

A COUP OF OWLS



Issue 4

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Foreword**Page 5****Tequila Sheila Rides Again by Susan R. Morritt****Page 7**

Sheila becomes fixated on a fellow patient in her care facility, after mistaking him for a former lover.

Susan R. Morritt is a sixty-one year old writer, visual artist and musician from Waterford, Ontario, Canada. She received an Honourable Mention in the L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future Contest (2019), was short-listed for the Staunch Short Fiction Prize (2020), and her fiction appears in Written Tales 'Tis the Season Anthology (2021). Her poetry has been published in Feathertale, Pulsar as well as others. She is a former race horse trainer and currently still works part-time with livestock on a turkey breeding farm.

Seeing Is Becoming by Regina Jade**Page 9**

Seeing a star dragon had been on Amber's bucket list; seeing it die and becoming a Death, however, hadn't even been on her radar

Regina Jade is an Asian American writer and poet. She loves chocolate, custard tarts, and cats. In her spare time, she can be found trawling the depths of libraries for new books to add to the to-be-read pile, which never seems to get any smaller. Her recent work appears in Moist Poetry Journal, Ink Drinkers Magazine, 3cents Magazine, and "Imaginary Creatures" anthology from Carnation Books.

No Two Are The Same by Ziggy Schutz**Page 16**

Two lovers — one alive, one not — adjust to the next stage in their relationship.

Ziggy Schutz (she/her/he/him) is a queer, disabled writer who is at all times looking for ways to make his favourite fairy tales and horror tropes reflect people who look a little more like her. When he's not writing, she's spending his time exploring haunted houses and chatting up the ghosts who live there. This is not a bit. You can find more about her writing (and the ghosts) on Twitter @ziggytschutz.

The Golden Feather by Christina Ladd**Page 17**

A not-quite fairy tale of flight

Christina Ladd is a writer, reviewer, and librarian. She will eventually die crushed under a pile of books, but until then she survives on a worrisome amount of tea and pizza. You can read more of her work at Strange Horizons, Vastarien, Speculative North, and others. You can also find her on Twitter @OLaddieGirl.

An aromantic vampire meets who the universe has decided is her (romantic) soulmate and, considering familial expectations, must figure out what to do.

S.L.W. is a biracial eighteen year old writer from Ontario, Canada. Her work has been previously published in Southchild Lit and Ice Lolly Review. You can find her on Twitter @slwwrites.

Foreword -

February, a month divided between those of us who care about Valentine's and those of us who really don't. At school, it was always 'a thing' – who got a card, who got flowers, who had a boyfriend, girlfriend. Then life happened, and we realised romance was kind of exhausting. Still, I always thought that, once I did – assuming I ever did – get a partner, I would be so romantic. It turned out, not so much! I always forget Valentine's. Like clockwork, every year, I forget. My husband used to remember until he realised that if I forgot, why was he remembering? It's the little things I prefer: filling up the car with petrol, making them tea, knowing that when you argue, everything really will be all right.

The biggest thing I have learned about love is that it comes in many forms.

I know this is trite, but truth is often at the bottom of well-worn clichés. Love is not always romantic; the deepest, most long-lasting loves often aren't. Love is personal; it feels different for every single person. Love is also not the route to happiness; yes, it can make you very happy, but it can also make you miserable! Love should be worth the trouble it causes you. Love should be equal. Love should be whatever you need it to be.

When discussing the theme for this issue, we collectively rolled our eyes at making this the 'love issue.' Yet we adored that the submissions we got were all wonderfully complex and beautiful (I know I'm not supposed to have favourites, but they are all in this issue!). You see, we are happy when our forest blooms with roses, but we will take those blood-dripping thorns too. We'll take the weeds, the ivy and the moss. We want it all from our writers, and we know our readers will too. We are the home of the weird, the strange, the spooky owl cry that sends a shiver down your spine. Love is scary, after all, terrifying even. Horror and romance have long been problematic bedfellows, gaslighting each other for centuries. I mean, Saint Valentine himself lost his head. I think our cover this issue, a black burning jewel, sums up how we all feel in this forest. Darkness and light. Life and death. All merging together as intertwined roots under the ground. Again, these may be a little cliché adjacent, but the truth is often over-written (though not this issue's stories).

Instead, we felt that the theme for this issue wasn't just love, but life and, of course, death. These three things, after all, are connected. You can't have life without death, and love is usually lurking, wanted or unwanted, around both. If you see something beautiful die, you are marked by it. It can cause your life to change forever. There is no coming back from that, especially when it continues to haunt you. Sometimes you could do without the

inconvenience of a heart altogether – they do get in the way most of the time. When given a choice to fly for the rest of your life or be stuck to the ground, weighing up your options is always important; these choices often come with an unexpected cost. Just ask Sheila. She made a deal she can't remember, and it continues to take its toll.

Whether you are a die-hard romantic, roses, love songs, clichés and all, or more of an I'd-rather-have-a-cup-of-tea-and-watch-a-horror-movie type of person, we hope you can find a little bit of love in our forest. We send it to you, slightly broken, probably a little damp with red, but still beating, wherever you may be this Valentine's Day...

Rhiannon Wood, Editor in Chief

Tequila Sheila Rides Again

by Susan Morritt

Content Warnings: Potentially offensive humour

Not your thing? Skip to page 9 for the next story.

Sheila Hagerty looked up from behind the bar she'd been wiping down, the wet dish rag still in her hand. 'We're closed,' she announced tersely.

The shadowy figure who'd entered through the unlit side door slipped towards the tables. Dirty glasses and the odd beer bottle still remained from the departed Friday night crowd.

'Surely you won't refuse just *one* draft to an old friend...'

Sheila's eyes opened wide and she drew in her breath sharply. Pete Latham! An old friend? Really... *Smack, smack, smack*, they'd just about worn the veneer off the wooden bar, screwing up against or even on top of it, back in the day...

Sheila threw the dish rag into the sink, and pulling two large mugs from the shelf, she proceeded to fill them to the foaming brim. 'Black Label still ok?' she asked, squinting in the dim light as her former lover seated himself on a stool across the bar.

'How nice of you to remember, Sheila. *Our* beer... And do you still chase it down with a shot of tequila?'

Sheila laughed and shook her head. She studied the familiar man across from her and marvelled at the relative smoothness of the skin on his still-handsome face, as compared to her own saggy jowl and wrinkled visage. Holy shit, there was barely a trace of grey amongst the sandy hairs on the head of her former stud muffin.

'Looks like life's treated you well...' Her voice trailed off, self-conscious of her own altered appearance.

'Let's have a dance for old time's sake, girl.' Pete sauntered to the jukebox in the corner and plugged the electrical prongs, dusty with disuse, into the wall socket. He grinned when the aged machine lit up immediately. 'E19, *our* song... Do you still love Elvis?'

Sheila allowed herself to be led across the empty dance floor, sticky with spilled drinks. She felt the old familiar heat flame between her thighs as she followed Pete's footsteps while they swayed together.

'You always said you'd sell your soul to the devil himself, Sheila, to get your name on the deed to this place.' Pete chuckled and gazed down at her as they moved across the floor.

Sheila stopped, abruptly, and stared blank-faced at her dance partner. 'Did I?'

*

'Sheila, you know you're not supposed to be in this gentleman's room, dear.'

Sheila Hagerty, now submissive, allowed herself to be led down the hall and into the lounge, where residents sat staring with uncomprehending eyes at a large-screen television.

The nurse turned away and called out to a white-coated man stepping from the elevator. 'Dr Latham, may I speak to you?'

Sheila watched as the retreating figures converged, and then she shuffled once more down the hall to slip unnoticed into the 'forbidden' room.

Good old 'Penis Pete.' Just one more ride, for old time's sake...

Seeing is Becoming

by Regina Jade

Content Warnings: None

Not your thing? Skip to page 16 for the next story.

‘What should we do with the body?’

Dana gave me a look – the kind of look that makes you want to grab a notepad and pen to look busy. ‘You mean,’ she said pointedly, ‘what should *you* do with the body. You saw it die.’

‘Hey, I helped you clean up your lab station last week! The least you can do is help me figure out how we can dispose of this.’

‘Amber. This is the first star dragon anyone has ever encountered. And you saw it die.’

I turned back to the enormous corpse of the star dragon. I had indeed watched it breathe its last: the light dimming in its brilliant gold eyes, the sparks flying out of its mouth lessening, the slowing of its ribcage. I hadn’t thought much of it, besides the desire to take frantic notes before we lost the ability to further study the star dragon. It had been completely by chance that it had been found anyways, and we scientists knew better than to look a gift like that in the eye.

On the other hand, because the whole dying business had happened on Dana’s lunch break, that meant I had been completely alone. I was, therefore, the first human who had seen a star dragon die. That kind of landmark didn’t come without consequences.

I looked down. My pristine white lab coat was already starting to turn black, tendrils growing from where my left hand rested against my leg. In time, I knew, the black colour would overtake my entire outfit and from there any article of clothing I ever put on. The clipboard in my right hand was also changing colour, but it was turning a shiny metallic grey, gleaming under the bright lights of the lab. The robes and scythe of a Death.

I closed my eyes. The old mantra that every child learned came to me without effort.
To see the death of the first creature is to become their Death: to wear the black robes, to wield the grey scythe, to be a guide to the afterlife for all eternity.

A beep sounded to my right. I turned and scowled.

‘Are you filming me?’

Dana shrugged innocently from where she was pointing a camera at me. ‘Hey, it’s not every day that you get to witness the birth of a Death.’

‘I wish I had become the Death of Cameras,’ I muttered. Then I stomped off to find my supervisor because, well, someone had to report that the star dragon had died and that I had become a Death. It might as well be me.

*

I left my supervisor’s office with a termination letter, a hefty goodbye bonus, and a pamphlet. The first two I had expected – Deaths couldn’t exactly hold normal nine-to-five jobs – but the pamphlet I had not. It was a garish thing with jaunty, lime green font proclaiming its title as *Welcome to Death*, and my supervisor had explained that it contained information on how to register and basic information on what to expect.

I scribbled down the address for the nearest Registration Hall from the inside cover and then chucked it straight in the garbage can before it could fry my eyeballs.

A few people waved or nodded at me as I walked out of the doors, but even more paled or quickly averted their eyes. It wasn’t surprising; Deaths always made people nervous, and I had never been the most social of butterflies. I wondered how quickly someone would claim my workstation. I wondered who would take over for my shifts. I wondered how soon the story would spread: *Amber, yeah, she used to work here, but now she’s a Death.*

Those melancholy thoughts got me all the way from my former office to the Registration Hall. I had never been to it, mostly because it was for aliens or other sentient non-humans to visit when they landed on Earth for the first time, but the pamphlet said Deaths had to register there too.

The Hall was deserted when I entered.

‘Hello?’ I called, tentatively stepping further inside. ‘Hello, is anyone there?’

My voice echoed off the gigantic, vaulted ceiling and cavernous side hallways. The entire Registration Hall was made of marble and steel, like some kind of government

building, but it had no photographs or helpful guides. There was just a single wooden desk and a handful of chairs clustered in the front.

I went to the desk and rang the bell. No one answered.

After about five minutes, I pulled out my phone. To my relief, it still responded to my thumbprint and didn't explode at my touch. Sometimes, turning from a human into something else meant that technology didn't really cooperate with you anymore, but my phone dutifully sent out my query on Deaths and returned with results.

A lot of results, actually.

I whistled lowly. 'I'm gonna have fun wading through all of this nonsense,' I muttered.

'Your pamphlet should have everything you need to know to get started,' a cheery voice said suddenly from over my shoulder.

I yelped and whirled around. A woman was now standing at the desk. She was dressed in a very sharp business suit, her hair pulled back in a tight bun and her nails painted a demure nude. She could have easily passed for one of my old schoolteachers – if she hadn't, you know, flickered as she smiled.

I cleared my throat and tucked my phone back in my pocket. 'You're... a ghost?'

'And you're a Death,' she replied. 'I assume you're here to register? Do you know what you're the Death of?'

I paused midway through accepting a stack of papers. 'You mean some people don't know?' I couldn't imagine waking up one day to find all of my clothes black and the nearest object I had touched grey while I tried desperately to wrack my brains for whatever I had witnessed die.

She shrugged. 'The universe is filled with so many creatures. It happens. Ah, a star dragon. Magnificent creatures. I didn't know we had succeeded in the research expedition to find them.'

'Ah, no,' I said awkwardly. 'A passing ship picked up an injured one. We were trying to see if we could treat it when. Well.'

'I see,' she said. 'In any case, your guide should be arriving shortly.'

'My what?'

'Well, most Deaths do throw out the pamphlet, as I suspect you did. So usually, we have at least one on-call so they can answer questions when you register. I think it's Steve on call right now. He's quite nice, you'll like him.'

I passed her back the stack of papers. 'What's he the Death of?'

‘Squirrels, I believe.’

‘What the—?’

*

Steve showed up about ten minutes later. He was dressed in shorts and a t-shirt, although the deep black of Death robes made them striking rather than casual. He was also, weirdly, carrying a hand mixer.

When we looked eyes, a shiver raced down my spine. For a second, I saw more than just Steve in his shorts – I saw a smiling skull and a flaming hand and an endless, star-filled void where eyes should be – but then I blinked, and he was back to normal. Well, as normal as Deaths could get.

‘Hi,’ he said cheerily, trotting up to me. ‘I assume you’re the new Death?’

‘That’s me. But you already knew that, right?’

His face turned serious. ‘Deaths always know each other. It might take a while for all of your new abilities to come online, but true sight – that always comes first. Don’t be alarmed if you start noticing some strange stuff.’

‘Like a ghost manning the Registration Hall?’ I said dryly.

‘Like a ghost manning the Registration Hall,’ he agreed with a wide grin. ‘Now then! I heard you were the Death of star dragons. I see you’re already rocking the black robes. Where’s your scythe?’

I held up my clipboard. It had fully mutated into its shiny grey glory; even a normal human would know at a glance that it was special.

‘Cool. Don’t lose it.’

‘I thought scythes always appeared when a Death needs them?’

‘Oh, good. So you did read part of the pamphlet.’

‘Yeah, well, I don’t know how to use it.’

‘Aaand that’s where you stopped,’ Steve said wryly. ‘I can work with that. Are you ready to reap your first soul?’

‘Something tells me that no matter what I say, you’re going to make me do it anyways.’

Steve winked. ‘See, you’re already learning. We’ll get along just fine. Come on, show me where your star dragon died.’

We set off back out the doors, with the ghost of Registration Hall waving a cheery goodbye to us. Steve seemed absolutely okay with how people parted to make way for us; I just followed along in his wake. Thank God for tall, confident people.

As we drew closer to the parking lot, I mustered up the nerve to finally ask. ‘Um, is there a reason why you’re carrying a hand mixer?’

Steve looked mournfully at it. ‘It’s my scythe.’

I winced. I had expected that, since his hand mixer was the same gleaming grey as my clipboard, but it was still weird. ‘Mind if I ask how you ended up with that as your scythe? I mean, I thought you were the Death of squirrels. Surely the first time a human saw a squirrel die was—’

‘Millennia ago,’ Steve interrupted wearily. He sighed. ‘Let’s just say: don’t volunteer to be a test subject for time travel.’

I blinked. I had heard of the time-travel trials, but I thought they were a joke. Then I realised: ‘You were baking during an experiment?’

‘Delayed trigger. I sat around all day with a million monitors on me and nothing, so I went home, intending to bake myself a nice treat. Ended up way further back in time than anyone meant. Plus, I spilt all the batter.’

I burst out laughing before I could stop myself.

Steve scowled and said, ‘Yeah, yeah, laugh it up.’ He even menaced me with his mixer, buzzing it on and off as he waved it in the air.

I just laughed harder.

*

‘So,’ I said, staring at the enormous star dragon. ‘What now?’

‘What do your instincts tell you to do?’

I looked over to where Steve was leaning against the nearest table, hands shoved in his pockets and a piece of candy in his mouth. He was the very picture of a casual frat boy who had wandered into the lab.

‘To throw a lab coat and proper shoes at you,’ I answered. ‘You’re a walking lab safety nightmare.’

Steve rolled his eyes. ‘I’m a Death. I won’t die until the last squirrel does. And you know that’s not what I mean.’ He gestured at my clipboard. ‘Close your eyes. Breathe. Listen to your heartbeat.’

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. For a moment, I heard nothing but Steve's munching and the gentle beeps of the monitoring equipment. I gripped my clipboard tighter, until my hands hurt, and thought back to when I had met eyes with Steve – when for a second, I had glimpsed something more, something deeper, something woven into the very fabric of the universe—

And it came to me.

As if in a trance, I took one step, and then another, and then another, until I was right next to the star dragon. I slowly extended my clipboard in one hand and placed my free hand on its hide. A name came to me, like snowflakes landing softly on my skin.

I murmured the dragon's name. 'Be at peace,' I added, because it felt right.

The dragon shuddered and stretched. A formless silver smoke poured out of the star dragon's mouth and eyes, gathering into the air above like a cloud. The cloud grew legs and wings and a head. It sparkled and flashed like dragon fire. Finally, it coalesced into the familiar shimmering silver of a soul, and the star dragon looked down at me.

'Hello,' the dragon said.

'Hello. I am your Death,' I replied, following the nudging of some instinct hopping along in my chest.

'Did I die a good death?'

I closed my eyes again. A story was unfolding in my brain, like a book being uploaded. I knew the dragon's name, her hopes and dreams, her fears and regrets, her beloved family and her hated enemies. I knew everything.

'Yes,' I told her. 'Your daughter lives because of you. You saved her. It was a good death.'

The dragon sighed a long breath tinged with sparks. 'That is good. Will you guide me home, Death of star dragons?'

'Yes. What would you like done with your body?'

'Burn it,' the dragon said. 'All dragons should return to the fire we came from.'

I looked at the dragon's body and knew instinctively that no regular fire would do. She was a star dragon who could burn planets and swim in lava without fear; she deserved a pyre worthy of the deeds she had done in life.

'There is a star called WR 102 that burns the hottest in our galaxy,' I told the dragon. 'I can send your body on a ship there so that the star may consume your body whole.'

'That will be a good fire. Thank you.'

The dragon swished her tail and flapped her wings, so that her soul sailed smoothly downwards. I lifted my hand upwards and thought of the endless void, of stars and flames, of the first breath and the last gasp. We touched, my flesh to her soul, and she vanished as abruptly as she had arrived.

I looked at my clipboard. Her name was branded there now, etched into the very fabric of my scythe.

I traced it with a finger. ‘Goodbye,’ I told her.

‘Well done,’ Steve told me. He was back to his solemn, serious self now, the candy gone, and the hand mixer held in his hands like a proper scythe. ‘You saw the death of the first star dragon, and you have now reaped their soul. It is your duty and honour to be their guide to the afterlife for all eternity.’

Then he winked. ‘Black robes optional, though.’

No Two Are The Same

by Ziggy Schutz

Content Warnings: Hauntings.

Not your thing? Skip to page 17 for the next story.

The cold hands take the most getting used to.

Verity's kisses are like snowflakes. Sybil can always see them coming, tries to catch them on her cheeks and lips as often as she can.

(Other places, skin she never thought to expose to snow, they explore together – shoulders, wrists, behind her knees –)

Kisses she can always see coming. It's the surprises that make her jump, still. When Verity grabs her arm during a scary movie or reaches out to hold her hand as they cross the street, or the light touch against the back of Sybil's neck as she combs semi-tangible fingers through her hair.

After the cold comes the guilt – she should be used to this by now, should know the touch of her girlfriend enough to not flinch when it comes.

But Verity can sense it, of course. In the same way she can tell when tea is about to over-steep or when a cat is about to scratch at the door to be let in, she can sense the guilt even as it wells up. She will pull Sybil into her arms, slow and kind, hold her until their temperatures even out, sharing the moment like they share body heat.

‘Guilt pickles souls,’ Verity whispers, with the confidence of one whose soul has managed just fine without its shell for a while now. ‘If you hurt me, I’ll let you know. But until then, save the guilt.’ And then she leans in, like she’s sharing a secret. ‘Anyway, I’ve been told it’s very hard, to hurt a ghost.’

Her breath is little more than memory, but the wind of her whisper still tickles at Sybil’s bones. It gets a giggle out of her, and her girlfriend grins like she does at all small triumphs, and they move forward together as two.

The Golden Feather

by Christina Ladd

Content Warnings: None

Not your thing? Skip to page 21 for the next story.

Once there lived a prince who yearned to fly. He brought the greatest minds of his court together, but although they created many clever devices, they could not grant him true flight. He scoured the land for the wise and the mad, but they could only teach him to loose his spirit or his mind, leaving his body firmly grounded. No consolation would he take from wealth or wonders. He wanted only the sky.

The King and the Queen watched their son in growing sorrow, for he was wan and listless. The King sent to his neighbours and begged them for their daughters, brides comely or clever enough to entice the prince back to the ground. The Queen sent to her people, far away in the deepest part of the Wood.

The King's neighbours sent seven princesses, each prettier and slyer than the last. The Queen's people sent an old woman riding upon a donkey and a little girl riding upon a stag.

‘Our son desires the power of flight,’ said the King. ‘Whoever can grant him this shall be his bride and inherit the kingdom alongside him.’

‘Our son desires the power of flight,’ agreed the Queen. ‘Cure him of it, and I shall allow the Wood to take root in our kingdom.’

The first princess went North, seeking the North Wind.

The second princess went East, seeking the Rising Sun.

The third princess went South, seeking the High Summer.

The fourth princess went West, seeking the Setting Moon.

The fifth princess went Up, seeking the hermit of the Highest Mountain.

The sixth princess went Down, seeking the Last Breath.

The seventh princess, prettiest and cleverest of all, requested a suite at the palace.

Then she stretched out and had a nap.

Meanwhile, the old woman and the little girl each set to work brewing a potion. They gathered ingredients from across the kingdom and beyond, chanted spells, and consulted charts for the position of the stars.

The old woman's potion would bring remembrance of the past and cause the prince to forever bear up under the weight of history.

The little girl's potion would bring forgetfulness of the future and cause the prince to live forever without care.

The seventh princess woke and stretched until the kinks in her back were gone. Travel by horse was a nuisance; no wonder the prince wanted to fly.

Speaking of the prince...

The seventh princess wandered about the palace until she found the prince, who was sitting in a tree staring up at the sky.

‘Why do you want to fly?’ she asked.

No one had asked the prince this before. ‘I want to be free,’ he said.

‘Oh. I thought it was because you were a ninny who enjoyed upsetting his parents and subjects. My mistake.’

The prince glared at her as she climbed up the tree and took a seat next to him. ‘I don’t *want* to upset them.’

‘I don’t *want* to be beautiful as a spring day, but here we are.’

The prince looked at her askance. ‘Yes, you do.’

‘Exactly.’

The prince wasn’t sure, but he thought he had been outmanoeuvred and insulted at the same time. ‘You don’t understand. My whole soul yearns for this.’

‘Congratulations. My whole soul yearns to decipher the secrets of Rygric Stones, but I can’t spend all my time studying ancient grammar.’

‘It’s not the same.’

‘Oh, fine, you’re the most special boy who’s ever lived. Tell me, your unique highness, have you ever considered what’s going to happen *after* you go flying?’

‘Well—I’ll be flying.’

‘And then what?’

The prince, who had clearly never considered this, was silent.

‘All right,’ said the princess, unfastening something from her hair. ‘I didn’t want to do this, but you’ve left me no choice.’ She held out a golden charm that sparkled in the sun.

‘What’s that?’

‘It’s a magic feather. It’ll let you fly.’

He snatched it greedily. But then he hesitated. ‘How does it work? And why didn’t you give it to me immediately?’

‘Because it’s *mine*? You’re really spoiled, you know that?’

‘I am not!’

‘No “please” or “thank you.” Oh yes, you’re the epitome of humility.’

The prince took a deep breath. ‘I apologise for my rudeness. Many, many thanks for your peerless gift, princess. But how does one invoke the charm?’

The seventh princess nodded. ‘Better. You can awaken the charm by falling – like falling out of this tree. *But*,’ she added when he began inching forward. ‘But. Once you start, you can never stop. You’ll never rest on the ground again. That’s a kind of freedom, I suppose.’

Then the princess shimmied down the tree, gave a sardonic little wave, and disappeared back into the castle.

The prince sat looking at the golden feather for a long time.

*

The King and Queen were overjoyed to find that, after a day and night during which the prince had seemingly disappeared, both he and the seventh princess were found in the kitchen, sharing a piece of cake and a pile of books. The Queen believed he was cured; the King believed he had flown.

‘Not yet,’ said the prince. ‘But we’ll get there.’

And they went back to their cake and their books.

The first princess found a magic mirror and caused a great deal of trouble before she was done.

The second princess met a djinn and took up residence in his palace of quartz and bone.

The third princess acquired an army and became a great warlord.

The fourth princess discovered that she did not like princes, thank you very much, and married a courtesan.

The fifth princess remained with the hermit and attained enlightenment.

The sixth princess returned from the underworld with a golden harp and no desire for royalty or kingdoms.

The old woman and the little girl went back to the Wood none the worse and none the better, as the Woodfolk so often are.

And the seventh princess and the prince continued their work.

Heartless Love

by S.L.W.

Content Warnings: None

Not your thing? Then this is the end.

In a hospital bed shortly after giving birth, a mother's cold arms coil around her baby. She rocks her baby and whispers, 'This is your making, little Dana; you'll be a dear and sit tight, won't you?' before passing her to the arms of the doctor.

The doctor carries little Dana to a separate, sterile room and lays her down onto an examination table. A second doctor, little Dana's father, comes around with a scalpel and a knife. He pats the small tuft of hair on top of little Dana's head and whispers, 'This is your making, little Dana. Don't fret over your missing heart; it will someday come find you,' before pressing his blade to her chest and cutting it open.

The doctors dig out her heart. To maintain the ruse of humanity, little Dana's father puts it on ice and prepares her heart to be gifted away. In the meantime, the first doctor smiles at her and whispers, 'Congratulations, little Dana; you're a real vampire now.'

*

At a measly eleven-and-a-half, Dana asks her father about the gaping hole in her chest. From his position on the pale-blue hemp couch, he folds his book closed, peers over his round glasses at her, and says, 'Isn't it interesting?'

Dana frowns, and he laughs. 'Your heart is out there in the world, waiting for you. It's found the body of someone else – the owner of your heart, your soulmate. Beyond diet and teeth and moonlight, we are vampires because of our separated hearts. We exist to love. When you meet your heart, you will find the romance of your dreams and will build a life to be proud of.'

He tells her that a vampire's heart follows fate to land in the body of their perfect

match. Individuals are then drawn together by virtue of the heart wanting to return home to the vampire's empty chest. The heart bond is the world's way of showing care.

Dana silently digests his words. Though she can't quite wrap her head around the idea, her father's never led her wrong before. Her heart will bring her a best friend? She wouldn't mind that.

Her father wags a finger at her. 'When you meet your heart, little Dana, don't forget my words. Don't forget to turn him. Stick with what you know.'

'What you know' being, of course, other vampires.

*

Now an adult and in the middle of a Valentine's day coffee rush before her shift starts, Dana feels a tugging from the gaping hole in her chest. It's an itch, a warning sign; her heart is nearby.

Very carefully, she accepts her drink and thanks the bartender before leaving as discreetly as possible. Making contact with her heart would surely cause a scene, and then she'd be late to her shift, and then she'd get fired, and then she'd be the laughingstock of not only her family but also any vampire she ever met. Word gets around quickly; she works at her father's cousin's mother-in-law's company – a branch of a major HVAC enterprise – wherein ninety percent of the employees are also vampires.

So. Dana tries to leave.

Unfortunately for her, the heart bond goes both ways. Unfortunately for her, her heart is proactive.

Just as the cafe door rings closed behind her, her heart pushes it back open and stumbles after her, calling, 'Hey, there! Miss!'

She turns – she has to, doesn't she? – and meets her heart's eyes. The gaping hole in her chest quavers, and her blood thrums with uneasy fear.

Dana has been dreading this confrontation ever since she learnt about the romantic nature of a vampire's heart bond. It will change her life, she's told, but she never understood how. Asking is never useful either; she's only ever received blank looks of confusion and tepid explanations. One former babysitter told her it was something to be felt. What is it that she's to feel?

One hand clenches into a fist. Her skin cracks from the effort. If she showed her true colours right here, right now, would her heart still want to belong to her? If she pulled him

apart – skin from muscle from ligament from bone – or if she sank her teeth into his veins and turned him in broad daylight – left him to die – would her heart still want to stay with her? Would they stay loyal?

Only a fool would stay, certainly. *Good*, thinks Dana.

Her heart comes to a stop in front of her, out of breath. She readjusts her floppy hat and tilts her head, faking innocence. He straightens and smiles. If her heart belonged to her, Dana thinks, it would have skipped a beat. That's what's supposed to happen, isn't it? She has read the books. As it is, she does not own her heart and feels nothing for him.

'Hey,' says her heart – says Bailey, whose name she instinctively knows. 'Hey, uh, this is going to sound weird, but when I saw you back in the shop, I felt something. I really felt something. And you're really pretty, so. Can I give you my number?'

Dana wonders, for a fleeting second, what would happen if she lied to his face and told him she does not own a phone.

In the end, she agrees; he scribbles his number down on the side of her hot coffee cup. He wishes her a good day and leaves as quickly as he came. Dana, thankfully, is not late to her shift.

*

Later that evening, her father shows up on her doorstep. They reconvene every once in a while – now that she has moved out and her mother frolics about doing business overseas – to eat and chat. Her father brings news of various childhood caretakers whose names Dana was never actually told. In return, she updates him on her current affairs.

This night, back in her little suburb, goes a little differently. Dana opens the door to her townhome unit and welcomes her father in. Instead of stepping inside, as he normally does, he takes one look at her and proclaims, 'Little Dana! You met your heart, didn't you? I can smell it; you did, you did.'

Dana grimaces at his exuberance and ushers him inside, muttering a hasty, 'Yes, yes.' Habit has him taking a seat around the dining table while she opens a pack of frozen blood into a pot of water to boil.

As they wait, she rests, standing behind the opposite side of the table. Her father is staring at her expectantly. 'How was it?'

'What?' Dana drums her fingers along the top rail of the chair in front of her.

'Meeting your heart,' he says. 'Did you turn him?'

She rolls her shoulders back. ‘I did not.’

‘How come?’ His concern rubs Dana the wrong way, makes her wonder if not turning her heart was a mistake. It’s not as though she wants to be alone. It’s not as though she wants to disappoint her father. But she cannot imagine herself in a romantic relationship; it would be awkward, uncomfortable, dishonest to herself. ‘Did you not speak to him?’

‘Only briefly. I was going to be late for work. There was nothing I could have done.’

‘Late for work!’ her father exclaims, throwing his hands up. He is grinning. ‘Little Dana, you met your heart! Everyone would have understood if you showed up late. I always say you overthink the little things. Do you not want it – your good future, your life together, your family?’

‘Besides that, we were in the middle of the street. I couldn’t have told him about—me. We’re all about discretion, are we not? We can’t have them coming after our corner of Stoney Creek.’ Dana ignores his last question. She’s become quite adept at that, though she wonders if she will continue. Her father is not one to relent.

He hums and leans back into his plastic chair, folding his arms across his chest. ‘Yes, I suppose that is true. So?’

‘So?’ she echoes, not following.

‘Did you get his’—her father makes a grabby gesture with one hand—‘information? Will you contact him again; will you see him again?’

‘Why does this matter so much?’ Dana asks. She’d have laughed at her father’s words – who says ‘information’ anymore? – if the conversation was any more pleasant. ‘You seem to be more invested in this than I am, and it’s my heart.’

‘I know,’ he says, frowning. ‘Is something wrong, Dana? Is there something you need to tell me?’

She knows it is serious when he forgoes the nickname, and she purses her lips. Selfishly, she wants to say something – to proclaim that *her* boundless future ought to be with her family and not kissing her heart under the moonlight while raising a horde of vampire children or whatever else romance appears to consist of.

In the end, she sighs and says, ‘No, I was just curious. I did get his number. Don’t worry.’

Her father beams. For a moment, despite the broiling in her stomach and the ache in her gums, it’s worth it. For a moment, she feels relief. ‘Good, good. You won’t regret it. Just don’t forget...’

He trails off, raising his eyebrows for Dana to respond. She dips her head in

acquiescence. 'I'll talk to him about being turned.'

The pot, having been forgotten, rattles. She takes that as her excuse to leave.

*

As expected, her heart – Bailey – asks her on a date. The heart-yearning appears to have hit him harder than it did her, which is strange. She was under the impression that it would be fair, their mutual gravity equal in magnitude but opposite in direction, rather than whatever imbalanced mess it is now.

He holds her hand as they traverse the busy streets of downtown Toronto. His palm is sweaty against hers, which she finds faintly unnerving.

Along the way, he chatters amicably about his life. She is content to listen. He is a graduate student working part-time to help fund his education and does not actually mind customer service because of the people he can meet (wink, wink). Someday, he intends to leave Toronto for a quieter town. Best of all, he does not comment on the copious amounts of sunblock Dana is wearing.

When he takes her to an aquarium – 'It's a must-see,' he told her after learning that she had never been before – he does not let go of her hand like she expected.

She could initiate the disengagement. Dana thinks of her father's hopes – expectations, to be precise – and does not. He was right when he said vampires were all she knew; their kind's secrecy creates mutual isolation. If her father wishes her some particular company, she will give it a try, even though she believes her reservations are justified.

In a feeble attempt to connect with peers her age, she spent one year in public – human – middle school. During that time, she was invited to a sleepover and was befuddled by what she found. Girls spent the night chatting away about boys-they-liked and boys-who-liked-them. Without having anyone to name for the former, Dana was continuously pressed for an answer. There had to be someone. The truth about her heart could have been an easy excuse then, or at the very least a consolation. But it only brought on an unwelcome realisation and more confusion: this must be what her father meant by building love. The world contains a pervasive insistence on romance. It is something distinctly other.

Now she wonders if her heart – Bailey – is meant to be a fortuitous second chance. Her father wants her to love him, wants him to be turned, wants her to spend her future with him. If she told him the truth about being a vampire and his heart and their connection, would he cry or scream or run away? She wouldn't mind that. It would be an easy solution.

When they finish their aquarium date – which went well; Dana bought him a turtle keychain and herself a pair of octopus earrings – and he leads the way to lunch, a small restaurant with outdoor seating, Dana makes her decision.

She could, technically, eat human food. Drinks taken in moderation typically have no effect. Indigestion for solids kicks in after a couple hours' delay. Her father knows a vampire who periodically gorges himself on high-end cuisine, just for the taste, before calling himself an ambulance to her father's hospital. Dana does not feel like doing that herself. Besides, she'd be saving her heart – Bailey – some money.

He orders. She requests the waiter return for her.

In the time that follows, Dana clears her throat and says, 'You are my heart. You are my soulmate.' A mild flush spreads across the tips of his ears. She adds, 'I am a vampire.'

She speaks of the meaning behind being a vampire; she speaks of their community and culture; she speaks of their heart bond and what it means for him. He does not move for a long moment after she finishes.

At last, her patience grows thin. 'Think on that,' she says, rising. Even though she can hope that he is repulsed by the truth, she knows, deep in her blood, that he will not be. She said it herself: he is her heart. He is her soulmate.

*

Albeit after a week of silence, they do continue to hang out. If not for the weight of their bond, she would enjoy Bailey's presence; he brings a bubble of surety and positivity wherever he goes, and they get along well enough. She would dare say they are becoming friends.

They always meet in Toronto. She does not invite him home. The commute is fine, bearable, and she always schedules their get-togethers on the days she's already there for work. Having him in her own space – her sanctuary – would imply something other than what is real.

He's not a vampire yet, anyway.

That perhaps means less when she has already revealed the secret. With her confession, Bailey possesses knowledge that could threaten her community's existence. Growing up, her mother would read Dana bedtime stories about the nineteenth-century hunts and ensure that she understood the history behind their close community. That is, she supposes, one reason why her father insists she turn Bailey; after being welcomed into the

fold, exposing the truth would hurt him the same as everyone else.

At this point, she's just putting it off. She did not ask him earlier, when she could have, because she was still hoping for rejection.

It is obvious what she should be. She'd seen the longing glances between her parents when she was little, before her mother left to travel the world. She's seen their affectionate pats and caresses during souvenir visits. She's heard the things they tell each other – be it over the phone or on video call or live – when having a bad day, meant to cheer and console. Her former babysitters, too, modelled perfect loving; there has never been a single vampire, not after meeting who their heart has brought them.

In the words of her father: 'Little Dana, dear, we are vampires; we have no need for anything beyond blood and water to keep our bodies swell. Our heart is a gift we give, one that returns tenfold. We do not need a heart to love, but we do it anyway.'

Dana just doesn't understand – not the what, not the why, not the how, not any of it.

But without a clear explanation, she cannot be the problem. No, the problem must lie elsewhere. It lies in her father and community and the humans who all subscribe to a way of life that still eludes her. It lies in the heart bond. If only the world did not try to matchmaking her; if only humans, too, did not have romantic love.

Even so, even knowing it is not her fault, she cannot lose her community's high regard. She cannot disappoint her father.

*

When Dana's father drops by to visit a month later, he sits her down around the low coffee table in her living room and begins by talking about her mother's whereabouts. Dana takes this conversation in stride and asks when her mother will visit next.

'Oh!' His face lights up. He shuffles through his pockets – he's recently taken to wearing these long, brown coats with eight or nine pockets – and produces a small velvet box. He passes it to Dana and gestures for her to open it. Inside lies a garish ring, the shank thick and black.

'Put it on,' her father says. Dana slips it on her middle finger and tilts her hand up to admire it. 'This is a gift from your mother; she bought it off the shores of France two months ago, though it only arrived yesterday. Do you like it?'

'Yes.' Dana slips it off and places it back in the case, which she sets on the table. The ring feels too precious to wear, but it *is* reassuring to know her mother is thinking of them,

the way Dana and her father do her. 'I'll take care of it.'

'I know you will,' her father says. He lays a hand on her shoulder. Dana takes a deep breath. She knows what is coming and is immediately proven right when her father continues: 'Your heart. Have you turned him?'

'I thought we were talking about Mom.'

'Ah. Yes, of course.' He pauses and licks his lips, clearly searching for words. 'Did I ever tell you how we met? Your mother was a vampire long before I – she never told me whether she was born or turned, but I digress – and I found myself in possession of her heart. Much like you and your heart, hm? Though we officially met in my forties, she turned me not long after. I will never regret that decision. But I know you've told your heart the truth about us. What is holding you back from your love? There is nothing to be afraid of; it's a promise, a bond, a treasure.'

Dana exhales. Her shoulders slump. He is correct, to a degree. There is nothing explicitly to fear. Bailey will not expose her community; he's already shown her that much. Instead – she's afraid of alienating herself. She's afraid of committing herself to an eternity of discomfort. She's afraid of making a mistake. Most of all, she thinks, she is simply tired of these sorts of conversations. She says, 'But you—Mom's not often home.'

He shakes his head and smiles. 'Your mother is doing good work, and I love her.'

Dana realises, then, that she doesn't know much about her mother as a person – she doesn't know her mother's thoughts, feelings, and opinions on her father and their heart bond.

'You're not worried?' She doesn't know what she's saying. What is there for her father to be worried about? 'It's fine, the distance?'

'Of course,' he says. 'We have eternity.'

'But,' she says, scrambling for something to hold on to. Something to justify her feelings, her disorientation, her selfishness. 'You know, I thought—I thought you wanted me to turn Bailey so we wouldn't have to worry about the truth getting out. And it won't. So I—That's it, for me.'

'The truth? No, little Dana, that's not it. It is—it is about your future, spending it with your heart. It is about your happiness. It is about our capacity for love. Our need for it. Among all the differences between our kinds, that is the one thing we will always share. Come now, haven't I always told you it was important?'

'You have,' she says slowly. He just never explains the why; why is it important that she fall in love with the owner of her heart?

'Then what is the issue? I am listening. You can tell me anything, you know this.'

She swallows; her throat is dry, and the action pricks. Her stomach is queasy. She is a stranger in her body. Despite her father's promises, she cannot bring herself to trust his words. That realisation brings with it the ache of betrayal.

But because she doesn't like lying to him, she says, 'I trust in the heart bond, but I've just never... I've never felt the need or want to turn him.' And because that is *too* honest, she adds, 'I'm happy with what I have now. What I had before I met him. You said I'd be happy with Bailey, with my heart, but I don't need that.'

'Little Dana,' her father says, so softly it makes her hurt. She wonders if Bailey feels it too. 'It's not about *need*. You have met your heart. You can have your heart. You can have your love. You can have your future, the one you deserve, the one that will make you the happiest.'

Dana turns her gaze towards the ring on the table. Her fingers twitch in her lap. He's missing the mark entirely, but it would be too exhausting to argue.

When she doesn't reply, her father says, 'I only want the best for you. I want you to find happiness and love and for you not to be lonely. I want you to be taken care of.'

'I know,' she says, and then because it is her father, she promises, 'I'll ask him.'

*

Dana invites Bailey – her heart – back to Stoney Creek. She offers to buy him a snack at a small bakery, which he graciously accepts, and then takes him on a quiet walk around her neighbourhood.

When conversation first lulls and Dana gathers the courage, she tells him about how she does not – cannot – love him romantically. His eyes flare wide, and he stops in the middle of the sidewalk. It's not like he's verbalised his love for her, but Dana feels the need to be upfront about it all. Even if it's accompanied by a sort of nervous agitation, it's easier telling him this than her father. Her heart means less to her.

After a long moment, he meets her eyes with set shoulders. 'What is this, then?'

'It's a request,' Dana says. She explains: she won't love him like that, but she doesn't mind if he does; he is still her soulmate, and she wants to know if he wouldn't mind being turned. She speaks quickly, desperate to get the words out and over with.

'A request,' he repeats, still sounding confused. 'Alright, I'll bite. Why do you want to turn me?'

Dana thinks of her father's words, remembers her mother. If the heart bond is a

guarantee of commitment, must it be romantic? She was never privy to the reason behind her mother leaving, if indeed there was one. In desperation, Dana imagines intentional distance, a cover for emotional fondness. She could imitate that. Partial honesty will become her exit. ‘For forever. For the future. For our friendship. I enjoy your company, I did not lie about that.’

‘Romantic,’ he laughs. She shrugs, off-kilter. Realising they’ve been standing in the middle of the sidewalk for some time now, she resumes their walk with a one-handed gesture.

‘Is that a no?’ she asks.

‘No,’ he says, quickly, and startles despite himself. He’s looking at her as they walk side by side. He’s not holding her hand like he normally does. He repeats, slower, ‘No, it’s not. Living forever, right? Sounds like fun.’

Dana lets out a breath. Should she feel more excited about the prospect? There is no appropriate room for guilt. ‘Alright. Thank you. Let’s go, then.’

‘Go where?’

‘To the hospital. I’ll turn you, and then your heart will be removed.’ Expecting a question, she reminds him, ‘This is your making as a vampire. The world will bring your heart to your soulmate.’

‘You,’ he says, laughing. Dana forces a smile. ‘I get it. And your father works at the hospital?’

‘Yes. You can meet him, I guess.’

*

Because of the dense vampire population in Stoney Creek, the hospital doors are always open. Dana strides in, greets the receptionist – a vampire a couple years younger than Dana herself – and requests a heart surgeon and her father once he’s free. With a knowing glance towards Bailey – her heart – the receptionist reserves a room out of the way for them.

There, Dana turns him. She wipes down the junction between his neck and his shoulder with some of the cheap sanitising wipes she keeps in her pocket. After drying the area with a paper towel, she puts her mouth to his skin and digs in.

When she pulls away and wipes the blood smear off her mouth with the back of her hand, she sees her heart running his tongue along his newly-sharpened teeth. There’s a knock at the door. ‘Come in,’ Dana says, turning.

A doctor enters – one of her father’s close friends, apparently the one that assisted her

mother when giving birth to Dana – saying that he'll perform the heart surgery.

‘Don't worry. I'll be waiting here,’ she reassures her heart. The doctor leads him out the door.

Her father arrives with a grin and open arms not long after. He gives her a hug and, pulling away, exclaims, ‘Little Dana! I came as quickly as I could once I heard the news.’

Despite herself, Dana smiles. ‘It's good to see you, too.’

He squeezes her shoulders. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘Normal. A little jittery, maybe.’ It's true; her hands tremble at her sides with pent-up adrenaline from the decision. But despite her body's agitation, her mind is a resigned calm. Her father is content, and her heart is understanding.

Her father laughs and steps away. ‘Jittery! You can say you're happy. I'm so proud of you. I was really worried, you know, that you wouldn't do it. That after everything with your heart, something was wrong, and you would not go for it.’

‘Well,’ Dana says, ‘I did.’

‘Ha! Yes, you did. I'm glad. When will I meet him? I've been waiting, you know, but I didn't want to push you while you two were still sorting things out.’

She snorts. He's been pushing her plenty, even though it doesn't seem to have registered. But that's fine. She's made her compromises. ‘Soon. I'm sure the two of you will get along great.’

‘Of course,’ her father says. ‘This is your heart, after all.’

Dana nods. Her life can return to what it was before. Perhaps it *was* cowardice that brought her to this middle ground, but she will not allow herself regret. She built her coffin; in the years that come, she will acquaint herself with lying in it.