

the loved

a horror anthology

the lost

michelle browne

the dreaming



The Loved, The Lost, The Dreaming: A Horror Anthology

Creativia

This book is for sale at
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This version was published on 2013-02-13

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THE LOVED, THE LOST, THE DREAMING

By Michelle Browne 2012

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More of the author's work can be found at <https://twitter.com/SciFiMagpie> or <http://scifimagpie.blogspot.ca/> for more information. Correspondence to the author can be sent to shellebrowne@gmail.com.

Acknowledgements

It takes a village to raise a child, and it takes dozens of people to help usher a novel into being. In the course of these short stories, the first of which were written while I was in high school, and the last of which were finished mere days before publication, I learned just how true this is.

First, I'd like to thank the biggest contributors. Andrey Taskaev spent many nights pouring tea, helping me understand arcane formatting issues, and listening to plot changes. Sarah Huntrods, Billea Alhgrim, Julia Rees, Travis Luedke, Jessica Curry, Ian Rideout, and Rachel Smith were extremely helpful in providing feedback and encouragement as I sweated over various details and editing changes. They are the godparents of this book, and it would not be as good as it is without their sweat and care.

Kit Pearson provided the lovely and unique art for the cover of this collection, giving the book the face it needed. I can't think of a better cover for this work.

My writing colleagues at ASMSG, who number in the hundreds, contributed with their shares, retweets, and lovely supportive words. Chris Shields, JC Eggleton, Travis Luedke, John Dolan, Richard Long, Jim Wright, Shannon McRoberts, Dianne Harman, Martha Emms, Christy Foster, Ally Shields, and Vanessa Wu are the first names that leap to mind. These are the talented authors and the kind people who gave advice, provided interviews, and encouraged me when I was swearing about formatting in the wee hours of the morning. There are many, many wonderful people at

ASMSG, and I would like to thank all of them for putting up with my frequent posts and being members of an awesome community.

I'd also like to thank my friends. Even the ones who didn't contribute directly provided a friendly ear, asked me about my work, and put up with missed parties and communication lapses as I worked feverishly. Your patience is definitely not going to be forgotten.

My parents deserve a special note once again, for their patience with an artistic daughter and my long hours of writing. Most importantly, they were there with a hug when the dark moved and the world was a scary place.

Finally, I'd like to thank you, the readers. By buying this book, you're sharing in one of the things I love most: telling a story. I hope the short stories within inspire and help you, wherever you're at in life. If you're afraid of the things hiding in the dark, may this book be a flashlight to help you get out of those shadowy places. Walk forward, into the light.

For Andrey, who keeps the bad dreams at bay.

PART 1

THE UNDERLIGHTERS

1-May 15, 0048 P.D.

The conversation went like this.

"You seem tired, kiddo. And—what happened to your shirt?"

"Uh...I killed a dragon on the way home from work."

"What? Very funny. Now, really."

"Look." I pulled the gory claw out of my pocket.

"This looks like a velociraptor claw. Where did you get it? Did you go Up to the museum?"

"No! I told you. I killed a dragon." He stared at me, trying to figure out which leg I was pulling the hardest. I turned up the light to its brightest without looking at the switch; he flinched.

"Look. There's blood on the end of this. And tissue. How would I get _that _from a museum sample?"

"Ooookay, where's the rest of the body?"

"I just sort of threw it in a hole and scuffed some dirt on it."

"*You mean it's still there?*"

"I'd assume so."

"Are you sure it's dead?"

"It's dead," I said confidently.

"Look. I'll go up with you and have a look at it if it's real. Sweetie, did you inhale Dust by accident?"

"No! I saw a dragon!"

"That looks like a dinosaur claw to me."

"*Dragon.* Not a dinosaur."

"Dinosaur. Dragons are imaginary. More likely, an extremely large iguana or a crocodile." He spoke slowly,

like I was an imbecile. “Dragons aren’t real.”

In some part of his mind, I’d never really had to grow up. I was six years old and holding up a lizard for his examination. How could I really blame him for looking at that bloody claw and stubbornly seeing ketchup on a museum souvenir?

“Dad! It was a *dragon*.”

“And not a scratch on you when you were killing it?”

“Are you blind? Look at my shirt! You don’t get this from fighting electrical wiring!” The fabric was dirty, and shredded over my stomach. It was really young, not even old enough to breathe fire properly, but it had still gotten in more than a few swipes. Light swipes, but still.

His eyes did the popping thing again.

“Janelle! Why didn’t you tell someone about those? Do you want tetanus?”

“Relax. I was going to go after I told you about this.”

“I don’t want to hear excuses. You should’ve gone to the hospital and called me from there. I’ll take you now.”

” It’s not as important as this, Dad! Are you listening to me at all? I. Killed. A. Dragon.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake! After you’re patched up!” A rare swearword. He was in panic mode. “Fuck. Just fuckin’ great.”

I sighed. “Okay, fine. A crocodile. Now, will you come look at the body?”

He inhaled slowly and exhaled. “All right. But later.”

Dragons were the least thing to worry about, later. I can’t help wondering what would’ve happened if he’d seen

the body, whether it would've saved us a lot of trouble and frustration, or whether it would've mattered at all. But I've gotten ahead of myself. Having a journal is convenient, but it blurs the lines of hindsight more than a little.

Even I admit it was stupid to just walk around like that. I must have been in shock when I first came to Dad. I didn't faint or anything, but when we got to the hospital, it finally started to sink in, and then it started to hurt. Getting stitched up made me scream a little, even with freezing. It was all superficial, but nasty-looking, and I can still remember that it stung and throbbed like hell. I wondered how it was going to scar up, whether I'd be able to wear halters ever again.

Stupid, but that mattered more than the thought of my intestines spilling out over the floor, of the muscles being part of that monster's steak sandwich. I thought about tattoo designs for a while, and hoped the scars wouldn't be too ugly. Apparently going into shock makes me shallow.

My shirt and overalls had stopped the claws well, but they'd still been pretty shredded, lined canvas or no. I have to admit that I can see why Dad seemed to have figured it was a knife or bottle fight from that. He got to work on sewing my clothes with his pocket kit while waiting for me.

They made Dad stay outside to keep the room sanitary, but he kept looking around the corner worriedly, peeking through the glass door to see how I was doing. When I could, I tossed him 'calm the fuck down' glances and grins, and he relaxed. But not a lot. Soundproof glass or no, you

can tell when someone's yelping in pain.

Obviously I didn't think talking about a dragon was going to land me anywhere other than in a Calm Box, so I told them I'd been skateboarding and the fall had scared an animal, some kind of big cat, into going for me. Cats wander into the drains and into the roads, sometimes, so it made enough sense. Coyotes, too, and dogs, but the big cats are the only things I could think of that would do that sort of damage to my shirt.

I told them the lie in the same way I was used to telling lies, full eye contact and flushed cheeks. Being embarrassed, but refusing to back down, is one of the best ways to make people do what you need them to.

They bandaged me up and used a lot of care making sure the stitches were fine, so it would all heal cleanly and with 'less cosmetic damage' as the nurse put it. I don't want to tell you how long it took—okay, I have no idea how long, *if* I could tell you. Probably at least an hour. Two. It felt like longer; you can believe it.

The best part is, I got a lot of dirty looks for their trouble from the scrubs and orderlies walking around. Yeah, stare down the scared and wounded girl, really judgemental, guys. I suppose they figured I was with one of the Rats and was therefore a waste of time. The look the doctor was giving me suggested he thought I was either a tart or tomboy muscle, but I was polite and friendly and ladylike (apart from screaming in pain) and after a bit he stopped giving me that look. Gangers aren't that nice, or grateful, when they go under the knife 'n' needle.

Afterward, Miranda, one of the nurses (according to her tag) pulled me aside under the pretense of changing the sheets I'd been sitting on.

"Don't mind Dr. Dhaliwal," she whispered. "We've had a few young people coming in with wounds like yours and he's concerned about some of the gang fights that have been going on."

I pricked my ears up at that, you can bet. "Same wounds?"

"Yeah. You wouldn't happen to know about a different kind of knife or sharpened foldie you kids might be using?"

I blinked. "What? I don't know. I'm not in a gang."

The nurse sighed, obviously convinced that I was still covering for myself. "I don't see soot on your face, but I understand if you washed it off to get treatment. Just, look, if you get the chance, tell them to use knives...bottles can have anything on them, but knives are cleaner cuts--sort of--and easier to patch up. If they're still alive afterward, you might as well make sure we can clean them up."

If they're still alive. I wondered if that was the only dragon around, and where its mother and father were. Obviously, I wasn't the first human it had run into, or tried to snack on.

"I'm...look, I'm learning to be an electrician. I don't know about gangs and I wish you'd stop treating me like a sugarplum." The nurse bit her lip and nodded. She still didn't believe me.

"Still, let them know. Oh, and put iodine or at least salt water on those cuts every day when you can. They should

heal cleanly enough but whatever you were cut with, it was meant to shred flesh. Next time, you might not be lucky enough to walk away with some scrapes.”

Dad kept looking at me funny as we went home. I knew that look and he’d given it to me around the time of explaining sex, and my period, and also when he explained about fizzes and shrooms. He was worried that I already understood what he was about to teach me.

He did the thing where he took a deep breath in and let it out slowly and took another one in, and rubbed his hands together. Every discussion is a solo bullfight, a duel for him with himself, even though I usually shut up and listen. He hates having to lecture me. He started going on about sugarplums and cuntgirls and tommies, and I interrupted.

“Dad, I promise, I’m not a Rat. I told you, I was attacked by a dragon.” He gave me a look that said he couldn’t decide whether to be relieved that I wasn’t in a gang (he can kind of tell when I fib or tell whoppers) or worried about my sanity. So after a bit he just went into nodding thoughtfully, and I stopped talking, and concentrated on counting the lamps along the tunnel walls.

It took a long while until we got to our own basement, but the walk made me feel better. Earth walls in the tunnels under the city made everything smell cool and safe, and lots of light made me feel better. Dad took the main routes, so there were no obstacle courses of awkwardly intersecting pipes to contend with. I wasn’t in the mood for swiping dangling safeguard charms out of my face or dealing with shadows. Too jumpy. Too much like the Dark, Up above,

where you can't see what's coming at you next. At least I had Dad to take me home, even if he didn't think the monster was real.

I was still pretty shaken up over the dragon thing and hurt and annoyed by Dad's lack of trust, so I went off to my room. He closed the door, moved the couch over to block it, and had a seat in front of his workdesk. He was working on one of his tiny balsawood planes. I shook my head and slipped off, my sock feet quiet on the carpet.

First, I wrote for a while—well, I wrote the stuff before, and have been working on everything else you're reading since then. Journaling lets most things that bother me out of my head. Usually. It isn't doing much of a job this time though.

Apparently I'm fidgety tonight. Before I got back to writing this, I was playing with my circuits and dicking around with electronics, trying to fix things and get them running again. It's useful practice for work and it gets my mind off things. Not this time, though. All the time as I was trying to get the busted iPod to behave, I was considering the dragon.

As my soldering iron reheated, I pondered how something like the dragon could have ended up down here in the first place. Does it have something to do with all the toxic chemicals that were undoubtedly leaking out of all the old electronics and batteries? Sure, we've been doing some processing and salvaging. And there are heavy metals and all kinds of pollutants in everything, it's a reality of life. We work around it but you can only do so much.

But, as I clipped bits of copper and stripped plastic coating away, it occurred to me that I might be a dumbass to blame contaminants. Chemicals alone, even nuclear shit, don't cause those kinds of mutations. Missing legs or extra eyes or excessive growth, sure. But not fire-breathing fairy-tale monsters.

As I fixed the broken adaptor and covered the connection point with electrical tape, I thought about contacting the others, and thanked god for underground cables and routers. Apart from being terrifying, the Dark also blocks out radio waves. Mind you, being underground dampens waves too. You can't win, but we try anyway.

So. I texted Chloe and Jaycenne to tell them to meet up by the sewage hub with Raheed and Kenny at about six, and to let the others know about the meet up, because I was busy.

'What about u? U ok?' Jay texted back. My heart hammered in my chest. She's good at picking up on things.

"No, I'm ok, just get everyone. See you soon!"

I clicked my phone shut, and my heart continued to hammer away.

"Dad, I'm going out, I'll be back soon."

I was putting my shoes on as I said this.

"Who are you meeting? Where?"

"My girlfriend and the others, by the sewage hub. I shouldn't be more than a couple of hours." He scanned my face. The short, luxuriant salt-and-pepper beard that covers the lower half of his face is good for concealing his expression. And Dad is good at keeping a neutral face.

“Should you be going out with your stomach ripped up, young lady?”

“Dad, I’m fine. I’m full of adrenalin and painkillers and I’m going stir crazy in here. I let them know about being injured, but...you know. I just want to let them know I’m okay.”

He harrumphed quietly. “I suppose that only makes sense. But don’t be out late. I don’t want you getting attacked again. Are you sure you wouldn’t rather just have them over, and rest?”

“Nuh uh. I really need to move, Dad.”

“Well, if you’re sure. Just please, be careful, kiddo.”

“I promise, I will. You don’t have to tell me not to wander off twice.”

“And I don’t want you having a run in with those hooligans near the surface.”

“Dad, it’s okay. I just need to go make sure my friends know I’m all right and burn off a little nervous energy.” I realised my voice was taut and sharp, and I softened it. “You have Chloe’s number. If you call and you can’t hear my voice, then worry about me being a sugarplum.”

“I’m sure you’ll be too busy to talk,” he said, smiling. I could tell he was less tense; he could tell I was too confident to hide something. “Say hello to your girlfriend for me.”

I grinned as I adjusted my shoes a final time. “I won’t be too long and I promise I won’t do anything too exciting. Love ya.” I closed the door behind me.

The path to get to the sewage hub involved some flexibility, because it’s a very low-ceilinged and narrow

tunnel, but frequent use by teenagers made it smooth-going.

It didn't take me long to get to the Hub. It's a glorified title for a bit of tunnel that comes up underneath the road in front of an apartment building, not far from our house. The curves and tunnels stretch around each other for kilometres, crossing and criss-crossing, interrupted only by stairways down to other levels. Our tunnels often have to weave around the occasional tangle of wires before rejoining sewer and basement-to-basement paths, so sometimes they end up in awkward places. This one is only accessible because we need to get at the wires to keep our precious and intermittent electricity system running. The tangle of pipes provides a sheltering overhang, a kind of underground thicket of metal tubes. There's also plenty of clear space around and in front of it, but being crawly and tight, and not in the best state of maintenance, most adults walk past, or avoid it.

We weren't really supposed to be there, come to it. If anything went wrong, we could all be drowned in an overflow of sewage, or electrocuted, or both. Probably the worst way to die I can think of. Actually, being electrocuted in sewage is probably the worst possible death in the history of ever. Of course, the chances of that are very, very low, and accordingly, we don't care much. You run your chances of being electrocuted by cables or choking on your morning glass of chicoffee anyway. Or, I suppose, being eaten by a young and hungry mythological creature.

Chloe was there already, and greeted me with a showy

hug and kiss on the mouth. Raheed gave me the evil eye and I pretended not to notice. We broke it off eons ago, but he still feels the need to give me deathly glares every time Chloe smooches me in public.

I gently disentangled myself from her and tried not to yelp in pain. "Where's Kenny and Jaycenne?"

"Here!"

They popped out from around a corner on the other side of the tunnel. I noticed Jaycenne was holding Kenny's hand and flashing him a smile. Raheed saw, too, and looked even more unhappy.

"Okay. So. Good. Um...so...I saw something strange in the upper tunnels. Why aren't Caleb and Aiden here?" I asked.

"Oops. Sorry," said Chloe, shrugging. "So, what's up?"

I managed not to roll my eyes. You'd think it would have occurred to them to invite the other people involved when I'd asked, but that's us teenagers for you, I suppose.

"Whatever. I think we should talk to them. Anyway...I saw...look, it looked like a dragon in the upper tunnels. I just wandered up after work because I wanted to go for a walk, and there was this thing..." I let out a very long breath.

"No way."

"The fuck?"

"Okay, come on--"

"Calm down, everyone," I said. "It...long story short, it went for me, but--I found a sports bat, guess a ganger left it there--and I sort of--well I got it upside the head, and it swiped at me, and it sort of...it breathed fire at me..." my

face heated. I knew it sounded ridiculous, but they were rapt, even Raheed. "And I dodged and knocked a claw off, and hit it upside the head again—it sort of went down, but it swiped the bat with its tail, so I got my foldie, and then, well, I just..." I swallowed. I'm an okay talker, but I hate public speaking or anything like it. "I hit it until it stopped moving. There was a hole, you know, just a shallow kind of...so I threw it in and kicked some dirt over it with my foldie and went on my way."

I patted my foldie. Sometimes, the fact that I try to follow regs can be useful. Without the compact shovel, I'd have had to leave the body there. It was dented from hitting the dragon's head, but it had done the trick. A flaming longsword would have been better. I remembered the fine, light scales, the way they'd felt under my fingertips when I dared to touch the still-warm corpse. It wasn't quite what I'd been expecting from the fairy tales.

They all gave me looks that varied from semi-credulous suspicion to concern to disbelief that bordered on laughter. "Look at the dents on my foldie if you don't believe me!" I held it up. It was nothing an hour of hammering couldn't fix, but you didn't get that kind of damage from anything less than concrete or a fight.

Chloe examined a nail. "Babe, no offense, but..."

Kenny interrupted, but it was Chloe's doubting face that upset me. "Are you seriously saying I made it up? Because if you are, I can prove it."

"I have to see this," said Raheed.

"She's been through a lot," Jay shot back.

“No, no, it’s fine.” I lifted my shirt up. “This convince you?”

I had bandages wrapped around most of me and a bra covering my tits, so it wasn’t really much of a flash. The dragon had gone for my belly, trying to use its sharp claws to disembowel me once its jaw was broken and useless. I pulled away bandages, swearing under my breath, to show them the gashes. They’re shallow—I jumped away very, very quickly—but they are showy, and are definitely not as clean as a knife cut would be, not at all.

Even so, I rolled up my sleeves, showing off the rest of my battle scars. They weren’t as bad as my stomach, but my arms were crisscrossed with thin red lines and scrapes in a really showy way. Raheed went pale and so did Chloe, but Jaycenne and Kenny were giving me the looks of respect I deserved.

“Oh, and if you’re not convinced, I almost forgot that I had this.” I reached into my pocket, took out the claw. Everyone flinched at the sight of the curved bone.

My stomach twisted as I looked at it, and I decided not to think too hard about the claws slicing towards my belly, the way my own blood had smelled. I stuffed it back in my pocket.

“So...anyone willing to help me haul the body back? If you don’t believe me now, you will when you see that.”

There was silence. Chloe’s nose wrinkled. “A giant lizard covered in blood has got to smell...that’s kind of nasty.”

“It shouldn’t smell too bad,” I said.

"I'll help," said Raheed. I sighed inwardly. I knew that tone. Fight time.

"Me too," said Chloe. She shot me a smile that was supposed to be supportive.

Great, they were ready to compete. Time to put on my leadership face, the one I use to boss other electricians back to work when they start screwing around on the job.

I nodded sharply at them. "This way, then. If anyone else wants to stay, you're free to. Okay," I said, trying not to let my voice crack, "thisaway."

Jaycenne and Kenny scampered ahead of me like eager puppies, around the corner and down the way, crouching and crawling through the narrow section back to the under-roads.

There was a tunnel leading along the outside of the cement housing of the pipe. We were pretty low, but still close to the Heaven Tubes, almost dangerously so. Along this section of drained sewer, a breach in the wall allowed passage in, to the main road; there was also a narrow road along the outside of the cement leading back in the general direction of the school. It led down, and up, so there was scrabbling and crawling in some parts—like I said, the Heaven Tubes are messy, and close to older wiring systems from when people lived Up. It's a mess to get through at times.

It was in one of the low areas that I'd run into my dragon. It was a wider tunnel, because it led towards a short cut underneath the sewage block, and was used often enough that it had been worn into friendliness. The part

near the divide continued up, up, closer to the surface, and there it was, my battleground.

My heart tightened and my stomach lurched, and my wounds started to hurt, more than they had already. The ground was scuffed with movement and there were claw-marks. Even Chloe, starting to chatter at others, fell silent. You could tell something had gone down. I touched my belly.

“So, guys,” I chirped, with more confidence than I felt, “where’d we stick the body again?”

Jay pointed to an obviously disturbed spot in the wall. We grabbed our foldies and got digging, expecting a clunk.

There wasn’t one. We kept digging. There still wasn’t, just an awkward silence.

“So, where’s the body?” asked Raheed. Oh boy, I thought, this is going to be fun. He had that argument look on his face.

“Uhhh...”

Kenny sneezed. “I don’t see the, um, body, but, um, there’s, um...”

“Is this all you had to show us?” Raheed added, crouching next to him. He lifted something out of the ground, silvery grains. “Dust?” He shot me a patronizing look. “If I wanted to see Dust I’d go Up.” He stood up and elaborately wiped his hands on his jeans.

I glared switchblades at him.

Kenny got up. “No need to be a dick. It could be that something weird happened or someone came and moved the body.”

Raheed shared a glance with Chloe that I didn't like, but then Chloe stepped up. "Honey...are you sure you didn't get attacked by some Rat with hallies? This sounds more like a shroomy story than..."

How could she? I wondered. I felt my chin start to wobble. "Explain this," I squeaked, and yanked the claw out of my pocket again.

It was still intact as I threw it, but when she picked it up, it turned into dust as we watched. It was like watching an image pixellate in real life. Everyone went very quiet, then.

"Dust?" Chloe lost her condescending, 'I'm worried, sweetie' look. "It was..."

"Do you believe me now?" I muttered.

"I do," said Jay quietly, putting a hand behind me for support. I felt a sudden flare of gratitude; if anyone would be taken seriously, it would be steady, warm little Jay. Raheed still had that stupid-bastard eyebrow raised, and Chloe looked uncertain, but it was something.

"Either way, we should clear out this tunnel," said Jay, always health-conscious and practical. "You know what happens if you inhale too much of that crap." Of course we did. We'd been lectured on it in school more times than anyone could count. And, once or twice, we'd seen it. At present, I was praying that what had happened to me wasn't a result of inhaling a bunch of Dust without realizing it.

We tied our various bandannas and nose masks on (anybody with a brain has something on hand, and an extra

or two) and got to work. If you mix Dust with normal dirt it helps a lot, so we dug a bunch of small holes and spread it into those, then covered them with dirt. The less Dust is swirling around, the less potent it is. Farther away from the surface, it sort of deactivates, I guess you'd say.

Anyway. You don't want to hear about the cleanup and boring stuff. Cleaning is cleaning, no matter what it involves, and cleaning sucks. We all finished that up, and then went down to the Rabbit Den for a bite to eat and some chicoffee.

Aiden and Caleb were both there, of course, at their own small table; naturally we pushed our tables together so all seven of us could compare notes and theories. They still don't fully believe me, but at least no-one was calling me crazy by the end. It helped that Caleb had seen a strange-looking rat with a human face the week before and had been worried about mentioning it. Caleb is known for being pretty sane, over all.

Aiden was all for jumping back into action and looking for more beasties, but I kyboshed that. He's awesome but god he doesn't always think. Caleb, like Jay, was all about being responsible, and not wasting our unit's break-day on something we weren't qualified to handle. Kay didn't know what to do. Raheed didn't say much, and Chloe was more interested in getting me home to rest.

Eventually, I agreed with Chloe, and left everyone else early. She walked me back to my place, said a few pleasantries to Dad, and kissed me goodnight. I spent some time just relaxing with Dad, but I didn't feel like discussing

the rest of it. I did write all of this down, of course, because it's too weird not to record.

It's been a retardedly long day, so I'm going to sleep now.

2-May 16, 0048 P.D.

Surprise, surprise, I didn't exactly get a lot of rest last night. Bad sleep and then Pramjit was on my butt because I was jittery and it affected my soldering. I didn't do anything horrifyingly stupid—okay, I may have glued my fingers together with epoxy, but still. Nothing terrible. I got a lecture on keeping my mind on work even after I showed him my bandaged stomach, which was just jerky. He seemed tense too though, and with a couple of newbies to train at the same time, I guess I shouldn't be surprised at his intolerance. Still mean and stupid though.

He was nicer after lunch and apologized, and let me go home early; the bending and moving around to fix the busted patch of wires around Hub 7 of the mall was really painful after a while. Somebody accidentally drove a Mole into the wall and shut out power for half the shops and boy did I hate the dumb bastard for messing up so many systems. We had to go around and check everyone's wiring—easy, but tedious—and of course routes were disrupted, signals messed up...everything 'fun' you can think of. Assholes need to be more careful. There are more than two thousand people just in Sector A—my sector—and if you drive a Mole into the wrong wall, you could leave half of them in the dark. So, yeah. Stressful day.

It also didn't help that Chloe kept texting me to see how I was doing and everyone else kept texting to share gossip and ask the same damn things. I kept having to plug my phone into the network and then unplug it, and with my

queue getting all backed up, every time I'd update, I'd get about five bazillion texts. They all came AT THE SAME TIME, of course, because whenever people text you a lot, they're synchronized about it. We were all still talking about the dragon and my epic battle.

That soothed my ego but people weren't making any bones about the fact that they thought Caleb and me were all a bit loony on some sort of hallie we had decided not to share with the group. As if. Dad would kill me. I remember how he reacted to the one time I came home with skunk on my breath, and I have nightmares enough without taking hallies. A little illicit vodka is plenty enough for me, thanks. Anything else and...it's not that I can't sleep. I usually would prefer it if I couldn't sleep, actually.

Enough about nightmares. I should sleep, and try to put today outta my head.

3-May 20, 0048 P.D.

I let Chloe talk me into a bite at the Den after work. In retrospect I think it might have been a mistake. Anyway. The Den is a cheap but sort of nice place. First thing when you walk in is the chalked up sign on the wall with the rate of exchange:

1 platinum = 4 gold

1 gold = 10 silver

1 silver = 10 coloured cards

1 coloured card = 5 white/multi

As if anyone would forget, but, like at the bank, they like to remind us so people don't try to bargain and cheat with the currency. Mostly the older people do that, but us younger ones get the brunt of it.

Checkered table clothes, spotty chrome, and slightly-too-tasteful floral prints dominate the place. They do put flowers on the table, but crappy little grown ones, weeds usually, not the fancy plastic kind. Still, the effort is there. It's not a candle-lit dinner place, but it's a good lunch spot. Then too, they hide some incredible Old wines there in addition to the piss-juice you get from our underground grapes and mushrooms. Anyway, you get the idea: shabby around the edges, but respectable, and with good food.

I was still pretty grubby because I'd just gotten off of work, and, stupid me, I didn't change even though she'd asked me out. She gave me a Look when I got there, and I held my hands up in surrender.

"At least I washed up. Come on. You said to meet you right away."

She pouted, and I had to admit she looked cute. “Fine, sweetie, but you know I like it better when you look pretty for me.”

I made a noncommittal noise. Admins like her don’t have to get their hands too dirty; the repair guys and IT techs handle all the computer stuff. At worst, she’d get correction fluid on a fingernail. Call me bitter.

It was one of those awkward lunches. I ordered sweet potato fries with coarse salt, and she, of course, went for the moss/dandelion salad with fried mushrooms. I saw her eye my tallow-fried deliciousness with affectionate contempt, but she wasn’t above stealing a couple.

We shared a roasted catfish in vinegar for the meal, and a banana dusted with beet-sugar for dessert. It would’ve been romantic, and it was certainly a tidy little snack, but I had my mind on the cost. Math lessons in childhood came back to me. I wished that instead of telling me about four gold equaling a platinum and five pals equaling a colour, they’d told us the economics of having a significant other. Anyway, it wasn’t the money, it was Chloe’s favour that I was worried about, and whether this was a reproach for not having taken her out lately.

Our conversation was awkward. She kept forcing laughs and I would say things that were supposed to be funny, and Gillian, the server, kept looking at us weirdly, and a well-dressed chick at another table—off-duty cuntgirl from what I’d heard of gossip—was giving Chloe long looks, and I kept worrying about getting texts from Raheed, and...yeah. I was jittery and anxious and could barely get

things into my mouth.

Chloe had been making a few remarks about how Raheed was looking at me, at us, and that he was still the odd one out. I wasn't feeling especially warm about him—after all, he and I had been pretty turbulent as well as short-lived. But seeing him picked to pieces was another thing. I couldn't decide whether to defend or make fun of him. I was pretty relieved when our nothingish, scattered conversations about everything except the dragon and tunnels were interrupted by Gillian bringing the bill. It was well-timed, too; Chloe had just asked me something awkward about where I'd hoped my relationship with him would lead, way back when.

Before I could answer, Gill had her pad out, and Chloe handed her a gold card and got a fistful of change.

I raised an eyebrow; the meal had only been worth six coloured cards, not exactly fancy, and the nine silver and four coloured in change were a pretty hefty lump of money to be carrying around.

"Payday," Chloe explained. "My lucky Tuesday, I guess. Or maybe yours."

I kept my trap shut. I have enough change for a couple of platinum cards at home—almost—but I only carry colors and white-multicoloured cards on hand. Electrical work pays decently, but secretarial sometimes pays better. Knowing Chloe though, it's better to hide my cards. Just because even though she's getting a bigger paycheque, doesn't mean she wouldn't expect me to drop half -a-gold or more on her as often as possible.

I pulled out my purse and took a handful of cards out. "Do you mind lots of change?"

She waved a hand munificently. "Keep it. This is my treat." I knew trouble was coming just from that.

"So," I said.

"So." She gave me a coy look. "Shall we walk and talk?"

"Oooo-kay."

Well, as I said, when Chloe paid for dinner, I knew I was in trouble.

Sure enough, as we walked slowly out of the restaurant, hand in hand, she dropped it on me.

"Sooooooooo, I've heard something delicious," she whispered, as we got up. "In fact, it's really juicy."

Oh, god, she was in the mood to play it out. "Tell me more, don't make me wait."

"I dunno, babe, I think you should." She squeezed my waist playfully. "All right. Aiden and Caleb are....can you guess?"

I thought hard. The boys were pretty snuggly, so 'breaking up' probably wasn't the answer. Then, too, she wouldn't be gleeful if they were.

"Uh, tell me," I said, playing dumb. I may be a tomboy, but I'm still enough of a woman to see a social lead-on when I get slapped in the face with it.

"Engaaaaged!" she sang. "Can you believe it? Isn't it great?"

"Yeah, it is. Good for them." Funny, I hadn't seen any rings popping on either of their hands. I wondered what her source was. "I guess they'll have to adopt or get a

surrogate, but that's great."

Chloe waved me off. "That's not important. The important thing is the wedding! Ahh, I can't wait—I hope it's soon!"

"Do you think they'll be able to get Old tuxes from Up, or make do with what people can scrounge?" I asked, interested in spite of myself.

"Of course they'll get real ones, I'm sure. Anyone who cares does. The clothing—oh! I bet they'll have a special search party _just _to get decorations. I can't wait to see what people bring! If only I had something to wear..."

Ah, here was the catch. A double whammy. Well-played, Chloe. Not only mentioning a new engagement—again—but...

"I'm sure we could squeeze in some time to go shopping soon," I said, like a sucker.

"Oh, would you?" With her eyes sparkling with excitement, I couldn't say no. I noticed, then, that she'd lured me out to a spot in the tunnel that was very out of the way. We were in an area that had a kind of grove of dangling charms overhead, a romantic little nook next to a sidealley.

"You make me feel so special, Janelle," said Chloe softly. "I love having a girlfriend who makes me feel like a woman."

I kissed Chloe, felt her tongue clumsy against mine, her breasts pressing against mine as she snuggled into my arms. At times like this, I can forget her occasional tantrums, her pettishness, and the other stuff that pisses me off from time to time. She's just my girl and she makes me feel beautiful and loved, at least for a few perfect moments. And even

though she was really pissing me off this afternoon, I couldn't help losing myself in her kiss.

I opened my eyes so I could look at her face, see the intense focus that she has on every kiss. I was enjoying her soft lips and skin and stroking her stripey hair when I saw it.

It was farther off, sort of down the sidealley, which had more intermittent lighting. I didn't understand what I was seeing at first. My brain couldn't bear to wrap around it.

Thin legs, spider legs, long and bony and dry as old meat salted for too long. The flesh was tight to the body as well as the limbs, translucent and dry-looking, but heavily veined. There were about eight legs, but the body was not a spider's. Instead, it had a head—or skull, I should say—like a small dog's, or like a bat's. Large, empty dark blue eyes filled the sockets, and small pointed ears, no more than skin, stood up from the top of the skull.

The doglike, spidery thing turned, and lifted its head from the short neck. The nose twitched and the stumpy nodule of flesh that its neck and legs were attached to quivered. The dry, greasy skin revealed the veins pulsing. The skinny bones in its limbs twitched, and slowly, it moved.

It scuttled slowly, stealthily along the edge of the tunnel, its movements echoed by the faint skittering of its steps. I almost wet myself.

"Chloe," I breathed, "let me go. Turn around slowly. Very slowly. Do. Not. Scream."

It hadn't really seen us yet, though it had been looking

in our direction, or so it seemed. The ugly little terror had just been strolling along in the tunnel, looking for a snack. Tame rabbits, probably, based on the size, but a pack of them could easily take down something bigger, like us.

I rotated Chloe in my arms, centimeter by centimeter, slow as breath in sleep. She was as silent as I'd told her to be. Smarter than she pretends to be, my Chloe, or at least, she has good instincts.

Our slow movements were gradual enough that the little predator didn't see us. I was feeling pretty proud of myself when it once again looked right past us. Then, Chloe finally saw it. And she screamed, and jumped, and hit her head on some corn dolls dangling from a pipe.

The beast let out a harsh, clicking, strangled yelp, and fled back into the shadowy part of the tunnel shortcut. The part, the only unfrozen part of my brain remembered, that went closer to Up.

Chloe whimpered. "Jesus, Janelle, what the fuck was that thing? What the fuck?"

"Shhh, shhh," I hushed her. "Let's go back to the lit part of the halls." I was shuddering in spite of myself. I still am, a little. That thing was fucking creepy.

"Oh God," she moaned. For once, it was anything but sexy. She was scared as hell.

"Honey, are you okay?"

"I..God that was scary looking. I swear to God I've had nightmares about things that looked like that." My darling Chloe has always had a thing about spiders.

"I don't blame you. Come on, let's get back. We should

probably warn the others to keep their eyes peeled.” I tugged her towards the nearest link spot and plugged my phone into the common network.

“Guys, we just saw something else,” I mass-texted.

“Lol what another dragon?”

“Sthu Raheed. No but a monster. Keep your eyes out and let me know if you see anything else. I want to make sure I’m not going crazy.”

“Ha,” texted Jay. “K we will.”

“Thx guys.”

I unplugged my phone. Messages would wait in the queue until the others got them, and if they texted me back, well, hell, I’d just deal with the queue avalanche later. At the moment, I had Chloe, and I didn’t feel like dealing with anyone else, or thinking about the fact that I might be going crazy.

Chloe, of course, wouldn’t stop talking about the damn thing. I made some noncommittal noises while she talked at me; I needed to think about the crawler, and especially, if we saw one again, how to kill it. That is, assuming it wouldn’t collapse into dust, like the baby dragon.

My belly ached, and I remembered that I had to take a dose of antibiotics and re-wrap the damage. I cut Chloe off, mid-flow in a speech about how we needed to be careful and perhaps we were going crazy after all, and maybe we should get ourselves checked over for the Fever?

I was lifting a foot carefully over an errant pipe, but I turned around to shoot her a withering glare. “This mess on my stomach says we’re perfectly sane. And you saw it

too. I'd be happy to get myself checked up, but I am pretty damn sure they aren't just hallucinations. For once, I'm pretty sure Tunnel Fever ain't the culprit."

She reassured me that of course she wasn't saying I was crazy, after all, she'd seen the crawler beast too, and no-one was arguing with my stomach wound, but...

I let her protest and chugged on home, giving her the boot just outside the door. Instead of plugging my phone in first-thing, the way I usually would, I stomped into the kitchen to get cooking.

Dad wasn't home yet, but he always prefers having me get something started. He usually returns the favour, especially if I happen to be working or going out late. Today, the habit wasn't just politeness, it was a much-needed distraction.

I grabbed a couple handfuls of white button mushrooms and threw them on the frying pan. A sparing burst of water from the tap to boil the beans and hemp seeds, a little oil for the mushrooms, and some salt, and dinner was well underway. Dad and I both tend to eat simple foods and wholesome stuff.

The cooking relaxed me, and gave me the chance to think about nothing at all for a while. Then Dad came home, and I decided not to tell him about the crawler, because it hadn't hurt me and he already seems to think I'm crazy. I did tell him about some of the gossip, though.

"Where'd you hear about your friends' engagement from?" he asked.

I paused for a minute. "Chloe," I admitted.

“Well, from what I know, it sounds like she was dropping a hint.” I nodded, not sure where he was going with that, but he didn’t say anything else.

“It sure sounds like that, but then she mentioned wanting to go shopping for a new dress.”

“So let me ask you, Janelle—do y’think you could foresee your relationship with her being—”

“I’m really not sure yet, Dad,” I said quickly. “It’s a big decision, and I always figured I’d be more than an apprentice before I settled down with anyone.” Then too, there was the problem of choosing—kids would be nice, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to be the one to pop them out, and with a wife, the kid thing could be complicated...

He looked at me steadily. “That’s probably a good choice.” After that, I changed the topic to work, and how the hydroponic farm repairs were going. He took the hint, and spent about half an hour happily telling me about some old botany texts he’d found. He hadn’t seen their like since university, he said. It reminded him of the old times.

That got us both thinking about the time before the Dark—which, to be fair, I don’t really remember—and Mom, who I can’t forget. The conversation sort of died off after that. I left the dishes to him, and went to play with circuits in my room, and to write this.

I guess I should mention what you’ve already figured out: the Dark has been in place for a very long time. We’re mostly used to it, but not at all, having automatically timed electric lights and lanterns to regulate our days, earth-warmth instead of the warmth of sunlight. You can’t

override every old instinct.

Still, it's a different world. They even changed the dates when the Dust came. It's a warm, wet climate, Dad tells me, compared to the way the surface was. There are some bigger fields, way down below, where they're trying to get some other crops growing, but even with the ceiling painted blue, it's nothing like the real sky was. I've been Up a couple of times, one of them being a mandatory field trip, but I can't really remember things like a 'breeze', or 'wind', even though I've read about them a few times. I wish going Up wasn't so scary and so risky; I like the openness even if it is disorienting. Dust and the Dark wait Up there, but down here, it's safe. Or at least, the risks are known.

Sometimes I think about what it would be like to live Up there. We started in the basements of houses and moved downward, taking everything we could, salvaging and recycling and going deeper and deeper. Still, a lot of things got left behind. A lot.

He has a bag full of photo albums and whatever they could print and salvage from stuff that was kept online, but-still. The Dust has taken everything. My grandparents, a good chunk of my extended family...

Okay, I really don't want to think about that right now. It happened a long time ago, when Dad was a kid, it's true, but that doesn't mean I like thinking about it. I don't know why, but something about those almost-memories of living normally-whatever that was like-upsets me almost as much, sometimes more, than memories of Mom.

Though, Dad told me one time that our brains can ac-

tually make memories, if people tell us about the situations enough. You can remember something that didn't ever happen to you, at all. I didn't need another reason to doubt my sanity, but I think I just found one. Maybe it's all this underground living, and we're all going crazy, just very slowly. I like it down here, don't get me wrong; this is home, but apart from the littlest kids, I think we all know that it's unnatural.

I'm back. I know I need to keep writing this, to get my head clear, but I can't help wondering if someday it might be more important. If I have kids, I want them to know who I was right now, let them know what we didn't understand about the Dust. And maybe, just maybe, if the Dust goes away and we all get to live Up there again, someone should remember what it was like.

God I sound old. According to Dad, I would be graduating from high school this year, if people still scheduled things the same way. As it is, we're making do and I read text books and stuff and digital files in the evenings. Sometimes I try to find info about things like Dust, but it's been pretty freaking useless, the old information. It's like everything we know has been turned upside-down, though, or else we hadn't learned enough about the nature of the universe to make sense of it.

The Dust isn't easy to understand, to be fair. Maybe my expectations are too high. For example, the waters were fine—the Dust, not unlike a pollen, is inert when submerged in water. Rain doesn't do much to it, either, but add a large, non-misty quantity of water to Dust and it dissolves. Cover

it in dirt, too, and it settles down and won't pick up again, like it's been suffocated. Dust has the strangest properties.

Animals and plants—except for chimps, gorillas, and other apes, so I'd heard—mostly weren't too bothered by it. The higher your brain functions, the worse the effect of Dust, so any species able to dream, imagine, think creatively, was screwed. For humans, it obliterated everything, filled the air with darkness. You knew your city was next when you saw the clouds on the horizon, coming like a spring thunderstorm. It was a thunderstorm without lightning or rain, just a kind of fog.

It traveled in clouds towards cities, mostly inactive until it reached them. The country, apparently, was mostly fine, but the minute people started to gather en masse, Dust followed. Then the terrifying part would really begin.

A little Dust here and there, you can handle, but the more of it you inhale, the more it clouds your vision, dark patches and mist thickening until you're blind even in broad daylight—blind, and a little mad. As it eats into your optic nerves and the occipital lobe of your brain, you stumble around, screaming about things other people can't see. It's worst in natural light: look towards the sun, and swirling blackness makes everything disappear. It seems to get worse when you have more in your system and more sunlight on your skin. Electric light doesn't have all the right wavelengths to activate it, so we're pretty safe down here.

At least, we have been pretty safe down here.

Dust. Inhale too much and sheeted ghosts and horrors

gibber and shriek in the streets. Your mind slowly dulls, your hormones and emotions go wild, and you see endless terrifying images...until you don't see anything at all. The rich life-sparks of neuroelectrical activity are extinguished, gobbled by the Dust. Eventually, of course, you die, but not before you spend days, sometimes weeks, being chased by everything you find paralyzingly scary.

Until now, though, Dust's horrors were only in people's heads. You could see them batting and clawing at invisible monsters, but nothing material. Having Dust take the shape of something, and convincing more than one of us...that scares me. Dust isn't conscious, that we know of. It doesn't travel in the tunnels or sculpt itself into shapes. Drive people crazy by eating their brains once they've inhaled enough of it, yes. But none of us have been Up enough to have that kind of exposure. And it got to all of us.

And that claw, the dragon's claw...it felt so real, Dad even saw it...he had to see something to not believe it was real. And, hell, having Dad painfully re-wrap me and have a look at the scabs and scratches reminded me—whatever else happened, it definitely left a mark on my skin. Dust doesn't attack people from the outside. Not like that.

I don't know. I'm confused and talking about Dust and what it does, scares me. I guess I can just be grateful for one thing, that it took the shape of one of the monsters under my bed from when I was a kid, rather than the stuff I dreamt about when I was a tween. Now, that would've been much, much worse.

That's all for tonight. Now I'm going to try and sleep.
If I can.