to lay with a witch, watching her colored hair become wild, since at night a witch has not only a naked body, but a naked condition. In those chambers converged heaven and hell, ecstasy and darkness.

The government banned sexual contact with witches, but this only solidified the witch prostitutes' status as forbidden fruit in the eyes of Yimlan men, who returned night after night to their beds.

Fruit falls more quickly from the womb of a witch than a Yimlan woman; a man who frequented witches, would suddenly find a bastard in a basket outside his doorstep. The urge to drown the pup in a river was beaten down by the peculiar power of the child's starkly colorful hair, the fruit of both a man's shame and his unbridled, illegal passion represented by tufts of blue hair.

Yimlan women were disappearing, and witches seemed to be colonizing their former homes with love children. Fearing a demographic time-bomb, the government decided on an unprecedented policy of extermination of the witches.

Women who had stood by their families, caring for their kids or their husbands, avoided at all costs talk of the witches of Yimla—they feared hearing the Amalis call and to be forced to abandon all they had, in order to face nature. But when the exterminations began, the so-called holocaust, many Yimlan women joined in defense of witches.

Most men had grown to love their curious and intelligent witch children, and revolted against the policy. Finally, an amnesty was granted for witch-Yimlan-offspring. (Powerful business interests also lobbied against the law; robot sales had quadrupled in the last fifteen years, as single men needed dolls to home school the kids.)

The process was kept from the public eye, but horror stories would seep through the killing fields in the forests, some apocryphal, some visibly true, like the soldiers wearing witches' fingers, complete with Amalis rings, around their necks like macabre trophies.

Thousands of witches tried desperately to keep a low profile by hiding their Amalis stones and covered their hair with turbans, and for three decades they had lived in the woods.

Tech and comfortable living in the cities was not for them. They wanted to go back in time at all costs. They lived alone, like animals. Some witches were devoted to alchemy, an ancient custom of the forests.

Redra, the madam of Sin Macula, had been one of them, and from her brothel she organized numerous returns to the woods. The Yimlans were not sure what were they doing in the forest, or how they organized socially. A long time ago, during my research, I read that there had existed groups of females in Eraya for millennia, who hunted, and lived alone, and who left their sons.

The Witches of Yimla, as also the women who had fled the cities came to be known, were a complete mystery, So I started studying their strange behavior.

And now, once more, I had one in front of me, sitting at my table, as tangible as a salt statue, breaking the silence again.

Misadora leaned forward and looked into my eyes. "Volatile, would you let me stay with you a few days? I need to think clearly. The reeds of the river brought me to a halt in front of your place. I must be here for a reason."

The least I could do for the red witch, after all, was let her stay under my roof.

2. Skullsplit

MISADORA

I woke up to the mechanical noise of the white little robot, which was spinning around the improvised bed on the top floor of my savior's cabin. She was staring at me, waiting for me to pet her, but I ignored her and she eventually got bored and left the room. I looked through the window, still lying down.

The sun, beyond the brush and the cement line that drew the horizon of Aletheia's gray mass, was a glowing marble in the sky. My bionic fingers returned to life. I brushed my thigh with them, drawing ice threads on it. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath and tried to order my mind.

In the forest we weren't as isolated as Volatile as the other Yimlans may have thought. Myself, every new moon, I used to meet Briana in one of the glades in Ruva.

Briana was bionic. They were hated by ordinary Yimlans. Like us, they were outlaws, but they lived in the cities and mostly went out at night, like vampires. They changed their bodies, making their limbs and joints metal. Rumor was that they even replaced their internal organs to achieve perfect machinery. Steel sheets and ceramic ornaments became inseparable parts of their bodies, like sugar dissolved in water.

Those with the most work done looked a bit like the motorcycles they rode around town. They smoked cigarettes and were so sufficiently *faux* rebellious that Yimlan parents feared their teenagers would join them and start operating pencil sharpeners into their chests. Some tried to preempt this by buying their kids tattoos, hoping that would take care of the adolescent need for a walk on the wild side.

The bionics wanted to reach what they called the eternal wakefulness; find the way to completely replace their human body, decrepit, decaying and mortal and, piece by piece, lock their soul up in their steel armor for eternity. The same way technicians had managed to bring life to dolls, they wanted to replace their mortal flesh with imperishable materials.

Briana was Skullsplit's girlfriend. (By that time I didn't know her other two names.) She was only sixteen years old, but her elbows and knees were already completely metal. Parts of her neck and face were tattooed, simulating a cables circuit. She was agile and beautiful. She used to come around Ruva from time to time, looking for Amalis extract for her post-op pains. The stone, she said, calmed her down after each graft, so I offered to get her some of it in exchange for information from the outside.

We met on moonless nights in the forest, she brought me Yimlan newspapers and data tapes that talked about the government war against witches. With her fanny pack and her military boots, swigging a bottle of Blue Powder, she looked like a strange cross between a mountain climber and a punk.

Her pains were at their worst; it saddened me to see the desperate zeal with which she seized upon the drugs I'd brought her. We sat in the dark, she snorted Amalis extract and I took shots of Blue Powder. I huddled into the tree trunk, feeling the warm glow of drunkenness, and listened to Briana as she told about her fights with her boyfriend.

Skullsplit was ten years older than her and he already mastered the art of implants.

He was one of the best, she said. Already almost half his body was metal, and all the outsiders in Aletheia had heard of him. During the days, he repaired dolls. At night, he repaired humans, mostly teenagers eager to escape their lives. One of them was Briana.

She had run away from home, and they quickly fell in love, or something close to love. He used to call her his little Frankenstein, not having read the book. He pretended to be offended when she pointed out that Frankenstein was actually the doctor. On one of our drunk forest nights, Briana told me that Skullspit even had his penis replaced.

“So what’s that like?”

“Cold and hot at the same time.”

That was actually the last step to becoming fully bionic.

I decided to seek out Skullspit’s repair shop when I got wise to the four bloody stumps on my right hand.

I arrived in Aletheia in the evening, a towel wrapped heavy and red around my throbbing wounds. I could feel the runaway heartbeat in my wrist. Briana had given me her coordinates a long time ago, 35 05, in case I’d ever want to visit her.

“I’m a witch,” I had told her, “I never leave the forest.”

But there I was, on an empty street in Aletheia, under the shimmering sky and the thick and putrid air of the city. I’m not sure how I got there. I had fainted at least twice.

Two men had driven me in their wasp-car from the edge of the forest to the outskirts of the city. Before diving into that maze of stone and smoke, I snorted a dose of the Amalis I was saving for Briana. That was the first time I did any. The pain faded and the dark storm clouds evaporated from my mind.

I entered a coffee shop in 35 06. I stuffed my witch hair into the cap that I had taken from one of the guys that had driven me halfway. The Yimlan likely guessed that I was one of them, but he had the sense not to ask any questions. My white dress was dotted with a few drops of blood.

I squeezed the cloth around my right hand and went straight to the bar. The bartender didn’t seem surprised to see me there, alone at night, nor did he pay attention to the vivid, red strands of hair escaping from my cap. I ordered a glass of Blue Powder and inhaled a bit of Cosmic Steam from a dispenser placed on the bar.

“I’m looking for Skullspit’s workshop,” I told the bartender.

He looked at me. A large tuft of black hair covered his forehead and hung down to his left eye, hiding half his soul. “I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

I should have guessed that Skullspit probably went by a different name to his neighbors.

“I’ve heard of a doll repair shop in 35 05. I’m looking for it.”

“Where is your doll?” he asked, pouring Blue Powder into my glass.

“That’s none of your business.”

He flinched, but graciously let me get away with this one piece of rotten attitude. “Look, calm down. Drink this,” he said, shoving the glass closer to me.

I took a drink, then explained: “I didn’t bring her, I left her at home. She can’t move and I don’t think I can carry her by myself. I want to talk to the repairman first, see what he can do.”

The bartender huffed his long black bangs out of his face, and I could see a metallic glint where his eye should be. The cafeteria was almost empty. At the dark side of the bar, a Yimlan played “Die Monster Die” on the jukebox. Many years ago I used to listen to those old Erayan records when I was locked in my room. I took a sip of the liquor and settled on my seat.

As there is no discreet way of looking at someone’s eye, the bartender finally got annoyed with me and explained: “Let me guess: you’re not from here, are you? Almost everyone around is bionic. So I guess you’re looking for Igor’s workshop. Is this your first implant?”

“I just want to talk to Igor. I’m not bionic.”

“Sure you’re not,” he said disdainfully, before giving me directions: “You’re in the right grid. Go down the next alley, to the back and you’ll see a golden door on your right. It’s usually open. You’ll see some stairs going down. Igor’s workshop is down there.”

“Hey, Lucien,” shouted the guy at the back of the bar. “This damn thing broke down again.” I noticed the song had jammed, looping a fragment of the chorus, it sounded like “diamond – diamond – diamond”.

The bartender put down the glass he was drying out and went over to the jukebox. He was kicking at it when I put a five blac note on the bar and left quietly.

Outside, night had already kidnapped the whole city. I looked left and right under the broken neon of the bionic cafeteria. Aletheia was a forbidding mass of dark gray stone. I took a deep breath of the heavy air. A swanwolf was sniffing around some garbage cans at the back of the alley. We didn’t have hybrid animals in the forest, so it was with some trepidation I walked in its direction, but it immediately fled when it saw me.

The mayor of Aletheia had long ago shut down the surveillance gargoyles of the Barsiddharta regime, but there were still some around, embedded in walls, where they stirred and sneered, snapping at passersby.

I felt sorry for the Wyvern that reigned over the golden gate in the back of the alley. Maybe he wouldn’t be around for too much longer. I stood in front of him and he blinked his little gray eyes at me. I stared fiercely into an iron pupil, and the door opened.

I walked down the black narrow stairs, dense Erayan metal music wafted at me from the bowels of the building. At the end of my descent glowed a burning light, exacerbating my Cosmic Steam high. Even if I’d wanted to, I wouldn’t have been able to go back at that point. I stepped over the bright threshold without hesitation.

A large room was revealed to me—the walls covered with dozens of doll faces staring at me as if I had appeared on stage and they were my static audience, frozen in mid-applause. Saws, prostheses and metal plates hung on another wall. There were shelves and benches, covered with wounded dolls sitting down. They were in trance, sleeping, thinking, or dead. In the center of the room there stood a large, white gurney, and leaning on it, looking at me, smiling, there was Skullspit - or was it Igor?

“Welcome to Igor’s workshop,” he said. Then he pointed at my bandaged hand. “You shouldn’t have done that all by yourself.”

“Were you waiting for me?” I asked him, again assuming a defensive position without quite knowing why. My witch condition and the events of the last few days

had made me naturally suspicious of all Yimlans, even if they were bionic rebels. It bothered me that this guy Igor was waiting for me, facing the door, assuming the status of protagonist I'd wanted for myself. I felt off-balance.

"Look," he said, pointing at a monitor, hanging from the ceiling. "The gargoyles have cameras in their eyes. If the Wyvern likes you, the door opens and I wait for you down here, with my saw ready. But it seems that tonight I won't need it."

The flickering monitor showed the alley. In the background there were some garbage cans and again, the swanwolf rummaging through them. I looked at the repairman, feeling the Blue Powder flowing in my veins, mingling with the Steam, making soothing stop-overs in all my joints.

The being before me, half human, half machine, was the most attractive creature I had ever seen, I had to admit it. His metal parts shone, reflecting the red and green lights in the room, recreating a light performance on his forearms, absorbing the small porcelain faces lining the shelves. I was pretty sure it was him, yet I wanted to hear it from his own voice.

"You're Skullspit, aren't you?"

He looked surprised.

"Do you know Varena? I go by Skullspit for her, and very few others."

"Tell me what to call you then."

"It's fine. In this encounter you may also call me Skullspit. And who are you?"

"I'm Ethereal, Lex and Misadora. I'd prefer you use 'Lex' for this encounter."

According to the heathen law that had ruled Yimla for centuries, even before The Mist, you need to say your three names at the very beginning of an encounter with someone who has saved, or is going to, save your life.

Skullspit moved towards me. Up close he was even more impressive. He was much taller than me, with robust, classical good looks enhanced by his metallic sheens. His face was almost completely human, only his teeth shone, like pearls of mercury. His head was covered with a smooth plate that imitated human skin color, and a cascade of black hair, similar to smoke from a wildfire, hanging down to one side from the center of his skull. He had blue eyes and his hands looked soft and large, also completely natural.

He took my arm and started unrolling the cloth around my wound. He looked at it, grimacing with assumed pain. "Come here, lie down on the gurney."

I leaned back, guided by the bionic. Again I felt like I was going to faint.

"I don't have any money," I said, closing my eyes.

"I don't care. I know who you are," he said. "Varena has told me about you. She told me that a witch from Ruva was her Amalis dealer and hung out with her some nights in the woods. It's you, right?"

"Where is she?"

"I don't know. Sometimes she goes away for a few days. She'll come back. She always does."

I stopped asking about Briana. They had probably argued again.

"This wound looks bad, and this cut is from an axe" he said, placing a stool beside the gurney. "I'm pretty sure that there are no bionic witches. You'll be the first one." He opened a plastic drawer under a light table, coming a transparent bag. Inside were four steel fingers.

“Don’t worry. This is a very easy graft, I’ve done it dozens of times. But you need to calm down, you’re very tense. They wanted your ring at any cost, didn’t they? They’re animals,” he said, removing my red hair from my forehead. With paired fingers he slid my eyelids open, and he looked at my heart through my pupils.

I didn’t have much to say to that creature. I just wanted to sleep, sleep by his side, while he was repairing my hand and we were listening to Eryan music. He kept on talking as he moved around the porcelain dolls workshop. Then, a three feet door opened and two almost identical dolls came in the room, dressed in white leather. The robots were Siamese, joined at the waist.

“Meet Red and Redder,” Skullspit said. “They’re mine. They’re my nurses.

The creatures approached the table, perfectly synchronized. Far from stumbling, their mixed-up legs worked around each other with such gliding precision that it seemed like they were doing some strange, complicated ritual dance. They took a quick look at my mauled hand before pulling a small trolley next to the stool where Skullspit sat. He put on a pair of transparent latex gloves and adjusted the height of his seat, putting his crotch on level with my face, and I thought about his metal penis. I shook my head to rid my mind of the image.

I must have looked ridiculous, but Skullspit didn’t seem to notice, he just kept on talking, in nonsensical jargon, while adjusting a pair of goggles. “I’m going to inject a dose of Astronaut in your forearm. It’s a pain inhibitor for the soldering. Since there’s no member to be amputated, you will only notice the vibration of the laser Ghor. The prostheses have living optical fibers inside and within a few hours you’ll be able to move your new fingers normally. In a few years we should renew the pieces, but you can keep on wearing your ring.”

“They took it away.”

“But don’t they say that every lost ring comes back to its witch?” he asked, studying the end of a dripping needle.

I closed my eyes again and surrendered to the Astronaut being injected into my arm. It felt a bit like the Cosmic Steam that I had taken at the bionic’s cafeteria, only multiplied by ten and concentrated in my arm.

In Yimla everybody was always stoned. There were hundreds of legal drugs that were easily accessible, and many of them, like the Cosmic Steam, were free. There were Steam dispensers on every corner, like garbage cans. Everest, Tears, Shakespeare pills... colored chemistry, available to everyone: bionics, sleepwalkers or witches, in addition to ordinary Yimlans, of course.

Although a dose of Astronaut limited to a single body part wasn’t supposed to make you lose consciousness, I gave up under the neon light and my mind flew away again. When I woke up, Skullspit was sitting by my side, smiling and stroking the shoulder of his two-headed doll.

“You slept for almost two hours,” he said. “I didn’t want to wake you. You look very tired. Your new fingers are ready.”

I raised my hand. I had four bright, articulated steel fingers. I tried to move them, but was unable to. Still, they looked like they had always been there, embedded in my flesh.

“You won’t be able to move them for a few hours, but they look perfect,” explained Skullspit. “The laser Ghor leaves no scars. Actually, your brain won’t distinguish

between real and metal fingers.”

“Thank you. I don’t know how can I pay you ... I’ll get more Yimlan money, maybe I can send it over to you through Briana.”

“I don’t want your money, witch Lex. Believe me when I say that you have helped us more than a million blac ever could. By the way, if you see her before I do, tell her that my Wyvern is still waiting for her to appear in front of him.”

I sat up on the gurney. The Siamese dolls tied laces of one boot each. They were still stained with the mud from the marshes. I said: “I don’t think I’ll go back to Ruva woods right away. I have other business in the city.”

“Like what?”

“I need to find my ring. I can’t go back without it.”

He smiled at me. “You don’t need me to wish you luck, Lex. I know it will find you regardless. I assume you know that if the steel gives you any trouble in the first days, Amalis dust will calm the pain down, right?”

Of course I knew. I kissed my creator’s lips and ran away from that terrifying three-ring circus.



I went back into the alley. The dawning sun encroached on the miasma of the polluted night, light and dark slugging it out for dominion—an awesome spectacle. I heard some tropical music coming from a window carved on the wall. The surviving gargoyles started moving their small stone heads to the beats, watching from above as I walked away from 35 05, feeling a strange cocktail of calm and excitement churning desperately in my stomach.

I couldn’t go into the woods yet. And I wasn’t even sure whether I wanted to go back. I didn’t know if my friends had also been mutilated, if they had fled or been imprisoned. The most important thing was to get my ring back. Or replace it with a similar one—that would be the next best thing. It had been stolen by the soldiers and I had no idea of where could I start looking for it, or where would I hear the cry of that ripped stone.

Maybe I could just get more solid Amalis and set it on a new ring. Then everything would be in its right place.

“I could put it on the new steel on my body and show up again in front of the Treemother.” I realized I’d said it out loud. My mind was racing.

I checked my map and I realized that the Adrenaline passed by 35 10, in the north of the city. It wasn’t far. If I could get there I could look for an Amalis deposit or even a Treemother.

I thought about stopping one of the wasp-cars that had begun to stir in the streets, and ask its owner to give me a ride to 35 10. But when I slowed down and tried to hail one, I could already hear the murmur from the Adrenaline’s electric current, not far away.

With the Astronaut in my body, I had walked for almost three hours without realizing it.



The stone walls had already disappeared behind me and in front of me I spotted a few wall-trees bordering the river. I saw some swanwolves sniffing around the outermost blocks of concrete next to the shore, wondering whether to go further. Over the coordinates 35 10 the Adrenaline lay, as black as my inquisitors' soul.

The wall-trees demarcated the city limits, and their branches had been modified to form arc-edged ornamental borders between the last Aletheian street and the fields beyond.

I walked down past the trees, stroking the rough trunks. The effect of the Astronaut was fading and I felt some pain on the link between my skin and the metal. I brushed the joints with my human hand. I had lost the cap that I was using to hide my hair, or maybe I left it at Skullspit's place, I could not remember. My red hair was blowing freely in the wind.

I sat on a hillock by the river, exhausted. I just wanted to sleep, sleep, sleep, wait for nightfall and then dawn again, and see the Fata Morgana form at the bottom, in the horizon, where no one was suffering.



“Witch! Hey, witch! Wake up!”

I sat up, violently kicked out of a black nightmare, in an alert position. How long had I been sleeping? I felt a crack of pain in my bionic hand.

I reached for my bag, where I kept the map and the Amalis dust. It wasn't there. I had lost it. I saw the tip of a cane touching my leg, it was held by an elderly woman in a wheelchair, being pushed by a little boy around seven or eight years old. I stood up quickly.

As they humped past me, the old woman looked at me, but didn't seem to actually see me. Her eyes were empty. Was she blind? No, she must have seen me. How would she know then that I was one of them? My hair color would always betray me. The elderly woman had long white hair all over her shoulders, like a snowy slope.

The wheelchair was an old one, manual, forged from dumpy rust and upholstered with a deep-red fabric. The boy pushed it forward jerkingly over the stone path that crossed the wooded wall into the riverbank. Walking beside them I got a glimpse of the boy's eyes, they were empty and white, too, and I realized they were sleepwalkers.

Yimlans liked their medicine, but no one had ever got around to finding a cure for sleepwalking, maybe because the sleepwalkers would simply refuse it. They weren't sick, they said, it was their ultimate form of existence. They lived in the realm of sleep. They weren't fully aware of what was going on around them, or how had they reached that low level of consciousness. They walked, ate, talked and were born asleep. And they died asleep.

Sleepwalkers had different levels of perception, and the ones close to the vigil state sometimes spoke in public, on behalf of others, defining their state and condition.

They reached tacit agreements between the parties, the negotiations always being conducted in dreams.

It was said they were in touch with another dimension, and they had certain strong telepathic abilities that made them excellent business consultants. They went out only a few hours every day, always asleep. They could be easily recognized by their way of walking, their lost gaze, the audible disconnect in their words.

But as with other marginalized Yimlan groups, there was also rebellion, subversion and terrorism to be found among the sleepwalkers. There existed organized, armed gangs of sleepwalkers, and they were fighting, somehow, always in dreams.

They were fighting to wake up.

The old woman and the boy had seen me, perhaps in their permanent sleep. Maybe they already knew what had happened to me and why part of my body was metallic. Maybe they knew that there was no Amalis stone to be found over there. Finally they stopped moving. I stepped in front of them.

“You must be hungry, witch. How long have you gone without eating?” asked the old lady suddenly. “In this wall-tree there are some apples. If you could get some for me and my grandson we would really appreciate it. Take some apples for yourself as well. You haven’t eaten anything in almost a day, have you? Help us reach the apples. Do it and I’ll tell you how can you regain your good witch ring.”

I couldn’t do anything but obey the old sleeping woman. I climbed up on a big stone, while the little boy stood next to me, looking up at me with his gray, hollow eyes.

I picked two apples and threw them down to the little boy.

Predictably, he didn’t manage to catch them. He was chasing the apples down towards the shore.

Suddenly I noticed a huge, beautiful, supple red apple, the envy of every other fruit on that tree, hanging off the end of a thick branch. I grabbed a branch. I grabbed it, and then I hung onto it with all my weight, climbing along it, hand over hand.

From this angle the Adrenaline looked like a torrent of Alethians’ nightmares, fed by the Aletheian’s bad dreams. I reached the apple and pulled myself up to it. I bit it without concession, forcing down a big, jagged piece, scraping my throat and noticeably working its way through my guts before settling in my stomach.

I swung around to return to the stone pad I had launched myself from, but now the boy was standing there, holding a big stick.

He swung it clumsily at me, at first I thought he was playing around, or trying to get at some more apples, but my protests only attracted more blows, and as he took a few steps forward and stretched, they rained on my head with terrible violence.

I fell into the river, and the last thing I remember is the shock of cold water and the swirling current shaking me.

And then I was the sleepwalker.

3. The Gag

VOLATILE

I heard the witch slamming shut the door to the bathroom upstairs in the cabin. Shades was coming down, descending the stairs one step at a time, with slow calculation in order to not fall over her short legs. I closed the book and notebooks and went out on the porch.

I inhaled the fresh air and listened to the calm current of the Adrenaline. I reckoned that sooner or later they would come after me, and I had to get ready to face the consequences of my flight.

The witch should have left by then; if she was seized they would certainly treat her with even greater cruelty this time, and I would be prosecuted for harboring a rebel witch.

I had been considering taking her to some far away city, maybe Cavern or Depth 2. Maybe I could convince her to start again, just the two of us. I smiled at my own naivety. Why would someone who has spent years with no attachment to anyone suddenly want to elope with a stranger?

My cabin by the Adrenaline was my secret retreat. I used to go there to think, to work on my writings, and lately, to run away from the noise and the smells of Aletheia.

The Pink Swan was around in the garden, sniffing around the stones of my garden patch, probably looking for bugs to sprinkle on the gray feed I had prepared for him near the shed. I stared at the animal. The shiny plumage absorbed the rays of the sun as if it was paper about to burn.

All of us who worked for the Yimlan government had a Pink Swan that, far from being a “motivational” pet, as our superiors had claimed at the start of the program, was actually a spy, monitoring all of our activities. Even at home.

It was mandatory to host that ridiculous, strutting thing for surveillance during top secret missions, they had claimed. One had to be wary of the fact that it was always watching, but for the sake of perspective also keep in mind that it was just a big, pink bird with a thinking chip installed. It might look majestic, but it was way dumber than Shades.

We hadn't been told how it worked in detail, so one day, a few months ago, I was determined to find out myself. I injected a high dose of Animal Iwo Jima into one of its wings and I dissected the bird while it was sleeping.

The Swan could capture images and sound through its eyes and nose, respectively (an ability to broadcast live was not expected until next summer's upgraded model), and it'd had basic interrogation training.

The Pink Swan had stored hours of our conversations, and listening to them anyone could make an accurate portrait of all my ghosts. I managed to listen randomly to one of the conversations stored in the chip, one I could barely recall having. I recognized my own voice, sounding intoxicated by Blue Powder, explaining the Swan the disease of The Gag.

Horrified by hearing my confessions, I started thinking of destroying it and report its loss or theft. But I had no way to know for sure that all those secrets weren't already in the hands of my superiors.

Imposing a Pink Swan was the way they made sure that nobody was ever unfaithful; or would sell Yimlan dark secrets to the highest bidder, or ensure that we would conduct ourselves according to the proper parameters, even when we were not working for the government.

I had grown especially paranoid about the Swan in the last weeks. I was even thinking that during one of the missions outside, someone might already have engaged my Pink Swan and extracted all the recordings of our first cohabitation period.

Therefore, if I destroyed the Swan, maybe I would have to be confronted with these hours and hours of delicate material, a far worse consequence.

When I discovered the true nature of the Pink Swan I summoned all my memories in order to identify any compromising piece of information that I could have confided to it, both in the cabin by the Adrenaline, or my apartment in Aletheia, or the intermittent trips on the wasp-car.

Actually, I couldn't recall anything truly revealing. There were some visits to Redra's witches to attenuate some sexual instincts, which had depleted due to the advance of The Gag. Also some one-night stands who came over in Aletheia when the vigilant Swan was around.

I became a bit nervous about its obscene animal gazes, and I even started to be very careful with my notebooks and my research. I closed them and kept them in safe places that he couldn't get to with his beak.

Sometimes the absurdity of my predicament hit me full force. Animals could not read, nor speak; he was just simulating communication with his montage of pre-recorded words and phrases.

But if that hybrid bird computer could store conversations like an answering machine, it was probably also programmed to copy hundreds of pages with its damn camera. I opted for prudence and put away any writing that could compromise my research into the witches.



That morning, obviously, my long-standing concern about the Swan's radio range had reached high levels again, because of the unusual and illegal nature of my red host.

I wasn't sure if the Swan had seen me dragging her out of the river, if it had registered with its camera-eye the revealing color of her hair, darkened by the water; or if it captured and analyzed my concern when I saw her drowning, tangled among the reeds.

Earlier I had been thinking what to do with the Swan, and unable to keep on working on my notes of the essay that was keeping me busy in that particular period: *Towards a definitive theory of the Pain Energy*. I was seriously considering locking the damn thing in the shed. I might have gotten away with that. It did follow me around everywhere.

I could pretend that I was looking for something in the garden's shed and pretend

that I hadn't realized that the Swan was following me, and then shut the door quickly behind me, leaving it inside until I knew what to do.

I would call it from outside, faking confusion and cluelessness, making it a matter of record that I didn't know where it was.

In my mind I went over this silly little plan; it was really basic, bordering on the outlandish, but it might win me enough time to decide what to do with it after my flight.

I stood in front of the Pink Swan, hands on hips. The animal looked at me with its gaze-camera, so I turned around and I walked to the shed, confirming out of the corner of my eye that he was indeed following me there.

When I opened the door and entered, I left some room so it too could get inside that wooden cage. It did not. The Swan was looking at me from the doorway with a bitter, hateful gaze, as if it had guessed my perfidious intention.

"The witch is here", he said in its ridiculous, mechanical voice. "The witch is here. The witch is looking for her ring."

"Oh, shut up," I snapped. I knew that its verbal diarrhea was completely reflexive; the Swan wasn't able to conduct meaningful conversations.

It just spat insults from time to time, occasionally asking questions in order to create the illusion of being an intelligent being that was actually listening to you.

"The witch is here. I'll tell the witch everything."

The Swan walked away. I badly wanted to kick it into the river. I made a real effort to rule that option out. The measure of a man is how he treats animals, I thought.

From among my tools I grabbed the muzzle, ran up the Swan and secured it between my knees. The little bastard had put on weight lately and possessed considerable strength, so I had to squeeze him tight. I immobilized his beak with the muzzle, treading it down on the bony, protruding yap, well out of the range of its recording gaze, and then I let him go. The Swan looked at me with anger and pecked at me a couple of times, but then went back to its silly walk.

Misadora had gone out to the garden as she stretched to the ailing sunlight. She was also looking at the beast, which was now inspecting the ground for bugs.

"What a beautiful animal", she said, her voice still affected by the quiet night's sleep. "Why have you shut its beak off?"

"Because it has an annoying squawk and sometimes it talks. It says inappropriate things and today is not a good day for testing my patience," I said, getting closer to her. I was dazzled by the glow of her metal hand. "Did you sleep well?"

The young witch nodded.

"Are you hungry? I made some breakfast," I said, inviting her to get back to the cabin.

The Swan had stopped exploring the ground and was currently staring at us. We got inside the cabin and I closed the door behind us.

Shades was swarming around the place, tidying up. She was walking barefoot, her metal feet clinking against the wooden floor.

"Can I help you?" Misadora asked.

"Everything's ready. Just sit down."

Instead of doing so right away, the witch walked in front of the bookshelves while I was taking the bread out of the food generator. She had a look at the huge water tank,