

by Geoffrey W. Cole

Rousse didn't notice the stranger when he joined the loose ring of villagers waiting to watch her burn; she was busy praying for absolution. At her feet, Pious Mathieu was trying to spark a flame with his flint and steel but the driving rain foiled his efforts.

"Fetch me a flame!" Pious Mathieu belted at the Fouinon brothers, who had helped build Rousse's pyre. "A lit lamp or candle, anything. We must see this witch burn!"

"Please, good neighbors," Rousse's voice was rough and splintered from long days of screaming. "Hear my final confession."

She looked to the dripping crowd for any friendly face. As always, her father's dark eyes drew her gaze first. Those eyes had haunted her for a fortnight now, ever since he'd fixed them on her and made that first accusation.

"I didn't kill Mother," Rousse said. "You know it, Father. I only used my herbs to ease her pain. Forgive me, as I have forgiven you for the lies you've spoken against me."

He crossed his arms over his barrel chest. Rousse knew he wouldn't speak, but she'd made her forgiveness and that was what counted. Rousse looked to the tall thin man next to her father, Gilbert le Brun, with his large brood of filthy children swarming about his feet.

"Monsieur le Brun, I killed your dog, but it was only because the mutt wouldn't leave my sheep alone. I told you this and offered you one of my dogs. Please, forgive me that killing."

Gilbert le Brun's laughter turned into a rheumy cough.

"I forgive you nothing, witch. I know your true nature. My eldest daughter saw you copulating with the devil on the night of the new moon. You shall burn for the evil you did my dog and you shall burn so my daughter may sleep at night!"

There were others in the crowd from whom she wished to beg forgiveness, but when the Fouinon brothers stepped out of a thatched cottage at the far end of the square, Rousse realised she had little time left to make her peace. She turned to the men who had condemned her. Father Tristram stood beneath his tall hat reciting invocations while Pious Mathieu continued to work his flint and steel.

"Father Tristram, Pious Mathieu, it is from you that I must ask the greatest forgiveness. The Lord didn't give me sufficient strength to withstand the tests you put to me and in my weakness, I lied. I lied when I confessed to consuming the flesh of babes torn from their mother's womb. I lied when I confessed to laying with other women in great orgies with the Devil. I lied when I confessed to renouncing the Christian faith. Worst of all, I lied when I confessed to making a pact with the devil and to being a witch. Please forgive me for these lies, as I have forgiven you for the cruelties you inflicted on me to draw those lies out."

"Pah," Pious Mathieu spat into the clinging mud. "Shut your wicked mouth, whore of Satan. You confessed to your crimes before the Lord, there shall be no recanting now!"

"Do not heed her twisted words," Father Tristram broke from his monotonous chanting to address the crowd.

"She tries to poison our minds with her heresy. She is a witch and a heathen and so she shall burn."

Her best efforts at absolution made, Rousse bowed her head and prayed.

"I am ready, Lord. Take me to you!"

"You see," said Father Tristram. "She dares address the Heavenly Father personally. Watch now as the Lord strikes her down."

The Fouinon brothers pushed through the crowd, a faint orange glow leaking from beneath the cloak they held between them. They pushed past Madame Boileau, who claimed she had seen Rousse flying over her fields before her crops failed. They shouldered Abram Caier out of the way, who had accused Rousse of making his young wife barren.

Then they pushed past someone else, someone Rousse didn't recognise. The stranger was dressed in a thick foreign overcoat that seemed to be made of spun glass. He stared at Rousse with sad, bright eyes. Rousse was about to call out to him when the Fouinon brothers arrived at her pyre. They upended the lamp they carried, spilling oil and flame



# KINDLING HOPE

onto the pitch-soaked kindling at her feet. The flames were blue and sickly at first and spread like an evening fog. She thought for a moment they might go out, so she sent a prayer to the Lord, begging Him to take her to Him quickly. Then the straw ignited. The fire burst to life, sprouting into ugly yellow shoots that pushed up through the loamy kindling.

"Hallelujah," Rousse called as the flames singed the hem of her soaked woolen shift.

Then everything stopped. The fire no longer burned. Rousse kept expecting the flames to waver and fall as all flames must, but they stood as cool and still as a cornfield at midnight.

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"THEY WEDGED NAILS UP ON THE RED HOT IRONS, AND AS THEY PULLED OUT THE NAILS THEY PULLED OUT VILE CONFESSIONS FROM ME OF EVILS THAT I NEVER COMMITTED."

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"What devilry is this?" Rousse whispered. Like the flames, the crowd was frozen. Pious Mathieu hung suspended in the air, having jumped heavenwards in ecstasy. The Fouinon brothers, Father Tristram, and the other villagers were frozen as well. Her father looked exactly as he had moments before, but when she moved her head his dark eyes no longer followed. The rain hung like pear-shaped diamonds in the still air.

"Lord, free me from this wretched sorcery."

"Not quite yet, I'd imagine," An odd voice answered her. "Let's get you down from there first."

The glass-robed stranger. His voice sounded like he was yelling at her from the far end of a large barn, and his words weren't right either. They were rounder somehow and longer in the vowels.

"Keep back, you vile thing," Rousse struggled against her bonds, "No demon shall touch me!"

"Come now." The stranger pushed passed Father Tristram who fell to the ground like

freshly cut timber. "I am no demon. Do you see horns? A tail? I'm here to save you."

He stepped onto the pile of kindling.

"As the Lord is my witness," Rousse said, "I shall not be tempted! I know the Devil when I see him. You mean to spirit me away. Come no closer!"

The stranger walked through the flames, which shattered like church glass and fell noiselessly to the ground. His appearance further confirmed his devilry. His hair was white as morning snow, though his face held no more years than did her youngest brother's. The stranger veiled his river-blue eyes with thin wired lenses. The overcoat that had first caught her attention was a threaded cloth of some glassy yarn that did not move with him as he walked.

The stranger knelt before Rousse and took what appeared to be a stunted knitting needle from his belt. When he touched the needle to the hemp cords binding her to the pole at the centre of the pyre, the thick rope melted like candle wax.

"There, you're free. Do you still think I am a devil?"

Rousse stood dumb, looking at her bruised wrists, shivering. The stranger noticed her chill. He pulled a small square of the glassy fabric from his belt and began to shake it; the square grew with every shake until the sheet was the size of her mother's best quilt. The sheet was as warm as one of Rousse's ewes as he draped it over her shoulders.

"The Lord is testing me," Rousse muttered, afraid to look into those terrible blue eyes. "He has made the Devil sweet to my eyes and his actions kind, but he shall not have my soul."

"I don't want your soul." The stranger stepped off the pile of kindling. "I'll say it again, I'm no devil. Come, let me take you from this terrible place."

The stranger extended a slim-fingered hand to Rousse. Her own hand betrayed her and extended to his. When their hands met, the stranger cried out:

"What's wrong with your fingers?"

"They wedged the nails up with red-hot irons, and as they pulled out the nails, they pulled vile confessions from me of evils I never committed. The thumbscrews crushed my fingers and when they did I recanted Christianity."

Rousse almost believed the pity she saw in his smooth face.

"It is as horrendous as the old books said. But we can fix your fingers, I am sure of it. Come with me. A doctor must see to this."

"Where shall you take me?" Rousse stopped in the small forest of orange flames. "To some craven hole in the ground where you shall ravage me time and again until I am yours?"

"No, no. This talk is madness. I'm here to rescue you. You wouldn't understand where I come from. Please, do not delay any further. I cannot sustain the field for long."

Rousse took her shattered hand from his. "Tell me where you would take me, Devil. What temptations have you that could keep me from my Lord?"

The stranger said something that Rousse couldn't understand. He seemed preoccupied with a coin-shaped device strapped to his wrist.

"Rousse, I am from a city not far from here but years from now in time. I come from a France almost a thousand years from now. I have employed a device that can navigate the tides of time as a ship navigates the sea. I have been granted its use to save those like you who have suffered unjustly—"

Rousse laughed for what seemed the first time in years. "A child wouldn't believe such ridiculous lies. If this is all that you can offer, it is a wonder the Church fears you so. Leave me. End this cursed sorcery. I go to the Lord

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"THE CATHOLIC CHURCH HAS CAUSED ME NAUGHT BUT SUFFERING. I'LL FIND MY OWN WAY TO THE LORD. THERE'S NOTHING MORE YOU CAN SAY DEVIL. BEGONE."

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now; I have passed his final test."

"No!" the stranger wailed. "Do not be a fool, Rousse. You are going back to certain death! I offer you a chance for life. There are priests in my time who can help you understand this, good Catholic priests who will take you

confession and help you find the redemption you're looking for. But you must come with me, our time is short!"

Rousse wrapped her hands around the pole and tried to knit her ruined fingers together. "The Catholic Church has caused me naught but suffering. I'll find my own way to the Lord. There is nothing more you can say, Devil. Begone."

This seemed to infuriate the stranger. He clambered back up on the pile, grabbed her soaked shift and tried to pull her off the pole. When her broken fingers ground together, Rousse screamed out all the pain inside her. This calmed the stranger's sudden madness.

"We may not return to the same time and place twice," the stranger said, releasing her. "And I am sworn to protect the current of history. This is your only chance. I offer you safety, true salvation. I am no devil. I am only a man who wants to heal some of the suffering other men have inflicted." A light seemed to come into his eyes. "If I am lying may God strike me down."

This made Rousse pause. She saw sincerity in those eyes, but she'd seen similar sincerity in the men she'd called neighbors days before they accused her of witchcraft. She doubted her resolve for a moment, then Rousse remembered one of the tests she'd failed while Pious Mathieu crushed her fingers.

"If you are indeed telling the truth, repeat the Lord's Prayer and I shall go with you. No demon may utter those blessed words."

The stranger's mouth dropped open, revealing perfect white teeth that Rousse knew could only belong to a fiend.

"It's been years," the man said. "Since I was a child. Of course I know it. Our Father, who art in heaven..."

He looked at his wrist.

"Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done..."

Rousse smiled as he paused again; she knew he would falter soon.

"In Earth as it is in Heaven," the stranger again looked at his wrist. "I can recite the rest, but please step off the pyre. The time field is about to end."

Rousse didn't understand him. "I won't move until you finish. Start again."

He did, repeating all he'd said, then, "Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those—"

The world roared to life around them. The fire sprang up where it had fallen and the screams of the crowd returned, changing to outrage when they saw they other figure on the pyre with Rousse. She yelled over the sudden noise:

"Continue, stranger. Finish the prayer if you can."

Her robe no longer smoldered but readily caught fire.

"As we forgive those who trespass against us..."

Acrid smoke choked the air, filled with the stench of burning flesh, pitch and wool. Rousse held her breath. He was close.

"For thine is the Kingdom, the power and the—"

Rousse threw herself onto the flames.

"But I said it!" she heard him scream. "I said it right."

"No," Rousse managed through the thick smoke. "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

The stranger fell backwards away from her. She could see the Fouinon brother on top of him, beating him with their heavy fists while Pious Mathieu cheered. Father Tristram had picked himself up and now continued his invocation. She could just see her father—the look on his face somehow satisfied—before the fire took her eyes.

She could still hear though, and now the stranger called out to her, repeating the words she'd just uttered:

"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil!" he cried, and she heard one of the Fouinon brother's scream. Then the stranger's cool hands wrapped around her burning body and drew her close.

"I said it," he whispered to her blackened ears. Rousse could smell mint on the stranger's breath despite the smoke. "It's not too late. I can still take you with me."

"Deliver us from evil," she said. "Amen." Then all was flame. ☹

by Caleb Das

And here you are, Mio, a spider. Not because you are trapped in a web of your own creation, deriving nourishment from the spinning dervishes you call prey, but because you are just that—a spider. Consider this, you have eight legs, a variety of shards that feel and move all at once and at the centre, I can never know what you are thinking.

"I'm hungover, Mio," I breathe into the voice unit. "Just let me know where the passengers are before we hit the red light, okay?"

There is no response. Presumably, you are pondering existential questions or simply musing on whether you will ever find another spider that lives within my lover's head. I have long since accepted that nothing will ever be perfect for you, my lover's spider will inevitably have a spindly fourth leg or an unattractive mole on the proboscis. The owner may have gigantic boobs, but that is never an issue, is it? Mio carino.

The year is 2525 and Man has left the known confines of the Milky Way after puttering about within it for centuries. We have cured the common cold. We have made rain-forests bloom where there were none. We have mastered the art of conveying emotion with just a single glance or a cursory touch. Orgasms are had simply by pressing two bodies together - tightly. It is not unusual for men and women to drop dead on the subway from too much contact. Those tight narrow spaces, those tight carbon walkways. It costs fifteen credits to touch someone now.

Along the way somewhere, we've adopted a certain spider. We attach it to the brain at birth. For a species on a tightrope, the spider's sense of balance has never been more handy. Around us, many millennia of possibility whirl continuously. Balance is at a premium.

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I try to wake Mio up by tapping my skull lightly and tilt to a side to loosen him from the folds of my cerebrum. I can't say I've ever seen inside my own head but I can imagine the cerebrospinal fluid he lives in to be pretty sticky. When spiders die, people say it's because they are far too weak to move about in the cerebral muck. Alcohol reportedly thickens the soup that sloshes inside our skull, weakening the spider of the mind. It is then swallowed up by the cerebral fluid. So I wake up Mio and squirm in my seat, waiting for that jolt of electricity that signals his awakening. It is almost 6am, time to go to work. Time for Mio to guide me through this sky-borne city towards all the people that need a ride someplace, other workers, drunks on the morning patrol, students.

"I'm hungover, Mio," I repeat. "Just let me know where the passengers are before we hit the red light, okay?"

A tingle in my ear lets me know he will. It's a faint tingle. I worry



about Mio. It doesn't take much alcohol to make him sluggish. I haven't had much more than two snifters of Sagittarian brandy and he's already having trouble waking up.

"Wake up, Mio. I can see someone up ahead." It is unusual for anyone to skulk on the roadside in this neighborhood. Cylent Grove is a retirement community and everyone knows the old folks all have fancy rides. Even up here in space, only the old folks are ever well off. This person, however, is not. The roadside lurker seems to be a middle-aged woman, drunk. Perfect.

"Need a ride, lady?"

"Uh-huh. How far will you go for some old-style absinthe, young man?"

"Wherever you need." I smile. This should be interesting. "You hear that, Mio?" I whisper into the voice unit. "Come aboard, miss."

She slides into the seat, Finlandia on rawhide leather. It is oddly kinky watching someone who has nothing more to gain. There are bags under her eyes from nights of absorbing everything the universe had to throw at her. On her pixie face, a knowing smile flickers. She likes being watched, appraised for the contents of her purse as well as her body, toned by years of careful decadence.

"Been doing this long?" Her voice is creamy and dulcet. "You missed the exit, you know."

"Fuck, eh? It's been a busy night for us. Where did you want to go again?"

Mio is supposed to know this. Mio is meant to communicate with the passenger's spider and relay the destination to me in our common language of electricity. I am meant to see her journey in a constellation of synapses, picking my way through the hazy morning and the blinding glare of the dual sun on instinct. Mio is a being dedicated to following the pheromones of his own kind. Don't fail me now...

"You wanna go to Circa, lady?" It's where all the rich women go after a long night of chemicals and synthetic organisms. Her brain is probably spinning, begging for the revitalising showers of sage and joba. Circa is the only place in this system where those plants can be grown—something to do with the way the rays of the dual suns intersect. It is expensive. She looks like she can pay.

"Presumptuous, aren't we?" Her smirk widens. "Having some trouble up here, honey?" a lean finger pointing at her skull.

"You tell me, lady." I tap my skull with the knuckle of my right hand.

"Yes, let's. The Circa sounds wonderful right about now."

And right then, the unexpected. She thrusts her hand through the fabric of the dividing membrane. I feel two fingers at the base of my skull. "Don't move", she grins. "It's not what you think."

I pause, waiting for a tremor to build within me. If Mio awakens, I might, I just might manage to have an orgasm that I didn't have to pay for. I tap my head nervously, wondering if Mio will kick in before she decides to withdraw her fingers. Two fingers.

I tap my head again, insistent. I can see her mouth widen into a smile.

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YOU KNOW WHEN A SPIDER MAKES LOVE TO A REAL BRAIN, IT DIES. COLLAPSES INTO ITSELF. IT SWALLOWS ITSELF UP, ONE SPIDER LEG AT A TIME. MINE DIED A LONG TIME AGO.

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"Don't feel anything, honey? Am I not your type?" she chirps, giggling because the question is rhetorical. She thrusts her chest out teasingly, her nipples visible through the fabric of the suit.

"My damn spider, lady. Mio will kick in at some point. He's a good lover, you know. Just keep doing that and you'll see." I never did learn to modulate my voice. The words spill out the way they were conceived, pitifully.

Her laugh is soothing. Her fingers stay where they were. "Whatever you say, honey. The name's May—after the month, not the perfume. Mio better kick in fast or you'll think I'm just a tease."

My eyes focus on the sky-lane. I think of Lily, of sex on the forests of Chira's moon; our mutual arousal in the vintage clothing of the 1900s before we'd even dreamed of spiders; of the twin girls hitchhiking across the galaxy—things that send electric pulses through Mio's arachnid mind at the very thought. Sex among spiders is a com-

OKER CHEN PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

mon ritual. It ends as soon as it begins but brings with it the possibility of numerous carnalities. It is a simple ritual that requires no investment. And to be fair, the only kinky thing about sex with the twins was nothing but the simultaneous humping of the three spider minds. That never takes more than a minute. This is not working, Mio is lifeless. I'm no closer to release now than I was five minutes ago.

"I could do this all day, honey, so stop trying so hard. The spider will kick in when it wants to. Relax." As an afterthought, she adds:

"What's your name, driverman?"

"Tony," I mutter tersely. I've given up on Mio. "I don't know what's wrong with Mio, lady May."

She raises a finger to her lips. "Never lasted this long, huh? In the old days, this would not be shameful, honey. People like that sort of thing."

I tap my skull again. I can hear my cerebral mush slide over my brain, ignoring my pleasure centers, the consistency of treacle conquering my insides in large swathes. Oh Mio carino. This will not do.

I am not aroused. The press of her skin upon mine does not end in an explosion of heat and light. The pit of my stomach lays unchurned, an ocean parted neatly from coast to coast, beckoning ecstasy. Disappointment trickles into my bones. Turn me, turn me to clay.

"We're almost there, honey. You're not going to make it, you know," she whispers, her voice dropping down to a polite whisper. "You know, when a spider actually does make love to a real brain, it dies. It collapses into itself. It swallows itself up, one spider leg at a time. Mine died a long time ago." It sounds so much like the truth. Her voice is sad. I don't want to believe.

"Mio? Mio?"

"Spiders don't belong in cages, Tony. You don't drink to kill spiders. The spider makes you drink so you can kill it. It's like suicide. Love's like that."

"Mio? Mio?"

The car stops somewhere near The Circa. I don't remember where. I could never hit a woman. So I turned her out on a sidewalk on a quiet neighborhood. I could never hit a woman. So I turned myself out. On the sidewalk, I remember thinking "Love's like that." It sounds so much like the truth. ☹