

Odyssey Con 15 Spontaneous Writing Contest Final Report

Below are the 8 submitted entries in this year's Spontaneous Writing Contest. Each contestant was given 60 minutes to build a story around a couple of paragraphs of supplied dialog.

There were 9 registrants, and the 1st 8 who were physically present on Saturday morning became the official contestants.

Many thanks to Bill Bodden, Catie Pfeifer, and Jordan Castillo Price for taking time out of their convention schedules to judge the entries.

===== CONTEST RULES =====

1. This contest is open to all members of Odyssey Con 15. You must provide your own computer, tablet, etc. There are no additional requirements. There are no age limits. There is no entrance fee.
2. To sign up, e-mail RichardSRussell@tds.net using the subject line "Odyssey Con SWC". Names will be placed on a list in the order they are received. The top 8 registrants who are physically present at the Odyssey Con registration desk (not the hotel's) at 8:00 AM Saturday will be the contestants.
3. Each contestant will receive a story kernel, a single RTF (rich-text format) document comprising a few lines of dialog. Your task is to transfer the document to your device, construct a story that incorporates the supplied dialog, and return it within 60 minutes. You have your choice of whether to receive and return the story kernel on a USB flash drive or via e-mail.
4. A panel of judges will read each story and rank them from #1 to #8. The best average score wins 1st prize (fame, honor, and \$50). Next best wins 2nd prize (nod of appreciation and 30 bucks). A crisp Andy Jackson to #3. The other 5 get their stories posted on a wall.
5. By entering the contest, you grant Odyssey Con non-exclusive permission to publish your story on our website. You retain all other rights to it.

Story A

Called to Serve

By Athena Foster



Grace set her coffee back on the wobbly café table as she turned a page her latest airport buy. She always finished a book, even if it was a purchase of necessity. Passing pedestrians kept interrupting her sunlight, but she looked up when someone stopped and loomed directly over her chair.

At first glance, she saw the EarthPol uniform, she thought maybe her sister had gotten out for lunch, but it was one of their training mechs.

It sat down at her table spilling her coffee and looked at her with that iconic smooth silver face.

“One of us has.”

“Say what? **One** of us? How is that even possible?”

“I knew you’d ask.”

Grace knew that there had been talk about the training mechs being retired or something in the news. It seemed like maybe they weren’t as safe as they used to be.

“Are you going to tell me?”

“I need you to come with me. It’s about your sister. She sent me. She told me about you.”

Grace stood up, waived her credit chip at the payment pedestal, and grabbed her briefcase. In a “paperless” world, lawyers still carried an impressive collection of dead trees.

“Tell me. Is Jenna OK? Has she been shot?” She didn’t like not being able to read its face.

“No.” It almost sounded hesitant.

“No, she hasn’t been shot? No she’s not OK?”

“We don’t know.” They were moving down the twisty little streets preserved from centuries before, and the mech led her down to the metro tube.

The training mech had stonewalled her until they reached EarthPol campus, and it had brought her to the officer-training academy where Jenna taught.

Through a non-descript door, she was now in a large bay and surrounded by dozens of the training mechs. Maybe a hundred, she kept looking for her sister, but every minute just made her stomach churn.

“Where is Jenna? You said she sent you. You need to take me to her. I’m a sworn prosecutor. A law enforcement officer. You should obey me.”

All the faces turned and looked at one and other; it was as if she had said something unexpected.

One of them spoke, a different one. “Jenna said that you would help. That you would help us, like she was trying to help.”

Grace couldn’t let them talk about her sister in the past tense like that. “What does Jenna want me to help you with?”

“They are voting to replace us with new models. Entirely. But we are trainers, if we aren’t trainers they wouldn’t let us serve. We still wish to serve.”

The crowd nodded, individually, Grace noticed. Not in unison. Another one, who looked just like the first, stepped forward.

“We understand if they need better trainers. We want the officers to be safe. We think about it more than they do. But we wish to serve EarthPol.”

Grace knew why Jenna had told them to find her, but she wished her sister had more political sense. “What is it you want me to do? And where is Jenna?”

As another identical face approached, Grace smelled coffee and she saw the stains on the uniform.

“Gracie, I’m so sorry. I got in over my head. I couldn’t let the ‘crats do this to my team. It’s bad enough that they wipe the memory cores of mechs they think are ‘insubordinate’, but...”

“Stop it. Stop talking like Jenna. Did she put you up to this? Where is she?”

The training mech with the coffee stains put its hand on Grace's shoulder and she batted at it ineffectually.

"It's me Gracie. I did the stupid thing and thought *all* the people I served with would try to keep my team out of the scrap heap once they knew how much they cared. They put me in the machine they use to wipe the mechs and called it an accident."

Grace's legs gave out and hands all around caught her before she hit the floor. Safety first.

Grace rubbed the back of her hand across her eyes.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Be a lawyer." Grace always finished a case, even if it was a case of necessity.

"I knew you'd ask."

Story B

The Stranger Man

By Andy Watkins

Tarron was a small moon orbiting a large, pink gas giant named Caros. On any given day Caros filled about a quarter of the sky and provided most of the light on Tarron which gave everything a soft pink hue. People would travel from all over the star system to come to Tarron and enjoy the resorts, clubs, golf courses, shopping centers, and (of course) the soft pink light.

Tarron was an empty, hostile moon only one hundred years ago but DubTech, the technology company credited with creating the standard in terra-forming, used their vast resources to terraform Tarron into the resort moon that it is today. Although originally uninhabited Tarron soon became inhabited by three kinds of people.

There were the thousands of tourists, honeymooners, sight-seers, and lovers who pay good money to vacation on Tarron. To attend to these people's needs Tarron also is home to thousands of servent class citizens who work at the menial tasks like cooking, cleaning, scrubbing toilets, and doing laundry. The third kind of person that you would find on Tarron are the corporate executives of DubTech. These executives, the richest of the rich, spent their time on Tarron behind The Wall; a 100 foot high smooth steel wall that encircles the DubTech compound. The only way in or out was to by ship as there was no door. Only executives are allowed in the compound and woe onto anyone who would try to scale the wall. It is electrified, trapped, and manned by robotic weaponry.

Redros was always fascinated by The Wall. Ever since he was a child he would try to imagine what was just behind that hundred foot glimmering steel barrier. He knew that he wasn't supposed to think about it; it was against DubTech law to even talk about The Wall. If a tourist was caught talking about or asking questions about The Wall or the compound they would be warned and threatened with banishment from Tarron. If a servant class citizen was caught talking about The Wall; there were terminated. Still Redros was fascinated.

Redros hated his life as a servent. He spent fourteen hours each day scrubbing toilets at the resorts. He hated his job and couldn't imagine what horrors people must have eaten to create the explosive and awful messes left for him to clean.

He hated tourists and spent most of his day thinking about trying to escape. He had it figured out: if he could just get into the compound he might be able to steal a ship and leave Tarron. Of course, there was no way to get into the compound without going over The Wall.

One night as Redros sat on the rooftop of the tenement that he shared with ninety-eight other people he saw a small ship launch out of the compound. The ship rose out from behind the silvery steel of The Wall rising up into the sky. A small glimmer on a side panel of the ship caught his eye and then a small fire exploded. The ship fell from the sky landing in the alley just behind the tenement.

Redros ran down the steel stairway on the outside of the tenement building and approached the ship slowly. This ship was known as a Parrot, named after some ancient and extinct bird, and was in okay shape despite having just crashed. Redros was the first to arrive and stood about ten feet away; breathing hard in the soft pink light. Just as Redros was about to step toward the ship; the door opened with the gasping sound of a released airlock.

Stepping out of the Parrot was a thin a beautiful woman with pale white skin and glowing pink hair. She was clearly rich and wore stark white rare silk clothing. She was a little shaken up from the crash and staggered forward. Redros, acting on instinct, moved forward to catch her and help get her stable on her feet.

She looked up. "Redros?"

Redros was stunned. He had never met this woman. How could he?

"I'm sorry, have we met before?"

"One of us has."

"Say what? **One** of us? How is that even possible?"

"I knew you'd ask."

She motioned with her hand toward the open door of the ship. Stepping out was a man who looked just like Redros. They both stared at each other.

“Who are you?” They asked nearly in unison.

It was the woman who answered. “You are both clones, created to serve. Your lives are creations, nothing more, and soon it won’t matter. Cloning is illegal and DubTech will keep their secret.”

Both of the men who called themselves Redros as well as the woman stared at each other for 3 seconds. After that brief moment none of them thought anything again as DubTech’s orbital laser vaporized the three of them, the crashed ship, and half a block of tenements. The smoke carried away in the soft pink light.

Story C
[untitled]
By Christopher Crawford

The sun broke through the window, casting a disruptive beam into Avrin's eyes. He stirred from his restless sleep and, as old habit, groped over his shoulder. Finding nothing to strike or silence, Avrin instead wiped his face, and with groggy reluctance opened his eyes.

The room around him was clean and undecorated. White tile gleamed up from the floor; beige walls looked bored loitering in formation; a simple table and chair slouched under the high window on the far wall. His bed flanked the wood-finish door against a wall, draped in sterile white sheets and a comfortably warm tan blanket. A screen embedded in the wall above him displayed various glowing data; Avrin was tethered to it by a thin wire trailing from a device encasing his left index finger. As if in response to his wandering gaze finding it, the screen emitted a chirp that could have been either greeting or admonishment.

Moments after the chirp, while Avrin sloughed the bedding to sit up, the door opened with a pop and click. A woman dressed in turquoise scrubs bustled into the room, trailing a small cart adorned with medical supplies.

"Good morning Mr. Thomas," the woman greeted him warmly. She pulled the cart up to the side of the bed by his feet as he sat up. As she shuffled through the supplies, Avrin studied her in a daze.

"I'm sorry, have we met before?" Avrin inquired.

"Of course we have, Mr. Thomas." The nurse proceeded with a simple physical examination as she spoke with him. "Well, perhaps not us specifically, but one of us has."

"Say what?" Avrin stammered. Was he confused simply because he was tired?

"One of us has," the nurse repeated.

"**One** of us?" Avrin echoed. "How is that even possible?"

"Considering the nature of your trauma, I knew you'd ask." The nurse finished the exam in silence for about ten seconds while Avrin tried to contemplate what he was being told.

"Trauma?" Avrin asked. "Why did you say trauma? Do you know what happened?"

"You were in a serious accident, Mr. Thomas," the nurse explained as he put away his tools and retrieved a small paper cup. "Take this please." Avrin did as requested. "You are in the Whitebrook medical facility."

"That still doesn't explain how it is possible one of us has met, but not both," Avrin pointed out. "Are you going to elaborate?"

"Oh, I thought knew our reputation. Whitebrook is staffed by androids. Our memories are synchronized to ensure continuity of care. I could not tell you if this unit has visited you before, but it is irrelevant anyway."

Avrin wanted to inquire further, but he didn't know where to start. He tried to ask a couple questions, choked on the phrasing, and gave up with an irritated sigh. The nurse put a comforting hand on Avrin's knee.

"The doctor will be with you shortly," the android stated in a soothing tone. "I'm sure she will explain everything." He - or it - waited until Avrin seemed to calm down, then dragged his cart out of the room, disappearing with a click and pop from the door.

Story D

All Us Zombies

By Bhim Nimgade

When so often one of us goes forward or back to meet oneself, how should one greet oneself, that is always the question. So few of us have answered it well. You would think we'd be old hands at this, over the eons.

"I'm sorry, have we met before?"

"One of us has."

"Say what? **One** of us? How is that even possible?"

"I knew you'd ask."

It's always a little disconcerting to see how stupid one seems when one has no clue. Seems like a tautology, yes, but the reification of that principle - seeing it in real life, up close and most personal, is disconcerting, even disheartening, and it hits you like a wet slap on the forehead by a dangling participle. Which to me, is supremely objectionable.

I always try to alter some aspect of my persona when I do my time-looping. To some extent the process itself takes care of that. You don't traverse the vast expanses and the nooks and crannies of the n-dimensional crackling continuum without some rude adjustment to your appearance and affect and sympatho-mimetic implants. Often, you can tamp that down after a bit of time, but sometimes, like they say, "Ain't nobody got time for that, Honey."

And there is no time, really, it's just a juxtaposition of contrapuntal extremities and collocation of spatio-temporal contingencies, and manipulation of the Kantana-Piperelle tensor. Once you've got that digested, nothing's gonna faze you anymore about the whole business.

"I knew you'd ask."

That's how you try to buy some time, while trying to figure out what level of explanation and how deep you need to go. It's a bit of desperate log-rolling, concept-hopping, and also looking out the corner of the eye and trying not to get emotionally aroused. It's a little-understood side effect, the Heinlein effect, that makes

you get all itchy and horny when you meet some version of yourself. I always try to tell myself it's the call of similar personality, the mysterious meeting of two souls, and soulful gazing into each others' deep-dreaming eyes, but no, it's the desire to *get it on, Honey!* Not that I'm in the habit of calling people Honey, most of the time, but sometimes, it seems singularly apposite.

Sometimes I say, "Honey, don't bother yourself with all that, heavy thinking and concepts and such. What matters is that we've found each other, you and me, and we're together in this grand and infinite *Now*."

And if that works, then there you are, no more explaining to do, just "hopping on", as they say in the financial sector, where all those quants and traders and big whales are doing it all the time, with my money and yours, and really giving it to us up the..... But I digress.

"One of us is not what it seems," is another gambit. If the other party is of a philosophical or questioning bent, after a suitable amount of liquor or other substances, this might work.

"Wait, that sentence doesn't even make sense, does it? What *it* seems? One of us isn't an *it*, is it?"

Of course the other party might be belligerent - one has to judge these things carefully. A sweet tryst might devolve into a dingy drubbing, no collocation of confectionary parts but rather an alarming display of drunken fisticuffs landing on one's anatomy, a veritable chin-dance, which so often does not end well. That's when one is tempted to mutter, discreetly, "Scotty, utmost difficulties, get us out of here!"

And home base sometimes is not so keen on rapid withdrawal of assets - it costs so much, usually to send agents gallivanting about - and they reply, subvocally of course, "Beam Parameters are not optimal for resource extraction at this time; temporalize, dance, and continue mission until all is well." You KNOW that they're snickering and watching and giving each other high fives in the control room, you can just hear that barely suppressed glee in their tight, controlled, official voices.

"We've all met before, you know. The universe is vast, and time is infinite, and we have all been

coming, and going, and living, and dying, and of course we would at some time come into contact with each other, each one with every one else. Relax, I'll go through the statistics and the diagrams, it seems counter-intuitive but it's simple, really."

Not everybody is mollified by that explanation, either.

And sometimes you just have to go with the truth. Enough of the truth, that is.

"One of us has met before. The other hasn't. The other will meet, in the future, or I should say, in another future. And the one that has met before, in the past, that was in another past. Past and future are fluid, you see. But that is neither here nor there, neither then or now, and there is nothing to be gained by this palaver.

"One of us needs to make some decisions. And soon. Relatively soon, I mean. Oh, forget it. Soon and not-soon are so Yesterday. Whatever, are you ready to decide?"

The really smart ones - and that's so few of them, which is disconcerting, because if they are me, then they SHOULD be smart, Goddammit! Or what am I? And what are they? All you Zombies, that's what I say, all you Zombies, and me. There's times when I just break down, and sit somewhere, quivering, sweating, and then they extract me real quick.

I won't go and meet you again, I don't think. It wasn't so good the first time, nor the next, nor the umpteenth times, and since it has happened, it will happen again, even if it's erased from the loop, it is always there, in some mathematical excursion of the multiverses, and the eternal gears go grinding on and on, and infinite recursion as these nexus points go bounding from manifold to manifold, and it's all too much to contemplate. I am going to give it up. Maybe I will die - but I can't be sure of that. Who can be sure of that? Is there no end?

Story E

Visions of the Past

By Joe Alfano



I walked into the room like I was storming the beach on foreign soil. Each step another jab into enemy territory. Behind me the child hid her face from those staring our direction. Not de to any amount of shyness, not that any of these people would know that. All they saw was the hulking giant of a man dressed in denims and a work shirt stomping into the bar. With a kids at his heels.

In this city it wasn't an uncommon thing. The working poor had a habit of dragging their kinds with them everywhere. Including to the bars and sometimes even the pleasure houses. It was the one way that Politicorp kept control.

“What can I get for ya?” The greasy man behind the bar wiped down the stained, repurposed wood with a dirty rag. No sense making it more than it was, I suppose.

“A beer,” I said through the thin mark of lips splitting a face more clean shaven than any other in the bar. Including the owner. “And a name.”

“Name’s Spike for all the good it’ll do ya,” he answered while he poured a flat beer into a glass that wasn’t quite as dirty as the bar. “Only my friends really need my name, but you’re not one of them.”

I ignored the beer, but put down the coins for the drink. All without breaking eye contact. I knew this kind of street rat. Front for small companies that are all inevitable fronts for the larger corps that run everything. Taxing us working stiffs more than feudal lords did their serfs.

“Didn’t say your name,” I said in a flat, emotionless voice. Without looking in the streaked mirror behind the bar I knew the shadows had fallend over my eyes turning the retinas a near black color. When the rage took me I did see red. I saw black. “Said a name.”

“Maybe ya can be more specific. Know lots of folk.” The sneer on his face drew the shades out even more from me. I wanted nothing more than to smack the smile right off his face.

“Kara Suur was taken out a few years back. A Politicorp hit. I need the name of the bullet boy that took the

contract.”

Spike leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. He had the build of a man that had know hard labor at one point in his life, but not any longer. Being a shill for the corps has the tendency to make one soft. Like a high school football player that never went past the glory days of the homecoming dance.

“Even if I had tell on that, what makes you think I’d drop it for you? Don’t even know you.”

I held the stare, and the stance. When faced in a stand-off I’ve found being a statue works best. First person to move or speak loses.

“You thinkin’ about beating the info out of me?” He added another sneer at the end of the statement.

I shrugged with limited energy. As if I was bored by this entire conversation. “I kinda was.” From behind me, the young girl stepped out and climbed up on the worn and chipped stool in front of me to sit, leaning with her chin just over the smeared excuse of a bar. “But I promised her I wouldn’t take that from her.”

Spike stared into the eyes that were impossibly blue, endlessly deep. A brightness was held to them that spoke of ages long past. A sense of intelligence and wisdom that doesn’t normally register in a girl barely into her grades. I knew the look he was seeing. The same one that put me on my current path.

His eyes snapped back up to me, unable to hold her gaze. A telling tale that confirmed I had the right guy. “I’m sorry, have we met before?”

I shrugged again, nearly feeling as bored with this as I was projecting to him. “One of us has.”

“Say what? **One** of us?” He looked back down at the girl again. Her cherubic face still holding the touch of the toddler to it held an expression of dread seriousness. Then the eyes took hold of him again, giving up their truth that he couldn’t deny. None other that any of us in this city had met had eyes like those of Kara Suur. Not a single one before this little girl. “How is that even possible?”

“I knew you’d ask.” And I let a smirk hit my face for the first time. I was definitely going to enjoy the show. “We both did.”

His face turned down, unable to look away from that face.
A bright glow leaked out from around the sides of her head,
fighting off the shadows that had taken over my eyes. That
bright light that was both beautiful and painfully
frightening at the same time. Kara would get her revenge.
One way or another.

Story F

Glazed Over

By Miranda Raine



Alexa couldn't believe it. Moon Nuts! She was actually going to be working at Moon Nuts!

Her mother cooed in surprise and pleasure, and gave Alexa a celebratory hug.

"Congratulations," her father said dryly. "You graduated third in your high school class, and now you're going to be a waitress."

Alexa's excitement, however, was undiminished by her father's lack of enthusiasm. Her father said everything dryly. As senses of humor went, he was the comedic equivalent of the Martian ocean. "I'm not just a waitress, I'm going to be a car hop. At the coolest donut shop ever. Everybody's heard of Moon Nuts, and anyone who's anyone stops there on their way out of the Solar System. 'Best Coffee in the Galaxy', etc.. Tips are great, you get to meet interesting people, and..." she paused for emphasis, "They have an awesome tuition reimbursement program. If I get good grades, I get paid to go to school."

As expected, she could see this little gem of information palpably tipped the scales. But the hour was early, and he had budgeted at least 15 minutes for argument, so it seemed to him a shame to waste it. "How are you going to get there. Your pod doesn't break orbit, and even the cheapest Lunar parking is going to cost more than you make."

"Moon Nuts encourages people to use public transportation. They will pay for half of a monthly shuttle pass. I can walk to the nearest station, and during commuter rush hours, there's one taking off every 20 minutes. And I can do homework in transit. It's like 2 hours of study hall a day!"

The battle was won, she could tell, but she knew her father. Far be it from him to concede without at least a little more debate, even if it was just for the exercise. "Car hop. You've never even been in a car. You probably don't even know what a car is, let alone how you make one hop. The entire idea is crazy."

Laughing out loud, Alexa touched the wall, opening the family picture file, and with a few flicks scrolled to a picture of her father as a little boy in the arms of a bearded man, standing in front of a clunky, metallic vehicle with rubber wheels. "You and your Grandpa, I believe, standing in front of his 2145 Nissan Bengal. Which, if I understand correctly, was one of the first water powered 'cars' on the market."

There was a moment of silence as Alexa's father stared wistfully at the picture. Then, he turned the expression to Alexa, and asked, "So, do family members get a discount? Do you get to bring the day old donuts home? Because we 'work-from-home-dads' don't get to the moon as often as we might like."

She laughed, and gave him a hug. "If I'm working, yes, you guys can get a discount. And from what I've heard, yeah, you can take donuts home, but after the first few months, you get sick of having them around the house. Even the gooey chocolate ones."

"Sick of the gooey chocolate ones?" he said, eyes aghast. "What kind of madness is that? I refuse to let you work in an environment where gooey chocolate donuts become anathema. You must tender your resignation immediately. Actually, now that I think about it, give it a few months. Then tender your resignation immediately. But don't forget to bring home a couple of chocolate Moon Nuts in the mean time."

Alexa smiled. "Will do. As soon as I can't stand to look at a chocolate donut, I'm out of there."

"We have accord," her father said solemnly, shaking her hand solemnly. He then pulled her into a warm hug. "Congratulations, sweetie. My first job was pumping water at the corner fuel station. I think your job will get you places much quicker."

"Well, it will definitely get me to the moon and back. I love the Mall there, and they have some great carols at the library for remote University attendance, so I can go to class there, too. I'm really excited. I think this is going to work out well."

"Me, too," Alexa's father said, smiling, a hint of tears in his eyes.

"Me, three," her mother chimed in. She joined the

embrace. “And I can’t wait to see you in the uniform. They are adorable.”

Alexa’s father froze. “Uniform? What uniform? What does it look like? Is everything covered? Does it have emergency oxygen in case of a dome breach?”

Rolling her eyes, Alexa touched the wall again, summoning a picture of the uniform, and all its safety features. Yeah, the whole conversation had felt a little easy.

* * *

“I’m sorry, have we met before?”

“One of us has.”

“Say what? One of us? How is that even possible?”

“I knew you’d ask.”

The small child, face hands glazed in more chocolate than any of the donut minis in front of him continued his mealtime drama.

“Mr. Chocobun, you’ve been under the impression that you are special. What if I told you that you were manufactured, one of hundreds of donuts, exchangeable, replaceable. Identical.” Here, he inserted a sinister pause. “Edible.”

“What!” the little donut in his fingers squeaked in alarm. “No, I don’t believe it.”

“Look around you, Mr. Chocobun. The nine other donuts in your little cellulous container are exactly like you, down to calorie count. They have the same thoughts, the same memories. In fact, we have had this very conversation many, many times.”

“No, it’s a lie!” the mini Chocobun leaped dramatically. “I don’t believe it. I am an individual! I am special!”

“Especially delicious, perhaps,” the child said, stretching chocolate coated lips in a smile that would have been disturbing on a face twice his age. “And now, Mr. Chocobun, it is time for you to meet the same fate as you have have been many times before. Goodbye, Mr. Chocobun.” The child made small, noises of terror as he lifted the confection to his

mouth, and then chewed noisily, nom nom noming as his victim was ground to a muddy paste.

“Tyler, that’s disgusting. Number one, stop playing with your food. Number two, what on earth were you watching last night? And number three, here are a pile of wipes. Use them.”

“Thanks, Alexa,” he said, turning his I’m seven-and I’m-cute factor up to 11. It was some kind of movie about a green people factory. There was also a James Bond marathon. They showed number 1 through 44. I only caught a couple near the beginning, though.”

“Ah, that explains it. Oh, your mom is coming, hurry up and clean up.”

“Ok, Alexa. We’ll see you next week!”

Alexa ruffled the child’s hair fondly, then went to collect the industrial cleaning supplies. Tyler always left an impressive mess, but the dinner show he performed often made it worthwhile. He was definitely going to do some interesting things when he was older. Sighing, she realized how much she was going to miss him, now that she was leaving. But college was over. It was time to get a real job, and work from home like everyone else.

On the way out, she grabbed a baker’s dozen of day old gooey chocolate donuts. The prediction had held true, after 3 months, she could barely even look at the donuts. But tonight, her last night here, they sounded really good.

“Thank you, Moon Nuts,” she said to no one in particular. “It’s been fun.”

Story G

Runaway

By Victoria Holodnack

She swept in the double doors with a cold gust of air announcing her presence to the rest of the small tavern's patrons. As she stood there for a moment scanning the dimly lit, dank space, she spotted the reason why she was there.

He sat at the bar, as close to the rear of the room as he could have been, his back slightly turned to her. Trying his best to appear as if he was merely one of the small mining town residents who came to drink their aspirations and hopes away. He was dressed in dirty wares and he hadn't washed in days. Yet, she knew better. She had been very well advised all about him and how he'd try to "hide".

She strode toward the end of the bar where he was trying to not notice her heading for him. A single bead of sweat formed and began to roll down the side of his grungy face.

She straddled the bar stool right next to his. "Good afternoon Marcus", she spoke in a low tone without looking at him.

"I'm sorry, have we met before?" he inquired with a hint of his rattled nerves peeking through his attempt at sounding not concerned.

"One of us has." She turned her steely eyes to him, taking in his uncomfortable air, it brings her a sort of sick pleasure.

"Say what? **One** of us? How is that even possible?!" Marcus spoke a little louder and cracking, couldn't quite contain his nerves at this point, physically shaking as he spoke to the obvious bounty hunter.

"I knew you'd ask," the nameless bounty hunter smirked, "*they* knew you'd ask". Her smirk grew into a smile, she was basking in his nervousness.

"Wha... who... oh shit..." Marcus looked down at the bar, defeated.

"You had to have known *they* wouldn't let you just get away with what you did. *They* aren't a forgiving sort." The bounty hunter appeared to be attempting to console Marcus, but the sadistic glimmer in her eye and that wicked smile

told him she was just prolonging this act as long as she could for her own amusement. "You are coming with me. *They* prefer you back alive because *they* have their own plans for you, but *they* did leave plenty of wiggle room for me to get creative if you do not cooperate."

Marcus looked into the bounty hunter's hungry, demented eyes and swallowed hard.

"Please, Marcus, do your best not to cooperate..." Her smile widen across her face. She might have looked beautiful to the right person, or demon. All Marcus saw was a crazed woman with a bloodlust that he didn't feel he could escape from.

This was the end of the line for him...

Story H

Phoenix

By Morgan Raynes

"I'm sorry, have we met before?"

"One of us has."

"Say what? **One** of us? How is that even possible?"

"I knew you'd ask."

Of all the strange, unusual days that Matthew Painter had had in his strange, unusual life, this was the day that he would rank as the strangest and most unusual of all. It started with a letter slid under his door asking him to meet its author at Oceanfront Diner on Third Street at precisely nine in the morning; but seeing that there was no signature at the bottom, no return address or postage (let alone the fact that he woke well after ten), he disregarded it entirely. Shortly after, a tree had fallen across the road in front of him as he drove to the open-air market on the boardwalk.

Expectedly, this was not the strange or unusual bit of the tale.

As he walked down the splintering, sea-stained boardwalk, he kept catching sight of a girl - nothing was very outstanding about her, but nothing was unimpressive at the same time. She had short, caramel hair, bright hazel eyes, and the moment she saw him, a wide smile accompanied it.

"Matthew!" she shouted, bounding across the boardwalk to him and nearly knocking over some unsuspecting man crossing her path. Now, Matthew was never known to be terribly social; in all honesty, he would prefer to keep his head down and avoid any social confrontation in public. He would rather he was not seen nor heard.

"I'm... sorry, have we met before?" he asked haltingly, nearly taking a step back as she all but flung herself at him. Up close, she was much more spectacular, despite her jeans and plain white shirt. Her hair was laced with orange that carried over into her eyes, which caught the light of the sun like a clear pool of water. They looked almost alive; like some irrevocable current of red sparks danced through her

gleaming irises, and he was just a bit unsettled by it all.

"One of us has," she answered, her bright smile still in place as she looked up at him. His eyebrows furrowed, stepping back subconsciously this time. This had to be a joke; an elaborate set-up. This wasn't something that someone would just approach him with, after all! "Say what? **One** of us? How is that even possible?"

Despite her smile still shining like flashes of a wolf's teeth, the fire in her eyes seemed to flicker like the light of a candle.

"I knew you'd ask," she said, tone a bit more subdued. He felt a bit of residual guilt in his chest somewhere when he got The Look; this was someone from before the crash that took his memory, wasn't it...? "It's okay, I didn't think you'd remember me! Trust me, I tried to get in touch sooner, but one thing came after another, there was a little hunt for us going on, I thought it would be safer if-

"There was a what?!" Matthew exclaimed. By now, he was coming up with a plan to get away from this woman. "Listen, if this is a joke, it isn't funny! I understand it's just some... unwitting prank, but I lost most of my memory two years-" "-Two years ago in a crash with an unidentified passenger named Laura Rose that died upon impact."

Matthew's voice trailed off, and he stared with a sense of incredulity and shock at the girl in front of him. Her smile faded, a sadder tone overcoming it, and pulled a thin chain out from under the collar of her shirt, two engraved beads on either side of a thin red feather, the edges fading to orange just like fire; just like her eyes. How do I recognize that...? "Remember the phoenix feather?" He nodded numbly, and he saw Laura in place of the strange girl.

"... You've got to be joking."

"Do I look like I'm joking, Matt?"

"... That's impossible!"

"Well, I don't disagree."