

The bounty came the way they all come lately, as an omen, a revelation. I switched channel to channel with the knob of the little ray-tube TV in the kitchen as the words - one from a newscast, one from a cooking program, a sports announcer, a commercial - arrayed themselves slow, punctuated by bursts of static. "Find - her - and - shhhh - kill - her. Kshh. One hundred - ksh - million - dollars." The poster at the sheriff's office confirmed the amount.

We hadn't seen each other in three days, and in three days, we had another date - to watch the hangin' in El Pano together, and then get dinner at some new place in town. If I waited the three days though, three long days - some other hunter might beat me to it, her blood might grease the coffers of some other bastard. Plus, there's no telling how grisly the other hunters might be. I owed her that much, to do her humane. The money and the easy life it bought me'd give her death meaning.

I saddled up and headed on out. The horse was uneasy. "Love is more valuable than money," it said. "I don't really want to hear it," I countered.

"It's uniquely human to love," neighed the horse, "I assume." I snorted and gave it the spurs a little to show I found this naive. "We're all born with a limited amount of time on this earth, and there's no amount of money that can buy more time. Love, though - love can give us a sense of purpose during that time.

"A fair and just world would be driven by love, instead of money, and killing."

"What would you say if I said I was driven by the love of money?"

"I'd say you were missing the point. Love is supposed to be generative." For a blessed moment it fell silent. The sun fell slow behind the mountains to the west. We rolled on through the hills, out through the rows of planted agave and into the wild desert.

A mile from her mansion, I tied my horse up to an ancient saguaro. "Mistress," my horse interrupted, "do you remember the story of the white snake and the weaver girl?"

"I don't, Horse."

"The white snake was like she sounds, an albino snake. Once, at the watering hole, she saw the daughter of a weaver getting water and fell madly in love. So the white snake transformed herself into a beautiful woman, and the snake and the weaver's daughter spent many happy years together."

I checked my pistols and holstered them. The weight across my chest and on my hip was comforting, like a soft embrace.

"But eventually," the horse continued, ignoring my disinterest, "the snake had to return to its own world, to being a snake. You see?"

I nodded. "Thank you, Horse." I didn't really understand what it was getting at, but I rubbed it behind the ears anyway and crept up to the front door of the mansion. I wouldn't ring the bell. I knew my love was guarded by thirty-three puppy-girl maids, each one armed to the teeth and ready to die for their mistress. I wanted to kill as few of them as possible. They didn't deserve to get caught up in this little spat.

I was sitting at dinner, alone. The maid - my number one one, the one who attends to dinner - splashed a few drops of decent chardonnay into my wine jar and topped it off with sparkling water. I have thirty-three maids, all puppy-girls - that is, half woman and half puppy. All maid.

Putting the dining room on the second floor was a little inconvenient for them, the help I mean, but I typically ate alone, and I liked to look out of the huge bay windows at the front of the second floor of the house as I ate. Tonight, out those same windows, I watch my lover tie her horse up and creep up to my front porch. I know why she's come - she is here to collect the one hundred million dollar bounty on my head.

I peer out through the gathering dusk at the desert horizon, a lump in my throat. I have to do it. I have to kill my love, and my heart - my heart is breaking in two.

Downstairs, I hear her kick in the door. I hear the click as she cocks her gun - it sounds like the 1851 Colt Navy revolver I got her for her birthday. I

hear the boom and the yelp as she dispatches the first maid. I can almost hear the unease as the other maids mass around her, none of them quite ready to make the first move. Another shot, the sounds of improvised weaponry falling to the floor.

"Enough."

I have a hand up in a "halt" gesture, I'm at the top of the stairs. She's there at the bottom, guns in hand. The blood of two dead maids stains the runner carpet in the foyer, a near priceless Persian. My love, in all black from hat to boots, looks more beautiful than I've ever seen her.

She swings her guns to aim at me.

"You should know," I start, softly, as loud as I can stammer out. My throat is tight. I didn't expect to be this emotional - but I'm never as cool as I hope to be. "You should know I placed the bounty on myself."

The shock on her face almost makes me reconsider my plan, stop right now, reconsider everything. But no. Surprise gives way to an

expression that can only mean she realizes she's failed my final test. My heart breaks all over again.

"You never had the guile to be a bounty hunter," I say, although the victory feels hollow. A maid, unseen, approaches from her left flank and puts her in a sleeper hold. She goes down fast.

Things weren't working in El Pano. There was probably a reason why, but the townspeople were less interested in fixing it than finding someone to blame. That's where you came in.

You are a puppy-girl, captured for a crime you didn't commit. Tomorrow at noon you will be hung from the neck until dead in front of the whole town. Tonight, tonight you spend a last lonely night in the jail cell in the sheriff's office on the main drag of El Pano.

Sleep won't come. You have no desire to die, but if you are to do so you'd like to find some kind of acceptance, some mental resolution to a brief and confusing life. You'd like to go to your grave with a dignity you never quite managed before.

Recollecting the brief farce of the sham trial distracts you. Even your lawyer - half owl, half beautiful woman, a rogue activist desperate to get you off - even your genius of a lawyer was unable to convince the jury. The puppy-girl was the guilty against which the townspeople defined their own innocence. They didn't want to hear the truth so much as they wanted blood.

The lawyer - you'd known her before the trial. Intimately. At her house, the owl's house, a stark white modern edifice that rises from the desert sands. The furniture is spare, but the walls inside are covered with tastefully-spaced paintings, all originals, mostly of a specific kind of aestheticized surrealism.

The lawyer has invited you over to seduce you, it's clear. A maid - a fellow puppy-girl - seethes with resent as she brings you cocktail after cocktail.

You and the owl sit by the fireplace in a large central living room. The ceilings are thirty-three feet high and an entire wall of the room is windowed to look out on the desert. Above you on a mezzanine, there's a bedroom, but that's for later.

For now, you settle into pleasant drunkenness on the plush carpet. The owl moves closer and closer to you. You let her, in no hurry but not resisting her many charms.

She's so smart. She seems to know everything about modernist and contemporary art, with an especial emphasis on the paintings she collects, the oddball surrealisms of Picabia and Miro. Picabia she loves for his variety, his jokes, his ease. A man who never found his subject, who refused the premise that one must find a subject. In Miro she respects a similar ease, but set towards a singleminded serialism. A man who found his subject quickly, simplified it to its essentials, and depicted it repeatedly until he died.

You discuss your personal aborted artistic ambitions, and she laughs and confesses to her own. She'll drag out her paintings, maybe, next time you come by. You feel warm inside. *Next time.* Another drink arrives, and you slink even deeper -

The owl bursts into the sheriff's office, waking the deputy slumbering at her desk. "It's over," she nearly shouts, catching herself and lowering her

volume, "I've done it." She walks straight across the room to your cell.

You aren't sure what she means. She lowers her voice even more and reaches through the bars to hold your hands in hers. "I've bribed the sheriff and she's agreed to let you go."

You can't believe your ears. You were close, you think, to the acceptance of death, and to have a lifeline offered now -

"But there is one caveat."

You wait for her to continue, your joy and confusion on pause.

"Tomorrow at noon, someone must hang. Innocent or guilty, it matters little. The town demands blood, and you have to be the one to choose."

You've been wrongfully accused, it's true. You don't deserve to die, any more or any less than anyone else. If your freedom is purchased by someone else hanging for a crime they didn't commit, is that worth your own relatively wretched

life? If you are truly innocent, who should the sacrifice for your sake be made by? Is there someone obviously guilty, someone who deserves to die?

You begin to think through the thirty-three residents of El Pano. One of them must be given up to the gallows. But who?

The legendary baker of El Pano was, at one time, the greatest baker who had ever lived. Her bread was always perfect, airy and crusty. Everyone who tasted it fell in love with it at once. The emperor herself sent for it once, and afterwards sent couriers every day to furnish her dinner table with the delicious bread. Some believed the town itself had derived its name from the bread.

The baker woke every morning well before the rest of the town, a fact of which she was inordinately proud. She set to work, mixing, kneading and proofing. By early morning each day her work was done, and she would spend the rest of

the day bragging to whoever came in earshot about the quality of her bread.

Word spread, even to Heaven. When the goddess Omnipotentia heard tell of the El Pano baker, she came down from on high herself to try it. She took a bite. It was, indeed, delicious. The coarse bragging of the proud baker, though, was like sharp noise to her ears. She admonished her for her hubris.

But the baker just laughed. "Surely, Goddess, this is the greatest bread, on Earth or up in Heaven." Omnipotentia's face contorted into a mask of fury, and she cursed the baker: from that moment, whoever ate of her bread would themselves transform into bread that was ten times more tasty than anything the baker could have ever devised.

In time, word spread, and the baker fell into ruin, her bread effectively poisonous. She scrapes out a kind of living now by setting traps around town, full of her cursed bread. Each morning, she feasts on the vagrants, local rodents, and insects she finds near her traps, transfigured into the most

delicious baked goods that anyone can possibly imagine.

The sheriff was born an alligator, and her mother taught her good. She internalized her mother's mantra: *Garbage in, garbage out*. Each morning she set out into the wilds to hunt her prey, and she accepted only the biggest and strongest of quarries. Each night she would return, having supped on an animal of significant power. She felt her own power growing in response.

One day, in the wilds she met a coyote. The coyote said, alligator, listen to me. Each day you eat the largest mountain lion, the deadliest eagle, the most durable armadillo. But there is one animal stronger even than these. The deadly viper could kill any of them with a single bite.

The alligator thought about this and decided the coyote was right. She set out immediately to hunt the deadly viper. It wasn't long until she found one, and had it for her lunch.

The poison of the viper sent the alligator into a coma for months. When she awoke in her hospital bed, she discovered all of her teeth had fallen out while she slept. The doctor explained that it had been touch-and-go for a while there, that she was truly lucky to be alive, even toothless.

Now the alligator eats only baby food and makes her living as the sheriff of El Pano. She brings her quarries back alive and feeds them to the gallows, sure. But not a day goes by that she doesn't miss the thrill of her old hunts.

The postman has been the postman for years and years. Her working day is also quite short. She sorts the incoming mail and distributes it to the small town's residents in a few short hours each morning, so she's typically drinking by noon.

Her first collection of poetry will be released next month by a small imprint in a neighboring town.

The rumor has it that the penmanship instructor once lived in the capital, but she moved to El Pano due to her overwhelming disgust with what she called "the world of adults." Now, she teaches children penmanship and calligraphy in a house on the main drag with all the windows on the street side painted black. Since she sends a student out for food and supplies, she never even has to see an adult.

That season, two boys of about fourteen that took the class together fell madly in love with one another. Everyone who witnessed their love for each other said that it was a burning, pure love unlike anyone had ever seen, and that it was amazing that from the old teacher's bitterness something as beautiful as this love could grow. Much to the annoyance of the old woman.

Outside of town, there lived a wizened crocodile monk who slept in a cave and spent his whole day meditating and praying. He was completely celibate and had dedicated his entire life to self-denial and suffering. He rejected any comfort, determined to face suffering head on for the rest of his life.

One day, the boys were walking hand in hand together in the mountains above the town. The handsome boy said, "Let's walk by the monk's cave, so that he can witness the joy of our love and have some comfort in his life." The beautiful boy agreed.

As they passed, the monk saw them together. The beauty of their love, and especially of their bodies, flashed in his brain like a bomb and drove him immediately insane. His lust reignited, he renounced his faith immediately.

The crocodile monk captured the two boys and tied them up in his cave. He loved them, but he was insane: to the monk, butchering their spirits was the ultimate expression of love. The monk, high on his own supply, believed only through pain and suffering can love be writ large, and he began to torture the boys as a way of showing his love.

The boys were too young to understand this kind of love. They were confused and afraid. The monk realized they could not appreciate or return his love, released the boys, and went up to the scrubby tree on the nearby peak to hang himself.

The boys ascended to the peak to find a love poem hanging next to the body. They read the poem without really understanding, then perform the proper rites to send the monk to rest. Then, they cut down the scrubby tree and make flutes from the wood. Together, they play a duet of unspeakable beauty.

The west is vast and empty, and most travelers travel alone. The country is indifferent if not outright hostile, huge, a place of starvation, of dehydration, a place of despair.

But at the edge of the desert there is a tiny, flickering candlelight of civilization - El Pano.

People want to go to the bounds of the known world. But they settle for El Pano. Some think they've done this for thousands of years.

She trembled a little bit. Another late night. The speed courses through her bloodstream. The ruins outside of town are huge, half-destroyed. With her tiny brush and her magnifying glass, the archaeologist hopes to unlock their secrets.

Tonight, she works in the large central chamber. Three of its four walls are intact, and the remaining walls are lined with carvings, carvings she slowly unearthed with her trusty brush. One shows a goddess in her aspect as a possum in a tree, another depicts the creation of the moon from the ribs of the earth. The carvings are in a primitive style with undeniable charm. It's a miracle, she thinks, that they haven't been destroyed by the gangs of outlaws and roughnecks who occasionally use the ruins as a hideout.

She'd found various relics before - tonight's, as she slowly unearthed it, seemed to be a human shinbone carved with strange glyphs. What is it for, one wonders. She tempers her expectations based on her history.

Once she found a shard of a richly decorated porcelain bowl, for example. Some magical relic. All it did was turn anything you shut up with it in a drawer into a perfect replica of the shard. Which was great if you needed an infinite number of a specific shard of an antique bowl, but since no one did, it wasn't hugely useful.

Or, once she found a scabbard with no sword. Once a scrap of unbelievably strong rope - but only three short inches of it. Or - fuck - the fucking terracotta coyote.

It speaks, sure, but it speaks only gibberish - and the gibberish has a vaguely foreboding atmosphere, like it's speaking in a forgotten and maybe even forbidden language. This one attracted a number of buyers initially, as well as some interest from cryptographers, but as horrible fates dispatched them one by one, that interest cooled. Now it sits on the archaeologist's bedside table, providing a sort of white noise for the fitful sleep she manages to get every few days.

Selling these odds and ends could barely fund her habit. She'd been in El Pano for years, ostensibly doing a doctorate at some eastern university - but with little to show for her trouble, the "research trip" to El Pano threatened to extend indefinitely.

The shinbone, though. It seemed promising. The archaeologist held it in her hand like a magic wand, waving it around with a few experimental swishes. It didn't do anything immediately obvious.

Probably another worthless piece of ancient junk,
more's the pity.

The torture chamber, if that's indeed what this is, is oddly fitted. Most of it is furnished like a standard living room: two pale beige couches ring a central coffee table, a heavily-wrought three legged thing with a solid pane of greenish glass atop it. The furniture is plush and inviting.

The ancient stone table I am bound to is off to the side a little. As I slowly come to I can feel the grooves of cut channels digging into my nude back, I assume to course my blood into the shapes necessary for your dark rituals. I wonder how long I've been out. I bet the horse is getting hungry.

My feet are each trapped in a metal cuff. I am barely conscious enough to note that those feet are now three-toed and covered in scales. A suddenly unearthed instinct causes me to twitch my tail, only to discover it is bound like all of the rest of my limbs, grasped in a kind of robotic claw.

"It's hard to be mad at you," you start. "It's part and parcel of why I love you. Why I tested you, I mean, and why you failed. I know you love money, and I know you're capricious, that the justice you dole out is near-random."

You clear your throat. Even though the speech sounds well-rehearsed there is a bit of stiffness, as though you've thought about this too long to say it naturally.

"Not random to you, of course, but in the opinion of anyone paying attention to you. But I love that you are moved by your passions. So few people are these days."

On the wall closest to the table is a gigantic painting, framed in a gilt frame. It depicts a single giant woman in an idealist neoclassical style. In her hands she holds a large sword with indecipherable runes lining the blade, her pose elegant and confident even though her body is pocked with sores and wounds. Other than the injuries, though, she otherwise appears in radiant, perfect health. Something in me knows that I am looking at an image of the goddess of this world, a depiction of incredible beauty and power.

You start to intone low. Your face is beaked in the aspect of a hawk, but even though the beak is inexpressive I can tell you're at the edge of tears.

"Yshykk, source of power, source of beauty. Her brain is sharpened - let her cut wells out of which flow a river of swords to cut your soft body. Let boiling pus from the sores that cover her leak and fill your happy home, to drown you and boil you alive. One million years of pestilence renders your wife infertile, your banked sperm impotent, the lands you occupy barren."

Now you are silent. I whimper and try to speak, to protest, but my forked tongue cannot easily make words and I choke on my empty protests.

"Why did you betray me?" you ask, "Your prayers would be in vain even if you could form them. Yshykk is cruel, and I will prove to you her cruelty. She created this world, and she created you to suffer."

You pull the fifth of the five levers on the control panel beside you. The claw grasping my tail begins to pull -

Stop. Stop! The pain is immense. I am nearly blacking out when finally my tail pulls off cleanly in the grasping mechanical claw. It writhes as though it is still alive, splattering me with blood that drips off of my body and settles into the cut channels of the stone table.

I would scream but I know it is useless. I'm just a lizard with a bloody stub on my back, my body permanently changed by you. I stare up at you, tears leaking from my eyes. I want to ask for mercy but I cannot speak.

I turn the other way, looking at the face of the painting of Yshykk, parsing the details for some explanation of my suffering, or at least a distraction from the pain that has become my entire world. In the background of the painting are several sand dunes, strewn with bones but lit by a very pretty sunrise.

The pianist at the saloon in El Pano was of considerable, but not great, talent. She had full command of the standard saloon repertoire, and she played the hits as she was expected to, without elaboration or extension. She sat each night at the honkytonk piano in the saloon, accepting a few drinks from the drunks who offered them as tips, nodding to the regulars. Playing the songs she knew they liked, the songs she had played one hundred thousand times.

One early morning, as she walked home from a late night at the saloon, she heard something from a barnyard as she passed - the low sound of a beautiful music unlike any she had heard before.

The music was subtle - a less musical ear might not even be able to perceive it, she thought. But the standards she knew so well rang in her ears at all times of the day, especially at the end of a long evening playing them, and she detected the patterns and melodies of her standards in the sounds she was hearing - which, upon investigation, was the sound of a pig devouring slop and scraps.

In the pig's oinks and snorts, the percussive of its teeth, the rustling and schlopping of the wet

trash as the pig consumed it, she heard new themes and structures that built on her standards.

Somehow, the pig had internalized the songs that she herself, the pianist, played, and it was eating and oinking in time to them, but adding unanticipated harmonies and elaborations she never could have invented on her own.

In the morning she returned to the barnyard, ready to buy the musical pig at any cost. The farmer sold it to her with some confusion, and she took it home with her. She scattered her dinner scraps before the pig and sat down at the old upright she practiced on at home.

The pig once again got to crunching and snorting in the musical way she'd heard the night before. She cried out in glee and copied the pig's elaborations with her own playing. In her hands, inspired by the pig, the standards took on new life. They played together until the pig had eaten all of the trash.

That night at the saloon, the pianist played the new versions of the songs she knew so well. The crowd, as used to the same old things as the pianist herself, perked up immediately. Night after night,

she played new songs coursing with vibrant inventions. And as word spread, the saloon attracted out-of-towners, people from the big city, people who tipped with more than just a drink or two.

As the money poured in, she decided the pig no longer needed to eat scraps. She bought the absolute best pig food available, feeding it full multi-course meals, feeding it better than she herself ate. Blinded by her gratitude to the pig and by her success she didn't notice that the pig ate these rich meals with far less musicality than it ate the trash and slops to which it was accustomed.

Months later, when the pianist ran out of inspiration, she turned to the pig for more and was disappointed to find that the pig no longer hummed with music in its oinks and grunts. Still, she owed everything to the pig, and she had bought all that pig food in advance, so that even as the money dwindled and she herself began to skip meals just to make ends meet, she still fed the pig his gourmet food. There was no use crying over spilt cash, she figured, the pig food was here, that's all there was to it.

Finally, though, she reached a breakpoint. The pig food was gone and she herself was starving. That night she butchered the formerly musical pig and ate it. It was delicious, though she ate each mouthful through tears. She put the scraps in the trash can, wiped her mouth off, and got ready for her shift at the saloon.

The proprietress of the saloon had owned it for fifty-odd years and showed no signs of slowing down. When she was fifteen years old, she had become convinced that on a specific date in the future, the world was going to come to an end. She didn't know how, or why, she simply became fixated on an arbitrary date in the future (the next February 2nd, to be precise) and somehow knew, precisely that this was to be the day everything ended, whether by meteor strike, sudden outbreak of disease, or any of a million other ways she invented in private moments, fearing abstractly for her life and the lives of those she loved.

February 2nd came and went without incident. A few years later, she bought the saloon.

The bounty hunter, it's said, was traipsing through the desert after one outlaw or the other when she came across a small village, surrounded on all sides by walls that shone in the sunlight. When she got closer, she realized the walls were inset with the largest precious stones she had ever seen - diamonds, rubies, and emeralds as big as her fist, coating the wall.

She dismounted.

"I don't like the feel of this place," said the horse, who was repelled by materialism of all kinds.

"Shut up," said the bounty hunter, who took the reins and led the horse through the city gates. They stood in a vast market, with stall after stall offering gigantic precious stones. Clearly, this was a village that sat atop an unusually productive mine, or a village where the stones grew like plants, or something like that, surely.

At a stall with a single huge sapphire, the bounty hunter lingered, trying to make a deal. "How about," she proffered, "my horse for your

immense sapphire." She knew the horse was extremely finicky, and would bolt back to her at the first opportunity.

"What?" protested the horse, shocked.

"Deal," said the stallkeeper.

The bounty hunter rubbed the horse behind the ears as a goodbye and put the huge sapphire in her saddlebag, which she carried off on foot, back towards a known territory where the sapphire would fetch a pretty penny. She figured the horse would catch her in an hour or two.

Indeed, an hour or two later, at a small oasis, she found the horse waiting for her.

"How'd you beat me here?" asked the bounty hunter, "I didn't see you pass me."

"What are you talking about?" said the horse. When the bounty hunter looked in her bag, there was no sapphire to be found. On further cross-examination, the horse had no recollection of the village.

"You think about money too much," said the horse.

"Perhaps," said the bounty hunter. Her stomach rumbled. It was getting late and she was quite hungry.

In El Pano, it was common knowledge that any of the boy actors who appeared on stage at the small theater were available for hire, if you catch my drift. Since affection was dear in El Pano, they didn't hire cheap, either.

Since the boy actors didn't have to work much and had a decent amount of disposable income, they needed other fads and fashions to distract them when they were offstage and not tricking.

They loved to dress in wild clothing and gamble, two activities that were always in style. And then for a while the fad among the boy actors was to freestyle rap over beats from castanets they made out of cacti. But this got old quickly.

The next craze was for cockfighting, which combined their preexisting love of gambling with an element of bloodsport. A potent recipe for pubescent boys. The activity grew quite elaborate as the boys collected and bred increasingly exotic roosters and traded them amongst themselves.

The most beautiful of the boy actors loved cockfighting dearly and collected thirty seven of the roosters.

The other thing he loved above all was the affections of a specific john.

Once, when this john was over for the night, the john informed the boy that he had to leave by seven. Stay til eight, begged the boy. Impossible, said the john. My wife returns from her sister's tomorrow.

In the morning, they awoke to the pealing of seven bells. That was only six peals, said the boy. I'm sure it was seven, said the john.

All of a sudden, all thirty-seven of the boy actor's roosters, caged out in the front yard, began

to crow in unison. See, said the john, it's time to get up. He left immediately.

Furious with the roosters, the boy went outside with a large knife and executed all thirty seven of them systematically, one by one, with considerable relish. Never again would they cost him his final hour basking in his lover's affections. The boy wiped the knife off and went inside to make some eggs - sunnyside, with a little grated cheese on top.

Some people fall into their careers, find purpose in life by chance. Others are born knowing what they will do with their lives. The stud knew from a very young age what he wanted to do: fuck.

He grew up on a farm, and he was barely ten years old before the goats and the cows and even the chickens were scared of him. He lost his human virginity not long after.

Some of the townspeople criticized him. He was useless, overdoing it, an addict like any other. Some others envied him: at the very least he knew

what it was he wanted, a rare enough thing in this world.

He was searching for transcendence through his penis, and it was all the more pity (for him, but rather a relief for the various pussies and assholes of El Pano) when, at age twenty-five, it ceased completely to function, as though he had used it all up.

Cursing the name of the Goddesses, he journeyed out to the low hills where the medicine woman lived, bringing with him the pair of chickens she demanded in exchange for her services.

The medicine woman laid out a delicate supernatural map in cornmeal, and cut one of the chicken's heads off. It squawked and convulsed, disrupting some of the cornmeal lines. The medicine woman studied the broken lines intently.

"Cacti," the medicine woman said.

"Cacti?" asked the former stud.

"Somewhere in this desert, there is a cactus that will restore your potency with a mere prick of its needles to your disabled member."

He grimaced. "Which cactus?"

"That, the map doesn't show me. You will simply have to test them all." The medicine woman put the second chicken in the hutch with the others she kept and went back inside to make tea.

Since then, each day at dawn the former stud wakes up, packs himself a lunch and some water and takes off into the desert to contest his fate. Each day until dusk he pricks himself on cactus after cactus, searching for the one that will make him whole again. In some ways, this activity has replaced sex for him - he is not sure he even still cares about sex. However, at this point, he doesn't know what else to do with his time.

The medicine woman laughs. All of her stories are funny, to her at least, and any one where she comes across as especially cruel is her favorite. She enjoys the captive audience. She knows as well as

you do you wouldn't be here at all if you didn't need a favor.

Lately, the bounties have stopped coming. Your strong sense of justice has always been divinely inspired, guided by what would seem to an outsider like happenstance. Like the medicine woman, you can read tea leaves, chicken bones, tarot cards - these things select your target, inform you of the rewards, motivate your actions. Some find it ridiculous to kill based on chance conglomerations of migratory birds, cats crossing your path, coins found on the ground - but this is how you've always lived.

Lately, however, they've stopped. The cards are silent, the birds unconglomerated, the coins all tails - the flow of bounties has dried up. You are aimless. Without a bounty, you don't even know why you're alive.

The medicine woman takes a quick look at your palm, tracing a line with her finger until it stops. "You're blocked up, alright." She confirms. But what to do about it?

One of the more precocious students enters the room.

"What are you doing, Master?"

The old penmanship instructor is seated at her writing table, an aura of immense focus surrounding her unlike any the student has seen before. On the page before her, she violently but precisely makes the same series of marks over and over again, subtly perfecting it more and more,

"I'm copying the Hate Sigil over and over again," the master said, as though it were obvious.

"If I squint, I can read it, nearly like text," the student said. "It describes an even lonelier world than the one I live in fear of, the one where we are the weak, oppressed by the great machine of the powerful. This text, though - this describes a world with no one's hands on the reins, a world peopled solely by the weak."

The master looked at her student with disgust. "Another desperate appeal to an authority higher than me, eh?"

When she was done beating the student, they both sat on the floor of the schoolroom, panting. Her hubris deflated, the student began to question her master in earnest.

"What is it you hate, Master?"

"Lots of things," the master started. "The objects of my desire who no longer return my affections, the systems that prevent me from acting freely. People who talk while they are chewing. Many, many things."

"And the Hate Sigil -?"

"When I draw it, I picture a missile in my head, aimed at the things I hate. Each time I draw it, the missile is coated with another layer of energy and becomes even more powerful..."

"And that makes you feel better?"

"No."

You entered the service of the owl only recently. As her second maid, you are still learning the ropes from the other maid, a puppy girl like yourself, though you are learning quickly and garnering much of your mistress's praise. You are entrusted with keeping the stark white edifice the owl inhabits clean and presentable for the high-class cultural guests the owl is always entertaining.

Your fellow maid is more beautiful than you are, and a much better cook, but she is jealous of you, likely believing she is more worthy of the respect the owl shows you. You are jealous of her as well for her beauty. You speak to each other occasionally in the discharge of your duties but there is no friendship or camaraderie between you.

It's the other maid who takes the mistress her coffee in the morning, so the first thing you hear is a scream and a dropped coffee service tray. You rush up the stairs to investigate.

Your mistress is dead in the bed with a long sword sticking out of her abdomen. The bed is drowning in a deep puddle of drying blood.

You walk over to the body, and look around for any clues, anything that might explain the owl's mysterious and untimely death. Are there signs of a struggle? How warm is the body? How long ago did the murder occur?

She picks up the old rotary phone, presumably to call for help. "There's no dial tone," she says. The phone line has been cut.

The other maid looks nervous, but not so nervous you are certain she is a murderer.

The sword's gleam catches your eye again. You hear a faint voice. It takes everything you have to suppress the urge to grab the sword.

The bear had the demon sword Asmuth strapped across her back. It is extremely powerful, more powerful than any other sword in the world, but it is extremely dangerous and will inevitably drain the life-force away from whoever wields it. It is a sword that is immensely tempting, hard to leave unused, but so deadly that one cannot afford to use it.

A mortal who wields the sword can make one perfect cut before succumbing to the effects.

On the path, the bear met with the coyote one day.

The coyote asked the bear how she had been. It had been so long since they had seen each other. They embraced as friends. They spoke late into the night.

Finally, the coyote said, "I must go, my friend." But when the coyote turned, a viper appeared from nowhere and bit the coyote on the heel.

The coyote would be dead in another few steps. The color drained from her face. She knew that she was about to die in immense pain. Her blood turned cold.

The bear watched the coyote and felt very sad inside. She knew that her friend was suffering and it broke her heart.

The bear unsheathed the magic sword and clove the coyote in two with a single elegant swipe.

The coyote died instantly and painlessly. Alongside, as the demon sword Asmuth glowed with evil, the bear fell to the ground and turned to dust.

You woke up on the stone table, untied, the other four levers un-pulled. I couldn't do it, couldn't bring myself to finish you off, rip you limb from limb, and I've swung open the huge ebony doors and left the room.

I'm upstairs trying to sleep. I have a sleep mask on, which one of the remaining thirty-one maids thoughtfully put in the microwave for a second so it's just a tiny bit warm for a few minutes.

I wish I could relax, but I can't. I want to see your face. But when I come back downstairs, you're already gone. All that's left is a pentagram of shallow channels in a stone table, filled with slowly drying lizard blood.

The coyote said to the dog, "Why are we fighting?"

"We are both suffering, and we should be suffering together.

The dog looked at the coyote strangely and said, "I will not suffer with you. My suffering will belong to me alone."

The dog went to the desert to dig. She finds a magic lamp with a very rare kind of genie inside. It is the two-sided wish granting genie, with one rule: for every wish, no matter what wish you make, you will receive the opposite of your wish immediately after the wish has been granted.

The dog wishes for a lifetime free of suffering. Immediately after the narcotizing wish is granted, an eternity of suffering follows close on its heels.

The genie apologizes. The dog sighs. "Another failed attempt at escape. Why can't I just be human? Why can't I just go with a smile to do my chores, the things my life requires of me?"

The genie pauses. "Do you really want my opinion?"

"Sure."

"There is a part of you that resents your mundane reality. You resent that you are not special. You resent that you are just a dog. There are parts of you with an insatiable desire for a life of adventure and excitement. You crave a life of drama and danger, of meaning and intrigue. Your own small life seems like nothing at all compared to what you have imagined.

"For you, the alternative to your ideal is a life of misery and suffering. You know that your life is entirely typical, nothing but a miserable and hopeless routine. The only way out is to embrace this suffering, to embrace the misery and hopelessness.

"You must embrace this suffering with everything you have."

When I walked out of the mansion, miraculously alive, I didn't look back. I went and untied the horse, hopped on and rode as fast as I could back towards El Pano.

“How did it go?”

“Don’t start with me,” I warned the horse.

I rode back into town. I tied the horse up outside and, even though I couldn’t really afford it, went to dinner alone at the new place, the place we had been planning on eating together after we watched the hanging. I ordered scallops (even though I typically eat vegetarian) and a gnocchi in a mushroom cream sauce. The first glass of pet nat went down real easy.