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Editor's Note:

Just because this is Issue 40, don't think we're doing anything crazy. It's not like we're having a mid-life crisis and running off to far-flung corners of the earth, getting drunk with Dionysus, becoming a master pickpocket, applying for a job as an axe murderer, or possibly doing something deeply inappropriate with a unicorn.

Nope, we're doing none of that.

But we are letting a great bunch of writers play around with the concept of archetypes, lore, and legend. Fairy tales and mythology say so much about a culture; how people mess around with them says even more.

It's like I once heard Patrick Stewart say: our myths define us.

(Then he told me to get the fuck out of his chair.)

With all that in mind, the March Issue of *Jersey Devil Press* is ready for you to explore.

Or, as Bono once said, back when he was still cool (no really), "This is 40."

— Mike Sweeney

Spike

Thomas Pluck

The fact that unicorn droppings sparkle iridescent doesn't make them any more pleasant to shovel than regular old horseshit. There's a lot of it, and its saccharine scent catches in the throat like cheap perfume.

Miss Nibs has seven of the beasts. Her carriage gathers dust in the barn. The unicorns are ageless, graceful alabaster sculptures long of limb and silken of tail and mane, and I've got to shovel their shit for eternity.

Kai-Lun has taken to fouling his trough. Leaves a rainbow slick on the water, like oil. He's curled up like a cat, having a snooze as I spoon it out. Amalthea bows in the back of her stall, crossing her forelegs. I pat her flank, and she nickers, but her heart's not in it. She blushes as I scoop out her dainty leavings from the corner, as always.

I get to the last stall, lean my silver shovel on the door, and tap a smoke out of my pack of Maleficent Lights. Snick my silver Zippo and take a drag, slouching against the beam.

"Enjoy the fag, mate. I left you a bloody dung castle in here to clean up. 'ave one 'ere."

That's Spike.

"Can't share anymore, big fella," I tell him. "Fire hazard."

His leathery nose with its nostrils like billiard pockets peeks out and I blow a smoke plume at it.

"Bloody tease."

"No manners," I say. "What, were you raised in a barn?" Only half a pack left, and nights get long and lonely.

"Funny man. For that I'm squeezing out another dollop."

"Now or later. What's one more scoop?"

"Getting to you, is it? The Herculean labor?"

"That big old Mary only had to do it once." I puff a smoke ring at his golden spire. He takes a few stabs at it. "This is more Sisyphean. Endless toil."

"Could be worse," Spike says. "You could be pushing dung boulders up and down a mountain."

"At least there's that."

I tap another smoke from the pack, light it off mine, and hold it before his stippled gray muzzle.

"'Bout bloody time." He lips it from me deftly, takes a deep drag. Waits for me to pluck it, so he can talk. "That's the stuff. Old Saint Nicotine. You ever feel guilt, contributing to the delinquency of a symbol of purity?"

"I sleep like baby," I tell him.

"Don't you mean a Beauty?"

"You're the funny one now."

"Speaking of, how is the old bitch? She nick your cherry yet?"

Spike loves rhetorical questions.

"Course not. I'd smell the stink on ye."

I let him have another drag.

"Still remember that lovely scent," Spike says. "Me last day of freedom. That little hussy three stalls down was prancing tail high, the poor dumb thing. Beggin' for it. And then there was that sparkle in the ol' nose. Virgin. Nothing quite like it."

I've heard it a thousand times, but I let him go on.

"Like the first clovers of spring. A hint of rain, in the dog days. Or a whiff o' one of your fags." His tail whips against the slats of his enclosure. His muscles are surely rippling down his flanks, alight with purple undertones. Majestic, that's what you'd call him.

"And all of a sudden, I'm rod stiff. She nickers and rolls round in the grass, hikes up and presents herself. And that's when I know. I trot right past 'er quivering quim and follow me nose. The day has come. I'd smelt it before, mind you. That zing. But never felt

the urge. I work myself up to a gallop. I'm on the hunt. Feel it in my blood. It's me purpose," Spike says. "Another puff, mate."

I give it to him, and he drags greedily.

"I burst into the clearing, toss me mane and neigh triumphant. 'ere I am, I'm saying." He laughs. It turns into a neigh and then a coughing jag. He stamps his hooves, works himself out of it.

"And there you are, in the bushes. Looking... sheepish. No offense. Not like a sheep. Filthy things, those," he says. His horn dips low. "And me, I trot up, and I bow. Like I was told I would. Can't 'elp myself." A ripple runs down his flanks. "'Cept you're a fella. And you come out, pat me neck. A thing of beauty, you are. So I lay me horn in your lap. It feels right. Then your fella stomps out, and what's he say?"

I shake my head, roll my eyes.

"C'mon, now. Do the voice. Me accent's all wrong."

I deepen mine as much as I can. "Well, that's just great."

Spike laughs, tosses his head back. "His Nibs looked fit to shit himself."

"That he did." I stub my smoke out on my boot.

"Pity what the Queen did," Spike says.

I say it along with him: "Not the King queen, the queen Queen." He laughs, I don't.

I hear him sometimes, at night. Down in the dungeon. Shoveling shit's not so bad after all.

"Think she'll let him out? When she gets it through her 'ead, that you won't turn?"

"I don't know."

"The heart wants what the heart wants, Queenie," he announces. Just a show. She hears everything, anyway.

Spike sighs, I offer the cigarette, he inhales deep. Blasts twin plumes out his nostrils. "Gotta show me how to blow rings, someday, Charming."

I nod, and pick up my shovel.

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Killer Interview

Chris Lewis Carter

The intercom plays a tinny rendition of Chopin's Funeral March, and my secretary's voice fills the office.

"Mr. Shax, your 4:30 has arrived."

"Just a moment, Cheryl." I pop open the bottle of polish stashed in my briefcase and slather a handful over the onyx-black horns jutting out of my forehead.

For the love of Lucifer, please let this be the last one.

"Alright, send him in."

My door opens, and the grizzled old man who steps inside is exactly what I'm looking for in an applicant. His assigned body appears to be in its fifties, with a tangle of silver hair and a knotted beard that twists in all directions. He's wearing a long, black cloak that's covered in dried bloodstains and has a patch over his left eye.

Promising, sure, but appearance can only take you so far. Yesterday, a candidate tried to impress me by wearing a suit jacket made of human skin, but he forgot my name twice during the interview. Twice!

DemoniCorp wants me to hire a psychopath, not a moron.

Still, I've got a good feeling about this one. After we shake hands, I offer him a seat across from my desk built entirely out of varnished skulls.

"Thanks for seeing me," he rasps, sounding like he just finished eating a carton of cigarettes. "I'm grateful for the opportunity." Satan's pitchfork, he even talks the part.

"My pleasure. It's nice to finally meet the man behind the resume," I boom, trying to sound even more baritone than usual. "Arson, robbery, homicide... Very impressive credentials, Mr. Miller."

"Call me Charles," he says, tracing a finger across the ridges in his chair, which is made from thousands of children's teeth. "And thank you. It's always nice to hear your work is appreciated."

I nod, then click my blood-red pen and hover it above the questionnaire on my desk. "Right, then. Down to business. Tell me, Charles, what do you know about the position you're applying for?"

He pauses for a moment, like he's unsure if I'm testing him somehow, then says, "The ad said *supernatural killer*. Sounds pretty straightforward to me."

"Well, yes, but let me elaborate," I say, scribbling a few notes on the paper. "For over five thousand years, DemoniCorp has been the Underworld's largest exporter of ghouls, demons, and reincarnated serial killers. We send them back to Earth to terrorize unsuspecting teenagers, and in return they help thin out some of the planet's, shall we say, less intelligent occupants."

Charles reaches inside his cloak and pulls out a rusty machete, which he then uses to prune his gnarled fingernails. "Everyone wins."

We take a moment to admire the shower of molten rock outside my office window—one of the many advantages to working at the base of an active volcano.

"Not anymore. Kids these days are becoming incredibly good at destroying our monsters. In fact, we've lost over a dozen of our employees in the past six months alone," I say, as flakes of ash collect against the glass. "That's why DemoniCorp is looking for an exceptionally evil soul to return to Earth and extract their unholy wrath upon our target demographic."

Charles rubs his hands together and flashes a grin full of yellow teeth. "Yes, I definitely feel this position matches my...skill set."

"That's the spirit," I say, tapping the questionnaire. "All you need to do is answer a few simple questions to see if you're

qualified for this particular line of work. We take reaching our quota of dead teenagers very seriously here."

"Good to know," Charles says, tossing his machete onto the kitten-skin rug lying at his feet. "Fire away."

Sweet Beelzebub, please let this one work out. If he's half the lunatic I think he is, that promotion is as good as mine.

"Question one," I say. "Did you die in a unique or brutal fashion, potentially causing others to fear your return in search of bloody vengeance?"

"Oh, well, um..." Charles shifts awkwardly in the teeth-chair.

Is the magma outside catching the light, or is he actually starting to blush?

"It's a pretty crazy story," he says finally.

My pen quivers in anticipation. "Do tell," I say. "Struck by lightning on Halloween? Committed suicide on an ancient burial ground?" I shoot him a quick wink. "Did it involve a pagan ritual, by chance?"

"Slipped in the driveway," he says, suddenly becoming very interested in his shoes. "Hit my head on the mailbox."

I laugh politely, thinking this must be his idea of a joke, but his expression is unflinchingly grim.

"Seriously?" I say.

"Yep."

"Oh." I'm not even sure what box to check on the questionnaire.

"Would you describe the mailbox as being malevolent?"

"Not really," he says. "It was shaped like a duck."

I sigh, then stroke my pointed beard for a moment. "Let's mark you down as 'Other.'"

So what if his grand exit wasn't that impressive. Not everyone gets to be impaled on a cursed Aztec spear. He'll still work out.

"Question two," I continue. "With your final words, did you swear the bloody vengeance referred to in question one?"

"You want to know my last words?" Charles says.

He's squirming again. Sweet Sammael, he looks uncomfortable.

"We're out of mozzarella."

"Excuse me?" I say.

"My last words." Charles clucks his tongue for a few seconds. "I told my wife that we were out of mozzarella. I was on my way to the store, but..."

"Mailbox attack?" I offer.

"Yeah."

Two days ago, my co-worker, Gaap, interviewed a guy who was put to death by the electric chair. His last words were—and I quote—"Today I fry, but tomorrow you'll die!"

Seriously, how perfect is that? He would have got the job if he didn't insist on not working holidays. Special occasions are our bread and butter. Just ask Ici-kill, he's non-stop during Christmas.

I check off, "Inaudible," and move down the list.

"Ah, here's a good one," I say. "Question three. Would you prefer to return in humanoid form, or are you comfortable with your soul being housed inside an inanimate object?"

Charles grabs a hot coal from the candy dish on my desk and pops it in his mouth. "You mean, stuff my soul inside a toaster or something?" he says between chews.

I hadn't thought about it, but that's not a bad idea. I'll pitch it to R&D first thing tomorrow.

"It's entirely your decision," I say. "Sure, there's a certain level of comfort in a typical body, but never underestimate the element of surprise. Imagine how easy it'll be to get the drop on a group of teenagers as a homicidal toilet seat."

When he narrows his good eye at me, I quickly add, "DemoniCorp loves to have employees who are team players."

"Humanoid, please," he says.

I check off the box, then rub my temples so hard that another pair of horns poke through the surface of my leathery skin.

"Alright, let's try another one. Question four: do you have any

relatives currently living on Earth who could carry on your dark work in the event of your unfortunate demise?"

Charles shakes his head. "No."

"No? Honestly, Mr. Miller..." I chuck my pen over my shoulder, where it sticks in the eye socket of the human head I have mounted on a hunting plaque. "Not even a child? I'm telling you, they make the best successors. Sure, they might try to stop you at first—maybe even side with the teenagers out to destroy you—but give them a year or so to mull things over and they'll take up your legacy every time."

Charles shrugs. "No kids. Think I've got a cousin in Ohio, though. Heard he became an accountant."

Why me, Baal? Just once, can't an arch-demon interview a well-spoken serial killer with an extended family, who died in a tragic incinerator accident, and wouldn't have a problem being reincarnated as a snow-blower?

Is that too much to ask?

"Question five, and this is a big one," I say. "Assuming you are sent back to Earth, describe to me your ideal method of slaughtering teenagers."

"Hmm, that's a toughie," Charles says, then gets up from his seat and grabs the machete. "If you people gave me a bunch of spooky superpowers, I'd run straight for the biggest group of teenagers I could find and cut them to ribbons before they knew what's what." He waves the blade around like a possessed feather-duster. "He-ayah! Ha! Woo-ah! Ga—"

"Mr. Miller, I'm going to stop you right there." I crumple the questionnaire into a ball and throw it in the trash. "Honestly, I don't even know where to start."

Charles cocks his head to the side, then slumps back down in the chair. "You didn't let me finish."

"Trust me, you've said plenty," I say. "First of all, our killers never run anywhere—they walk. Sure, your target is allowed to run, but you're supposed to know exactly where they're headed

and calmly stroll to that location. It's like the old saying, slow and steady wins the chase."

Charles opens his mouth to respond, but I don't give him the opportunity. It's been a long day and I'm in the mood to rant.

"Not to mention that nonsense about finding the biggest group of teenagers. Everybody knows that you focus your attention on four, maybe five, tops, and at least two of them better be dating!"

Chopin's Funeral March blares from the intercom again, which is probably for the best. I'm about two seconds away from lecturing this wannabe on the finer points of stalking teens while they shower.

"Mr. Shax, I've got a John Gordon here to see you," my secretary says. "He says it's urgent."

Mephisto's ghost, will this day ever end?

I take a deep breath, then push the intercom button. "Gore-Eyed Gordon is back already? He just got reincarnated last week."

The line goes silent for a moment, then Cheryl comes back on. "He says that he's really sorry, but his long-lost daughter tricked him into revealing his true weakness."

"Unbelievable," I say. "So help me, he's not getting another chance until somebody recites his name three times!"

"I'll tell him you're busy, sir."

"No, it's fine, Cheryl. Just a minute." I turn back to Charles, and see that his patch is now on the opposite side. He quickly slides it back, but not before I notice that both eyes are perfectly fine. "You aren't really psychotic, are you Mr. Miller?"

He fidgets with his hands, then sighs. "Err, not exactly, no. It's just so hard to find employment these days," he says with the smooth voice of a television announcer. "I didn't bathe for a week to prepare for this interview. Even had to borrow an outfit from my neighbour. Now there's a nut-job. The guy loves earwigs. Seriously, he makes wigs out of human ears!"

"No kidding. Tell him to drop off his resume." I push back my chair, and stand up. "At any rate, it's been a... pleasure meeting you. We'll be making our final decision within the next few weeks."

Charles nods, and we exchange another brief handshake.

"Level with me, Mr. Slacks," he says, tucking the machete back inside his cloak. "I'm not getting the job, am I?"

Ugh.

"Truthfully? Not a chance," I say. "But we encourage all applicants to apply with us again in the future. Judging by the current rate of humanity's progress, DemoniCorp should be opening a brand new division within the next hundred years."

"Oh yeah?" he says. "That sounds exciting."

"It certainly is. We're going to revolutionize the supernatural killer industry." I walk him to the door, then clap my hand over his shoulder. "Just think about it. Executing teenagers in...outer space!"

From high-school textbooks to award-winning magazines and podcasts, **CHRIS LEWIS CARTER** has been featured in over two dozen publications—both online and print—including *Nelson Literacy 8*, *Word Riot*, *Thunderdome*, *Murky Depths*, *Niteblade*, and *Pseudopod*. A member of Studio Kontrabida, he is the lead writer for *Rival Threads: Last Class Heroes*, their first video game, which is scheduled to be released for iOS, Windows, and Mac in 2013. He is also the creator of *Camp Myth*, a successfully-kickstarted YA series. Find out more at www.chrislewiscarter.com.

Chestnut Trifold

Zarren Mykhail Kuzma

I once lifted from a man in the subway, and when he turned to look at me, I knew I'd been caught.

What would they think?! thought I. They'd always told me that everyone gets caught eventually, but I was supposed to be a *legend*. Never again would they put up with me when I told them that their fingers were too fat for this line of work. Never again would they listen when I said that they knew nothing of innocence, of grace and naturalness—like your hand belongs in someone else's pocket.

I'd always believed that I could steal the shirt from a man's back (had I a use for it), but now, in one foul stroke, the Virtuoso was finished. At once I'd been reduced from a Mozarta, Leonarda De Vincia, Michelangela, a genius, a *true artist*! ...to a common everyday thug, grabbing after a stranger's buttocks.

He reached above his head, and I braced myself for the inevitable pang of retribution, but instead he raised his cap from his graying hair before saying, "Excuse me for bumping into you, young lady."

"Not a problem, sir," said I, and I made my way from the subway-car, eighty-four dollars and two Visas richer.

And so instead my grand legend continued.

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Bakkheia

Rose Williamson

"Evoe," says the wild-haired nymph opening the door to Apartment 6-C. We stand bewildered in the foyer, expecting a Grecian den tucked away in Central Park or a sky rise built on ionic columns, not this classic New York place with fire escapes and all. "Welcome and evoe," she says to us, "our word of worship and gratitude. We've been expecting you. Please, take off your shoes. He likes us to enjoy our dancing barefoot." She smiles wickedly, her lips stained with a cabernet gloss. "Well, that and the downstairs neighbors complained up a storm last week."

We take off our shoes and leave them in a heap by the door, and she leads us to the living room. Her own feet are tiny and delicate, and around one ankle is tied a string of silver bells which jangle musically as she walks. When we comment on the pretty noise, she says, "All the Maenads wear these," and, though her smile seems a little sad, we will love this knowledge later when we need someone to refill our cups.

Inside, the hardwood floor has been laid with patchy carpets of moss, and the walls, originally painted "Weathered Sandstone," are dripping with vines, ivy crawling up one side of the room and plump Savatiano grapes down the other. The energy-conserving light bulbs have been replaced with candles, and, where the television used to be, someone has installed a fountain of a lithe and naked naiad pouring out a pitcher into the pool below her. Tucked everywhere are the naiad's marble and bronze friends, frozen in acts of revel. Here, a satyr with a lecherous grin. There, a musician with her stone lyre. They watch us with smirks as the night goes on, inexplicably changing places when we aren't looking.

The furniture, arranged carefully by the landlord so he might charge a higher price for trendy, immediate living, has been left mostly the same: a chic leather sofa with matching armchair, a modern glass and chrome coffee table, the black Ikea bookcase catalogued as “Grevbäck” which fits neatly into a corner and is full of, not books, but an array of wine glasses, kylikes, amphorae, cups, tumblers, goblets, chalices, and flutes. We all rush toward Grevbäck, clamoring to get our favorite choice before someone else, but by midnight, we will be drinking straight from the bottles and decanters, and little things like etiquette will no longer matter.

But now, while everyone still has a cup, the Maenads float about, jingling and whispering “Evoe!” and leaving none of us without a brimful. One second too long and we snap our fingers impatiently until one of the pretty little things comes running, her bells singing against her ankle. We sip the liquid cure-all, eschewing in a feel-good haze our Vicodins and Percocets. The house wine is a deep red, thick and sweet and easy to pour down the throats of us willing worshippers. We drink it as we talk, sing, and kiss. We drink it as we undress one another. One of us lounging on the leather sofa drinks it as Maenads giggle and rub his feet with olive oil and honey. Another of us, a woman who is large with round, red cheeks, drinks as she pulls the ripe grapes off the vined wall and stuffs them into her mouth. We laugh at her and she laughs back and we spill on everything, even each other, filling the room with a heady smell of earth and wine until even the air is drunk and painting everything pink-purple-red.

Laughing, we keep laughing, and we are more happy than we ever remembered being before. We chuckle with mirth and giggle coyly and howl and guffaw and titter. We love everything and everyone and nobody isn’t touching somebody else somewhere. When someone falls into the fountain, we scream with laughter, even the girl now drenched, and we drizzle her with wine until the naiad’s pitcher is pouring pink. The girl chokes and splutters, a

gargling watery laughter that makes our shoulders shake and we gasp for air between smiles. We just keep drinking and drinking and laughing and laughing and the Maenads nod to one another and begin their hymn.

"Dionysus," they sing, "bearer of the vine, thee I invoke to bless these rites divine! Rejoice, rejoice, evoe!" We look around as the ritual begins, a strange dance where the tinkling of silver follows complicated steps and the harmony of the orbs.

"Sing with us," beckons the wild-haired Maenad who let us all in, leaning close to our ears and touching our lips with her merlot fingers. "Rejoice, rejoice, evoe!" As if magicked by her touch, each of us joins the chant, and in lieu of dancing the Maenads' complex dance, we make a tipsy conga-line that snakes around the room to an unheard rhythm.

"Rejoice, rejoice, evoe!" we yell happily, tripping fantastic in the moss. We forget the words and make up our own: "Dionysus with a vine, you are so divine! Dionysus give us wine and we'll love you all the time!" We dance until our thighs ache, and then we dance more, driven by the sacred beat of our wild waitresses. We dance until one of us breaks the rhythm with a yelp and points at her bloody feet. But when we check, all our feet are bloody, cut by broken shards of discarded cups and glasses. We only laugh more at the pain, because we can barely feel it. It is more important to keep dancing.

"Rejoice, rejoice, evoe!" sings a new voice, a deep, clear baritone that rings out in the room. We stop as the Maenads whisper "hush!", and those of us who have been here before drop to our knees, stretching our arms toward the striking man who has appeared suddenly by the wall of ivy.

"Dionysus," murmurs the wild-haired Maenad, prostrating herself at his feet.

"Dionysus, Dionysus!" The name echoes around the room, from some of us with reverence and others with surprise that such a man truly exists.

He is handsome and smirking, with dark curls and strong arms, and we find ourselves filled with a desire to touch him. We hold back for fear that we are not good enough, and because some of us are not really sure what “Dionysus” means. He stands before us like a god and we can barely stand at all. He looks perfect to us, though blurry vision makes us squint at hidden hooves and wonder at horns on the host’s head.

“Thank you for coming,” he says, and the Maenads rush to bring him a bottle of the best. He strolls through the room, the silence strange after the cacophony of the hymn. He inspects us, noting our stained mouths and varying states of undress, our drooping eyelids and swaying bodies. Finally, he comes to the still soaking wet girl who fell into the fountain. He glances at his stone naiad, pouring a familiar vintage, then back to the girl dripping watery rosé. He lets out a hearty bray. The silence broken, the party begins once more, and Dionysus throws himself into the carousing with gusto.

We are eager to drink with Dionysus, to toast to him, and so we surround him, dancing and clapping in a circle of which he is the center. He kisses the women and fondles the men, he lets us run our fingers through his hair, and he calls for song after song from the Maenads to keep the party going. He even brings out a feast, clapping his hands for two of the pretty servants to jingle into the kitchen and emerge with bowls and platters of food. He gorges on the marinated olives, succulent spiced lamb, and salty dried fish, passing bowl after bowl around the room to us. We didn’t realize how hungry we were, and we eat ravenously, trying to sop up our sloshing insides with thick pieces of bread spread with creamy goat’s cheese and unknown herbs.

We think we are full, and we ask for Tupperware for leftovers, but he demands dessert. The women in our revel gather around to feed him figs and pomegranate seeds, giggling at his teeth nibbling our fingers. In return, he gives us honey cakes, letting us lap the

sticky-sweet residue from his hands and lips. The wild-haired Maenad looks on jealously, but only opens another bottle and serves.

We eat and eat until we can eat no more, and some of us fill urns with the contents of our bellies to make room for just one more sweet. We ache but we cannot stop; we love food as much as we love wine. Only when the Maenads stop parading platters out do we pause for breath between each bite, realizing we are full and washing the taste of cheese and olives and sick and sweet out of our mouths with more wine.

Fat and happy after our midnight spread, we, feeling truly bacchanalian, roll around the floor in pairs, too sleepy to actually try anything but craving the feel of a nearby body. We look up at Dionysus, stretched on the leather couch and finishing an apricot.

"Tell us a story," one of us suggests, and the rest of us begin to implore with a steady chant, "Story, story, story." Dionysus looks to the ceiling, as if painted there is a tableau of what he might say next. He considers for a very long time, and we forget to stop chanting even though we are no longer sure what we are asking for.

"Midas."

We are quieted, and Dionysus turns to the wild-haired Maenad, who has not spoken since her hymnal song. She pushes off the pawing hands of a bibulous invitee and holds up a finger to remind Dionysus of the tale.

"Midas and his golden touch."

"Of course," says Dionysus, a slow smile coming to his face. He thinks for a moment before beginning.

"Midas was a king where he came from. He had great charm and flair and he always dressed in the finest Gucci suits. He liked money almost as much as I like wine"—here we give a lazy cheer—"and he would do almost anything to get more of it. But Midas was a good man if there were no dollar bills in front of him, and he proved it by taking care of one of my little followers who got lost

one night stumbling home. Midas didn't just give him a cup of diner coffee and toss him to the dogs, but instead, I had word the next week that my man was working a job with Midas, learning the trade, earning some cash.

"I offered Midas a reward, anything he wanted, and that silly bastard asked for more money. Fine, I said, thinking it was a waste of a request, and opened my wallet, but he stopped me.

"'I've heard of you,' he said. 'Got a lot of important people under your thumb. I know you can give me an endless supply if you wanted. I want to know the inside scoop. Always.'

"'Sure,' I said. I'm not one to argue with desire. I made it happen. He couldn't even look at a stock without it going up, though I can't say if that was intuition or influence. Gods, he made money. Filled a bank in a week."

"Sounds nice," murmurs one of us, and we nod to one another, some of us in half-missing business suits ourselves.

"It was. He bought a Benz and moved his family into a choice place on the Upper East Side. Got a little ahead of himself, if you ask me, but that was Midas. He liked spending money on nice things as much as he liked having it in his pocket. Everything he wanted, he bought. Jewelry, women, seats at the finest restaurants and entrance into the craziest clubs. He liked the best stuff, in powder or pill form, and he had it all—New York was his at the snap of his money clip."

"I know this story," says the red-cheeked woman a little too loudly. We groan and she tosses us a glare. "Tell 'em what happened in the end, Dio."

"That is the end, in my opinion. That's where my gift ends, at least," shrugs Dionysus, and we are eager to agree with him, since whatever happened next we already knew. We wanted to skip the regret of Midas and revel in his yummy over-indulgence, and we did, over-indulging in one another as we realized how blessed we were to have the gifts of Dionysus still coming to us.

The Maenads tinkle in on bells to end our story time, surrounding their master to adore him. He groans with pleasure and beckons his favorite slave, the wild-haired thing who forgets her early jealousy and gives him what he wants. Tomorrow, they will wake to find him gone, as usual, and they will begin preparations for the next weekend. But now, they fall asleep draped on one another, touching their beloved deity and inhaling the sweet scent of wine which seems permanently part of him.

We barely notice, cuddling into one another and falling into intoxicated dreams. We will wake in the morning with monumental headaches and patchy memories. We will stumble home and wonder if it was real, hailing cabs to our offices and swallowing pills with our Starbucks. But despite our pounding brains, we will all come back when the next bacchanalia begins. We must.

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The Snake Eaters

Tara Isabella Burton

We had not died. We had made it deep into Khevsureti without tumbling off the pass or being shot by itinerant Chechens; the van had rolled precariously down the mountain until we thought to secure it with a stray log, and Misha, beleaguered but well-paid, had escorted us to the summit of a nearby cliff and pointed out the crypts with one of the three remaining fingers on his right hand.

"Bones."

He returned to the van to finish his cigarette. The cliffs curved and protruded outwards like the spines of dragons; the air smelled like rain.

Felix leaped upon the tombs and traipsed from one to the other with all the reverence of a mountain goat, clicking his camera at the skeletons.

"Don't do that," Leah placed her hands against the tomb and closed her eyes. "There are spirits here." She began to hum softly and drag her skirts into the mud. "Do you know what they used to do?" She did not wait for my reply. "If they had cholera, back in the old days. Or the plague. They'd just come out here to die." She peered into the crypt and blew the dust off the bones. "Just wait. So as not to infect the others. I think that's beautiful. To come *here* to die."

"If I did have to die," I said. "I suspect this is the place I'd do it." The waterfall had grown black with shale and the air vibrated with mosquitoes.

"If you look long enough," said Leah, "the green becomes black." She put her hand on my shoulders and I shivered but said nothing. "We should say a prayer or something?" she said. "Which

gods do the Khevsurs worship? That's the sort of thing you'd know, isn't it?"

I did.

Leah had declared herself a pagan over breakfast. She had squeezed my hand and told me that she felt the power of wood-nymphs and sky-goddesses wherever she went, and that the fresh rams' skulls she'd spotted dotted all along the mountain path had brought her far closer to the brink of illumination than the perfunctory services she'd attended in Tbilisi.

"My friend gave me a copy of your book," she said. "I thought about reading it. But I'm not very academic. I don't normally read anything with footnotes—I'm not clever enough." She smiled at me. "And maybe it's better not to know. I like to make up my own gods."

It was a methodical study of pagan syncretism in the Southern Caucasus; it was the only interesting thing I'd ever done.

We looked out over the ravine. "How long was it, do you think?" she asked me. "Until people found them."

Felix was tottering on the edge of the crypt, and the American girls had started shrieking and begging him to come down.

"I'm not going to fall, you know," said Felix. "Can't."

"How do you know?"

"*Spirits*." He grinned at Leah and hopped down to a lower ridge.

"Spirits?"

"When I was in Djibouti. Met a witch-woman. This fucking nutter—sorry, ma'am" (he turned to me) "who offered to tell my fortune. She told me I was going to die at sea. Be thrown overboard—a proper ship's funeral." He kicked out his feet against the roof of the crypt. "So you see, I shan't die here. No matter what the danger."

Of course he was lying. The story had come to him the moment Leah had closed her eyes and gone into ecstasies at the sheer pagan possibility of the place. I knew it as soon as he had spoken, and

when Leah had gone round the bend to pay her respect to the dust and the dead he shot me a sprightly and conspiratorial wink.

"That's beautiful," Leah considered, knotting the ferns.

"What is?" He bounded past her and leaned neatly against the crypt until she looked up at him.

"To have a prophecy. I've never had anything like that." Leah had tangled pink hair and wide unblinking eyes and narrow sparrow shoulders when she hunched forward, her face set against the wind and the oncoming darkness. "Do you avoid ships, then?"

Felix laughed. "God, no. I take ships all the time. Sailed from Istanbul to Batumi to get here. Stopped at Trabzon. There was this terrible tornado, came awfully close to biting it..."

The rest vanished on the wind. He strode out to the brook and Leah, entranced, followed close after him. They left me behind.

I was used to this. It happened to me often when I was traveling. For a few hours, for the duration of a train-journey or a *marshrutka* ride, hours I cherished and folded away under my pillow, I could be trusted. My must-curtained skirts and uncombed hair gave off the impression of respectability.

On the drive up, Leah had confessed to me that at the age of sixteen she had once, unable to resist the morbidity of her curiosity and the cigarette-tinted terror of one enormous and empty New York night, stood on a chair and attempted to hang herself off the pipes in her bedroom. At the last moment she'd gotten stuck, and so she'd smashed a porcelain Virgin Mary she kept on her dress-top altar, and used the shards to cut herself down.

Even today, she said, she kept them in her pocket, in a velvet pouch she'd picked up in Marrakesh. They kept her safe.

I told myself her story on the drive up the pass. She was twenty-five and had dyed her hair pink and ran slipshod over continents and never slept in the same bed for more than a month at a time. She carried an altar with her wherever she went—a bag that smelled of patchouli, full of candles and incense and icons she'd

picked up on her travels. Her nightly ablutions on the grimy floor of the hostel bore little resemblance to any authentic pagan practice; I could not stand to correct her.

She was beautiful and she was vital and the vast cavernous expanse of her promise yawned out at her feet and threatened at every moment to swallow her up.

She had squeezed my hand and blushed when she spoke and pressed into my hand a part of her that would linger with me when she had gone.

It had happened before; it would happen again. The smell of patchouli lingered on my shawl and Felix had convinced her to traipse with him on the rooftops of tombs. Misha emitted an imperious grunt and we re-embarked and continued the journey to Shatili.

The American girls passed around the camera to show off their pictures; one of the Russians attempted an untranslatable boast; the Czech girl kept eating cucumbers out of her backpack, for Misha had thwarted all of our attempts at procuring dinner.

I sat at the end of the table with my book, eating biscuits out of a paper bag, and knew that I had traveled as far as I would ever go with her. She was flirting with Felix, now, and I no longer mattered. Her ears were pink and my face was flushed and she did not look at me.

As we pulled up beneath the black and abandoned fortress at Shatili, the sun burnt out overhead and the first stars appeared motionless in the firmament. I returned to *Legends and Histories of the Greater Caucasus* and tried to make notes in the margins.

We got off the bus.

"Tower," said Misha.

Leah looked up at it and rushed forth, her skirts trailing in the mud. "So we're here," she called out, and in infinitesimal ecstasy leaned her head against a patch of wildflowers and gaze out to where green had eclipsed the path. "Are we really staying *here*?"

Felix had decided to jog along the mountainside and leap onto the rooftops; Misha had long since stopped trying to keep him alive.

Leah closed her eyes. "At last." I stepped toward her, but she had already gone, following Felix's headlong pursuit of a firefly, scrambling after him and skinning her ankle when she fell.

Misha had uprooted a fern from the earth. "Special."

"Special?" One of the American girls snapped a photograph.

"Magic."

This caught Felix's attention. "A magic flower?" He jumped down from the tower and began to interfere. "You mean like salvia or something?" He plucked a bit and chortled and pretended to chew a stalk. "Go on, then—let's see what it does."

"The fern-flower." I knew something he did not; I made no effort to hide my satisfaction. "It's a popular legend in a number of former-USSR countries. Slavic, initially. You crush them and put them in someone's drink and they fall in desperate, violent, all-consuming love for the course of several hours. It's at the root of several of the happiest marriages. Not, of course, that I would know."

Leah smiled slightly; the others looked uncomfortable and said nothing, as people often did when faced with the fact of my spinsterhood. Only Felix laughed, spluttering into nonsense.

"Yes, well, when you're busy, you know—no time for proper dating, anything like that. Got to speed up the process somehow?" He made a clumsy attempt to nudge me in the ribs.

I told him I had no such idea.

Leah reached down and plucked one of the flowers. "Of course there *would* be a love-potion," she said. "Out here."

"What do you mean, out here?" Felix was absent-mindedly scratching himself behind the ear.

"Well, there's nothing else out here, is there?" Leah knotted the flowers into a daisy-chain. "We're so far from home—so far from

everything. Why shouldn't there be love-potions out here? There's no phone signal."

"Why not, indeed?" I smiled my inscrutable maiden-aunt smile and did not elaborate further.

It was why I had come, after all; it was why we had all come, putting our lives into Misha's mutilated hands to spend the night in the writhing, empty Caucasus, where serpents bred and rams wandered and altars stained with blood and moonshine still dotted the mountainside.

"Yes," Leah decided. "It's beautiful—they *must* work. It's the only way." She looked at me half-apologetically. "Do they frighten you, Dr. Volk? Or do those things not work on you?"

I had asked her to call me Rebecca. "Does what not work?"

"Don't you get bored of that sort of thing? If you're scurried up in a library somewhere writing down spells on index cards. Doesn't it ruin the mystique, a bit?"

"Doubt it!" Felix interjected swiftly. "I bet she knows every spell and potion by heart. I bet she could hex all of us, if she wanted to."

"I'm an academic. We don't hex people. Even if we'd very much like to."

They did not frighten me. Love-potions and rams' heads and empty chrismatic vodka-bottles were for those who needed them, for those who lived life soaked through by its storms. Leah's spirits and wood-nymphs and buzzing dryads did not touch me; I had catalogued them all. I knew their secrets.

Felix cocked his head at Leah. "So you're a *pagan*?" He took her in. "That's terribly interesting. Do you have naked bacchanals in the woods, things like that?"

She laughed; she could not know he was mocking her. "No—not at all. I only light candles..."

"Food." Misha appeared in the doorway, beckoning us inside.

They left me alone in the starlight, knee-deep in the grass. The cliffs were black now, blacker than the towers, and the only sign of life against that vast emptiness was the clouding and unclouding of

the moon. The river ran and the ferns rustled and I belonged to none of it, and so I stood and stared. Here I could stare out into the ravine until it became an abyss, and down the waterfalls to where they penetrated into the broken-down battlements of the earth, and when mountains had become valleys and the streams flowed into the sky, there would be little else to separate the living and the dead.

I pressed the fern-flowers between my fingertips until they turned black; I closed my eyes and felt the naked light of stars. I thought of her—of the way she touched my hand and of the way she did not look at me, of the way she smiled when looking in any direction but mine, and of the things that made her smile, and of the old gods she carried in her rucksack, and of the familiar emptiness that would bring me to my knees when she was gone

But tonight, with my hands black and the petals wedged beneath my fingertips, with the touch of her fingers still seared into my palm, I was no longer divided from the kingdom of all living things, from the rocks that breathed out lizards and the grass that buzzed and hummed and the water that sang as it poured down.

I thought of Leah's mouth, breaking open into a smile when Felix teased her, when he offered her his arm, and thought of it as I crushed the petals between my palms. I thought of Felix's sweat and the smell of moonshine on his breath and his hand pushing at her neck and his fingers twining in her hair.

In the distance Misha had brought out the *panduri* and had begun to play a strange and atonal melody; the night air slanted with sound.

I poured out Misha's cheap wine into two plastic cups. I crushed the flower into them both and then set them before me on a stone.

I imagined gorging myself, gulping and vomiting up love. I saw myself delirious, stained, pink-haired and overwhelmed and knotted to my own flesh. I saw myself, silvery in moonshine, biting

the stains of my palms, licking the pulp from underneath my fingernails, spilling the wine onto my breasts and perfuming my hair. I could tear up my notes; I could devour her trust; I could light candles with her and roll, moss-shrouded, under the light of the moon.

But of course, those things didn't work on me.

I returned to the tower; I poured out the wine for the table and gave a toast in impeccable Khevsur dialect in honor of new friends and fellow travelers. I placed them down before Felix and Leah and waited.

I watched as her face flushed; I watched as his insouciant grin lost its despicable edge and became foolish and dogged and despairing. I watched as she leaned in and breathed in his words with the night air and parted her lips and rejoiced, dizzy and disquieted, that for the first time in her life she had at last been understood. He touched her hand and I felt it; she let her ankle rest against his and the sensation shivered up my spine. She whispered something in his ear and I heard it. I was there, between them. I was at her side and in the wine they drank. She was dizzy and he was reeling and the light from the fire filled the air with mist.

"I want to make a toast!" Leah was barely standing; she had no breath left. She leaned against the table and it threatened to buckle under her. "No—it's my turn! It is!"

One of the American girls tried to steady her; Leah pushed her away. "It's a toast—it's a love toast. To towers...to the middle of nowhere—it's so beautiful." She turned to Felix. "It is—you understand, don't you? About this? About everything? Yes—you said it yourself, about the prophecy..."

He took her into his arms and kissed her; I burned with them. He pressed her against the stone walls and let his hands wander down her long skirts; he threaded his fingers into her hair and inhaled the breath from her lips.

The others made half-hearted cluckings about propriety; it did not stop them. Her fingers were unbuttoning his shirt; his hands

squeezed bruises into her shoulders. The fire was crackling and the air smelled like wine and she had lost herself in him and in her ecstasy she made small mewling sounds of earthly joy.

One of the American girls turned to me. "Shouldn't you stop them?"

"It's nothing to do with me," I said.

They had by now fallen onto the divan. His legs were tangled in her skirts; her hair had wound its way around his neck. The American girls tried to separate them. Leah pushed them away and Felix screamed various curses in languages he did not know. Misha was clutching at his bayonet and banging his misshapen fist upon the table.

They did not hear him. They were foolish and they were glorious; their lips were dark with black wine and their faces flushed with desire and I felt their joy course through me.

"At least wait until we're gone," I said, with infinite respectability.

The rest of us filed upstairs in defeat. I stood upon the landing and listened—first to her joy and his murmurs and then the pulsing of her breath and the beginning of his groans.

They were drunk and shook through by love. Felix had stripped to the waist and pulled her chemise over her head; he kissed her breasts and whispered secrets into the side of her wrists. They did not notice me where I remained, silent upon the stair, party and privy and feeling with them the first thrust and the second bite and the final, shivering scream.

She lay in his arms, afterward, kissing his chest and staring out the window at the stars.

"I feel safe here," she whispered. "I don't feel safe many places, but here..."

"I've been waiting for this," he said. "Been all over, you know. Been to Djibouti. I was looking for something. But this is what I needed..."

"Why did you come here?" She wrapped his arms more tightly around her breasts.

"Been everywhere else," he said. "Things stop seeming new."

"But *this* is new?"

"It's different."

"Different how?" She rolled over and looked at him, propped up upon her elbows, her eyes taking in the fine pale hair on his forearms, the victorious blush on his cheeks.

"I'm not bored," he said. It meant something.

"It's different for me too, you know." Her voice was hasty and breathless. "I've never done this before."

"In a tower?"

She swallowed. "I've been waiting for something."

"Something like what?"

"Your story about the ships...that's when I knew. That it had to be like this. Out here. With the stars and the wine and the *panduri* and the mountains all around us. Something like that."

"I've never done it in a tower..." He was staring out the window, conscious only of the moon. "On a ship. I've done that. And in a temple, once. And in an opera-house..." He laughed quietly to himself. "But never in a tower. You're wonderful."

I listened to them make love a second time. I learned that she wept and that he cried out and that when the astronomical enormity of the moment overwhelmed her she clung to him with drowning desperation and buried her head in his neck. Dawn crept through the holes in the tower and they spoke again:

"We should go to the Black Sea," she said. "On horseback. With falcons."

He stirred.

She whispered as she kissed his chest. "I'll take you to the Black Sea—I've always wanted to go. I have it written down in my diary, you know, from when I was little. Not little—but young. That I wanted to fall in love and run off to the Black Sea." She pressed his fingers to her lips.

I closed my eyes and listened to the sound of her voice mingling with the echoes of the streams.

"But you're here now," she continued. "I want to give you something." She turned and reached into the folds of her skirts and in the exhilarating flush of dawn I could see the naked curve of her breasts.

She pressed something into his hand.

"What are you doing?"

"It's for good luck," she said. "I've kept it with me my whole life—since I was sixteen. It's a talisman. But don't take them out of the pouch—the edges are sharp."

He sat up. His hair fell from his eyes and the sheet fell from his chest and in the morning light I saw that his lips were pale and that he no longer loved her.

"I can't take this," he said. "I'm sorry."

"Of course you can—I'm giving it to you..." Her mouth was black and parted; her eyes were wide and still glittered with tears.

"No—I mean, I can't accept it. You're wonderful—I mean, you really are wonderful, and this has *been* wonderful..." He fumbled through a litany of excuses and could not settle on any one. "I mean—Georgian wine, awfully strong, you know. Not used to it. Had to go off alcohol for a bit—antibiotics...something I picked up in Senegal."

She remained naked and unblinking before him.

"I don't want you to get the impression..."

She waited motionlessly for him to finish.

"I don't regret a lot of things," he said. "But I do regret this."

He could no longer remember what he had whispered, nor the feeling of her hair twined about his fingers, nor the overwhelming taste of that wine. I remembered everything.

He passed me on the stair.

She was naked and curled up before the fire. Her hair covered her breasts and she did not move but only rocked on her heels, her

eyes still staring out to where there were no longer stars. Beneath the curve of her emaciated shoulders lay aches and bruises on the flesh which I had not touched, but which I had tasted; my arms ached and stung where they had not been bitten. For a night I had stood upon the stair and known all things; now I stood beside her, and wept with her, and felt the curious ecstasy that came upon me when I knew that my heart had been broken, and that there was no more to feel.

I put a blanket over her shoulders and asked if she was all right.

"You wouldn't understand," she said. She dressed swiftly and did not look at me.

I told her I did not.

"I've had an adventure," she said, as she fastened her belt. Her voice was tin-hollow. "I'm going to go out for a while. Don't wake the others."

I gathered the velvet pouch from the floor and slipped it into my skirt-pocket. By the time I reached the threshold she was already at the bottom of the hill, running into the bosom of the mountain that embraced her, her skirts lost against the chromatic onslaught of that impossible, ever-darkening green.

We heated our breakfast on the fire, bleary-eyed, and the American girls gossiped when they were sure that Felix was not listening. By nightfall she had not returned.

When the storm first broke above us I dreamed that I saw her come to a breathless stop before the crypts. I saw her furiously uprooting flowers from the earth and praying to old stone gods and ram's heads. I saw her throwing out her arms against the thunder that shook the bones in their dwelling-places and the lightning bolts that forked down into the river like the tongues of snakes. I saw her, shaking as the mountain shook, wrapping her arms about her knees, curling into the stone, to wait.

It took them three days to find her.

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On the cover:

**"HEART OF DARKNESS,
page 065"**
Matt Kish

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