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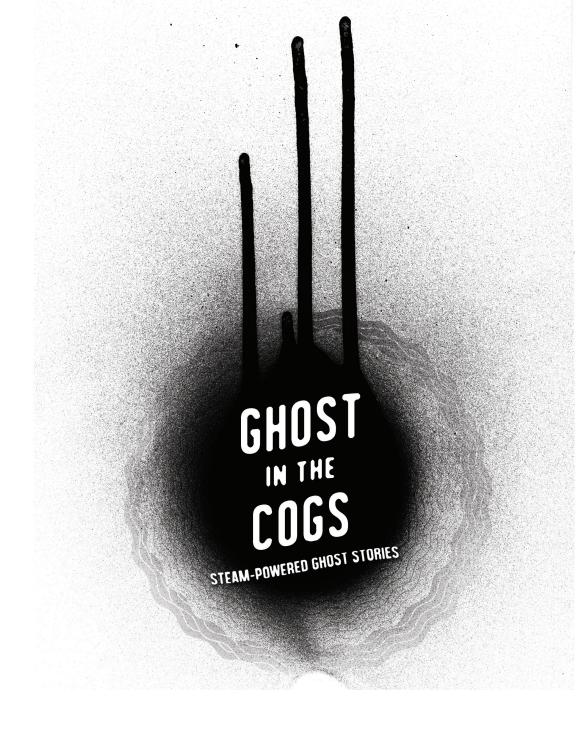
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GHOST IN THE COGS

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Introduction

C. Dombrowski Scott Gable

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That persistent squeaking you hear? Sometimes, it requires more than grease. This time, you're gonna need an exorcist. Or is the proper term ghost hunter? Undead acquisitions expert? Well, you probably get what we're saying.

This world is a special place, a clanking and industrious world where steam hisses and engineers beckon with pipes aglow. It's a world where ingenuity and possibility rattle ahead, hand in hand, at full steam. Delicately contrived clockwork determines the timing. Yet sometimes, there's something more, something whispering amidst the engines. Something other-worldly. These are the tales of the ghosts between the gears, of the clanking spirits, of the possessed and moaning gadgetry.

We hope you won't be too scared . . .

"Ships and sails proper for the heavenly air should be fashioned. Then there will also be people, who do not shrink from the vastness of space." —Johannes Kepler, letter to Galileo Galilei, 1609

Asmodeus Flight

Siobhan Carroll

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The day she turned eleven, Effie's father showed her how to die.

"Even the best aeronaut can be taken down by a spark," he said, his hand tracing the air between the Asmodeus engine and the oil-varnished paper over their heads. Effie swallowed. The ground below the air balloon looked unreal now, falling away into a picture of farmland and houses. But the hot flame that licked and danced before her—that threat seemed real.

Effie's father hesitated, studying the engine's blue glow. Carefully, very carefully, he reached out as if to take the brass globe off its resting place. Effie braced herself but relaxed when she saw her father was not actually going to touch the engine's surface.

"Mr. Sadler, when he was going down, kept his wits about him." Her father mimed pulling at the two rolling hitches that tied the globe to the brass circle. "He undid the fastenings, and . . ." He pressed an invisible globe to his face and mimed blowing his last breath into the smallest of the three valves on the engine.

Effie watched, amazed. She had glimpsed her father making this gesture before, through doorways, when he thought he was alone. She had not realized he was rehearsing his death. If she hadn't been so captivated by his performance, the realization might have chilled her.

"And that's it," her father said, returning his hands to the sides of the globe, framing the flickering blue grate. "That's him in there. Mr. Sadler's ghost. Still

flying after all these years."

At a thousand feet, the air around them was clear and cool. The sun glowed red and blue through the paper of the *Dover*, and below them, the world was spreading out like a map in green and gold. But what Effie noticed was the reverence on her father's face as he watched his old friend dance in the air balloon's hot engine.

Four years later when the news of the accident reached them, the memory of that moment made it easier for Effie to compose herself. She walked through the white glare of shock, past her sobbing mother, and approached the gentleman standing awkwardly in the entrance hall.

"Thank you for retrieving it," Effie heard herself say. She watched her hands pluck the globe from the stranger's hands. The engine's surface was cool to the touch, and for a moment, it felt unfamiliar. But peering down through the grate, she saw two blue undulations. The ghosts of Mr. Sadler and her father.

"Thank you," Effie said again. "It's what he would have wanted." And she hugged the globe as though she herself were already falling from the heavens, as though it were her own death and not her father's that she had been called to witness.

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"It's no' for sale."

Effie didn't bother looking up from her knots. The redoubtable Mrs. Brown was as adept at dispatching gentleman buyers as she was in dealing with local tradesmen. Despite her limited height—Effie's assistant measured only four feet three inches to the objective gaze—Mrs. Brown somehow still managed to loom at people. Effie could practically hear her looming now.

"It's no' for sale young man—and don't you go shaking that puss a' me. D'ye think we're country faffle you can swindle with your sing-time songs? Off wi' ye."

"But Mr. Baxter—"

"Mr. Baxter'll be hearing his man's portuning puir wimmin like a common ragart!"

Effie straightened up in time to see the young servant cower away from Mrs. Brown, his face displaying the confusion that typically attended her barrages of (partly invented) dialect. He obviously wasn't sure what he had been accused of

but suspected it was deeply improper.

Taking pity, Effie wiped her hands with the stain-rag. "Is that Mr. Stanley Baxter of Endsgate?"

"The same!" The young man's eager-to-please face dissolved in alarm when he realized he might have committed another faux pas. "Er, Madam—"

"You're new to service, I take it? I am to be addressed as Miss Mitchell. And you are?"

"Fielding, Ma-Miss Mitchell. Samuel Fielding."

"Well, Mr. Fielding," Effie said, "Please, tell your master that we are not entertaining offers for the engine, now or in the future."

"Miss Mitchell," Fielding shifted uncomfortably. "Mr. Baxter said you'd say that. He said to say . . ." (The young man closed his eyes, evidently trying to recall the message exactly.) "I cannot imagine my fleet without a high balloon like the *Dover*. Therefore, I am proposing to hire the services of Miss Mitchell, her assistant, the balloon, and the *Dover's* Asmodeus engine, for £2,000."

Mrs. Brown sucked in a sharp breath. Efficient to keep her face still while her mind raced. Two thousand pounds! The balloon itself was only worth a hundred. The engine, true, was worth more—how much more was unclear these days, given Parliament's ban on West Indies aether and the old aeronautical families' reluctance to part with their engines. But £2,000! With that money, she could secure a land lease for her mother and still have years' worth of income set aside.

"Tell your master I will consider his generous offer." Feeling a flare of pride, Effie added, "Though my answer will probably still be the same." She flushed, wondering if she sounded childish.

Fielding appeared not to notice. "Thank you! Miss. Uh. Mrs." He slid out a rolled piece of paper—evidently a contract—and dropped it on the counter. He managed an awkward bow to her and a hesitating bob in the direction of Mrs. Brown before fleeing down the street.

"What's that about?" Mrs. Brown's dialect was sheathed now that combat was over.

Effie gazed after the servant, her mind racing. "It's the Exhibition," she decided finally. "Mr. Baxter has his aerial display planned for the solstice. To truly outdo Mr. Green, he needs to put a ship close to the Crystal Palace."

Mrs. Brown sniffed. "He wilna do it wi' those lumbrin' creechurs."

"Not the dirigibles," Effie agreed. The new inventions might be cheaper to fly

than Asmodeus balloons, but they were clumsy.

"If he hadn'e wrecked his own, he wouldn'e be looking," Mrs. Brown observed.

Effie nodded. Mr. Baxter had lost his *Witch of Atlas* some years ago after launching his balloon in a brewing storm. Since then, he had gained a reputation as a man who had gambled much of his family's money away at card tables but then won it back with some clever investments in the colonies. A dubious sort of man.

"It would be a lot of money for Mother." Effie was suddenly aware that she had been toying with the rag in her hand, smearing her fingers with oil in the process. She re-wiped them, but it was too late: the telltale stains had crept into the cracks of her knuckles. "I'll have to consult with her."

As she turned away, two things flickered at the edge of Effie's perception that, in retrospect, she would wish she'd paid attention to. The first was the blue smudge the contract's seal left on the counter. The second was a figure in the crowd whose posture strongly reminded Effie of Mr. Baxter. But why would Mr. Baxter watch his own servant's delivery? Effie looked back. The man had vanished into the churn of the London street.

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That night, Effie lay awake fretting over Mr. Baxter's offer. Her father's marriage bond guaranteed Effie's mother a small stipend, and Effie's aeronautical demonstrations brought in occasional tides of money. But a reliable source of income would be useful. Unlike the marriage proposals Effie had fielded in recent years, Baxter's offer would also enable her to keep flying. What then was the source of her unease?

Something kept turning at the back of her mind—a smudge of blue as though from a hex seal. Though that was impossible.

Around three in the morning, Effie realized her decision was already made. The Asmodeus engine was her family's legacy. She would not sell it for a million pounds.

Thankful for an excuse to close her eyes, she rolled onto her side.

She was woken by a clamor outside.

Lurching up, Effie saw the orange glow at her window and knew.

Effie plummeted down the stairs in a rush of dark. Figures clustered uselessly

in front of the workshop, lit by orange and yellow.

"Fire!" someone hollered, but Effie was already running past them, her bare feet bruising the ground, her nightdress—*improper*, part of her noted—a frustrating drag on the night air. Sparks floated up from the workshop—*Even the best aeronaut can be taken down by one*, she thought—and she struggled with the massive padlock, forcing in her necklace key while some faint voice behind her cried "Miss! Please don't!"

The workshop was a blaze of heat, its walls moving fire. Eyes stinging, Effie dropped to her knees, where the pure air was thickest. She crawled toward the safe. No good saving the *Dover's* paper now. That and the galley she'd stained were gone, but neither of these things were the heart of an Asmodeus balloon.

Something crashed beside her, letting in a gust of air. *I might die here*, *on the ground of all places*—but Effie set that thought aside. The entire world came down to this: feeling her way to the mercifully cool metal of the safe.

It was empty.

Effie groped inside the space the Asmodeus engine should be. It couldn't not be here.

Suddenly, hard arms yanked her away. She struggled, trying to protest, but her burning lungs lacked air. She was dragged backward through the flaring dark. She was on cold ground, rolling and coughing while ice water drenched her body. Pushing herself up on a numb arm, Effie saw her father's workshop collapse in a shower of sparks.

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"Today," Effie said grimly.

Mrs. Brown glanced sideways. Since the fire, she'd treated her young mistress cautiously, as though Effie was one of her mother's fine Wedgwood cups. "There's no proof Mr. Baxter had owt to do with the fire—"

Effie shook her head, unwilling to replay her frustrating conversations with Scotland Yard. "He offered that contract to cover himself," she muttered. "Nobody will suspect a 'gentleman' of stealing an item he was about to purchase. He knew I'd refuse. The contract seal was hexed. It silenced our alarms—"

"Oh aye," Mrs. Brown agreed, "but coppers want proof if they're to lay hands on a gen'lman." For a moment, Mrs. Brown looked abstracted, perhaps reflecting on some episode from her mysterious past. Then she said, "If you're caught filching, it'll be a hard sing. They won't drop you, miss, but—"

"I'll sell my confession to the newspapers," Effie said, her chin jutting defiance. "It'll be a scandal."

"He'll shirk about for a day or two," Mrs. Brown agreed. "They'll clap you in Bedlam a mite longer."

Effie had visited Bedlam once, and her recollection of that tour—which had, after all, only shown the Lady's Botanical Club the respectable cells—brought her up cold. "You think they'd do that?"

Mrs. Brown gazed at her with flat, hard eyes. "If you weren't respectable, miss," she said, "you'd already be there."

Effie swallowed, taking in Mrs. Brown's meaningful glance at her unusual dress with its flexible stays and higher petticoats. The sideways glances of the shuffling crowd suddenly struck her as menacing. It was one thing to attract such glances as a female aeronaut with a balloon—an outré figure to be sure, but one protected by the aura of British science. But as an oddly dressed woman without a balloon, she suddenly felt her vulnerability keenly.

"Still," Effie said, hearing the stubbornness in her voice and half-hating herself for it. "We're going to find it. Today."

She turned, craning her neck to catch sight of the aerial fleet bobbing behind the Crystal Palace. There was Mr. Green's *Nassau*, the largest Asmodeus balloon ever built, turning in the breeze like a glorious red-and-blue planet. There was an old-fashioned Montgolfier. There were passenger vessels, taking paying customers up in cautious trips to view the top of the palace. And then there were the detestable Mr. Baxter's dirigibles, hovering at a distance from the rest.

Effie and Mrs. Brown dutifully filed in with the shilling crowd. The Great Exhibition had attracted a seething mixture of nationalities—scar-faced Americans, queue-sporting Chinese, green-scaled Inner Earthers—even an odd Frenchman, the latter drawing suspicious glances from John Bull and continental exiles alike. But nominally, at least, the *Pax Francia* treaty still held. The Frenchman wafted through the crowd, an unhappy-looking security agent plodding in his wake.

Under different circumstances, Effie might have joined the crowd in gaping at the Crystal Palace's dazzle of fabrics, its pink diamonds and arching dinosaur bones. As it was, she and Mrs. Brown had one destination in mind: the great aerial docks, futuristically imagined.

The crowd entered the observation platform for the docks. Upturned

faces gawped at the shadows of dirigibles and at the statues commemorating aeronautical luminaries: Joseph Priestly, whose quest for pure air had led to the isolation of the aetherial element; the Montgolfier Brothers, who had first demonstrated humanity's capacity for flight; and lastly, Sir Humphry Davy, who had successfully driven Napoleon from England's skies only to expire from his wounds in the Battle of Britain's final hour. A bouquet of flowers lay at Davy's feet. Two guards stood on either side of the display case for the *Veritas's* engine, scanning the crowd. No doubt they were looking for the usual dangers: foreign agitators and religious enthusiasts who mistakenly identified aether "ghosts" with immortal souls.

Forgetting herself, Effie pressed forward with the rest of the crowd for a glimpse of Davy's ghost circling its brass confines.

"Miss," Mrs. Brown whispered. Reluctantly, Effie pulled back. Now that they had actually arrived, she could feel an anxious pit forming in her stomach. She *ahemed* some distracted laborers out of her way. Behind her, she heard a series of surprised wheezes as Mrs. Brown, unconstrained by social niceties, elbowed her way to the front of the platform.

"'Ere you!" Mrs. Brown thundered. "What's this!"

Effie ducked under the guard rope as the crowd behind her exploded into shrieks of alarm. "Grenado!" someone shouted.

"He's workin' for Boney!" Mrs. Brown declared.

As Effie swung herself over the raised platform, she glimpsed a Vril'ya splayed to the floor by one of the guards, its yellow eyes wide with astonishment. Effie found herself hoping the guards would figure out quickly that the "grenado" Mrs. Brown had planted on the Inner Earther was a dummy.

In the shadow of the now-chaotic platform Effie whipped off her skirt, revealing the aeronaut's trousers underneath. She pinned the forged performer's ribbon to her collar, tucked in her pocket, and started forward, trying to look as though she had somewhere to be.

Nobody challenged her as she walked into the aeronauts' workshop. She strode between the benches, trying to glance surreptitiously at each station she passed. In her pocket, the Hobbs pick-lock chafed uncomfortably against her leg. "It'll open all but cold iron, miss," Mrs. Brown had promised. Under different circumstances, Effie would have been taken aback by her servant's familiarity with such devices, but now was not the time to ask questions.

Then she saw the gold-and-purple colors of the Donna Julia. Effie slowed to

an amble, smiling vaguely at the young men sanding the tackle blocks. They did a double take when they saw her, eyes wide at the sight of a female aeronaut. Effie let her gaze float over the workstation. She saw no safe.

"I'm the new pilot," she said pleasantly. "Mr. Baxter's new engine wants airing. Where am I to get it from?"

It was a gamble, of course. But if Baxter had stolen her engine—and he did, Effie thought furiously—it had to be somewhere nearby.

The two men looked both amazed and blank. Then the first one waved his hand at someone behind her. "Oi! Fielding! The miss is looking for a new engine."

Effie turned to see Baxter's mop-haired servant bounding toward them. The air seemed to freeze around her. Fielding's pleasant face changed expressions in slow motion, first taking on a look of surprise and then one of happy recognition.

"Miss Mitchell! What a—I'm glad to see you're back on the field! That is," he said, remembering himself, "Mr. Baxter will be glad. He was terribly disappointed to hear you wouldn't be joining us. What a horrible thing! That fire! Did you lose much of the workshop?"

Effie stared. If Fielding was a liar, he was the best she'd ever encountered.

"The *Dover* won't fly this season, I'm afraid." She smiled, delivering the line she and Mrs. Brown had practiced. "One of my father's friends invited me to assist today. Alongside my chaperone, of course," she added, remembering balloons' dubious reputation as French inventions.

She blushed, and Mr. Fielding blushed. No progress whatsoever occurred until one of the sanders said, "The miss wants a look at the new engine?"

Fielding practically bounced with joy. "He told you about the engine!" Catching himself, he lowered his voice. "It's a remarkable innovation, Miss Mitchell. You have to see it!"

Smiling tensely, Effie followed Fielding out of the workshop and toward the looming dirigibles. They looked like something out of an antediluvian nightmare, huge and iron grey. It was hard not to believe the Nonconformists were right when they said the burning of fossilized aether—the very innovation that had permitted the elimination of the West Indies trade—infected their crafts with the souls of ancient beasts. Effie shivered in the bright sunlight, feeling as though she were indeed coming into the territory of massive predators.

"Mr. Baxter!" Fielding waved his hands toward one of the figures examining

the strain on an almost filled dirigible. Baxter—a slender man clad in impractical ruffles—froze. His expression told Effie all she needed to know.

Certainty exploded into rage. She pointed at him. "Thief!" she yelled. "Arsonist!"

This was not part of the plan. Neither, however, was Mr. Baxter's reaction: to lean over the galley and order one of his men to cast off the bowlines.

Effie took off at a run. The bowline had just left its mooring post when Effie caught hold of it. Forgetting any pretense of propriety, she launched herself up the rope, hand over hand.

Below, she saw the shadow of the balloon drift away from the ground and a bewildered Fielding being pulled into the air by the bowline's loop. She hoped the man had the sense to let go before they were too high. Effie, having abandoned all sense herself, hauled up into the galley, almost at the feet of a frightened-looking Baxter.

"You!" she puffed. "Stole! My! Engine!"

Baxter raised his hands as if in protest. "I needed to show it could be done!" He gestured toward the dirigible's glowing engine. Following his gesture, Effie saw, to her horror, a familiar brass globe burning blue within the green flame of an Owen engine. He'd stacked the two devices, a combination of power that ought to be impossible and that would—she saw now—grant this dirigible more maneuverability than it had ever had before.

She realized her mistake a second later when a blow to the side of her head blackened her vision. Effie crashed onto the galley deck. Above her, Baxter wielded a heavy pole. "I didn't mean to kill you," he apologized. "If you only understood! I've seen the future, you see. In the emperor's telescope. Napoleon's got a new alliance. The men from Mars and their mechanical ships. They'll invade from the sky and turn England red."

A well-placed kick cut short the madman's rant. Effie scrambled away, her head throbbing. Somehow, in all her scheming, she had never envisioned the possibility of dying. *If only I can get my engine back*, she thought wildly, *it'll be worth it*.

Her hair was yanked backward. Effie had to clutch a cleat to keep from falling. In the corner of her eye, she saw the dark shape of the pole coming for her and turned away. But before it hit, there was a crash behind her, and the grip on her hair loosened.

Mr. Fielding, having pulled himself on board the airship, was apparently

terminating his employment with his fists. "Working for Boney, is it?" He yelled. "You Frenchified villain!"

Effie hauled herself up. It wasn't just her head wound, she realized. The dirigible was listing. With a mind of its own, the monstrous airship was heading straight for the Crystal Palace. The sharp point of a British flagpole sailed into view.

"Brace!" she yelled, her training leaping to the fore. Effie pulled into four-point contact with the galley as the shatter of glass announced the worst. Glancing down, she saw Baxter push the overbalanced Fielding overboard—and was relieved to see the servant tumble onto one of the Palace's iron ribs, just missing a fall through its glass ceiling. The dirigible leapt free.

"No, no, no!" Baxter, his face bleeding, launched himself at the helm. "Why aren't you working?" Buckets of tools skidded down the deck as the dirigible's tilt increased.

Effie, hearing the hiss of air above, knew. Wasn't this the moment she'd practiced since she was eleven years old? Carefully, she reached for a loose line, found its tension, and slid down toward the engines.

All the fight seemed to have gone out of Baxter. He stared up at the dirigible's sagging envelope like a blind man. "It can't be."

Effie landed on the engine's frame. The heat from the fire was excruciating, but she had no time. Even as Baxter turned, she was already snatching the blistering Asmodeus engine from the flames, already raising it—

"No!" Baxter grabbed at her.

And suddenly he was falling, and she was following, the green ground rushing up to meet them both.

The wind was loud around Effie. Screechingly loud. She tried to drag the engine toward her face. *This is how you die*, her father had said.

The engine pulled away from her. It twisted underneath her, crunching into her abdomen, forcing her upward. The wind died.

Below her, a tiny figure—Baxter—hit the ground. Effic turned her face away. Her own fall had slowed to a crawl. The hard fist of the engine pushed her up, the fierce heat of her family's ghosts lowering her gently to Earth.

The engine deposited Effie, burned and bleeding, in the middle of Hyde Park. Energy expended, it settled in the grass beside her. She stared at it as the running people approached.

Something new has been discovered today, she thought dazedly. The Asmodeus

ghosts were still conscious. And they could move independently, without flame. Shapes were aligning differently in her head: the famous dexterity of Asmodeus craft, the hideous accidents attending West Indies "slave" balloons, the alien ponderousness of the dirigibles. And somewhere, too, she was remembering what Baxter has said about the Continental Emperor and Mars and an invasion. She wasn't sure how it all fit together yet.

In later years, Effie would say she'd felt the shadow of destiny in that moment. That for a brief second, the Asmodeus engine had shown her the shape of things to come.

But the moment passed. A crowd raced across the green. The determined shape of Mrs. Brown led them, and behind her, a limping Fielding looked confused.

Effie glanced down at the gleaming engine sitting on the grass, its familiar ghosts circling contentedly.

"Thank you," the next aerial admiral said. And she clambered up to greet the future.

8

When not globetrotting in search of dusty tomes, Siobhan Carroll lives and lurks in Delaware. She is a graduate of Clarion West, the indefatigable OWW, and the twin ivory towers of Indiana University and U.B.C. Her fiction can be found in magazines like Beneath Ceaseless Skies, Realms of Fantasy, and Lightspeed. Sometimes she writes under the byline "Von Carr." Both versions of herself firmly support the use of the Oxford Comma. For more, visit voncarr-siobhan-carroll.blogspot.com.

Hiss

Folly Blaine Randy Henderson

000

Mary pushed open the heavy oak door to her uncle's laboratory with stiff, white fingers and led Simon, the housekeeper's boy, inside. Moonlight streamed through tall arched windows that overlooked the rear gardens. Pale flowers shifted in the evening breeze like ghostly dancers.

"There, you've had your look," Mary said.

"We have time. Sir went all the way to the gate." Simon wandered deeper into the room.

Mary followed. He was the newest addition to their family. She would indulge him. "I told you it isn't scary." She shrugged. "Only another room."

Instruments rested neatly on wooden tables and hung on the walls, perfectly spaced between tall cabinets. In addition to the pincers and vises, there were tongs, tiny hammers, handsaws, and thin metal rods. Long tables spanned the length of the walls with curtained areas beneath.

While Simon inspected a row of glass beakers, Mary picked up a scalpel, considered it. She enjoyed how the blade glinted in the moonlight. She touched the tip lightly to her index finger. A prick, and then a spot of brown welled, pooling at the tip. So sharp. So precise.

Mary ran the blade slowly along the pad of her thumb, splitting the skin apart in a neat line. Thick brown sludge oozed from the wound.

She stared, waited. No pain, no fear. Nothing. She felt nothing.

Mary glanced at Simon and pocketed the scalpel.

Approaching the shadows at the back of the room, Simon paused before a large object, easily three times taller than himself. A gray sheet covered the object.

Simon yanked away the sheet. Fabric pooled at the object's base, revealing a large metal sphere covered in curved rectangles of copper and bronze, bolted at each corner. Sets of orderly pipes stacked like an organ fed into the top of the strange device. The sphere rested on squat feet of mortared brick, set right into the laboratory floor.

Was this the "battery" that she'd heard her uncle whisper about with visitors? Simon stepped forward, touching the smooth shell, pinching a bolt between his fingers and twisting. It didn't budge. Wires trailed from the side of the machine to a raised bed next to it where a helmet rested on the long, low cushion.

"What is this?" Simon asked.

"I'm sure it's for his work."

"Everything is for his work, but what's it do?" Simon flicked the helmet.

Male voices from the hallway interrupted them. Mary grabbed Simon's arm and whispered, "Hide." She pushed him toward a curtained area beneath a shelf along the wall. It would give them a clear view of the machine. The two crawled inside, and Mary pulled the curtain shut just as the door opened, and Uncle entered the room, trailed by Mister Davis and several men. Their shoes shuffled across the floor. They moved like they carried something heavy. A kerosene lamp flared to life. Then another.

"Set the body there," her uncle said. He sounded different, more official than she was used to hearing.

Men's legs passed the sliver in the curtain. Mary held her breath.

Body? Simon mouthed.

Mary glared and shook her head.

Together, they peered between the curtains.

Mister Davis picked up the helmet while the other dark-haired men dropped something on the raised bed. It creaked in protest.

"How long will this take?" Mister Davis asked. He stood shorter than the others. "You two, wait outside," he said, and the other men left.

Uncle frowned at the sheet on the ground and kicked it aside. He opened a panel on the sphere. He turned dials, listened, pressed switches. The machine gurgled and then roared to life. Steam trickled and hissed from vents at the side.

Hiss 19

"Do you feel it?" Simon whispered, his voice bright. "I feel . . . looser. Stronger."

Now that he said it, Mary realized it was true. She lifted her hands and flexed them. The sluggishness she usually felt, the . . . disconnect between her will and her body had lessened. And her special heart, the one that sang beneath the ragged scar on her chest with a constant *click click*, pulsed with new vigor.

"You say he died this afternoon?" Uncle said loudly, over the roar of the machine. "Here," he took the helmet from Mister Davis and seated it firmly on the dead man's skull, rocking it into place. "Time's right on the edge, but we may get lucky. Souls tend to cling to the familiar."

"I don't care about his soul," Mister Davis said. "I care about his tongue. We need to know if they've found us out, if our undertaking is at risk."

"If there's not enough soul to bring back the whole man, we risk greater danger than discovery. Let me work."

Mary's head whipped toward Simon, but he'd lost interest and was cupping a glass beaker over his mouth.

The machine quieted to a low hum.

"What are you waiting for?" Mister Davis said. "Ask him."

Uncle pressed a finger to his mouth. "Shhhh." He shifted a lever up on the great machine, and the humming and hissing increased.

The dead man screamed.

Mary felt a surge, a tingling that flowed from her humming heart, matched pulse for pulse by the excited hissing of the machine and the convulsions of the dead man.

"The window!" Mister Davis cried.

Mary looked over in time to see a hooded face ducking between the lilies.

"Damn," Uncle muttered. He hesitated. "Damn, damn, damn." Then he pulled the lever all the way down and rushed from the room. "Gather your men. He mustn't leave the grounds."

Mister Davis followed, calling to his helpers. The room fell silent and still once again, save for the hissing of the machine and the groaning of the dead man. Already, Mary could feel the hum of her heart slowing to its normal soft and steady clicking.

Mary climbed out from under the shelf. Simon held back, clinging to the curtains as though they were his mother's dress.

The dead man's torso lurched upward, his eyelids peeling back to reveal black

pits. His mouth wrenched to one side then drooped, tongue lolling out like an overheated dog. The sudden reek of spoiled food washed over Mary. Simon shrieked and backed away.

The dead man's fingers closed around Mary's wrist, and he pulled her toward him. His breath stank of foulness, rot.

Mary jerked away, and her arm ripped from her shoulder with the wet gristly sound of a pork chop being torn in two.

"You-you," the dead man stuttered. Something like spit but milky yellow, strung from his lips as he dropped the arm.

Mary reached down and picked up her arm from the floor where it had fallen. The joint had gone soft again. The housekeeper could fix it, but it was such a bother.

She set her arm on the table.

"Please," the man said. Dried blood flecked the corner of his mouth. "So much hurt—"

Mary leaned in closer. "What do you feel?" She licked her lips. "Tell me."

"Needles. In my arms, my legs. Oh God, my eyes. Like someone shoving pins into my eyes."

He struggled to stand and fell back again, his muscles seizing and contorting, head jerking beneath the helmet, his mouth opening and closing like a fish. "It burns," he said.

"Do you really want my help?" Mary said slowly. Her hand moved to the scalpel in her pocket.

"Yes," the dead man pleaded again, air wheezing past his slack lips.

"Truly?"

"I said I do!"

Mary plunged the blade deep into the dead man's chest. He fell against the bed and shuddered. "Thank you." He smiled through a mouthful of black grime. "Thank . . . you."

Mary looked from the man to the machine to Simon who stood peeking with wide, yellowed eyes from between the curtains. She retrieved the scalpel, wiped the blood on the dead man's shirt, and counted to ten. Then Mary grasped the lever and pushed up. The hissing began again. The machine shuddered to life.

The dead man screamed. And then his screams turned to tearless sobs. "Whywhy-why—"

Hiss 21

"You shouldn't've hurt my arm, sir," Mary said. "It wasn't nice. It wasn't good. Come, Simon," she said and held out her hand. "Uncle will be back soon."

Simon walked to her as though in a daze, and she led him to the door.

"No! No! Please! I'm sorry," the man said. "Let me sleep again."

Uncle returned, breathing heavily. He frowned as Mary and a quivering Simon emerged.

"You shouldn't be here," he said. "What happened to your arm?"

"You know, Uncle," Mary said, leading Simon into the hall, "our little family could really use a butler."

8

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The Misplaced Body of Fitzhugh Alvey

Jessica Corra

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When Dr. Alvey finally opened his eyes, he was delighted to find himself in his own home. He had no recollection of having gotten there, but one did not question good fortune. The fact that he was indeed questioning it indicated that he was a scientist, and questions were simply his order of business. More importantly, Fitzhugh Alvey had never in his life encountered good fortune when bad fortune would do.

Fitzhugh remembered testing the portment chamber as planned and that it had worked. That at least explained how he had come to be on the floor of his study. He must've returned from his trip. He stood up slowly and attempted to straighten his clothes.

Fitzhugh shrieked. For despite solving one mystery, a bigger one had just presented itself. He could see through his hands. He was entirely transparent, in the manner of one of the spiritualists' ghosts. But he did not remember dying. Surely, if the portment chamber had killed him, his body would be in the chamber and not just his ghost. Only a scientist of Dr. Alvey's caliber would posit a hypothesis upon finding himself probably dead, but science was his first love, and he was only probably dead. Panic was not necessary until he had obtained more facts.

In the next room, he could hear his secretary, Miss Windless, moving about. A glance at the clock indicated tea time, but Fitzhugh was not hungry. He thought

to write down that observation, as it seemed to support that he was dead, but he could not hold a pen. He growled his frustration.

"Dr. Alvey? Have you returned?" Miss Windless called.

Fitzhugh froze. His clothing was still mussed, but he couldn't fix it, and that was the lesser concern if Esther should see him now. Clearly, she was aware the machine had worked to some degree. He hid behind his desk as the doorknob rattled and watched. Esther's buttoned boots stepped into the room. "Dr. Alvey?"

Esther knew almost as much about the chamber as he did, being his assistant as much as his secretary. If anyone would be able to help him, it was her. Fitzhugh straightened. "Do not be alarmed, Miss Windless, but there was a mishap with the machine."

Esther's mouth puckered in astonishment, her blue eyes wide. She swayed, and Fitzhugh said, "Please do not faint. I am unable to catch you."

Esther pursed her lips. "Well then. Do tell."

"It would appear that the portment chamber was not able to bring back my body with my soul, and I cannot operate the machine to return for it," he theorized. It was easier to theorize than to reflect personally upon the matter, or he might faint himself. Could ghosts faint? They were pure consciousness according to the most current journals. But then, he *had* awoken on the floor, indicating either that he was not technically a ghost, but something else, or that current science was wrong about ghosts. He would write that down as evidence neither for nor against the theory that he was dead. If he could write.

"Miss Windless, a new journal, if you would," he snapped and began to dictate everything he could remember about his trip and his discovery upon return.

"Yes, sir," she said, and for a time, the only sounds were the scratch of her pen and his quiet tenor.

000

Esther Windless was no stranger to the unusual. She had a knack for it, which was how she found herself the assistant to Dr. Fitzhugh Alvey in the first place. Her first cousin Dorothea on her mother's side had become a medium, and a lady scientist was only slightly more bizarre to the Windless family. But these were progressive, modern times, so allowances must be made for such eccentricities as Esther and Dorothea.

In addition to being her cousin, Dot was also her best friend and the person to consult about her employer's matter. Esther had convinced him that research always facilitated action, no matter how badly he wanted to retrieve his body. She had done this less by argument and more by a simple refusal to work the machine.

Esther explained Dr. Alvey's experiment and his hypothesis.

Dot whistled. "So he thinks he's dead somewhere?"

"I believe it is his primary theory, the one that makes the most sense, but I do not think he believes it, no," she said, then paused. "It is perhaps a bit too metaphysical to believe one is dead when one is conscious to ponder it? Descartes's 'cogito ergo sum,' I would say."

"So you do not believe he is dead either?"

"I am withholding my opinion until you tell me what you know of ghosts," Esther said and smiled.

Dot frowned and sat upright. "This calls for tea." She rang the bell.

A discussion followed, the likes of which would have horrified the Windless family into disownment, and it was accompanied by the most delightful lemon cookies.

Dot concluded, "We have accepted the notion of ghosts, insofar as a soul exists. Consciousness is quantifiable in that sense. A soul is potential energy in a body, which becomes a sort of sustained kinetic energy apart. Ghosts. How the energy sustains itself is a fascinating question, but it is enough for now to posit that it can."

"How exciting! You should be a scientist, too," Esther exclaimed.

Dot tutted in an unladylike fashion. "If you will pardon, science could not handle me. I am best left to spiritualism."

"Science could not handle you? What does that say of me, then?" Esther was incensed.

Dot said, "I expect you will force science into line eventually, and you will start by sorting out Dr. Alvey's latest mess. I suggest you try the most recent jump first. I can't imagine the machine would have left his body somewhen else and continued jumping without his notice."

Esther had the distinct impression that Dot did not think much of Fitzhugh Alvey. True, he was a bit unkempt but in a striking way. His black hair stuck up in the back but it framed a handsome face behind horn-rimmed spectacles. He was altogether not unpleasant to work with in any capacity.

Rather than say that, Esther nodded. "I thought so, too. I suppose there's nothing for it. We'll go tonight. That is the other reason I wanted to consult you. In case the machine malfunctions again," Esther swallowed, "you might know what had become of me."

"I would never give you up to your parents, dear one," Dot said, patting Esther's hand. Esther relaxed until Dot added, "I would simply tell them you eloped with the doctor and we would never hear from you again."

Esther choked and said, barely withholding her own laughter, "The truth would be easier on their constitutions than that."

000

Fitzhugh was quite enthused to try the portment chamber again.

Miss Windless said, "Really, sir? I would think given your condition . . ." she trailed off, unsure how to politely finish.

He smiled. His assistant had always been a forthright young lady, one of the reasons he had hired her. Laboratories were not the place for dainty specimens of either sex. Miss Windless had presented herself at an opportune time, and he could not resist. That she had saved him from a dilemma involving his latest automaton and a tree had only been part of his consideration.

"Alright then, shall we?" He had spent the hour she had called upon her cousin confined to the study. The internal debate over how he might pass through a wall, given the conservation of energy, had occupied him so thoroughly he had hardly noticed the time.

Miss Windless had explained her cousin's theory of energy states, which was his preferred conclusion as well, but it didn't account for a great many things. His mind reeled at the implications of being a cognizant ghost if, indeed, he were dead. And if he weren't, the implications were greater still and best left to someone in possession of a body for an appropriately overwhelmed response.

He followed Miss Windless into the portment chamber. It was not designed for use by multiple persons, though Fitzhugh would construct a bigger one if it proved successful. A simple chair sat inside a casing of aluminum into which he had built a console containing the wiring and mechanisms necessary to power the machine.

Miss Windless sat in the chair, and Fitzhugh crowded in beside her. He

was lanky and had to bend nearly in half to fit. "My sincere apologies, Miss Windless."

"It's alright, Dr. Alvey," she said, but sounded constricted. "I'll shut the door."

Only he was blocking it. Esther could see the door through him but had no way of reaching it as they were positioned. Embarrassment swept over him, and he would have blushed had he the systems to do it. He said, "Maybe I could go back out and come in after you've shut it."

Esther said, "My own sincere apologies, Dr. Alvey," before plunging her hand into his abdomen and sliding shut the door to the chamber. She gasped and withdrew.

Fitzhugh felt nothing, only watched in horror as his assistant clutched her hand. He'd have felt sick, but he was more concerned for the lady, who looked pale in the dim interior, lit only by the burning polyaetherate beneath the desk. "Are you well?"

"You're hot, sir," she said, astonished. "Give me a moment to write it down, but I think this supports our conclusion that you are in some sort of energy state."

"Very good, Esther." he said. He had just called her by her Christian name, and she'd said *our*, but he didn't correct her or apologize for his own gaffe. She had just stuck her hand through his soul. They were a bit past formalities.

Under his careful instruction, Esther started the machine. It sounded much like a storm had unleashed itself inside the chamber. Esther said, "Is it supposed to sound like this?"

"We are fine," Fitzhugh reassured her. The chamber filled with the diffuse, cloying scent of elderberry as the polyaetherate gas burned. "Brace yourself, Esther!"

With a shudder, the portment chamber blinked out of the study. It appeared simultaneously in the alley behind Dr. Alvey's brownstone, ten years previous.

Inside the portment chamber, Esther had fallen off the chair. She was a wisp of a girl, and the sort of bounce the chamber made as it landed would have toppled almost anyone. Dr. Alvey said, "I fell off, too. Excuse me for not helping you up."

"Yes, sir." Esther righted herself on the seat and checked her dress. Nothing was askew enough to be indecent, and Fitzhugh found himself disappointed.

Miss Windless was a model example of a modern lady in terms of intellect and bearing. She said, "Your body should be near here, then?"

"Let's hope."

000

Esther was oddly disenchanted. She hadn't felt the time travel. Opening the chamber door to the alley and not the inside of the study was the only indication they'd gone anywhere. Given the noise and shuddering, Esther could believe the machine had fallen out the study window. The past didn't look much different from the present.

"It was only ten years. I didn't want to tax us," Dr. Alvey defended the machine.

Esther smiled. "Alright, let's search the alley. You ought to be here somewhere."

It occurred to Esther that should they find his body and Dr. Alvey couldn't put himself back, she would be required to finagle it into the portment chamber with her. Regardless of its condition. Esther was suddenly quite ill.

"Whatever is the matter?"

She explained. Dr. Alvey's eyes widened, and his shoulders slumped. "I'm so very sorry, Miss Windless. I'm a horrible scientist not to have thought this through."

"That's not true, Dr. Alvey. I didn't think of it either," she said. They walked the length of the alley, trepidation mounting with each step. The only part of Dr. Alvey present was the one which had arrived with her. "I thought for sure your body would be here."

"The machine was slightly closer to the house. Perhaps in the garden?"

Esther didn't know how a soulless body could get itself to the garden without help, but she kept the thought to herself. She could hear the twinge of desperation in her employer's voice. She said, "I shall check."

The gate to the garden was not latched, and she could tell someone had indeed been this way. The dust was disturbed as though something had been dragged through the gate. Esther swallowed. "It looks like something went into the garden. Shall we follow? I don't wish to trespass. I'm afraid I might be seen."

"I can scout ahead," the doctor offered. "Wait here."

Esther did as instructed. Dr. Alvey returned moments later. "I'm sure I went this way."

"Why do you think that, sir?"

"One of my shoes fell off about halfway down the path," he said and grinned.

His face looked boyishly young. Esther didn't have the heart to say that she doubted he'd been walking. Fitzhugh Alvey was a smart man intellectually, but common sense was sometimes lacking. Rather, the man could be naïve. That was how the automaton and the tree had gotten the best of him.

Esther picked up the shoe. She was sure they'd be apprehended as trespassers at any moment. Or she would since Dr. Alvey was half invisible and entirely unarrestable. "Dr. Alvey, from whom did you purchase the house? Are they... nice?"

Dr. Alvey sobered. "I suppose that depends on one's perspective. They are my parents."

She had not met them, but if their son was any indication, Sir Alvin Alvey and Lady Alvey were awkward sorts, though no more challenging than her own parents. At least they were not peerage.

"They seem to have taken you into the house," she observed. "Or their butler has."

"I can't be dead, then," Dr. Alvey rejoiced, perhaps prematurely. "Why don't I go in and have a gander?"

"Yes, why don't you?" Esther said, her nerves fraying by the second. "You could simply join your body and sneak out."

"That seems smart," he said. "Thank you for your help, Miss Windless."

"Of course, Dr. Alvey, I am your assistant. It is my job." She bit her lip.

"Yes, but this goes above and beyond duty, I should say," Dr. Alvey said.

Was he going to offer her compensation? Esther didn't want that kind of reward, only recognition.

Thankfully, Fitzhugh Alvey, for his naiveté, knew his secretary well enough. "You have performed most admirably. I couldn't ask for a better assistant."

Esther blushed. That was a bit much. The affection in his voice was rather personal sounding. She looked up at Dr. Alvey through her lashes. He gazed back fondly. She wasn't sure what to make of that. He had always been a kind boss and friendly. She trusted him explicitly, even in such mishaps as this. "We are not home yet. Go on."

"Of course, Esther," he straightened and marched through the back door. Esther rather liked how he said her name.



Fitzhugh had been obtuse in regards to the current owners of the house. The Alveys were a controversial family, given their progressive leanings, but a wealthy one. Sir Alvin was the first Baronet of Blakeley where he owned a much nicer home than this brownstone, having had the title conferred upon him for scientific advancements.

Sir Alvin had a somewhat paranoid leaning, which his wife, a beautiful, much younger woman, did not discourage. The more time Sir Alvin spent locked in his laboratory, the more time she had to dally. It was Fitzhugh's poor fortune that the Alveys were in residence at the brownstone and not Blakeley when he tried his experiment.

Fitzhugh took a moment to recover from walking through the door. It was like walking through mud, if he were the mud. He suspected his energy flowed around or through the matter of the door, rather than the door parting around him.

He followed voices from the front rooms, careful to stay in shadow. He peeked into the parlor to see his body slumped on a lounge and his parents arguing. Fitzhugh wished he had not waited the hour for Esther's visit to her cousin.

"We have to call someone," Sir Alvin said. "We can't just let him—it—rot here."

Fitzhugh's mother was beside herself. "I am not sure which is worse, that you have another son or that he's dead! We can't call the doctor and say we found him like this!"

Another son? Fitzhugh had two sisters. He crept closer.

"We have a little more time before his condition matters, my dear, so calm yourself and let us approach once more. I have let you rant for near an hour, but the servants will be back soon, and we must have done something. Firstly, I do not have another son. I do not know who this young man is or why he resembles me. I suspect he is a stranger who wished to capitalize upon the fact and ask for money. How he came to be dead in the alley, I cannot say. Biology is not my specialty!"

Fitzhugh was saved from having to create a distraction by a noise in the

hallway. The servants had returned, with a struggling Esther between them. As the Alveys' attention turned toward the noise, Fitzhugh dashed through the piano and launched himself into his body, praying he would stick, although he was not a man of faith.

Upon sinking into the body, his soul tethered itself. Fitzhugh had a moment to wonder if this would have happened with any other inanimate body but his own, presuming enough preservation to function, before he felt the exertion of his body restarting and began to cough and ache.

All present turned toward the couch.

"Do beg your pardon," he wheezed. His voice was rusty, his body not certain it should respond to his commands. "Esther, the notebook, if you please."

His mother fainted. The butler carried her to the other lounge and went for the smelling salts. His father muttered to himself, "I'd have vouched he was wholly dead."

Esther shrugged off the cook's arm and crossed the room to hand Fitzhugh the journal, glaring at them all as she went. Fitzhugh jotted down everything that had just transpired and *looked* up to see his father's sputtering face reach breaking point.

"Who the blast are you?"

"Sir Alvey, you have my sincere apology for this predicament. I shall be out of your parlor and on my way at once," he said. He did not trust himself to actually stand yet, but he sounded confident.

His father, for all his awkwardness, could still be an intimidating man. The muttonchops had that effect. "That still does not explain who you are or why you are here or why you were . . . unconscious." Sir Alvin's specialty might not have been biology, but he knew when he touched a dead man, and he did not wish to alarm the wait staff, whom he had dismissed as soon as he had discovered the body of the man in the garden after lunch.

Fitzhugh said, "A distant relation, tenuously. I came seeking employment and your good grace, sir."

Esther cocked her head, but he placed a hand upon her arm, hoping she would remain quiet. He was being familiar, but he had no other idea how to communicate with her in front of everyone. His father's eyes narrowed.

"Do you always bring along a young lady to your inquiries?" Sir Alvin remarked dryly.

"Oh, Esther is, uh, is my wife," he stammered. "And I brought her because, well, you see, I—"

Esther interrupted. "Excuse him, he's embarrassed. My husband has the rare condition called narcolepsy. As a scientist, perhaps you've heard of it? Quite a new diagnosis, but we're relieved to finally know why he has such horrible sleeping spells, and when he did not return directly from his inquiry an hour ago, I thought he might have had trouble, so I came looking."

Everyone stared at her, including Fitzhugh. Narcolepsy had only been named a year or so previously, quite ingenious of her to think of it. To even know of it, really, Fitzhugh thought with admiration.

"I see," Sir Alvin said, though he clearly did not.

"But I can see how disastrously this has gone and shall bother you no more, sir," Fitzhugh said and rose with Esther's help. They walked toward the front door.

It was strange to feel things. Esther's hand leading him toward the door was soft and warm. He wondered if the rest of her felt as nice.

Under her breath, she said, "Dr. Alvey—"

"Fitzhugh, my dear. I did just call you my wife," he whispered back with a wink. She colored lightly. The door to the brownstone shut firmly behind them. They walked around the block toward the portment chamber. Fitzhugh tried not to become apprehensive, having only just regained his body.

"I am afraid there was a mishap with the machine. They did not find me loitering. I was looking for you," she said.

He froze. "What is it?"

"It's gone. It started up while I was waiting and poof!" She threw her hands up to demonstrate.

The color drained from his newly healthy cheeks. "Poof."

She made the hand motion again. "Poof."

Fitzhugh thought he might cry. They would need to petition his parents after all, and how did he possibly exist here as a young boy and as himself? And the technology! It was ten years outmoded from what he was used to. He'd have to compensate somehow. And what of Miss Windless?

They rounded the corner, and there sat the portment chamber. "It came back!"

He turned to Esther.

She did not look astonished. Her eyes twinkled. "It never left, so you needn't

fear another malfunction. But I saw the look on your face, *Fitzhugh*, when I said it had gone, and that is precisely how I felt in there with your parents! Your wife! I should say!"

"Oh, Miss Windless, I am sorry," he said. "Shall we go home now?"

"Indeed." And then she said, "Oh, dear, but how will we fit?"

Fitzhugh blushed. "In the interest of science, you might sit on my lap."

"Science," Esther repeated. Her eyebrows rose, and she blushed as madly as he did.

He climbed into the chamber, so she could not see his face. She sat down and closed the door. Fitzhugh was very glad to have his body back to appreciate this. He reached around her to operate the machine and added, "Well, mostly science."

000

Dot hit Esther on the shoulder with her fan. She didn't even wait for them to be seated in the parlor before she launched herself verbally at her cousin. "How long have you been back? What happened? Why were you gone so long? Why are you smiling like that? Esther Mallory Windless, you answer me! I had to tell your parents something."

"Yes, and about that little excuse."

Dot sucked in her breath.

Esther waited until her cousin squirmed with the anticipation.

"You were not lying," Esther said and sat back to watch her cousin sputter.

8

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The Ghost Pearl

Howard Andrew Jones

000

And the best thing," Applesby said, "is that there's no catch."

Gentleman Jim took the pipe from between his teeth and arched an eyebrow. I'm pretty sure it was more for Applesby than me. He was seated across the table, and I was at Jim's side, usual like, so Jim had to turn to face me, like an actor mugging for the audience.

The three of us sat in one of the little private room's of *Captain Thorne's*, the window behind us. There was a lot of green carpet and a lot of stained bamboo simulating dark wood—real wood being rare in dirigibles on account of the weight—and a little wine. Jim was a hospitable sort when folk came calling.

Applesby fussed with his waist coat. I figured he was exactly what he said, an under butler. He had the look. Soft and well-dressed, but no gentleman. He had huge brown mutton chops and eyes blue and hard as glass.

"I'll leave the clock tower window open." He deposited a brass key on the table with a thunk and picked up the wineglass by the stem, his pinky outthrust. "That's a key I had made of the lord's storeroom. That's all you need. That and the maps." He nodded at the papers face down on the dark table top in front of Jim. They were extremely detailed floor plans of the mansion where the fat man worked. They'd looked pretty thorough—almost as good as I usually drew myself.

Jim barely glanced at the key. He watched Applesby.

Now, it might be you never saw Jim. Six two, he was, without even putting his

shoes on. Fair-haired and fit. He could talk like a gentleman, and he looked fine in those dapper clothes. He had a trim blonde mustache and long thin sideburns, and that day, he was dressed in a swell black coat and a white shirt with silver cuff links. They were real silver, too. I was there when he nicked them.

"Applesby," said Jim, "it's a fine plan." Jim could sound all sorts of ways, depending upon who he was talking at. With Applesby, he sounded like an aristocrat, though not one with his nose too lofty. "But there's a problem." Jim tapped the ivory stemmed pipe against his palm. "Jane?"

"We plan our own jobs," I said.

From Applesby's pop-eyed look, I figure he hadn't heard women talk very much.

"But it's a good plan," Applesby objected. "A fine plan." He leaned forward and shoved a whole hand toward Gentleman Jim. "You said so yourself!"

"It's true. But imagine I wandered on to the estate where you worked and planned your day. I've a fair notion of what you do, but I'd probably miss some obvious things, wouldn't I?"

"So you won't do it?"

"I didn't say that." Jim settled the pipe back into his mouth and puffed once. He never smoked the thing long. He used it for effect and because he liked the sweet smell.

"So you *will* do it?" Poor Applesby didn't know whether to look excited or disappointed.

Jim slid the key toward Applesby. "Jane and I will talk it over."

From Applesby's stare, I sensed he just generally disproved of the idea of talking women. He reached tentatively for the key as if he wasn't sure he'd really find it there and pocketed it, his lower lip hanging out like a puzzled bulldog.

"We'll be in touch," Jim said.

"But..." Applesby blustered. "You have to be careful, eh... contacting me. You could give the whole thing up."

"We'll be careful." Jim rose, taking the pipe from his mouth as he leaned forward to shake Applesby's hand.

Still looking bemused, Applesby left. He was a sufficiently well-trained servant that he closed the door after him.

"What do you think of him?" Jim asked.

"I think he's desperate."

"Desperate men make mistakes."

"Right. Probably, he's made some bets he shouldn't have."

"Maybe."

"So his plan's bosh. We can still go after the lord's pearl."

Jim settled back in the chair, twisted it to face me, and puffed his pipe.

"And not cut him in," I added.

"That wouldn't be fair. We wouldn't know about the pearl if it wasn't for him."

"I suppose." If we weren't going with his plan or his key, I wasn't sure we owed Applesby anything, and that pearl almost as big as my fist he'd promised us sounded grand. But Jim had an over-developed sense of fair play. "When do you want to do it?"

"What are you doing tonight?"

000

Baneridge is one of those old suburbs stuffed with mansions of moss-caked, gray stones lost behind huge lawns. Even in sunlight, the place looks dreary and downcast, like the moorlands of Calveny, so you can imagine how it looked at two that morning when me and Jim sneaked into the neighborhood to break in through an attic window. Lord Grevon's home felt more like a tomb than a manor.

We hadn't followed Applesby's plan, but we'd made careful note of the times Grevon's various lackeys were supposed to be in various places. Two o'clock is always a good time for burglary. Folks are sleeping their deepest then and are slow to rise.

That floor plan was twenty carat. We could have navigated blind. We nearly did, moving through the dark halls with only one little glow eel lamp between us. By the hazy blue light from its squirming occupant, we maneuvered down to the windowless room on the main floor where I sprung the lock on the room and the vault behind the painting. No key required.

After that, we lowered ourselves out through a first floor window and headed across that lawn. They didn't have any guard dogs, silly fools, although that might not have been as much an oversight as we thought at the time.

You might have expected I was going to tell you all about the heist and how clever we were and like that, but I'm not going to bore you with all the details about how skilled I was or how nimble Jim was despite being a big fellow.

No, this here's a tale about that pearl.

We first knew something was strange as we were making our way out of the Baneridge area. You know how those places are. The black cloaks are out even in the morning, making sure rich folk don't lose any riches. The best way into Baneridge if you're not wanting to be noticed is through the old cemetery. There was an old bush concealing a sizeable crack in the wall, and me and Jim slid through that and into the cemetery. It's a rambling big stretch of ground, and we wound up and down through the hills and past the crypts and the grim-looking angels that long-dead rich folk threw up for their relatives. Some of them lean a little, so if you come upon them sudden-like when you're sneaking around, it seems they're swooping down to get you.

There's owls hooting, too, or sounds you can't place. A scratching in the bushes, say, or a low growl Jim told me was a dog, or the low moan coming from the tomb we passed on the right.

"What's that?" I asked.

Jim looked that way himself and grinned. "Must be a spook."

That's when the thing drifted into our path.

One minute, I was following Jim's gaze, my heart racing a bit on account of the moan. The next thing, a white figure draped in fluttering clothing darted across the path. My blood chilled at the same time my heart slammed into my ribs, and I was surprised enough I didn't notice there weren't no wind for that clothing to be blowing in until *after* I noticed the figure didn't actually seem to be running on the ground.

I'm not generally a screaming sort. Instead, I cursed me a blue streak. "It is spooks, you great lummox!" I said.

"Come on!"

We ran, and I'm glad I didn't get too good a look at that white thing. I wish I hadn't gotten a good look at the face with the missing eyes that thrust out at us from behind one cracked gravestone or at the limping child that was partly seethrough or at a couple of other things that were even worse.

We were so busy running, neither of us said much until we were up and over the wall on the far side and changing out of our skulking clothes in Madame Taval's cellar.

"It's the world's end!" I said.

Jim's black pants was fine for his outfit, but he chucked his shirt and pulled

on a white one and threw on a red overcoat and shoved a black angle cap down over his crown.

I fussed my way into a lady's gown. "The dead's rising up!"

"I don't think the world's ending," Jim said.

"You got an explanation for what just happened?" I asked.

All Jim said was "Let's keep moving."

I grumbled, though he was right. When you're on a job, you stick to the plan and the schedule, and part of the plan was getting out of the neighborhood and well on the way in case we was followed. Madame Taval was sort of a friend, like, so long as we paid her, and wouldn't take kind to spending a few years in the lockup on account of us lingering to gab.

I finished dolling up like a lady, and me and Jim climbed into the hansom cab we'd left with Madame Taval. There weren't no ghosts lurking about, just Madame Taval's crook-toothed son, hooking our horse up by lantern light.

In moments, we were on our way. Our skulking blacks and our filchings was shoved into my bag where they'd give a surprise to anyone expecting to find proper lady's stuff.

With Jim in his cap and coat and me in my proper dress with my bonnet cocked just so and a red veil hanging down, I looked just like a woman out to pay respects to a dying relative, which was our cover story. Proper ladies, of course, didn't lean forward from the passenger bench to talk to their cart drivers.

"Well?" I said.

The horse snorted, and Jim guided us through the cobblestone streets. It was a prosperous neighborhood with streetlights even over the bridge. I thought it was a little strange that a stiltsman should be out so late, but there one was, right along the old brick bridge crossing a Skein tributary. His oil pack was on his back and a long pole in his hand and, naturally, the ten foot stilts strapped to his feet so's he could reach the lanterns that hung way up over the road.

Except this stiltsman turned toward us, and his face was all bloated, like he'd been lying dead at the bottom of the Skein for a week, getting nibbled by fishes and crabs.

The horse whinnied in terror and reared. Jim whipped the poor beast's backside 'til it ran fast enough to win at the downs. What with me and the horse both screaming, we didn't do too good of a job of being discreet, but we got past the dead man on the stilts.

The horse took some coaxing before it slowed.

"Did you see that?" Jim said. "We passed right through his left stilt!"

"Of course we did! It was a ghost!" I was digging through my lady's bag, trying to ignore the fact my hand was shaking. I had a small green case for emergencies. I unsnapped it and pulled out two witch bullets, grey like normal bullets but with silver swirls. I slipped my revolver out of my skirts and was opening the chamber to trade out two of the rounds when the horse whinnied again.

Damned if there wasn't a coal black dog standing in the shadows of a graveyard tree and almost as big as our horse. It weren't normal black. It was more like the shadow of a dog, and it had two blazing eyes like windows onto hellfire.

I never did fire the gun, though, 'cause the cart jumped so bad with Jim driving us so fast.

We lost the dog around the next turn where Jim announced he was taking us to the temple. The plan had been to head straight back to Cliffside and the airship docks, but I figured Sister Toomey might just be able to help. I couldn't think of anyone else who could.

I'd stopped thinking it was the world's end. Near as I could tell, the ghosts weren't wandering down any other streets, and they weren't after the horse. They were after us. And the only reason they could be was that me and Jim had done some filching: the gold and silver necklaces, a fancy watch, and that pearl.

"The pearl's cursed," I said. "Applesby set us up!" I dug through the bag.

"What's your plan, Jane?"

"I say we throw this damned pearl in the Skein!" Hell, I was ready to just toss it into the street.

"You think it'll be that easy?" Jim asked.

I paused, the cloth-wrapped pearl in my fist. "What do you mean?"

"Applesby set us up, alright. I just don't think it's going to be that easy to get rid of."

"Watch me," I said. But I didn't throw it because I trusted Jim.

"Suppose," he said over his shoulder, "you need the pearl to break the curse, and you've thrown it in the ocean?"

I frowned and settled back on the cushioned bench. I supposed it *was* possible. I mean, why set us up if the curse was so easily gotten rid of? And then there was the thought we might simply be able to pawn the thing onto some unsuspecting boob and get our value out of it.

The pearl was worth a small fortune. It would be grand to get its worth, though I had a niggling suspicion that wouldn't be very easy.

The spooks down in central Alston weren't nearly as aggressive or frightening, and we managed not to look at the few we saw drifting along. By then, I was sort of used to the idea we had us a ghost magnet, so long as we could get it over with.

By the time we pulled to a stop at the moon sister temple, it was three bells, which I could hear real well on account of the bell ringing three times up at the top of the temple tower.

Jim parked in the alley, him stopping to hook up a feed bag for the poor old gelding. I was already hammering on the side entrance when Jim jogged up. Something was staggering around amid the old stones in the little moon sister graveyard, but I didn't want to see it clear, so I didn't turn my head.

It took a lot of pounding before Sister Toomey opened up. Usually, she was all sweetness and light, but being wakened at three in the morning puts the brakes on even the best moods. After a few choice words, she said, "You're making enough noise to wake the dead!"

"Funny you saying that," said Gentleman Jim.

"The law after you?"

"Spooks," I said. Right then the thing in the graveyard was scuffling closer.

"Who's that with you?" the moon sister asked.

"Spooks!" I might have sounded a little emphatic.

Sister Toomey sighed dramatically and stepped away. For a split second, I thought her done with us, but three great latches clicked, one after the other, and the door swung wide. She stood in the doorway with a blue candle. Me and Jim scrambled through, and Sister Toomey let out a little gasp when she caught sight of whatever it was. Jim's in the habit of holding doors for folks but not them what's dead, so he slammed it tight, closed the eye slit, and locked up the latches.

"You weren't joking!" Sister Toomey said.

"Spooks," I said, gasping a little.

"What Jane said," said Jim.

Sister Toomey asked us to tell her what in blazes was going on, so after she sent the little acolytes away—they'd come running up to see what the commotion was—we filled her in. Though we left out some of the incriminating details.

Sister Toomey took us to the back of the temple, which she said was especially

holy, and lit some candles in the wall niches. Each was inset with pretty mosaics showing the different phases of the moons, all in blue and gold. There was an old wooden door just behind us that something was knocking against when we all sat down on the marble floor.

Toomey studied it in horror. "The crypts," she said.

"Can it get through?" I asked.

"The door's locked." Toomey frowned at the door and ran a hand back through her hair, which was about equal parts gray and black and hung back to her shoulders. She fixed us with a stare that could melt stone. Normally, she was pretty for an older lady, even with one blue eye and one green, but right then, she looked like a fairytale witch.

What with all the commotion, I'd never gotten a real good look at the pearl, and it stole my breath when I got it out. It was perfectly round, like you'd expect of a fine pearl, but it was opalescent and smooth and seemed to glow with some kind of inner light.

Sister Toomey let out a low whistle as she took it but set right to praying over the thing. After, she held it at arm's length and peered at it through the candle flame. Me and Jim watched and pretended that there wasn't some dead thing knocking on the door six feet away. Jim even pulled out his pipe and used one of those candles to light it while the sister wasn't looking.

After a while, Sister Toomey lowered the pearl and spoke in a tired, far-away voice. "This pearl's bad news."

Jim took out the pipe. "Can't say as I'm surprised."

"Can I shoot it with a witch bullet?" I asked.

Sister Toomey shook her head. "No, Jane. That wouldn't help. The pearl must be taken willingly. Until it is, whoever took it will draw the dead to them, every night."

Sister Toomey knew about things like that. Moon Sisters usually do, at least them with the gift, and she had it. We were inclined to trust her, too, on account of all the favors she owed us. Why, if it weren't for the cut Jim gave her, a lot of those little acolytes would be living on the street instead of getting beds and meals and reading lessons and all.

Jim puffed on his pipe. "I was afraid of something like that." He sounded frustratingly nonchalant.

"Why did Applesby pick us?" I asked.

"We've made a lot of enemies," Jim said. "The why's not as important, is it? The trick's figuring a way through."

"We just have to find some bloke to foist the pearl on," I said.

"No one but Lord Grevon and Applesby are getting that pearl," Jim said, and he had that glint in his eye that meant trouble.

"How are you going to get them to take it?" I asked. "They *know* about the curse."

"They deserve it," Jim said.

I reckoned they did. "But Jim, if they know about it, how are we going to get them to take it?"

He smiled real big and put the pipe back in his mouth. "I've got an idea."



As ideas went, it was fair, though a lot depended on how Jim worded the letter he sent to Applesby's contact and upon Grevon's greed. I was skeptical of Grevon wanting any more money, but Jim said rich men always want more money, no matter how much they have. Like a weed drinker—once you start on the stuff, you keep putting more and more of the little blue puffballs into your beer.

Me and Jim stayed in the moon temple 'til dawn, when the ghosts was gone, then grabbed some sleep in our rooms off Felding street. By three, all of our arrangements were in place, and we were back in the same room at *Captain Thorne's*, though he'd moved his dirigible to a different berth. Thorne flew around a little bit every day over lunch and during the dinner hours so's to give his guests a view.

Me and Jim ate some fish while up in Thorne's, which always struck me as kind of funny, and waited on Applesby, who Jim had told to show up at four. I was looking at the pearl every now and then, seated on the black cloth on the table, and wondering how much it was really worth and who we could trick into taking it if Applesby didn't show. There were plenty of bad folks in the city, after all. In some places, just leaving the thing on the street would just about guarantee *only* a black-hearted man would get it.

I ran this idea and others past Jim, but he was set on getting it back to Applesby and Grevon.

Four came, and then five after, and then five ten. I could tell the time because I was looking at Lord Grevon's gold pocket watch, which is how I know it was

exactly five sixteen and forty-five seconds when Thorne's waiter announced there were two gentlemen to see us. Jim didn't show his relief. He just nodded and told the waiter to show them through.

Applesby looked even more nervous than the last time. His little blue eyes kept shifting back and forth. I paid 'specially close attention to his right hand, which was slipped into the pocket of his overcoat.

Much as I noticed Applesby, I paid even more heed to the fellow with him. He was dressed in a black overcoat of finest Moravian silk, complete with a winding dragon pattern. He had a scarlet kerchief of the same stuff—pattern and all—and a little scarlet flower poked into the side of his top hat. Lord Grevon was even harder-eyed and grimmer-lipped than his servant, but he cut a dashing figure, really, and if he hadn't held his face like he'd sucked down a couple of lemons, he might have been a good-looking bloke.

"My man," he said in a reedy voice, "has a revolver upon you. I wish you to know that right away."

Jim laughed genially. "Lord Grevon. Please, join us for a drink."

Grevon sneered. "I have no interest in your fellowship, thief."

Jim completely ignored the hostility. "I admit," Jim said, "it was a fine trick until I figured out how to make it work."

Grevon's cold gray eyes narrowed. "There's no way to make it 'work."

"Ah, but you're curious, or you wouldn't have come."

"I came to gloat," Grevon said. "To see you come to your just desserts."

"And why is that, exactly?" Jim asked.

A cold, cold smile frosted those lips. "That little caper those rags printed last month? That steel was intended for *my* factory."

Jim didn't like factories, and you could see it, briefly, in his eyes before he smiled again. "Well, it seems like we got off on the wrong foot, lord. Fate may give us a second chance to work together."

Grevon snorted.

"The trick to the pearl," said Jim, "is to know what to do with the ghosts when they turn up. Jane studied with the moon sisters and saw the how of it after a few hours."

Grevon's eyes snapped over to me. I focused hard against a desire to curtsy.

"Think of it. You know how many secrets the dead know?" Jim lifted the pearl in one big hand and held it up to the light. "It's even more priceless than

you thought. Why, with Jane's skills, we can learn all kinds of things that could profit us!"

Jim had more speechifying ready, but Grevon was canny enough to see the potential already. And suspicious, naturally. Although I saw his eyes drift back to the pearl as Jim set it down. "If this is true, why do you need me?"

"You, lord, have access to places we can't get. Oh, we can sneak into Baneridge, but we'd attract attention eventually. But not if we're in the company of a lord. And who knows better which dead are likely to have useful secrets than an aristocrat? We could help each other."

I could tell this sounded a lot more interesting than Grevon had expected. He was trying awful hard not to look at the pearl. His eyes flashed to me. "This is true, girl? You studied with the moon sisters?"

"I've spent a lot of time in the temples," I said, which was true. The secret to lying is to wrap that lie in truth and stuff it full of implications.

Grevon opened his mouth to speak, and I had myself ready with more lies, when the door bursts open.

In come two big gents in black pants, red coats, dark cloaks, and shining gold helms with ebon horse hair crests.

"Black cloaks!" Jim cried.

"Gentleman Jim," the black-haired one on the right said, "you and Jane are under arrest! Get your hands up! One side, sir." With that, he stepped forward, raising a revolver. Applesby went popeyed and Grevon stiffened in alarm.

The black cloaks came past Grevon and Applesby, pointing their weapons.

Jim reached for the inside of his coat, and that's when the black cloak fired. My friend let out a moan and sank backward, dropping like a stone.

I screamed, all girly-like, and put my hands to my mouth, and the black-haired one fired at me.

It was a blank, of course, like Jim had worked out with the Somersby boys, but it was still a shock to see a pistol aimed at you and hear a bang. I jumped back and then remembered to drop. I even groaned because I accidentally hit my head on the chair leg.

While I heard Frank Somersby complaining to his brother that I was a woman—he was really getting into his part—Ed came back that I was a criminal and deserved what I'd gotten. I squeezed the packet in my hand and groaned some more as I rubbed the red stuff all over the belly of my brown dress, as if I was feeling a stomach wound. The Somersbys turned their backs on Grevon and

Applesby and came to investigate us, like they would if they were really black cloaks and we were really criminals. Well, we were criminals, but you know what I mean.

"Jim's dead," Ed said in his deep voice. "What about the girl?"

"She won't live long," Frank answered, though he gave me a wink. I glared at him. I happened to catch Grevon looking my way, so my angry glare slid right into the scene. And speaking of sliding, Grevon's hand swooped up that pearl and popped it into his pocket. He then stepped back and drew himself up like the lord he was. "I'm Lord Grevon of Baneridge."

Ed and Frank both turned.

"I'm sorry, Lord," Ed said, very proper. He holstered his revolver. "We didn't recognize you."

"I quite understand," Grevon said with false cheer. You'd think he'd found an old friend. "You had your eyes upon your quarry, like a keen hunter. I commend you. You're quite sure they're both dead?"

"The poor lass won't last long," Frank said. He sounded a touch too sympathetic to me, but Grevon was too nervous to notice.

"They were attempting to blackmail me," Grevon said, "so I'm afraid I can't muster much sympathy."

"Oho!" said Ed. I guess he didn't know what else to say because he stayed quiet after that.

"We'll send someone around to collect your statement, Lord," Frank said. "Probably tomorrow morning. Now Officer Frunk and I will need to deal with the owners and arrange transport for the bodies and try to make the lass comfortable in her final moments."

"Of course," Grevon said.

I rolled my eyes back, like I was getting woozy and weak.

"Well then," Grevon said. "I shall expect someone in the morning. Come, Applesby."

And like that, they were gone. Me and Jim stayed quiet for a good long while, though, until Ed had closed the door and started laughing. "Frunk? What in blazes was that?"

"Your timing," Jim told them as he pulled himself up, "was perfect."

"I can't believe he took it," I said. Frank handed me a napkin to wipe my "blood" with. He was always a little sweet on me.

"Call back the waiter, boys, and stay for a drink."

Frank and Ed took off their helmets and cloaks and trotted off.

"I don't get how Grevon expected to use the pearl if I was dead?" I asked Jim.

"What's one dead girl to him? If *you* could talk to the dead, he figured someone else could too." Jim pulled out his pipe and lit it.

"You called it," I admitted, dabbing more napkins on my dress.

Jim puffed once on the pipe and chuckled. "I just wish I could be there when he goes to the graveyard some evening and tries it out. He'll be in for a rude awakening."

"No bones about it," I said.

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Howard Andrew Jones is the author of an Arabian fantasy series for St. Martin's/Thomas Dunne, starting with The Desert of Souls, and three Pathfinder novels, including the recent Beyond the Pool of Stars. A former Black Gate editor, he also assembled and edited 8 collections of historical-fiction writer Harold Lamb's work for the University of Nebraska Press. He can be found lurking at www.howardandrewjones. com.