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The staff of *Altered Reality Magazine* would like to give warning to those who might be upset by violence, gore, terrifying situations and imagery, or other dark themes. This collection has been rated **M for mature** by the staff.

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Featured Stories: *Amore e Anarchia*, *The Barbary Coast*, *To Be Gifted a Faire Shot*

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AMORE E ANARCHIA

A tumble beneath the sheets was abruptly and rudely interrupted when Conestabile Aldo and his intrusive pack of halfwit officials barged unannounced into the couples' private chambers within L'Albergo della Puttane in search of the bandits that made off with the Emerald Marquee. Springing from the mattress, the male gripped his readied rapier and thrust the tip into the mustachioed Conestabile's thigh, giving his partner time to don her hat, grip her musket, and fling a sheet over her bare form. Bounding out the open window, Dolores Llorenc was quickly followed by her paramour, naked as the day he was born.

Sword in hand, the unclothed pirate took the Madame's hand to assist the woman to her feet. Flicking gravel from her ample posterior, Dolores flung the white bed cloth about her body as the house of coin-procured love from which they just absconded broke out in a cacophony of shrill, feminine screeches. Taking the cue, the duo fled as fast their bare feet allowed.

Heels and toes slapping full upon the cobbles, Dolores Llorenc and Ignio Santinelli, the pirate from Corsica, ran until their lungs burned with the heat of a furnace. Darting into a random avenue, the two outlaws panted like dogs until they regained full use of their breathing apparatuses.

"Well, dear Ignio, that green gemstone I attempted to help you embezzle is now in the dirty clutches of the constabulary." Dolores swathed the pale bedsheet around her dusky skin in the manner of a Grecian toga. "Not to mention our clothing, coin, and all other effects... I do believe I lost my favorite shawl..."

"A minor impediment or a major hindrance, tis true." The cocksure Corsican planted his blade before him in a paltry attempt to shield his nether regions from visibility with the placement of his hand and hilt.

Dolores adjusted her broad-brimmed cavalier's hat to hide her blushing smirk at her partner's gallant and blatantly ridiculous attempt to conceal his lack of attire. "Come Ignio, I retained the good sense to grab coverings, but now we must garb you properly to protect the prudish populace from your naked truth.

#

Advancing forth in a paradox of nonchalant brevity and conciliatory shame, the Pistollera and the pirate sought suitable cover, both for their flesh and roofing over their heads. He threadbare and her scantily clad, the twosome skirted their way across the night shrouded streets of Genoa's pleasure district. Scurrying adrift the miasma of narcotic smokes from Eastern opiates, hashish, and New World tobacco, the two halfcocked rogues strode ever onward to avoid the punishments of the authorities and their own vulnerable exposure. When a leprous vagrant held out his hands for alms, the disrobed Ignio smashed his fist squarely between the eyes of the beggar.

Reeling back in shock and swiftly losing consciousness from the explosion of his nose, the aggressor stepped forth to pull the homeless stranger's burlap from his comatose torso to pull it over his own shoulders. The invalid was obviously far shorter than the buccaneer for the family jewels still draped from the tattered edges of the coarse material.

Dolores stood aghast. "Ignio! What dishonor to engage in fisticuffs with an unarmed and unprepared delinquent? And a leper to compound upon your transgressions."

The corsair from Corsica upheld the bum's hand and quickly unraveled the man's bandages to reveal whole fingers bound together in the guise of rotted digits. "Do you see this, dear Dolores? No leper at all but a deceiver, a common tactic amongst the homeless and destitute to illicit pity from the more wealthy and gullible members of society." Ignio excused his violent outburst.

"I will pray for this poor soul and your sins later." Dolores scolded her romantic bully. "But a bag suitable for turnips barely contains your carrot and beans."

"True, I will need pantaloons and boots if I am to enter an establishment with any propriety." The Corsican conceded. "Let us continue onward, fair Madame. I too desire to sheath my swords, both crafted and natural."

#

Creeping forth by the dim lighting of the Genoese streets, the half-clad comrades edged ever deeper towards the heart of the city. The hour was not too late and foot traffic was still heavy upon the main roads, so Dolores and her more unscrupulous lover ducked into the alleyways to make their awkward way by less populated routes.

The problem with this logic is that other scoundrels and ne'er-do-wells also occupied said pathways, so it did not take long for the beautiful Catalanian and Ignio to become waylaid by a pack of drunken ruffians. A handful of inebriated louts spotted the sparsely shrouded couple and picked them out as targets for their thuggish pursuits.

"Drop ye sword and any silver!" The brawniest of the gang demanded. "If ye have no coin, then we will suffice with the lil' lassie." The man leered with a lusty perk of the brow.

Dolores, in all her boldness, began to step forward, but was hindered from her progression when Ignio pulled her close and decided to utilize less upfront tactics.

"As you can clearly see, we are visibly lacking in both wealth and well-being." The landlocked pirate chose his words carefully. "If you seek riches, might I suggest infiltrating the domains of the Doje. Plenty of coin to disperse between the lot of you... No? And you shall have quite the tale to tell and repeat for the remainder of your days."

Unimpressed, the adversarial spokesman retaliated. "If such be so, then relinquish your blade and hand over the lil' misses into our loving hands."

Nodding solemnly, the sea-wolf ushered Dolores forward as he dropped his blade to clatter upon the hardpacked alley floor. In a sudden flourish, the corsair ripped the sheet from Dolores's exquisite countenance. Taking full advantage of the posses' open-mouthed awe, Ignio stripped the firearm from the Pistollera's grasp and fired a fatal blast dead center into the front of the man's chest.

Ker-Plow!

Rocketing off his feet, the leader of the small gang bowled into his band of bruisers, lifeless and akimbo. Save her swooping hat, Dolores stood stark naked like Botticelli's Venus as she tried her best to conceal perky areolas and downy underreaches

with her hands. Snatching the cloth and gun back from Ignio who reached down to retrieve his blade as the gang of cutpurses stood in shock at the sudden death of one of their own.

Blinded by beauty and brutal black powder, the remaining four thugs were swiftly routed when Ignio charged forward and swatted the flat of his blade back and forth amidst the crew of would-be bullies. Quickly reapplying her gowned sheeting, Dolores stood and sneered at her mate in disgust as he rummaged through the clothing of the corpse on the ground.

"Now you sink even lower in standards to rob a dead man." Dolores chided. "Not much better than a graverobber, are you, Ignio?"

The Corsican pulled the deceased man's tattered trousers over his bare legs, then cursed when the pilfered boots would not fit his feet properly. "Last I recall, Madame, your fair city does not take kindly to the unclothed streaking about the streets before the eyes of the God-fearing innocents."

"Well, all my powder is now in the hands of the police agency, so you have left me quite defenseless after firing my only shot." The Pistollera continued her complaints, chastising her brash companion for the evening.

Fear not, my dear." Ignio tried to console Dolores. "We shall procure you a pig sticker or kitchen knife if worse comes to worse. Now let us be on our way."

#

After being ousted from a number of late-night establishments for lack of decent attire, shouts of "bums" and "slut" sharp on their heels, the couple quickly became flustered and desperate. Perusing the streets for any opportunity that would better their circumstances with less and less options as the hour grew ever later. The unhoused citizenry and drunken revelers were now the only people to roam the cobblestones as the waning moon finally made its appearance above the towering roofs of the city.

Despite the passing of time and a prolonged state of adrenalized survival instincts coursing through their veins, Dolores Llorenc found herself still inebriated from the vintage she imbibed prior to the interrupted tryst that brought her and Ignio to the half-dressed position they currently found themselves embroiled in. They had wandered long enough that the trailing end for her makeshift skirt to grow tattered and stained from the variety of roads they traversed.

With a sudden jolt, Ignio pressed Dolores against the wall, jostling her ferment influenced mind. Signaling with a finger to his lips, he whispered for her to stay put before traipsing out into the main corridor. From the shadows, Dolores watched the buccaneer make his way towards a well-to-do couple passing a wine jug back and forth between the two of them as they came upon Ignio. With an exaggerated bow directed at the corseted dame, Ignio whipped out his rapier with blurring alacrity and leveled it at the man's throat, taking a deep fencer's stance as he addressed the popinjay.

"Good and kindly sir, out of forced desperation and dire need, I shall be taking your boots, purse, and vessel of liqueurs with no bloodshed... if you so please."

The finely dressed woman appeared as if she were about to put up a fuss, but her faint-hearted suitor managed to calm his mistress down as he relented to the pirate's ultimatum. Arms quickly overburdened with blade and booty, Ignio pranced his merry way back to Dolores's place of concealment as the young woman behind him rent the brisk night air with a wail that shook the windows.

Springing into the boots with freshly polished buckles, Ignio darted after Dolores who had to hitch the awkward covering to her thighs to sprint top speed away from the pilfered aristocrats. As the picaroon's newly padded feet caught up with the shorter legs of his female companion, she panted her condemnation at the criminal fleeing by her side.

"At this rate of atrocities you are so fond of committing, nooses shall be strung for both our necks."

"Fear not, Madame." Ignio wheezed. "By the time the night is over, I will have made up for the loss of my emerald."

"You prove you think only of yourself, you thieving scoundrel." Dolores kept pace as she drew ragged breaths into her tortured lungs. "You could have at least made off with the damsel's footwear."

#

The pirate and the Pistollera found themselves at Il Gallo e Cunny, a rather seedy establishment that took their ill-gotten coin for a night's room and a hard loaf of bread. Too exhausted to mingle with the rough and rowdy crowd that continued to celebrate Devil-may-care into the wee hours of the night, the two oddly garbed misfits wove their way through the blustering mass of humanity in its most lewd and degraded state to make entrance into their assigned chambers.

The musty little apartment was far removed from the finest of rentals, but the duo's raggedy and frazzled presence made it difficult for them to care overmuch about their immediate surroundings. Softening their tooth-grinding baguette in glasses of stolen wine, the free-wheeling couple slowly grew full and hazy from bread and ambrosia. The vintage was quite savory, belying the strength of the pressed grapes, and Dolores found herself swiftly losing all inhibitions.

As Ignio boisterously relayed previous exploits, sailing the exotic coastlines of the Americas and the tropical islands of the West Indies, Dolores quickly forgot about the scandalous demeanor of the rapsallion who so frustrated her sensibilities earlier in the evening. His slick and gleaming curls framing his angled features called out to be smoothed away from his nut-brown skin, delicious as almonds. The wild liquidity and depth of his gaze drew her into his fantastic tales just as he was drawn to the wild depths of the ocean blue.

When his rope-burned hands accidentally grazed the skin of her wrist, the faint hairs of her arm stood to attention with exquisite sensitivity. His broad and pouting lips continued their rant as she studied the well-situated stubble that gracefully swooped around his luscious mouth. Her eyes wandered down to the lean, toned musculature of his sun-bronzed arms, dexterous as a dancer or a master conductor in his bold gesticulations.

Mouth watering with the fruity tang of the vine, Dolores leaned in to gingerly peck the ear of the unsuspecting bandit. Completely jarred from the recital of his tall tales by the delicate chilling of his nerves coursing along his entire body, he turned his wolf's eyes to the seductress.

With a predatory expression upon his face, Ignio forsook his stories to grasp Dolores's smooth, bare shoulders and throw her full upon the mattress. Hastily tugging the coarse burlap from his sleek torso, he carelessly tossed the rag to the corner of the room. Like a tiger to the kill, the corsair playfully pounced upon the prone female splayed erotically upon the disheveled bedding.

The careless momentum of his lunge broke the wrought-iron bedposts, tossing the lovers to the floor and causing quite the clatter and commotion. Their botched lovemaking was promptly interrupted by the brawny, bald barkeep and proprietor of the dilapidated structure.

"You'll pay for this with coin and blood, you mangy cur!" The massive figure, easily a head taller than the Corsican, hoisted the bed wrecker from the floor and began pummeling his victim upon the face and stomach with his meaty fists. His merciless beating was abruptly halted by Dolores, nonchalantly donning her dark cavalier's hat as she aimed her dog lock pistol pointblank at the large man's hairless dome.

"Drop my associate and you shall continue on with your life with what little amount of brains you possess."

Tossing the beaten man aside, the barkeep turned to face the barrel of the gun aimed at him but made no further move. "Get out the lot of you and let me never see you around these parts."

Shirtless, Ignio scurried from the room as Dolores saluted the inn's owner and followed quickly behind her partner. Reaching the dark streets of Genoa, the two outcasts found themselves on the run yet again. Checking over her counterpart from the corner of her eyes, the Pistollera commented upon the man's roughhewn appearance.

"That's quite the shiner you received, lover boy. And besides not having your shirt, you have also left your sword behind. Now we are truly defenseless."

"Easy come, easy go." Ignio retorted in his carefree manner, trying to assuage his sheeted paramour of her constant fussing.

Twirling her pistol expertly by the trigger guard as she kept pace with the Corsican, Dolores tried her best to keep the man grounded in reality. "You are lucky the bouncer did not call my bluff. Until I get back to my quarters, my piece is just as useless as a toy. And by the way I saw you fight, we shall be easy prey for any drunk or surly vagrant."

#

Dolores Llorenc felt as though her calluses had turned into bunions and then burst into oozing pustules as her bare feet tread ever onward for what seemed like an endless number of leagues. Despite his overconfident demeanor and cocksure, demigod posturing, the Pistollera's astute eyes could tell Ignio Santinelli's constitution was beginning to wane. Befuddled by drink and fatigued by sleep deprivation and a marathon run across the length of the coastal city, Dolores and Ignio plod on in a state of numb drudgery.

The Mediterranean breeze grew starker and the streets emptier and more silent as the atmosphere entered the eerie phase when shifting shadows and dastardly souls sought to remind the light dwellers who ruled the night. Dolores felt the ephemeral and spooky setting infiltrate her being to chill the blood and grip the bones. Even the bravado of the Corsican corsair shivered at his own vulnerability, noticeable in the brisk pace he maintained to escape the unknown threats of the darkling hours.

The cloying silence was shattered by the barks of gruff voices and stomps of heavy boots. When Dolores made out the distinct timbre of Aldo's confident vocals, she pulled Ignio up short in his march, signaling the danger upon the road. The lights flickering in the man's eyes signified to the Pistollera's acute perceptions the pirate concocting yet another wild plan. Sighing, she tersely addressed the seadog with a scathing tongue.

“What crazy scheme do you have brewing inside that wine-addled brain of yours?”

Taking the diminutive markswoman by the arms, the audacious pirate dragged Dolores to a nearby alcove. “Quickly, doll! Cover that pretty hair of yours and play the part of the beggar.”

The small Catalanian adjusted her hijacked bedsheet to fully hood her head and face as the two sojourners dropped to a crouch in the heavy shadows of the recessed wall just in time for the troop of patrolling authorities to turn the corner, tromping boldly into view. Hiding his countenance beneath his disheveled curls as the constabulary approached, Ignio watched the small troop laughing bawdily and nonchalantly twirling batons.

“Alms... alms for the poor, good sirs.” Ignio slurred out a plea to the passing men at arms, out of place with his bare chest, tattered breeches, and polished boots.

One of the uniformed upholders of the law spat upon the ground before the pair of vagrants, sneering down at the perceived dregs of society. “Give us one good reason why we should give you coin and not throw you lot into the dungeons, worthless scum?”

“If we can receive three daily meals of bread, broth, and barley... then lock us up I says.” Ignio retorted with a hoarse distortion to his accent.

Conestabile Aldo stepped forward to oversee control of the situation, placing a reassuring hand upon the shoulder of his underling. “No need to harass these hapless strays.” Directing his attention to the mismatched rabble at his toes, he addressed the couple before him. “If you riffraff can make your way to the back alleys and out of sight of the good and honest citizens soon to frequent these fair roads, then there shall be no need to haul your hides to the cages.” The leader of the enforcers pompously put on airs of false sympathy and generosity. His thigh bandaged where the Corsican pricked him at the onset of the evening.

Spying the velvet pouch that housed his illicitly procured gemstone dangling from the thick belt of the Conestabile, Ignio lunged from his seat and tore the dainty drawstrings of the purse that contained the precious jewel, reclaiming the emerald that cradled so reassuringly within his palm.

“Fly girl! Flee for your life and all you hold dear!”

Spry on her feet, Dolores sprang into action, bearing her firearm to the constable nearest her. Taking advantage of his shock, the Pistollera pirouetted between the man and his closet companion, bedsheet furling in her wake as intangible as the ghost she resembled. Ignoring her blistered feet and strained muscles, Dolores swiftly caught ground with her larcenist compadre, increasing the distance between herself and her pursuers.

One advantage the Pistollera had over nearly everyone was a greater knowledge of the backroads and secret side streets of Genoa, regardless of her Spanish upbringing. Leading her islander friend through dark alleys, weaving between rubbish littered sidewalks with the constabulary in hot pursuit, Dolores decided to resort to one of her primary evasion tactics – the rooftops.

Clutching hold of the first drainpipe that came into view, the white cowed Pistollera climbed hand over hand, feet too sore to grip the corroded and rusty drainage as her lithe body escalated like a kite. Clumsier on high, Ignio lumbered behind, grasping desperately to the eroded iron tubing as his feet waddled up the supporting brickwork.

Ascending to the top of the multistoried building, Dolores dove on top of the overlapping ceramics that made up the roofing of the structure she escalated. Nearing the apex, Ignio's heavier weight began to peel the aged pipe from the wall as the constables stood below swearing threats and curses at the dauntless duo. Kicking off his stolen boots, too slick for the climb, he shouted to his partner above.

"Dolores! Dangle your sheet down and pull me up." The pirate pleaded.

Peering down smugly at the Corsican, the Pistollera calmly answered the thief. "And expose myself indecently? You seek to shame me further? Besides, there is no where to attach the sheet and I lack the strength to hoist you."

The pipes beneath her began to creak. "Please, my dear! I have the Emerald Marquee! Do not leave me dangling."

"Like your short sword was left dangling most of the evening?" Dolores countered. "You can keep the jewel, Ignio. You are a liar, murderer, and exploiter of women and the weak. If you are truly a wolf of the sea, then it should be no problem to reach the rooftops. As for me, this is where we depart. It was quite the adventure though, I must admit."

Blowing a kiss, Dolores turned and bolted over the crest, disappearing like a wraith into the night.

#

Dolores Llorenc burst into La Tettarella del Drago with nothing more than a hat, pistol in hand, and a tattered sheet that trailed after her dirt-smeared feet. Her best friend, Jerome the Moor, was the only one up at this ungodly hour, jotting furiously at scattered sheaves of paper littered about his favorite booth of the inn. No one else, not even a barkeep, occupied the main hall.

Without a word, Dolores strolled to the dour figure and promptly removed the ever-present crimson scarf from his dark hair and leaned down to pop a loud kiss upon his forehead. Shocked by her bold behavior, the tawny skinned poet-rogue dripped ink from his quill as he sat with mouth agape. She followed this gesture by grabbing his wine glass and downing half of its contents before setting it back in place. Nary a word spoken, the Purple Pistollera snatched the carafe from the polished oak table and pivoted, making way to her chambers.

Jerome watched her depart, noticing her disheveled hair exploding from the confines of her feather-topped hat like a hoary witch's mane above the soiled and frayed white cape flowing behind her as she took the steps to the upper rooms, slow and regal. Her wild and unseemly appearance gave her an exotic and tantalizing appeal uncommon to her typically upkept style.

The late-night author wondered if the short string of events was an invitation to follow, and his first instinct was to dive out of his seat and give chase to the dainty little treat. Instead, he mopped up the spilt ink and reapplied the thick, dark liquid to the tip of his writing implement, pondering how best to distil his imagination into words, ruminating over what events could have led to this odd and brief encounter.

By candleflame, Jerome torched the last piece he was pining over, grabbing a fresh sheaf to start anew.

THE BARBARY COAST

The stout merchant galleon, La Scorfa Gonfia, raised anchor, exiting the Alexandrian ports of Egypt to traverse the Mediterranean Sea on the return voyage back to the coastal city-state of Genoa, the prosperous peak of the Tyrrhenian inlet. Departing the ancient land of the Pharaohs, the tawny Saharan sands vanished beyond the crest of the waves just before the dimming sun dropped below the western horizon.

The crew that manned the vessel were not just seasoned boatmen but savvy in the ways of coin and commerce being longtime associates of the Peroraro corporation. Thus, everyone onboard worked as well-oiled associates, if not bosom buddies. It was amongst these sailing salesmen that Dolores, relatively new to the company of seafaring entrepreneurs, found herself guided by the wind on the journey back full circle.

Gowned in the fineries of a highborn lady, Dolores Llorenc stood upon the deck's prow like an animated figurehead, gripping the ship's rail as the sea's gale ruffled her long hair, dark as the deepening night. Her sun-kissed, Spanish skin prickled at the salt-tang of the breeze as her honey-brown irises gazed out at the starry array of the blue-black heavens above. The sporadic saline gusts mingled with the moisture of her eyes, stirring a melancholy within her sensitive soul.

Closing her lids and raising her head to stem the brewing tears, missing all the lands and beautiful people she left in her wake mixed with a nostalgic longing to return home. Using the edge of her blouse's sleeve, Dolores dabbed at the edges of her smooth features, turning from the infinite vantage of the starlit sky to slowly meander towards the confines of her private chambers. Mumbling her goodnights to the sailors she passed, the lone woman made way to her bedding that rocked gently upon the lapping waters of the Great Sea.

#

The following morning found Dolores situating her attire to the best of her abilities with no mirror or assistance. She was startled from her grooming by a frantic call hollering for all hands-on deck. Sliding on riding boots beneath billowing skirts, she grabbed her satchel and ran into the open air.

Dolores burst from her room, shielding her eyes from the glaring sun radiating from a cloudless morning reflecting off the blinding waves. Atop the crow's nest, the lookout shouted the sighting of three Muslim flags from the western shoals. Hitching her skirts high up about her waist, Dolores took to the riggings like a monkey gluttonous for the banana. The adventurous Catalanian was as swift and sure a climber as any man, having spent a period of her youth as eyes on high for a French caravel. Her petite frame belied an athletic musculature that was undeniable by the ship's crew who whistled up at her admirable skills.

Reaching the heights of the mainmast, she joined the slight man in the snug nest and took the extended lens from his grasp. He scuttled down the hemp cordage now that Dolores swapped his position as she peered through the spyglass in the direction he motioned towards. The stars and crescents came clearly into view surmounting three ships coming in from Sale, Algeria, Tunis, or Tripoli – Muslim held territories of North Africa. The trinity of slave-rowed galleys, smaller and more sleek than the swollen hull

of the merchant galleon, moved much more quickly than their own vessel since they were powered by both oars and sails.

The alacrity of the approaching Muslim crafts brought greater detail through the magnification glass glued to Dolores's spying eye. On each deck, drummers beat great leather-capped bowls, spurring on naked, musclebound slaves to propel the ships forward at a rapid clip through synchronized pulls of dozens of oars. Upon the bronze ram-post of the nearest galley, Dolores's vantage allowed her to make out two bearded men, heads wrapped in swaths of cloth and pantalooned in baggy silks that reminded the woman of her friend Jerome back home. One pointed an unsheathed nimcha scimitar at La Scorfa Gonfia while his partner cradled a Turkish-style arquebus in a military fashion – like the infamous Aruj and Kheir-ed-Din Barbarosa brothers from more than one hundred years ago.

Pirates!

Barbary corsairs!

Dolores screamed down at her comrades below, stirring into action the nervous crew as if she dislodged an angry hornets' nest. Despite the commotion and constant roar of the sea, Dolores could make out the bellowing voice of Captain Marco, debating with his navigator over the best course to proceed – continue northward upon their route or retreat east towards the Holy Lands of the Levant.

Knowing she was no longer required upon the perch, Dolores Llorenc dropped from the mast's basket, scampering down ropes, pole, and sail to stand on level flooring with the scurrying seamen preparing themselves to shift broadcloths, ready the cannons, or drop precious cargo overboard to lighten their load. Retrieving her haversack, the Spaniard withdrew her trusty dog lock pistol and carefully poured powder with the practiced finesse of a true professional. Slinging her carryall about one shoulder, Dolores rose from her crouch to face whatever the Fates had devised for them.

Deciding to flee despite the navigator's insistence that escaping towards Islamic ruled territory was a fool's gambit, Captain Marco trumpeted out his ultimatum as he took to the wheel.

"Turn sunwise, mates! Make leagues between us and these heathen Moors! Our very lives depend upon it!"

The galleon lurched its hulking mass, flinging many a sea-legged veteran to the weather-beaten deck. One poor soul was tossed overboard by the tilting merchant vessel, nearly capsizing with the abrupt shift in course. The flailing sailor was left in Neptune's embrace as La Scorfa Gonfia sped along, unwilling to think twice about the life of one in the hopes of saving the many.

Dolores gesticulated the Sign of the Cross and kissed her rosary for the life of one of God's good creatures. Bracing the barrel of her firearm against her forehead, pleading to the Almighty that no one else need die, especially by her own hand. Keeping low and out of the way, she watched the frantic paces of her party prepare musketry and pack the cannons.

The sharp red sails of the corsairs were of a vastly different structure and aesthetic than that of the plump, European vessel, resembling the dorsal fins of sharks drawn to the blood of a kill. Like a slow-grazing humpback, the galleon had no chance to evade the wind and manpowered fleet of Moorish design, hot on their tails.

Cannons positioned with fuses at the ready, the merchant crew stood in nerve-racking anticipation of the looming threat drawing ever nearer. Looking about her

crewmates, the grinding jaws and sweat beading faces were palpable to the hawk eyes of the Catalanian. Stalwart and brave men, yet workers most adapt hoisting the sails and bartering goods than the life and death immediacy of warfare and military strategy. She said a quick prayer for the men trying their utmost to staunch the quavering of limbs knowing retreat was not an option. Now, more than ever, Dolores wished the battle-hardened Jerome and his gang of Crimson Cinquedeas had accompanied her back-and-forth mission across the Mediterranean.

The centermost vessel of the pursuers held back as the flanking galleys pushed forward in a trident formation, the leftmost antagonist drawing close to the merchant ship as the opposite craft carved a wide berth about their prey. Pulling parallel to the larboard stretch of La Scorfa Gonfia whose members maintained a neutral stance, firearms concealed against shipping barrels or braided rails. The peaceful countenance held no sway over the corsairs who fired the initial round of lead shot upon their targets.

The man nearest Dolores dropped upon the planks before her, a growing bloodspot at the center of his chest. Retrieving his rifle, she pivoted and discharged the longarm into the hide of the kettle drum in a thunderous explosion of leather and pottery, scattering the slave master in a shower of ceramics. Her fellow riflemen simultaneously fired a return volley into their aggressors, dropping more men than fell from their own defensive line.

After both sides emptied their barrels of sulfurous gunpowder and death-dealing pellets, the frontline of the Muslim force jumped ship, boarding the Genoese transport. More than a half dozen fanatics entered melee combat with the merchants having discarded their firepower for handheld weaponry. Backpedaling, Madame Llorenc tossed aside the spent musket to draw her pistol at an approaching seadog scowling menacingly through his dark, curly beard. Shifting her aim centered upon his face, she unleashed smoke and shot, shattering his serrated cutlas into a shower of shimmering steel.

Stowing her custom one-shot into her violet sash, she ran full speed back to the mainmast. Hand over hand, Dolores ascended the netting, making a timely twist that barely avoided the cruel, curved jambiya meant to skewer her vulnerable calf. Reaching a height above arms reach of the bloodthirsty pirate, she quickly looped a hempen cord thrice about her thigh and hip, suspending her weight before freeing her hands to reload the firearm.

Finishing the deed from a precarious dangle, the acrobatic woman spun full circle to survey the state of chaos and carnage below. Assessing a risky and potentially neck-breaking maneuver, Dolores inhaled a deep breath of air, withdrawing a concealed stiletto from her boot. Swinging out to a taunt sail-line, Dolores sliced the strained cordage and clenched her stomach muscles in preparation for the daredevil sequence of actions she initiated.

“Patricco... Duck!”

Severing the bonds that held fast the boom, the perpendicular bar swung loose at a spring-loaded trajectory with whipcrack celerity. Her companion instinctively heeded her command upon hearing his name, narrowly dodging the crossbeam which crashed like a horned ram into the torso of his combatant with a breath-stealing thump. Another Mohammedan managed to avoid the trunk with a swift backstep, bracing himself against the ship’s edge as Dolores was thrown from mid-mast. Flung free from her makeshift harness, she logrolled several times upon the deck before ending her

momentum with a somersault that culminated with Dolores crouched on one knee. Loaded pistol in hand, she leveled the sights and blew out the rail the corsair was gripping. Relying upon the brace for stability, the off-kilter invader fell from his unsteady footing, toppling head over heels into the waters below.

Having fended off the first wave of attackers, the galleon's men rushed forward to ignite the cannons. A series of blasts exploded forth in a deafening barrage of three iron spheres that splintered the mizzen-topped hull with such fury that the thin vessel of the invasive force was instantly obliterated, sending the chained rowers and armed pirates to their watery graves.

Cheering raucously their small victory, Dolores had to screech at the highest pitch to capture the sailors' attention, shattering the triumphal illusion. Pivoting in alarm, the crews' eyes grew collectively wide at the oncoming charge of the forgotten galley that had veered far to the right before being promptly ignored for the more immediate threat newly thwarted.

The metallic ram, only a few fathoms distant, propelled towards La Scorfa Gonfia at a velocity seeming to defy the laws of nature. Resigned that she would not be graced the time to prepare her weapon, Dolores quickly stashed the firearm securely inside her large leather purse and gripped tight the foremast for dear life. With no opportunity to swivel the artillery, much less form a defensive wall to stymie the flow of the enemy's unstoppable bulk designed to engage as a floating spear upon the ocean blue, men panicked, clutching any rope or rail at hand while others dived overboard to take their chances in the hostile seas.

The concussive impact was so explosive it nearly cleaved the galleon's sturdy hull in twain, flinging men from their feet like ragdolls discarded by a child's tantrum into the disturbed crests of the crashing waves. With the quarters and bulkheads instantaneously taking on water, Dolores's bearhug encircling the foremost of the sail-clothed masts was ripped from the post with the riveting battery that tore the mighty ship asunder. The wooden pillar swayed, then cracked at the base, tipping ominously like a felled tree in the woods. Darting like a blurring mongoose, the nimble Catalanian barely evaded the crushing beam, but the trunk-sized span of timber plunged through the shattered decking, driving the forecastle and Dolores below the disrupted waves in an unfolding of petticoats that spread like a blooming flower upon her submersion. Too late did the Genoese crew realize the initial flank of attack by the Muslim zealots was nothing more than a suicide run allowing their comrades to attack savagely from the starboard side.

In a surreal and timeless instant, thoughts, emotions, and physicality collapsed into a moment of pure visualizations. With a complete absence of discernment, Dolores witnessed the actions unfolding above as she slowly sank into the liquidous depths. The enemy galley pierced completely through the midriff of La Scorfa Gonfia, the rowing slaves pummeling any survivors until their dead and comatose bodies joined Dolores in her perilous descent.

The brass and ironworks plunged past the submerged Spaniard while the more buoyant wooden wreckage drifted upon the surface in a diaspora of shredded planks and splintered cargo. When a cask of cannonballs barreled directly towards her, Dolores's survival instincts and the immediacy of reality snapped back into full effect.

Feet kicking to action, the brave beauty from Barcelona doggedly paddled herself out of the shower of deadly debris cascading down about her. Hampered by the

excessive folds of silk and linen garments, Dolores cut herself free from the dress that hampered her aquamarine propulsions. More at home amidst the riggings or skipping the wagon ruts of worn city streets, the cavalier expeditioner regretted her deficiencies in the skills aquatic.

Out of her element, Dolores strapped the precious contents of her satchel tight against her bosom. Invaluable air bubbles began to escape the strained confines of her tiny lungs as she struggled ineffectively to escalate the cloying swell encapsulating her. The pressure of the depths forced more rarified air from her constricted chest. Eyes bulging with defeat and desperation, Dolores's sharp vision grew hazy with the collapse of her vital organs.

Born from the waters of the womb, Dolores sank into her grave within the lifeblood of the planet. A full circle return to the Source, for life begets death.

TO BE GIFTED A FAIRE SHOT

Through word-of-mouth, street chatter, and overheard rumors, Dolores Llorenc and her crew were made cognizant of the Champion Shot, hosted by the high court for the prize of a full purse of gold coins granted to the winner. Sitting about a tavern's largest table nestled in one of Paris's border towns, the seven sojourners from Genoa supped upon fresh baked bread and roasted duckling. After a top-heavy barmaid delivered a platter of ale and wine, Jerome bounced up to hoist a toast.

"Salute, Madame Pistollera... or should I say Lady Katrina... or do you prefer Dolores? The ruddy-faced bravo rose his tankard on high after whispering the final name of his dearest friend. Clinking glasses and cheering the sole female of the party, Jerome waved his men to silence as he continued with his proclamation. "Ragazza, our arrival to this quaint little town could not have come at a more fortuitous time. The musketry competition is mere leagues from Paris and so are we. And no one can fire like our own Senorita. So, who agrees that our wee Mademoiselle enter said tournament."

A unanimous roar and clatter of mugs answered the querist as Dolores Llorenc blushed, sipping from her wine both as cover for her glowing cheeks and to bolster her resolve. Even bookish Alonso, who longingly wished to return home as soon as possible, looked excited to see the contest of precision and firepower. Sliding her glass before her, Dolores leaned forward to make her address.

"You all are too kind, and I would trust any of you with my life. But this idea of Jerome's is ludicrous and utter hogwash. Even if I desired to enter such a juvenile competition of comparing the machismo of each other's barrels, there is absolutely no way they would allow a woman to join the games."

Her fans looked boyishly disappointed, but Jerome was unrelenting. "I did not lie when I said you are the best shot I have ever beheld. And it would be no trouble at all to grant you entry into the tourney..." He flashed a wicked rake's grin at his gorgeous cohort.

The infuriating freebooter knew the Pistollera too well. It took little self-reflection to realize she did indeed long to engage in the pistol matches. To show all that she could best a man at his own game. To prove to the world that despite all odds, a diminutive orphan girl could stand level with men of the highest esteem. To relish in the thrill of testing her skills, not only against the top brass - the cream of the crop - but to challenge her own viability to better understand her own limitations so she could transcend her own aptitude within a field she found necessary for her own survival, as well as that of others. Grudgingly, Dolores allowed herself to show a slight crack in her armor.

"If you were to fulfill your part of the bargain, Jerome, and if I were to agree with such a silly endeavor, could you ensure me that you will have my back if I were to become exposed?"

The entire table swore their undying allegiance to the Madame of the Musket, and after another round of beverages and adulations, the gang dispersed to pursue their own interests, be it dance or cards or drinking games. Sitting alone at a table filled with grimy dishes and spilled drinks, Dolores brewed over various schemes to make a foray into the heart of the elites to infiltrate their restricted frivolities.

#

The day of the festival arrived with uproarious fanfare from the crowding masses. French cheers and a smattering of Germanic and even Slavic dialects comingled in a raucous cacophony undecipherable by many within the party of six foreigners who crossed the threshold heralding entry into the much-anticipated event. Jostling through the crammed line of eager spectators, the Crimson Cinquedeas and members of the Peroraro expedition pushed against the bustle to force their way towards front row seats.

When the jumbling pedestrians gathered within the confines of the oblong arena, surrounding buglers raised man-sized trumpets dangling Parisian banners to their lips, belting out a peal signaling the show of arms. After the blaring declaration of flared brass hushed the crowd, the Bourbon royals made their way into the most gilded booth, marking the true initiation of the tournament proper. After the King and his family took their seats, cannons outside the ring were fired to the audible excitement of the onlookers. As sulfurous smoke wafted above the raised bleachers, a page beneath a powdered periwig in the highest of hose strode to the center of the field and unraveled an enormous scroll.

“Hark... hark! Here ye and hear ye! All in attendance! Welcome to Le Tournoi du Champion de Tir.” The proclamation was interrupted by a roaring burst of applause by the circumference of fans. Patiently awaiting the gradual quieting of the viewers, the spokesman continued.

“Here for your viewing pleasure shall be displayed a fantastic array of the latest in innovative technologies and advanced military weaponry utilized by the most proficient of riflemen, musketeers, and gunnery technicians. No blood shall be shed upon this day of glory and achievement, but a fair competition of well-trained and highly talented longarm men and pistoleers. So, the time has come to take your seats and maintain a respective silence while the warriors take aim... there shall be ample amounts of time to celebrate and place bets between rounds. And now, without further delay... let the games begin!”

One final round of cheers preceded the galloping burst of a charger thundering into the stadium bearing the weight of a black-armored mercenary from the eastern Holy Roman Empire, helm entirely shielding his features from view. Riding just outside the length of a lance, the black knight discharged a pistol square into the chest of a mannequin. Dropping the firearm, he continued his ride without slowing pace to extract another gun, blasting an identical target square in the head.

Cantering back to the horse-gate, hoots and stomping followed the shadow-knight who vanished as adroitly as he arrived. After the withdraw of the horseman, the riffers took to the grounds to an equidistant pace from the stumps ringed red and white – a Scotsman, Bavarian, Swiss, and a Frenchman (of course). No disciplinary orders required for the sportsmen thoroughly indoctrinated by military rigmarole. Ritualistically loading the brim powder down their barrels, some longer than the height

of a tall child. Belting out the contestant's names and prior achievements, the screeching orator stiffly departed to allow the gunners their spot.

Kzizzle... Bang BOOM Bang!!

After the dust and smoke cleared, the official stepped forth to extend his measuring thread to determine the most accurate of long-range shots. The two nearest the mark were proclaimed dual winners for a subsequent round as the field was cleared for the pistolleros. Fresh targets were erected as the two contestants, Jack McKenzie and Von Reubens of Bavaria were set for the next phase, making room for the single shot hand gunners.

When all was made ready the four pistoleers cut their entrance, likewise representing a variety of different kingdoms; the local Frenchman, a Venetian, Ottoman, and a short statured Spaniard. The range was shorter than the previous, but so too the barrels. Gallant were the bows and waves of each representative to the fawning watchers, with kisses blown to wives and courtesans. Titles and accomplishments were expounded upon to persuade the gamblers and loan sharks to strike their bids with impassioned insight. As the sharp shots powdered their weaponry and fit strikers, the announcer revealed the names Marcel Raniard, Luciano Ferro, Mohmed Ayallah, and Deago Laurencius the Castilian. Each of the rivals stood poised and steady as their respective camps cajoled them on.

BangPowPowPow!!

The billowing obscuration of foul darkness cleared to the impatient anticipation of the audience awaiting the call for the winners. With the aid of the metrics cord, the two most precise marksmen were declared. Both the French Musketeer and the mysterious Spaniard paraded off the grounds in triumph as the two premiere shootists.

During the intermission, a team all the way from distant Cathay wheeled out their large cart, all topped with tasseled caps covering dark locks bound in tight queues. With furtive steps, the foreign entourage unfolded their simple yet intricate chests to reveal fused containers from cubbies to prepare their display. After setup, strikers were ignited to light the oiled threads that sent rockets through the sky. Far above the heads of those situated in the high seats, the cannisters exploded, sending a cascade of colored sparklers like patterned comets descending from the heavens.

As the festivities held the viewers enraptured, the participants of the competition busied themselves within their designated bunker to refit their intricate arms. The rotten egg reek of sulfur and refined oils consumed the chamber, but the veterans of the gun were well accustomed to the volatile materials that fueled their ballista. Swiping clean the residual buildup coating the hollow of his sidearm, the Musketeer sidled up to the Spanish competition in a sly yet friendly manner, like a housecat demanding to be pet.

"Monsieur Diego, do I have dat right?" The wily Frenchman edged uncomfortably near, his curls brushing against the delicate Spanish ear. "I am most interested in your piece. A very fine and well-shaped instrument. May I touch?"

With a wary cast of the eye, Daego swiveled to hold out the dog lock pistol for Marcel to finger, but not embrace. Gracefully tracing his digit along the pristine meld of hardwood and metal as if it were the sensitive flesh of a lover, the Musketeer looked up to gaze longingly into the gold-brown eyes of the Spaniard.

"Such a smooth yet firm package... I can almost feel the power of it throbbing, pulsating if you will." His wandering forefinger drifted from the gentle swoop of the

pommel to graze across the palm and nerves of the wrist gripping the weapon. "It would be an absolute pleasure if we were to steal a private moment to ourselves after zis silly show is over... to further discuss and explore each other's unique aptitudes and methodologies..."

Instinctively, Daego recoiled with clammy chills coursing along the length of the forearm. With a hearty guffaw, the towering Scotsman interrupted the awkward exchange, barging his large frame between the two. "Tis not the décor, nor even the size needs it be said." The strawberry-blond hoisted his own rifle in emphasis. "It be the sharp eye and steady hand of the shooter." The blustering Northerner interjected his own jovial philosophy unabashedly as the taciturn Bavarian remained silent, either by nature or holding his tongue in disgust at the ribald antics of his fellow contestants. Adjusting mustachios to make sure they were in place, Daego Laurencius pondered the predicament involving Monsieur Raniald.

Is this snakish popinjay flirting with me, or trying to unsettle my resolve?

Batting the dandy from his advances, Jack McKenzie scuttled in to whisper words of warning to the transplant from the Aragon Peninsula. "N'ver ye mind the veneer and perfume masking the stink of this jackal. One of your bearing should ave no dealings wit this posturing bugger. Aye? Stay true, Spanish, and you shall hit the mark, or near enough to skirt on by..."

#

The Far Eastern fireworks reached a climactic crescendo when a cinder-spewing, electric-blue Dragon was tailed by a flaming Phoenix, the fiery symmetry of its wings dissipating in a cascade of dwindling orange embers. Awed into a silence deeper than any absence of voices yet heard, the crowd stared wide-eyed at the brilliance that none had ever beheld, transcended to another realm by a culture responsible for the invention of gunpowder, now firmly in the hands of the Europeans who currently dominated its utilization in military application.

Respectfully carting away all their equipment and whisking away any traces of their endeavors, the Cathayans made off leaving an open stage for the next round of lethal grandeur. Marching with pomp to their designated stations, Mad Jack McKenzie and Von Reubens were heralded by name as they strode with rifles propped formally upon their shoulders. The targets were positioned ten paces back from the previous distance as the two rifleman each took a knee to sight their barrels.

BOOM!! BOOM!!

By a slim margin, the Scottish riffler was announced foremost marksman of the longshot. The Bavarian gripped his opponent's forearm in a show of good grace and camaraderie before Mad Jack broke into an ecstatic jig, skipping across the lawn to make his lively departure. The onlookers stomped their approval and cried their disappointment, growing increasingly drunk by shared wine and rising anticipation as the contest narrowed down to its finale.

Time was granted for the gamblers to tally their wagers and relieve strained bladders in the surrounding woodlands. Reading the escalating impatience of the audience, the orator proceeded forth to the epicenter of everyone's attention to cry out the competition between the two remaining hand gunners – the French Musketeer versus the short and swarthy Spaniard. The target was extended five measured steps from the distance of their former trial of arms. Doffing the wide, dark hat into a low, sweeping bow, Daego Laurencius graciously motioned Monsieur Raniald to take the first

pull. Accepting the gesture since the foreigner beat him to the punch, Marcel begrudgingly took stance out of a strict sense of honor even though the native-born Kingsman should have acted the part of the host.

Klick BAM!!

The shot struck solid center red, yet southwest of bullseye. The citizens and guests stood and clapped with a heightened civility as the games became ever more climactic. Spinning to the adoring attendees, Daego flung with a flourish the cavalier's hat that umbrellaed the head to the manicured grass. Peering astutely at the target before drawing the violet headcloth to cover the dark eagle eyes. With slow diligence to the art, the sharpshooter from Spain leveled the firearm with both hands and carefully set the intricate dog lock.

PANG!!

Rolling the cloth from the eyes, the Spaniard sighted the splintering mark of the bullet's entrance between the Musketeer's indentation and true center. Dozens of boos echoed amongst the locals, disappointed to see one of their own bested by a member of another nation, but many roared in admiration for the darkling trick shooter from the South. Turning towards the winner, Marcel kissed his rival upon both cheeks and the lips, too long and too passionately for comfort. Continuing the embrace, the Frenchman addressed the victor with all the dignity his second-place stature could muster.

"Monsieur Diego, victory is yours, fair and square. My offer still stands though, and you are welcome to meet me at my personal villa to discuss matters of a more intimate nature..." He winked at Senor Laurencius, offering back the wide-brimmed hat to its owner. "Now win this final challenge in honor of us single-arm warriors."

The last event of the day's competition was to be held for the top ranked gunner of each division – pistoleer and rifleman. Fidgeting over their finely forged instruments, two fresh target rounds were rolled to carefully situated designations, the riffler's mark ten strides further to compensate for the longer barrel's greater striking range. The spokesman and workers scurried from the field as the crowd grew hushed for the finale. Daego turned blindside as Mad Jack McKenzie held his fuselage ready to ignite his powder.

"Best of luck to ye, Spanish." The Scotsman took his knee as Daego slid the humongous hat forward to slyly slip a discrete sliver of mirror from a secreted pocket stitched into the black felt of the brim. Hearing the crackle of the musket, the Spaniard swung a rainbow arc of the arm to fire a backwards shot as the final display of prowess.

POP!! POW!!

With the dissipation of gun smoke it became clear that neither finalist hit the central circle, but it was visible to all that the pistol shot was far nearer the mark. Amongst the din of the spectators, Daego swore he heard the hoarse shouts of rowdy friends from the entry seats. Praises were heaped upon the hitherto unknown Senor who was gifted the royal purse for an acumen determined to be the crème de la crème.

Small ship's cannons were scuttled out and simultaneously lit towards the mock citadel erected at the far end of the arena. The faux construction was expertly designed to explode in dramatic fashion to the absolute delight of all watching. Senor Daego took this opportunity of the final spectacle to near the gap between bleachers marking the exit and released her hair as she tore off the fake moustache with some amount of discomfort.

“Good denizens of the French Kingdom! Since your ‘Just’ Louis has forced the wages of your endeavors from your hands to fund his decadence and frivolous games, I return, full circle, that which is truly yours.”

Ripping open the strings of the purse, Dolores flung the shiny contents of the velvet pouch upon the path before her. The surrounding bystanders instantly leapt from their benches to dive greedily towards the golden coinage in a tangle of flailing limbs, all the while screeching claims for the scattered wealth. Light on her feet, the Pistollera lunged, her lithe frame hopping upon the backs of the scrambling pedestrians to make good her escape.

Guards raced to surround the royals from a riot while others advanced to disperse the rabble from the threshold as a smattering of halberdiers stood paralyzed, stunned by the unforeseen turn of events. When one of the peacekeepers clutched hold of Dolores’s billowing sleeves, her fellow Crimson Cinquedeas sprung into action, barreling into the guardsman so their female cohort could make good her disappearance. Mad Jack McKenzie likewise entered the fray, swinging the butt of his long rifle back and forth to keep any from pursuing the champion of the games.

“Fly like the wind, lil’ lassie! Live on to shoot another day!”

Outside the confines of the makeshift stadium, the Peroraro company, less inclined than their red-swathed companions to succumb to lawless acts of roguery, had the horses at the ready. Hopping upon saddles, the band of ne’er-do-wells rode off to make way for their coastal home of Genoa.

From the station housing the yeller and field official, the former turned wide-eyed with bewilderment and confusion at the chaos that completely disrupted the day’s pomp and ceremony. Looking upon his associate, the scorekeeper assuaged his partner with grace and dignity.

“Rest assured, Monsieur, the day’s debacle shall not reach the annals of history.”

#

Seven riders galloped in a southerly direction, purple and red streamers flapping wildly in their wake. After many weeks of travel on horseback, the entire company had grown quite competent upon their mounts. In the lead, Jerome slowed to level side by side with Dolores to make conversation over the thundering of their steed’s hooves.

“You sure laid your declaration on thick as spaghetti sauce, ragazza.” The gruff Tuscan teased his friend, beard flying about his scarred face. “And you could have pocketed a penny or two.”

“I did not plan my closing statement...” The Purple Pistollera heeled her horse hard to maintain pace. “I wanted to capture the crowd’s attention, and words of dissent work best to stir the enthusiasm of the masses. Besides, we have plenty of coin to make our way back home.” Her face grew wistful after a pause. “I do so wish I could have seen Aramis though.”

“Uhh? Who?”

The look of bafflement on Jerome’s dark face almost brought Dolores to a fit of laughter when her sharp ears picked up the angry cries of French pursuers in the rear. Motioning her compadre of their predicament, the small ensemble of foreign infiltrators picked up speed, eager to be gone from the kingdom that no longer relished their company.

PHOTOGRAPHY OF EMILY KRAMER



EMILY KRAMER COVER ARTIST INTERVIEW

1. What got you interested in art/photography?

While growing up, my dad's sketches and paintings were around the house. Somehow that type of art form escaped me, but I loved playing around with a camera. Since middle school I've had a camera in my hand. Being shy, I enjoyed attending events behind the lens. Being the person who captured unique moments appealed to me. It was the moments.

At one point I got into costuming. I knew how to sew, and it felt great to be part of visually creating a story. After some years of theater costuming, I decided to try my hand at fashion design. A friend had talked me into showing at one of his shows in Chicago. It was incredible. Wow factor became my thing – it was like a drug. Yes, we can hear you clapping and cheering backstage when our first piece walks out.

I feel I had a great run, an amazing recycled materials fashion show at New York Fashion Week, and other incredible experiences, but that was the conclusion of my fashion career. After that, I worked (and still do) on some amazing costuming projects in music video, film, and other photographer's projects. There is a closet in my home of fun costumes that come in quite handy.

Photographing my own designs is kind of where the two merged. I was even advised against it, and I went for it anyway. DIY is far more accepted now. Several talented local photographers had photographed my dresses, but no one had quite the vision for it that I had. I wanted the model in the riding jacket to be half deer exploring the woods. That evolved into this dream to create visual stories that felt real but also had elements that are bigger than life. I did not just want to composite images in Photoshop, I wanted to physically put together epic scenes and capture them as reality.



2. Do you prefer digital art or traditional mediums?

Traditional mediums appeal to me because I like the authenticity of reality, and there's some level of cool factor in saying "yes, that was all real." That's not to say I don't do any digital art; I do use Photoshop as well. I

have even done a few composites, to stretch my skills and comfort level. Yet to create real magic, if in any way I can, is what makes it magical for my own soul. It is immersive, and really lends itself to those wow moments on set. Everyone involved can feel those moments.

3. Banking off that, how do you compose? First, what's your process. Second, do you go back and forth between programs for editing?

Many of my best images have been in-the-moment surprises with little or no planning. While grand idealistic images are in my head, there are so many uncontrollable variables in going to a location with a model and a camera. So, I've learned what works best is to have few expectations, high hopes, and an open mind to go with the flow of the moment.

For example, I might be dreaming of a melancholy old bridge with a moody sky and a poetic red-caped figure. Since I know not to plan too many details, I plan the basics. So, I start with my model. Usually, I have one in mind already and hope they are available and on board. Next, I consult my Pinterest board of locations to see if I have saved any that fit. Once the location is set, I sit down and make a red cape if I don't already have one that fits my vision. I like a quality dramatic garment, and it's one element I do not cut corners on. I also add pockets to everything I can because... pockets. Sometimes I put a surprise gift in the pocket for the model - a little figurine, a painted rock, maybe a sticker. Gotta keep things fun.

Then, when we are on location, cape in hand, on the way to the bridge, it's sure to happen: I'll be captivated by a nearby cliff. There are oohs and ahhs by all. It's game-changing and we all know it. That is just how it works. Ultimately, I will likely shoot both the original bridge plan and the cliff. As you might have guessed, it's like eight times out of ten that the cliff photos turn out better than the planned ones.

Then I comb through the photos and pick the ones that speak to me. I will pull them onto a larger screen to double-check that factor because thumbnails lie. Then I tweak some details with Photoshop, removing fire hydrants, stray humans, and whatever doesn't belong. Currently, Photoshop is the only program I use.

One of the most important parts of editing for me is walking away. Coming back to an image on another day, I see it differently. Rarely do I finish an image on the same day I start it. It's been a healthy method to give it fresh eyes.



4. What's your favorite genre to create art in?

Definitely fantasy. I can say I have successfully and escaped reality in every piece of art I've created.

5. What typically inspires you?

Nature, sunsets, animals, old architecture, great stories and cinema. I am also really inspired by people who are fearless or overcome fears.

Additionally, I'm inspired by travel and adventure. When my friend Ambur, (the amazing jewelry designer from Ambur Rose Designs, who I have partnered with for many shoots) and I traveled to the UK a few years ago, I think we were both ready to burst from all the inspiration we felt from our experience. The things we encountered by accident were even better than the ones we planned. There were glorious church ruins in

the middle of a roundabout in Cornwall, thick ivy-covered walls that strangely led to unexpected friendships, and a fairy wedding on a breezy hillside. I still draw from it.

6. Who is your favorite villain in movies, TV show, or book?

Probably Hannibal Lecter. I like an intelligent, somewhat classy, literary, educated villain I guess. In the books he fits that bill more than the movies. If I could pick two, I would also pick Edward Charles Glyver, the main character from the book *The Meaning of Night*.



7. Do you read? What genre? And do you have a certain author you like?

Pretty much constantly you will find me reading something. Oddly, for being a fantasy lover, I read a lot of non-fiction. Right now, I'm reading up on beekeeping because I'm preparing to acquire a colony. There are too many authors I love to name one, but I am currently reading Tom Blomquist's novel, *Silent Partners*.



8. Do things like books and movies influence what you decide to photograph/create?

Absolutely. There will be a scene or even a single shot in a show or a movie that alights in my soul and gives me an idea to create. I have done whole shoots inspired by series or a movie, like elves from Lord of the Rings, or the people of Game of Thrones and Outlander. However, my preference is to do my own thing. I love the idea of creating something new, whilst being inspired and influenced by other epic works.

9. Do you do commissions or ever get asked to do events like weddings? What's that like?

Indeed I do! Years ago, I photographed weddings. There's some pressure in being an event photographer, documenting big life events. I put that down because I needed a break from it, and never picked it back up.

As for commissions, it's fun to explore possibilities with another mind with big dreams. The commissions I accept are ones that fit within my style, are something new, meaningful, and typically fulfill a dream someone has. When someone connects with me, really wants the full experience, and brainstorms on the same level as me, it's the best time. I get Christmas-morning-level excited for those.

Most of the bigger shoots require a team of people, and it can be surprising to some. It's easy to think of it as just a model or two and a photographer, but many things go unnoticed. It can be an entire production team with animal handlers and weapon masters. Every piece of what everyone is wearing was thought out and planned. I use project management software to make those happen. I like to be prepared and professional. People like being part of something they can count on, so I try to make sure it's a solid production, with communication and excellence.

One of the bigger shoots I did for a magazine had fifteen people involved, with roles people do not consider, like a caterer, baker, custom jewelry maker, set designer, floral designer, hair stylist, FX makeup artist, and people assisting in hundreds of little things. It's a wonderful flurry of people making magic come together. Thankfully, I have wonderful creative and resourceful friends in the art world that help make it possible.

10. When do art for yourself, does it relax you?

It can be therapeutic, for sure. I am a true believer in art play, which is doing art just to do it, to play with it, and to explore it. The idea is not necessarily to think about the endgame of the piece, such as monetizing it, posting it online, entering it into contests, etc. Just to be in the moment with it, for you and for the sake of purely exploring and creating. For instance, I picked up watercolors because I love the art form, and I just wanted something to pull my brain in a different direction. Playing with colors and

water drops and watching them interact is fun! Now I think about that often and I have some inspiration from it for a photoshoot I want to do.

11. Is art your full-time job?

It lives in my brain full time, but no. I am also a retail consultant for small business, and I host the arts podcast Modern Romantic. It's a full life!

12. Lastly, anything you'd like us to know about you? And please offer a piece of advice for artists in your field.

It's not a competition, there is room for everyone, just tell your stories, be kind to everyone, and never ever stop learning.

13. Where can our readers find you online?

You can find me online at emilykramerdesigns.com, on Facebook under Emily Kramer Art (facebook.com/emilykramerart) and on Instagram [@emilykramerart](https://instagram.com/emilykramerart) (instagram.com/emilykramerart)



LORI R. LOPEZ

is an award-winning hat-wearing Indie Author, Illustrator, and Poet. Books include *The Dark Mister Snark*, *An Ill Wind Blows*, *Darkverse: The Shadow Hours*, *Odds & Ends*, *The Fairy Fly*, *Leery Lane*, *Chocolate-Covered Eyes*, and *The Witchhunt*. A member of the HWA and SFPA, her verse and stories have appeared in a number of publications, among them *The Sirens Call*, *Spectral Realms*, *Space & Time*, *The Horror Zine*, *Weirdbook*, *Altered Reality*, *JOURN-E*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Impspired*, *Aphelion*, *Oddball Magazine*, *California Screamin'* (the Foreword Poem), *HWA Poetry*

Showcases, *Rhysling Anthologies* and more. Lori is an Elgin and seven-time Rhysling Nominee, a San Diego Book Awards Winner, and a Kindle Book Awards Finalist. She co-owns a Creative Company with two talented sons, *Fairy Fly Entertainment*.

Featured poems: *Demons of Dusk*, *Garden Variety*, *War Zone*

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<http://www.amazon.com/author/lorirlopez>

<http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/1455488>

DEMONS OF DUSK

I am aware . . . unlike most.
I know terrible things.
I see things that aren't there.
But really are!

Call it Paranormal Enlightenment.
Extra-Sensory Perception.
Eldritch Vision. Or call me insane.
Sooner or later . . .

It has to happen. They all think me
daft. Measure me for a Strait-Jacket.
You'd be no different than the rest —
friends, family, doctors.

There are secrets. Too occult. Arcane.
Beyond the realm of spirits. Past the
edges of warmth, security. You do not
wish to know!

In the blackness of a starless void
rove mysterious frenzies. Stark
and awful, blending with any hour.
Subliminal wretches.

Connoptions that cause bad dreams.
That make our pulses jitterbug in fits
of calamitous pallor. The heart watusi
with fervent disquiet.

For we are ill-equipped to contend,
vanquish the gloam and fog, whisk
away the foul vapor of stale heated
breath on a frigid night.

Or the cloak of frost that surrounds
like the cold embrace of a grinning
corpse reaching from a crack in the
hard sunken earth.

Where beasts and ghouls of the abyss
steal out. Worse than wraiths and

specters. The atrocious and vile.
Heed their livid aspects.

Their bleeding gums, cavernous
sockets. Be wariest of a sinister
smile, of soulless orbs that never
blink! Staring vacuous . . .

With morbid rapture, a leery
grimace. Nastily arisen from
an unsealed tomb, smelling of
mildew and decay.

Ripe as rot, teeming with portents
of the murkiest soggiest gloom.
Once glimpsed, you cannot unsee.
Horrors untold.

Macabre entities. Covert creeps.
Scurrilous forces inhabiting Nature.
Clustered in caves and corridors,
tunnels without end.

Beyond human boundaries, the paved
and pixellated world we occupy.
They are out there. Around us. Always
watching. Scuttling . . .

On little rat feet. Why do I whisper?
They might hear. They might come.
Since I first suspected, then spied them
crouched in shadows . . .

Corners, crevices, the darkness of
blinks. I've endured the cruel pokes
and pinches, their sharp taunts
each tremulous second.

In the slick wet minutes of an echoing
heart that lacks the least empathy as
it clamors on in the thickness of
the twilit expanse —

From which all manner of goons
expose their fangs. Their bitters and
brumes — ague-laden exhalations;
final fetid gasps.

And still, it isn't them alone to
dread, listen for, peel our eyeballs,
but also the ones who emerge by day:
sickly and white.

Chilling our marrow. Furtive, somber,
sneaky devils. Assumed to have been
mortal. We shiver and share their
ghastly gruesome tales.

Blanching at every sight and sound.
Paying Mediums to contact them,
host Séances, hold our hands,
rid our houses . . .

There are lurid fiends alurk.
Devious, plotting to overpower.
Whispering back they're harmless,
in our head . . .

Convincing us they aren't present,
merely phantoms. You must be
vigilant. Don't trust the shadows!
I've told you . . .

Now you know to stay alert and
never let the bulbs go off, or close
the drapes against the bright, for we
are vulnerable.

We are prey. Hunted as much as
haunted. You mustn't scorn at my
qualms, dismiss them as silly fears,
an Eek Mentality.

I beg you to believe the monsters
are among us! Rabid, grotesque
Their cusps and gazes honed.
Demons of Dusk.

I've spilled my secrets, bared
my soul. Put down the phone.
If I'm crazy . . . so are you!
They cannot be unseen.

GARDEN VARIETY

I'm afraid of my Garden . . .
of what's growing in the corner
behind the Tomatoes and Hydrangeas,
under the Rhubarb where I would
bury things. Dead birds and squirrels.
The neighbor's dog in the street.
(I let them think he ran away.
It seemed kinder). A woman who
froze one night down the block.
I guess you could call her a friend.

She had nobody. Said so when I asked,
so I dragged her stiff body home and held
a small Funeral as I always do. She was nice,
grateful if I'd stop for a chat, or bring little
gifts of food and drink, items she might need.
It wasn't enough. I should have invited her
to stay in my Guest Room. Would she accept?
It's too late to find out. At least I could
bury her. In my Garden. But the people
before me used gallons of Pesticides.
The most unhealthy substances.

Like many have done — freely dumping
Forever Chemicals and who-knows-what into
yards to kill the weeds and pests, accelerate
growth; contaminating soil and groundwater
and all lifeforms. After a week I started hearing
strange noises. Out there. It makes me
nervous. I think something's wrong, springing
from the earth by the fence, and it's not
an old lady. All of that death and decaying
matter was bound to interact with the unholy
compounds, combining, breaking down the gist
and germ and genesis of Life. Altering . . .
decomposing to another state: a new
composition or consistency.

Now I'm worried. I don't know what's
going to emerge!

Last night there was no Moon when

I decided to check it out. I waited till
nightfall, preferring darkness to sunny skies.
Clutching a lantern, I stepped out into
fog and cold, leaving my place of warmth,
security. Walking to the gate, I entered
a jungle of menacing shapes, exaggerated
by the dim glow preceding my steps.
Following a path, I brushed aside scary
branches to behold a gutted trench —
a gaping hole where I buried Sue —
the dirt uprooted and pushed out
from within. I fled.

Huddled in a corner of my house,
cringing, trying to shrink into a wall,
I'm hearing sounds . . . a tap, a creak.
Furtive scratches. Low gurgles. A shadow
crossed the window. Halting like
a statue or tall Garden Gnome. A grotesque
form is peering at me while I try not to be
visible. Banging, rattling. Whatever it is
wants in. Silence. An unbearable moment
of suspense. Maybe it's gone. Looks like
the creeper disappeared. Hopefully
what I planted has wandered off.

Nope. It's at the door. As you can
probably tell, I'm beside myself with
fear . . . The two of me quake and shudder
as the door yields, splintering, and a grossly
assembled garden-variety ogre looms.
I've seen this movie and it didn't end well!
The mutant effigy of a Bag Lady (and other
dead or hazardous things that won't die)
swayed on my stoop, moaning, growling,
resembling a disheveled Tatterdemalion;
an unkempt Mulch Monster. I'm filming it
because the Police would never believe me.
And Social Media could increase the odds,
my chances for survival.

Please click Like and Share! Someone
has to come!

I'm not sure if I'm doing this right.
I hope you can see . . . My hand's shaky
as I'm holding an all-purpose high-tech

“gadget of the future” according to
the Salesperson. I’m begging anyone who’s
viewing this to do something more than
watch! The device comes with Extras
including Mace, a Flame-Thrower, a Siren,
a Laser, a Nail-Gun, a detachable mini
Spy Drone, a variety of blades.
It’s the Swiss Army Military Model.
It even doubles for a Grenade.

I don’t like phones. I don’t call anyone.
I just carry it for emergencies, like this.
I think this qualifies, don’t you?
It’s for protection. Perhaps a bit extreme.
I wanted to feel safe, and there was
a discount. What was that? I pressed
a large Red Button by accident.
Now the screen’s flashing. Beeping.
What does that mean? Oh man.
I think it’s ticking! It’s a bomb!
There goes the Alarm. Wow, that’s loud!
Everything’s activated. It’s going nuts,
warming up, vibrating. And attracting
the monster!

How do I shut it off? The Battery’s
not removable. I don’t know what to do!
Throw it? I’ll stick it in the Freezer.
That might shield the blast . . .
My house is burning. Stuff’s on fire!
Mace is spreading. I’m crying.
These are real tears. Nails are flying.
Knives protruding! I’m leaving.
The door’s clear. She’s coming after me,
and my phone is about to blow!
I’m dropping it — hurling it.
Wish me luck!

(This Account is inactive.)

WAR ZONE

Annie Oakley sits on a wooden chair,
cradling a Shotgun across her knees.
Weatherbeaten like the house.
Her name is really Shania Barnes,
and her people lived on this stretch for
a hundred and some years. Now the sky is
the color of Lead Syrup. Murkier than the
Polluted Pond, or so I'm told, with clouds like
a bowl of gray congealed Grits. I spot arrows
of Lightning — sizzling wet ground,
electrifying crimson puddles. A black and white
slice-of-life scene from an old magazine,
except for that blood.

It's how you recognize we're in a War Zone.

Shania mutters that the Monsters
killed most of her neighbors and kin.
Folks she knew her entire life . . .
She watched it happen from her porch.
Listened to the chaos. Why didn't she help?
"I couldn't move." Paralyzed by shock.
Finally she took shelter, hiding in the
Storm Cellar, battened against tempests
not beasts, staying quiet for a week.
She lived on glass jars of Beets, Carrots,
Peas. "Lots of Tomaters." These days
she watches and waits for them
to return. "They will."

A glowering oath; hands tighten on the gun.

Her confidence both impresses and
alarms. "How can you be sure?
Maybe they've moved on, taken what they
came for." The chair creaks behind me
as I peer about, unsettled, the back of my
neck prickling. I find the barrels of
her weapon pointed at my face.
The woman's expression is dire. Adamant.
"Unless you was here — lessen ya
seen them with your own eyes — you don't

know beans about it!" she growls.
My hands raise in surrender. "Yes ma'am."
There's little else but to agree.

I've been in Wars before. Never like this.

"You get enough for your story,
Newslady? Maybe you should just go.
While you can." Her tone chills, more than
tales of Monsters, roaming fiends, disfigured
ghouls that feed on flesh and blood.
"If you see anything out there . . .
don't stop." An unfriendly warning.
Swallowing, I back to my car.
The last thing I hear her say: "It's sad
having to choose sides against
your own kind." Nodding, I lift the
Sure-Shot Camera on a strap around my neck.
Inanely I bid her to smile. She doesn't.

The portrait's as grim as the story. And the sky.

ARTWORK AND COLORING PAGES FROM J.D. DONNELLY





Painting Dragon Feathers



Find J.D. online at <https://www.facebook.com/paintingdragonfeathers>



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THE CANDLE WENCH

It was the sixteenth century in fall of 2016. The barren Kingdom of Finehaven opened its gates to a new recruit. Dead leaves crunched under her boots and shop counters slept in dust. On the cusp of reawakening, trailers began to park behind castles and tents sprung up in meadows. Once empty of jugglers, crowns, and turkey legs, Finehaven returned from three seasons bare as it had every year. Fall had arrived. The trees shuddered to welcome the new Candle Wench.

Like most who stepped into Finehaven, the new recruit's head was full of fairytales. She had been fired from her insurance job last month and had begun to daydream childish fancies. No more emails about HVAC repairs. Instead, she could don a corset and feel its tight hug. No more office pizza Fridays. Now every day was to become a gentle Halloween. She'd never have to pick up the phone for mechanics or bosses again. Finehaven forbid phones from its hires. (Phones didn't exist in the sixteenth century.)

The new Candle Wench found the wooden sign etched with the words "Carved Candles." Inside, empty shelves lined the walls. The floorboards creaked. Outside, forgotten marigolds decayed at the building's entrance. Behind the sixteenth century façade, a giant RV was parked between shop and forest.

That was where she met her four coworkers, the Candlemen.

"You're cuter than the last girl, so you are already better," said one.

Another handed his ID card to her. It showed that he was a registered pedophile. "Since we'll be working together, you should know this about me," he said.

The third seemed nice, but smelled like vomit.

The fourth was the boss, the Candle Carver. To time travelers who paid to visit Finehaven, he was a jovial merchant, hardworking, and knowledgeable of all things wax. He sat his large body by an enormous vat to dip his creations. He twisted wax into lighthouses, mushrooms, castles with dragons, and wedding candles. When Finehaven was empty though, he listened to Fox News and told stories of killing chickens and bad marriages. In the winter, he kept the space heater to himself while the Candlemen shivered. In the summer, he kept the fan by his seat while the Candlemen dripped in sweat.

The Candlemen worked hard to bring the wax vat to life from its hibernation. All three used their bodies to scoot the metal monstrosity into the Candle Carver's workspace. One had to dive under the floorboards among spiders and crickets to hook up electricity. Soon the vat hummed with life. Lots of colored wax liquefied and bubbled.

The Candle Wench scraped together an outfit for the Candle Carver's approval: a white blouse, black skirt, and a baby's breath flower crown. For thirty dollars, she bought her first corset. It was night black and embroidered with silver vines. The corset was cheaply made with plastic bones and ribbon that could not tighten completely.

"You're so lucky I'm not taking a peek," a Candleman said as she dressed in the closet full of boxes of scented candles.

#

When Finehaven fully awoke, its meadows filled with time travelers. Lutes, flutes, and violins played at the gates like a siren song. The day began always with cannon fire, and visitors lined up to pay for a taste of past, when *Romeo and Juliet* was new and women squeezed their skeletons tight. White girls lined up for mimosas and little boys dragged mothers to see camels. Families took selfies with faerie dusted cheeks while their breath smelled of roasted pecans.

The Candle Wench was stuck at the candle shop's cash register, watching the merriment beyond the candle covered walls. The once empty store shelves were now lined with buckets of scented jar candles. Shield-shaped signs with price tags and "no smoking" hung from the walls. The Candle Carver sat by his vat working on ribbon candles while the time travelers looked on. First, he peeled white wax skin back, showing stripes of blue, pink, and purple. Next, he tied bows from the peeled wax and rolled them down like streamers.

In the meadows, the Candlemen hawked their wares. They mingled with the time travelers and enticed them to the shop with fragrances and honeyed words. The Candle Wench wished to be out with them, but the Candle Carver found her voice too soft to peddle goods and kept her inside.

Whenever a time traveler entered, the Candle Wench welcomed them in a voice not her own. She spoke old English laced with "Good day," "My lady," and "Huzzah." In time, she would warp her voice so often; it would come with her outside of Finehaven in places like Walmart and her apartment complex.

The Candle Wench's favorite duty was flower dipping. Every morning, the Candle Carver bought flowers from the Flower Ladies who travelled around Finehaven. The Candle Wench dunked each flower gently in the clear wax vat slot. Behind the shop, she hung the roses and sunflowers to dry. When they no longer dripped, she gave them a soft spray of glitter on their petal tips. In such a state, the flowers could last for years and years. "Like a zombie," one of the Candlemen said.

As the weather chilled, the Candle Wench kept close to the warmth of the wax vat. Her feet ached all the time, since only sixteenth century shoes were allowed for the hires of Finehaven, no sneakers, no Velcro, or soles built to run. Only leather to disguise the toes, and wrap the secret of

modern, pug-printed socks. The poor Candle Wench could only afford cheap slip-ons that never stood a chance against the hours of standing by the register.

With raw ankles and crooked toes, the Wench's day ended as it began, with a bang of fired cannon. The gravel roads behind the walls of Finehaven rocked bruises into her heels. There, those bound to the sixteenth century lived away from their stores and costumes. Rennies, they called themselves, like the carnies in carnivals. October had come, and pumpkins smiled by the wheels of their camping trailers.

On her walk to the parking lot, the Candle Wench sometimes saw animals. Finehaven had plenty of creatures for its petting zoo and various shows. For the bird show, they had a kookaburra all the way from Australia. When the Wench passed its cage, it sometimes laughed.

At home, in her little apartment, the Wench peeled off her shoes and corset. Burned out, she lay on her couch and scrolled on her phone. The twenty-first century was all tears and fire. Brexit, the Pulse nightclub massacre, Tennessee wildfires, fake news, Zika virus, presidential election, and clown sightings all caused hysteria. The Candle Wench shut her eyes and dreamed of medieval maidens, twirling skirts, and crystal crowns. Maybe one of the jousting knights would notice her, and pull her upon his horse.

Then they'd gallop away from it all.

#

Before visitors came, the Candle Wench rested her feet at the edge of Carved Candles. She watched the dancers, whom the Candle Carver scowled at the kilted boys kicking up their legs. When the cannon fired, the Carver turned off his radio and the Candlesmen left to hawk. The Candle Wench set to work on making a bouquet of wax dipped flowers.

The flowers were almost always roses, as other flora broke during the dip and tainted the vat. With red rose, the Wench scooted behind the Candle Carver to dip her first flower of the day. The vat greeted her with a droning hum, its clear wax slot bubbled with its daily anticipation. Her fingers hung the end of the stem as she dipped. Cool fall air gave way to the vat's sickly warmth. She had to dip slowly, or petals could be lost. As she pulled the flower back up, it snagged. It felt like something in the vat held on tight, and would not let go.

The Candle Wench pulled harder and the top half of the rose was gone. The stem did not appear broken, but cleanly cut. Her boss was too busy carving a sea wave into a candle to notice this grave mistake. The Wench threw the stem into the trash and tried another rose.

This time she did not catch a snag, but instead there was a pull. Thorns hit her fingers and she let go to witness the rose not sink, but quickly jerk into the wax.

#

The Candle Carver hated field trip days, as children never bought candles. That did not stop them from marveling at the merchandise and begging for freebies. When a kid asked the Carver if he had anything he could give for free, the Carver leaned forward so far it looked like he was about to spit on the child, and then he said: "Not on your life."

As children danced among fairies outside and mocked the pirates, the Candle Wench thought of her missing roses. On certain days, the vat claimed more, enough that a rose graveyard could sit at the bottom of all the hot wax with no one the wiser. The Wench wondered if perhaps they'd melted and become part of every candle.

Later in the day, the Trumpet Boy visited Carved Candles. He grew up among the Rennies with a Flower Maiden mother and Cobbler father. He saw things differently than most kids his age, as he grew up in a world of tents and castles. He could juggle anything, balance on

spires, and often spoke to the pigs. His job was to play the trumpet in the jousts, and to follow the queen around. He rarely visited Carved Candles, but when he did, he kept to the corners. His eyes often slid to the Candle Carver's frothing vat.

"You love dipping the flowers, don't you?"

The Candle Wench was surprised he spoke to her, as Rennies often ignored her. Though she worked among them, she would always be treated as an outsourced stranger. She put on a big smile for the Trumpet Boy and nodded.

"It loves when pretty girls give it flowers," he said.

"What?"

"Vatty," the Trumpet Boy pointed to the Candle Carver's now empty station. He spoke of the wax vat. "You're cuter than the last girl, so Vatty is very happy."

#

At the Candle Wench's dark apartment, she slipped her blistered feet free and limped to her bathroom. She prepared a hot bath with Rose Sea Soak salts, melted into the water, and shut her eyes. She thought of what she would do once her seasonal job ended, and the sixteenth century would be gone until next fall. She would have to do retail without fantasies, the laughing kookaburra, and scented wax. The twenty-first century would grip her once again, tight and inescapable.

Rising from her bath, the Wench wiped her foggy bathroom mirror. Over the past month, her cheeks had thinned and her shoulders now drooped. In the bath, she lost hair, the brown strands floating, sinking, and sticking to the fiberglass walls.

She froze when she heard a knock on her apartment door. She had no friends or family in town, and the hour was late. Wrapping herself in her white bathrobe, she made light steps to the

front door. All was silent and, for a moment, the Wench wondered if she'd imagined the knock. When she placed her eye to the peephole, she met the wide golden eye of another.

She ducked, praying the peephole only worked on her end. Trembling, she tried to make no sound as she set the chain lock. That night, she slept with her bedroom door open and light on. She texted faraway friends about the knock and eye, but it was late: they must already be asleep and would not respond till morning.

#

The trees had turned red and the Candle Wench flinched at the morning cannon fire. She brought hot cocoa for the Candle Carver and his Candlemen. The wax vat hummed louder on certain days like today, when rain scared off all the time travelers. Tears fell from plastic gargoyles and goatskin boots jumped over puddles. The Candlemen stood with their cocoa at the edge of the shop, wistful to roam.

Some, like the Candle Wench, loved when it rained upon Finehaven. The Pirate Man was free of the stalkers who took his flirts and winks as real. The Queen, for once, did not stuff ibuprofen in her pockets along with her Tic Tacs and lipstick. Under some cash registers, Fair Maidens opened their phones to Facebook. Frolicking in their pens, the goats and lambs were free of the reach of children's hands.

The twenty-five acres of Finehaven muddied until sunset, when the cannon fired to shut the gates. The Candle Carver gave the Wench her payment of seventy-five dollars in cash before settling down for the night in his RV, where an angry Chihuahua always trembled by the window. The Wench, feet numb and eyes heavy, held up her skirt over the mud and made her way past the tents and cars towards where she always parked. Wet earth clung to her cheap shoes and campfire smells wafted from the woods.

Rennies sometimes partied in the forest. The Candle Wench heard about the parties from the Candlemen. They were invited, but not her, not a non-Rennie. She imagined a get-together with beer cans and people in pajamas, where bodies could relax after long days standing and wearing stiff clothes. They'd sit on folded lawn chairs and roast marshmallows.

In the dark, navigating to her car by the light of her phone, the Wench heard music. A flute, a lute, and the gentle tap of a tambourine came from the trees. She stopped. Her phone light moved from gravel to the woods.

Curiosity took the Wench's feet. She traversed the roots, brambles, and brush until the sounds of people talking and laughing got closer. Darting behind a tree, she peeked into a clearing. Rennies sat around a campfire wearing their Finehaven clothes. Employees usually shed their corsets and doublets for baggy t-shirts and hoodies the moment they left the kingdom's illusion, but not here. The time travelers were gone and now was the time to be someone else, and yet this party had all its members still in character. A juggler weaved balls in the dark sky. The lute player wore a feathered hat and strummed. Two maidens twirled around the fire, bosoms tight in corsets and hips blooming in skirts. On a log, sat a Rennie with long white dreadlocks sat. He wore a crown of roses. His black doublet had gold embroidery that glistened in flame light.

"My lady, pray do not hide in the dark," he said.

The Candle Wench stepped out.

"Ah," he smiled. "Tis ye ol' Candle Wench."

The rest of the Rennies mirrored his smile in unison. No familiar faces were among them. The dreadlocked man patted a space on the log next to him. The Wench sat on the moist wood and shivered. This close, the man smelled of dust. The maidens dripped in dance sweat, shoulders small and eyes wide.

“What is your name? I don’t think we’ve met before,” the Wench asked.

“I’m the Prince.”

As far as the Wench knew, Finehaven had no prince, only a queen, a woman who owned the farmland and worked as an ESL teacher when Finehaven was out of season. She possessed no sons, make believe or real.

“You’re far lovelier than the last Candle Wench,” the Prince said.

“So I am told, again and again.”

The Prince laughed, a childish sort of giggle at odds with his stoic look. The rest of the Rennies giggled in unison. One of the maidens ran a hand through her own hair, strands coming undone. The juggler stopped his tricks and handed the Wench a goblet of warm cider.

“So, what does a Prince even do in Finehaven?” the Wench asked.

She knew the Queen took at least two hours every morning to get ready before cannon. She knighted children and watched every joust. Once in a while, she visited the shops, where all the employees would coo, “Your majesty.”

“A Prince seeks a Princess,” the Prince said.

“Ah. So you flirt with the time travelers?”

“Nay. Time travelers do not interest me. They set my people on fire to stay warm.”

“Why are you talking like that?” the Wench finally asked.

“A strange question for one with two voices.”

“Ha.” The Candle Wench began to wonder if this was all a dream or prank. Perhaps the Prince was just a man in another world and refused to leave it. Every employee of Finehaven had a little of that stubbornness in them, even the Wench.

The Prince invited her to dance. With one cider in her, she obliged. The Maidens made room and the music picked up. When the Prince took her hand, the Wench felt as though a part of herself had thawed. He twirled and cast her around him and back close. She could only move with him with no time to think. His dreadlocks spun and, for a second, the Wench imagined they melted like candle wax, thinning and elongating from bouncing around the bonfire.

Five ciders later, the Wench and Prince walked and danced in Finehaven's streets under the waxing moon. The kingdom at night was a liminal space where eeriness and nostalgia had formed a covenant. The Prince and Wench moved to the jousting area, past tents of psychics and the booth covered in silicone elf ears.

In the jousting area, the sky was open. Benches bordered the outskirts. In the daytime, time travelers crowded the bleachers to see armored men splinter shields on horseback. The Prince helped the Candle Wench over the fence and they snuck back to visit the horses. In hay-filled air, they pet the horse's faces.

"Do you have a horse, Prince?" the Wench asked.

"I possess only my people."

"That's too bad. The knights get to have horses."

The best jobs in Finehaven were knights and royalty. The Wench, however, did not have the worst job. That belonged to Finehaven's best comedian. All day he bent into a pillory and insulted all that passed him in the hopes they'd pay money to throw tomatoes at him.

The Wench was still unsure what the Prince did in Finehaven.

"So, did you ever find a Princess?" she asked.

"You could be one."

The Wench blushed and pulled her hand from the horse. “Okay, wait, are we talking a job or are you asking me out?”

“Not a Wench, but a Candle Princess. One that is not trapped in a dusty little shop, but one that can attend jousts, wear finer clothes, and attend parties.”

“Well, that does sound lovely but—“

“Come with me, I’ll show you what I mean.”

He removed his crown of roses and placed it on her head. She followed him through Finehaven once more, past carts of puzzle rings and blown glass. They came to the front of Carved Candles, between the axe throwing and crystal shop.

The Prince disappeared into Carved Candles. A chill ran down the Wench’s spine. Suddenly, she felt alone and the night seemed darker. Turning on her phone light, she went after the Prince. She called him, walled in by rows of unlit candles under tarps. No sign of him, no breath, no creak of the floorboards. But the room hummed. Someone left the vat on.

The Wench unplugged the steel vat. For a moment, she gazed at the steel to see handprints marking the top edge. White dreadlocks of wax freshly oozed down the corners.

#

The Candlemen did not know of a Prince. One suggested he could’ve been a time traveler with a screw loose. The Candle Wench still had the rose crown he gave her. Every day she wore the crown, hoping he’d come visit the little candle shop.

“She’s got some kind of crush,” the Candlemen told each other.

The weather chilled and the Wench envied the Finehaven hounds who sat on beds among space heaters with sweaters on their thin bodies. She and the Candlemen bundled up in gloves, robes, and hats. She hid leggings under her skirt to guard her legs from the wind and breathed

warm breath into her hands. The heat of the vat became more welcome as she continued her dipping work.

With winter here, it was only a few weeks before Finehaven would shut its gates until next year. The Rennies would move on and the Wench would be left alone in her apartment with a computer full of job applications.

At home, she noticed she'd lost weight and that her hair was thinning. Her hairline shrunk down and her bones got closer to her skin. After Finehaven closed, she planned to see a doctor. The internet told her she may have a nutrient deficiency, perhaps a lack of protein, iron, fatty acids, and zinc. Apparently weight loss and hair loss were often connected. She could have androgenetic alopecia or telogen effluvium.

Despite the cold, she sweated on the job. She took more trips to the privy just to remove loose hair and wipe herself down. On her lunch break, she looked up "excessive sweating." The health conditions listed included malaria, fever, leukemia, menopause, and tuberculosis. She sighed. Being a Candle Wench did not come with health insurance.

On a rainy Sunday, she fainted on the job. She stayed up late applying for jobs and skipped breakfast. Auras floated among the shelves as she stood in her assigned spot. She thought she could withstand the dizziness and held herself up at the cash register by leaning forward. When a customer wanted a rose, she moved and lost feeling in her body. Suddenly, she was on the floor. The Candlemen gathered and carried her to the back of the shop to rest in a tent, away from the eyes of time travelers.

The Wench awoke to wax dripping on her cheeks. Her eyes fluttered open to see a woman bent over her. The neck was too long and eyes too big. Her face shined like plastic with nostrils and lips melted shut. Black hair plastered backwards with white wax at the roots.

The Candle Wench began to hyperventilate. The woman's bone-thin fingers reached for the rose crown.

She awoke struggling against a Candleman. His hands held her wrists and his knee sat between her thighs.

"You were having a nightmare! You fainted."

"Get off me," she yelled.

With hands up, he backed away. The Wench stormed out of the tent and leaned against the drying rack of roses. Leaning her head by the wood wall, she cried.

#

On the last week of Finehaven, the Candle Wench let some roses sink into the vat and smiled as they jerked downwards. After the fainting episode, the Carver and Candlemen treated her a little better, with offers of snacks and water throughout the day.

Her skin touched the boiling wax as she dipped a rose. With a sharp inhale, she held her index and middle finger to her chest.

"You should pay attention," one of the Candlemen said as he got a first-aid kit from the back.

"That vat can get hot as an oven."

An hour before closing time, a time traveler in a cloak with hood up came to the cash register with ten candles: two ribbon carved, three mushrooms, five strawberry scented. It was common for customers to buy this many as Christmas closed in. As she set candles next to the register, the Candle Wench noticed the time traveler's burn-scarred hands, a web of pink veins wrinkling her skin.

"Enjoying my old job?" said the customer.

"What?"

She spoke softly, "I was the last Candle Wench."

#

The two Candle Wenchs went out for ice cream after Finehaven closed. While helping themselves to chocolate mint and strawberry ice cream outside Ben and Jerrys they got a lot of looks from families, as they still wore their sixteenth century outfits.

The previous Candle Wench could have been mistaken for a handsome boy if not for her corset and skirt. With her hood down, she revealed short hair dyed green and piercings in her nose, lips, and eyebrows. She even ate ice cream like a boy with large bites while the current Candle Wench restrained herself to little licks.

"The Candlemen are jackasses, totally," the previous Wench agreed. "They're lucky I didn't sue them for the burns they gave me."

"Wait, your burned hands are from them?"

"Back when I thought they were my friends, we were joking around and one jokingly pretended he was going to throw me into the wax vat. I screamed bloody murder and threw my hands forward by instinct, thinking I was going to fall. It didn't help that I was scared of the vat."

"You were afraid of the vat?"

The former Candle Wench frowned and put down her mint chocolate chip. "I don't like to talk about it."

The incumbent Wench glared at her predecessor's burned hands. "You think there is something off with the vat?"

The other Wench shivered. "No. Of course not. It's just a normal vat."

Whatever was unsaid thickened the air between them. Even when eating ice cream, the Candle Wench was sweating. After a couple of bites and unable to stand the silence, she asked, “Do you know the Prince?”

“That playboy? Sure. He kept trying to get me to hang out with them but I declined. Not interested. You better stay away from him too. I think he stalked me once.”

“He did seem odd, but not like a weird playboy stalker.”

“I don’t want to be an ass since you’re treating me to ice cream, but you seem like the type that men take advantage of. No offense. You should do what I did, and quit.”

The Candle Wench poked her strawberry ice cream. It was her last week, so quitting seemed pointless. Even if she had more time in Finehaven, she would not wish to quit. If only the world of Finehaven could split in two, one with all the delights, and the other with its lesser qualities.

The Wench threw away their ice cream cups. Before her predecessor left, the Wench asked, “Why did you work at Carved Candles in the first place?”

“Same as all who come to Finehaven,” she said. “To escape the twenty-first century.”

“We can’t ever escape it, though, can we?”

The other Wench did not hear her, already walking back to her car to drive back to the city.

#

The clock ticked down the minutes until Finehaven closed. As she weakly kept post at the cash register, the Candle Wench wondered if the Prince would visit her one last time. He did not, and the nights came early. Chills fell upon all the Rennies and time travelers as they retreated to their cars and campers. The Candle Wench stayed around the vat before the store closed. Her hands

caressed the steel and she looked down at the bubbling colors until a Candleman snapped her out of the trance with a, “Hello? What’s wrong with you?” or, finally: “We’re closing, time to get the heck out.”

On the foggy morning of the last day, the Candle Wench smiled at the Candlemen and said: “So, who are we sacrificing to the vat today?” Her form had shrunk, and she hid her baldness under the dark hood of her cloak. Her thin fingers sweat under gloves.

The Carver laughed, “What do you think we do to the naughty children and thieves?”

One of the Candlemen noticed the Wench look far off towards the fog. “Are you alright?” he asked. “You look sad.”

“I’m sad that it’s my last day.”

“I’m sure you’ll be hired again next fall.”

The cannon fired.

#

Closing time was when Finehaven got coldest. The surrounding pine and oak trees cast long shadows across the Rennie camp. The Carver retreated to his RV. The Wench typically had the Candlemen help her cover all the candles in tarps, but they left to help other Rennies and were late to return. She attempted to cover the candles alone, but the tarp came undone on every opposite side.

Tired and cold, the Candle Wench went to the wax vat for warmth. She held her hands to it as though it were a campfire. Warmth spread through her body like a hot bath. Forgetting where she stood for a moment, she shut her eyes and leaned further towards the vat. This century, the sixteenth, and all others could not hold this dreaming soul. Hands met hers, holding her gently as she melted down further and further, until she was gone.

#

It was the sixteenth century in the fall of 2017, and the barren Kingdom of Finehaven opened its doors to a new Candle Wench. She greeted her new co-workers, the Candlemen, who were preoccupied with turning on their wax vat.

Once awake, the vat hummed. The new Candle Wench found it loud, but as she stood near it throughout the fall season, the hum became white noise. When Finehaven opened and time travelers asked the Candlemen what happened to the cute Wench from last year, they had no memory of such a person.

ART BY JANIS BUTLER HOLM



Alien Transformation

Alien Glam Girl

