

Scryer's Gulch: Magic in the Wild, Wild West

The first ten episodes of
an ongoing web serial
by MeiLin Miranda

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Other books by MeiLin Miranda:

"Lovers and Beloveds: An Intimate History of the Greater Kingdom Book One"

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Episode 1: Annabelle Arrives

With all the money pouring in and out of it, you'd think Scryer's Gulch would be more scenic. It's still no looker, but in the early days it hunkered down and at the same time sprawled in its valley like a cold sore, crouching near a gaping, toothless mouth that swallowed up men and spit out the ore that gave the town both its name and its fortune. I'm speaking, of course, of hermetauxite, without which little that we call modern life would be possible.

So much of it veins the Big Blavatsky Mine that, for example, anyone with any scrying talent at all can look into a glass of water, a mirror, a candle flame, the odd

crystal ball, a shiny window, and catch a glimpse of the future. Anyone with a measure of telekinetic power can bend a spoon a little. That sorta thing. The original inhabitants of this land of ours were strangely absent from the area, odd considering its rich supply of wildlife, but they were wiser than we are, or perhaps just less greedy: living so close to that much hermetauxite eventually drives folks crazy.

But I digress.

Perhaps I'm not being fair when I say Scryer's Gulch in those days was a cold sore, a carbuncle on the surface of the earth, a muck pit lined with hastily thrown-up buildings of questionable architectural provenance filled with humans of questionable parentage. There were a few beauties: the arrestingly ostentatious bulk of Jedediah Bonham's mansion, built with the proceeds of the mine; the spun sugar and gilt Hotel LeFay, with all the most modern conveniences Bonham's son Anthony could provide his guests; and the opulent Mamzelle's Palace, whose beauties were on the inside--a good thing, considering they were barely dressed and likely to cause riots were they actually on the outside.

In those early days, Scryer's Gulch was a wide-open town, filled with all the vices lonely men with no families and too much money usually indulge in. Anatole Prake, the first mayor, tried his hardest to bring civilization to town--he hired Sheriff Runnels with his own money--but you can't fight demand by reducing supply; it doesn't get rid of vice, it only makes it more expensive. Higher prices for drink, cards and girls meant more money for Jedediah Bonham. Mamzelle's name may have been on the Palace, but everyone knew Jed really owned it; he owned her, after all. Making Bonham richer rankled the sheriff no end, for if there was one man John Runnels hated, it was Jed Bonham, and that consideration was returned, in spades.

So Sheriff Runnels and Mayor Prake bowed to reality, and worked on keeping things down to a dull roar. A minimum of murders; discretion in fleecing the yokels come in to prospect--at least leave them their underwear; respect for the genteel variety of womenfolk: that's all they asked for. Most of the time, they got it. Some of the time, they didn't.

But no matter how hard Bonham tried to keep the town free of the law except when it suited him, he couldn't stop the natural progression of things. Some of the men settled permanently, and brought their womenfolk and families out. By and by, there were a dozen children in town, and no school yet.

Mayor Prake had two children of school age, besides his grown son. Bonham himself had a little girl, Lily, who he loved more than anything in the world--even his fortune. And while his new wife Charity pestered him to send Lily away to school after her three older brothers, he couldn't bear to part with her. Besides, look how his oldest, Anthony, had turned out when he came home from the east. He could advertise for a tutor, but he'd promised his late wife Lillian that no matter how rich he got, Lily would have a normal life. And so, Bonham reluctantly agreed with Prake that it was time the town had itself a school.

Mayor Prake sent for a schoolteacher. What he got was Miss Annabelle Duniway.

* * *

The day the new teacher was expected, a small knot of local luminaries milled before the Hopewell Hotel, the local stagecoach stop: all to one side were square-sided Mayor Prake, plump and comfortable Mrs Prake, their oldest son Simon and two stiffy-dressed children, along with straight-backed Sheriff Runnels, his shy little boy Jamie hanging behind; suave Jedediah Bonham stood to the other side, holding his daughter Lily's hand. The girl was turned out as pretty as a doll, but her face was pink with stifled laughter; Georgie Prake, her best friend Amelia's twin brother, kept making faces at her behind their fathers' backs.

Julian Hopewell hovered near the door of the hotel that bore his name, his assistant Ralph hovering near him. Hopewell glanced back at him, then turned with a jerk, his usually cheerful face covered in outrage. "Get outta that bib, Ralph, you got pig's blood all down your front! Don't want people in the front seeing that, ever! Especially Miss Duniway!"

"I don't see why this Duniway lady's so special, boss," Ralph grumbled, stripping off the offending apron. "Then, I don't know why you kicked the girls to the curb, neither. They was good custom."

"They was bringing the tone of the establishment down, is what they was," snapped Hopewell. "Goodtime girls renting rooms was okay when we started, but new people are coming to town. Respectable people, people with kids. They don't want some--some *woman of ill repute* next door, banging the bed against the wall all day, and they don't all want to spend the kinda money Tony Bonham wants for a night at the LeFay. We can get more money from respectable folks than from those girls, and the teacher on the premises'll raise our reputation."

"If you reckon so, boss, but I don't figure it," said Ralph, shaking his head. "Them girls paid regular. And I do wonder where they'll go," he added in a murmur.

"Some'll go to Mamzelle's where they belong, some'll start their own place, some'll take to the gutter. Not my lookout. Aw, now, Ralph, don't look at me like that," said Hopewell apologetically. "Some things just hafta be done." He squinted up the road. A promising cloud was moving down the switchback toward town; the roads were still dry in the fall, but soon the stagecoach would be throwing up mud, not dust.

"I just don't figure it," said Ralph, looking the other way down the boardwalk. He poked Hopewell in the ribs. "Here comes Tony Bonham, boss, all done up like the President's coming instead a some old biddy."

"He always dresses like that," said Hopewell with a wistful air. "I would too if I had that kinda money." Tony stationed himself a decent pace down from the hotel, and nodded politely at Hopewell, who gave a faint, nervous grin in return. Hopewell adjusted his collar, shot his cuffs, and kicked behind him at Ralph, who sighed and headed back to the kitchen, bloody apron in hand, just as the stagecoach clattered to a stop before the hotel.

Mayor Prake stepped forward, but Bonham beat him to the coach door. It opened; a blonde head in a modest straw bonnet emerged, followed by the rest of a striking young woman in a dusty blue coat. Her figure was tidy, her ankle well-turned, her nose pert, and her slightly smudged cheeks were roses on porcelain. Hopewell let out a long, almost silent whistle. "I'd go back to school fer that!" said a nearby lollygagger.

Jedediah handed her down from the coach. "Miss Duniway?" he said.

"Yes," she answered with a flutter. "Oh! Oh, dear. I was hoping I wouldn't meet anyone until I had freshened up!"

A loud meow came from inside the coach, and a wicker cage came flying through the door; Annabelle barely caught it before it hit the ground. "There's your infernal cat, miss!" cried the passenger who'd thrown it. He descended from the stagecoach and shook a finger at Annabelle. "Take the creature down the mineshaft and let him return to hell where he belongs!"

"I *am* sorry, Mister Smith," she said, "but I did tell you not to stick your fingers in his cage." Bonham took the wicker enclosure from her; its occupant threw itself against the sides, yowling, and nearly knocking it from Bonham's grip. He finally got the cage settled on the ground, where the huge black cat inside picked itself up, glared round with slitted amber eyes, then commenced to cleaning its whiskers in an attempt to recover its dignity. *Just like that beast to cause a scene*, thought Annabelle.

Prake took advantage of the ruckus, and extended his hand before Bonham could finish with the cage. "Miss Duniway, may I welcome you to Scryer's Gulch. I'm Anatole Prake, and this is my wife, Mary," he said.

"Ah, Mayor Prake! You are the one who sent for me. I have been anxious to make your acquaintance--sir, Mrs Prake," smiled Annabelle. She shook the mayor's hand; it was as gentle and protective as her own father's, and Mrs Prake beamed at her so sweetly from behind her round spectacles that Annabelle completely warmed to her.

"May I also present my son Simon, John Runnels our sheriff, and our most prominent citizen, Mister Jedediah Bonham, owner of the Big Blavatsky Mine, to which we all owe our...prosperity." Was that a sour note at the last?

Annabelle went round the circle.

Simon Prake is not supposed to be here, she thought. He was supposed to be in Jackson, working at an ethergraph research firm. Why was he back in Scryer's Gulch? He was close to her own age--no older than 24, she'd forgotten exactly. Had she packed his dossier? Misi would know. She smoothed the surprise from her face. Simon's smile was warm, genuine, a little shy; he was in the tail end of his reedy youth, but already showing signs of filling out into the kind of well-built man his father had probably been in his prime. Good-looking, too, with lovely brown eyes in a guileless face, and his handshake was as gentle as his father's. She turned to the next man.

John Runnels was as grim as she had expected: upright, brooding, angular, watchful, and tense as a spring. Sun and grief had etched lines on his face before his time, and she felt the hardness of his hand even through her glove. When their eyes met, she felt a shock and did her best to suppress a blush, and from his face, he felt it too; the sheriff gazed at her as if he were taking her measure from the inside out. Even standing on a massive hermetauxite deposit she had no mind-reading abilities, but she could almost hear his questions: Was she trustworthy? Was she what she seemed? Or would he have to watch her--the same questions she asked herself about him, and about everyone else she would meet here. Even so, she found herself drawn to him; in his suspicion and watchfulness, he was a kindred soul. She already wanted to confide in him, to trust him, though she knew she couldn't.

Jedediah took her proffered hand in both of his, and Annabelle's guard went straight back up. Here was a man who expected obedience, hard-eyed and yet charming; the first thing he said in his smooth voice was, "Miss Annabelle, what a pleasure. I do hope you'll

accept my invitation to stay at our family's hotel, the LeFay--gratis, of course. My son, Anthony, is the proprietor," he added, gesturing to the dapper young man standing on the boardwalk.

The young man strode into the street, and said, "Miss Duniway, while my father's invitation stands, it would not be an offer from the Bonham family, but from myself. I am the sole owner of the LeFay. My father forgets himself. Please, though, feel free to consider the hotel your home here." Annabelle smiled inwardly. Everything she'd read about the strained relationship between Anthony and Jed Bonham was apparently true. Perhaps they were too much alike; the younger Bonham didn't take her hand in that proprietary way, but he had his father's smooth, hard surface and hooded eyes.

"Oh, I hadn't thought about staying at a hotel, Mr Bonham," Annabelle demurred. "I expected to stay at the schoolhouse. Is there not a room attached to it for me?"

"I'm afraid not, my dear," Jedediah smiled.

Her heart sank; this was not the plan. "I would feel obligated and awkward, accepting a free room at your hotel," she said, turning to Anthony. "And I am afraid I could not pay you for such a grand accommodation. Perhaps I might let a room somewhere? Surely there is a boarding house?"

"I would certainly be happy to let you a room in my house, Miss Annabelle," said Jedediah. Anthony shot him a startled glance.

"Oh, I could not impose on a private family--"

"Miss Duniway!" came a voice. "Miss Duniway!" She looked up to see a genial man in a checkered waistcoat, coming down the hotel steps. "Julian Hopewell, miss, the proprietor of the Hopewell Hotel behind me. I have the perfect rooms for you, a little suite, very private, convenient to everything, and while I would never insult you by offering you free accomodation"--he shot a significant glance at Anthony--"I will say that the Hopewell's rates are quite reasonable. Board included, and chits for the bath house."

Annabelle smiled up at him. While she wanted to get close to the Bonhams, resting under their roof was a little too close; she would never feel safe. If she was going to be observed, better to hide in plain sight, observed by all and not just Jedediah. "I think your establishment will do nicely, sir, thank you!" she told the ecstatic Hopewell. She looked around. "And you would be some of my scholars?" she said to the Prake children.

"Yes'm," said the boy. "I'm Georgie and this is my sister Amelia. We're ten. That's Jamie. He's only eight." Jamie hid himself further behind his father's pant leg, only to have the sheriff push him back to the front.

"And this is Lily, she's our age," said Amelia, ignoring Jedediah's cold stare and crossing to take her friend by the hand.

"Is that your kitty?" said Lily.

"Yes, his name is Misi," answered Annabelle.

"Missy? That's a strange name for a tomcat," sniffed Georgie.

The cat hissed. "Not 'Missy,' Georgie--M-I-S-I. Mee-see," laughed Annabelle. She shook the hands of her new students, and then excused herself from company; she'd had a long journey and wanted nothing more than to refresh herself and perhaps rest a bit in her new rooms. Hopewell triumphantly called for Ralph, who came stumping out of the building sans apron to cart Miss Duniway's trunks to her rooms. The schoolteacher herself followed behind, carrying her cat in its wicker cage, and Hopewell brought up the rear, smirking coolly over his shoulder at the furious Jed Bonham. "You can't have

everyone under your thumb all the time, Jed," he heard Anatole Prake say just as the doors swung shut.

Annabelle found her rooms just as Hopewell had promised: a clean, modestly but decently appointed sitting room and bedroom, on the second floor of a little addition to the side of the building. Hopewell's own apartment was on the ground floor, and her rooms were directly above. It was quiet, and private--perhaps not as private as she'd hoped the schoolhouse would be, but it would do. And there were measures she could take, after all. She thanked Hopewell, pressed some coins into Ralph's hand for carrying her luggage into the bedroom, and closed the door.

Once alone, she carried the cat's cage to the bedroom and put it on the bed. She took a pair of small, elegant goggles from a case in her breast pocket, and held them up to her face without bothering to strap them on. She scanned the rooms, looking under furniture, inside all the drawers, into all the corners, until she was satisfied the rooms were unobserved; she was unsuspected.

On the side board in the bedroom, in hopeful anticipation of her residency, stood a vase of haphazard wildflowers, a full water pitcher, and a basin. She pulled off her gloves, hung the dusty coat on a peg, and tossed her hat on the bed, then washed her face and neck with a happy groan.

"You can let me out any time, really," said the cat. "No hurry. I'll just piss on your hat here."

"You'll do no such thing, Misi," said Annabelle, absently tidying her hair in a little mirror on the wall, "or I'll order you to clean my shoes with your tongue again."

The cat scowled. "I really do need to pee, Annie."

"Don't worry, I'm coming." She lifted the latch on the cage door, and the big cat came bounding out. He seemed to grow as he stretched, until Annabelle opened the window and said, "Go do your business and then change." The grumbling cat stalked out the window and came back a moment later. Annabelle closed the window and curtains, and nodded.

Misi arched his back and flexed his paws. He took one great bound into the air, and landed lightly back down on the carpet--a man now, covered in silky black fur but for the pads of his fingers and toes, the heels of his hands and feet, and the shell-pink insides of his triangular ears. His eyes remained the same malicious amber. "I still have some of that foul Smith under my fingernails," he frowned, examining one hand.

"You shouldn't attract attention like that."

"If I didn't scratch someone now and again, I'd attract attention. People would think I'm the kind of cat you can pet, and I prefer that you be the only one that rubs me behind the ears. It's humiliating. Though it does feel good. Speaking of which, you wouldn't mind, would you?" he said, presenting the top of his head.

"You can reach them yourself in that form," said Annabelle, unlatching her carpet bag.

"Feh." Misi sat down on the floor cross-legged. "The worst part of this form is that I can't lick my balls. The second worst part is that I can only get this far from cat. Annie," he wheedled, "I can be more use to you if you let me be something else now and again!"

"I don't have use for you as anything else. As a cat, you draw no attention as my traveling companion, you aren't anything's prey but dogs--and I know you can handle any

dog. You can still do a great deal of spying for me, and you can lick your balls. And I like cats best. Don't complain, or I'll make you be a canary bird."

"Helluva life for a demon, this is," he said, stretching out on the floor. "When I'm free, I'll kill you, you know. Oh, this is a good spot, I can see up your skirts. Are those new bloomers?"

Annabelle ignored him and opened her carpet bag wide; all of her equipment had come through its travels safely. She pulled out a handful of tiny, spidery doodads, each with a body made of a single matte hermetauxite cabochon. She dropped one on Misi's stomach. "Up with you, furry pervert."

Misi sighed, got to his feet, and leaped into the air, sticking the minute spider into the far corner of the ceiling. Soon, every corner of both rooms contained the inconspicuous devices. "There. No snoopers, no scanners, no eavesdroppers. Now we can get down to work in safety, Misi old friend."

"I'm not your friend," muttered the demon, taking up his position on the floor again. "Can we just go home? All this hermetauxite is making me antsy."

"As soon as we finish what we came for," said Annabelle. "We find out who's trying to take over the world, and then we go home."

* * *

[Episode 2: Redeye Gravy and Fellow Travelers](#)

Before we go on, I thought I'd best give you an idea what Scryer's Gulch looked like in those days.

The first sight you saw about four miles out of town were the charcoal kilns, rising like giant beehives just off the road. Thirty-seven cords of wood per kiln every time they fired them up, and those things ran day and night--you need a lot of charcoal to smelt hermetauxite, and then there are the blacksmiths to think of. Jed Bonham owned those kilns, but I suppose that's no surprise.

The miners' camp was next, rank upon rank of bunkhouses, tents, tiny shacks and cabins, enough to hold the hundreds of men who worked at the mines. It wasn't just the "BB"--the Big Blavatsky; there were the Honest Alastair, the Li'l Levy, the By-and-By, and those were just the major ones. Up in the hills, men worked small claims hoping for the next big strike, watching as they dug for their pendulums to tremble in the presence of hermetauxite ore--usually in vain.

Now, the greenhorn prospectors--there was box office business for the confidence men. They'd set up as seers, claim they could feel where the hermetauxite was. All seers can feel that, depending on how big the strike and how strong the seer. Problem is, all the real seers were either out prospecting for themselves, or working for Bonham. The tricksters worked in two-man teams. One would buy a worthless claim and pretend to be a prospector. Then some sap from back east would hire the other of them as a seer, and wouldn't you know, he'd find a big strike right there on that empty piece of nothing.

The first trickster would act all reluctant to sell, say (honestly) that the claim wouldn't pay out, but that he liked the area and might build a little cabin there some day, right by the stream where "his ol' dog were laid teh rest," or some other piece of sentimental claptrap. The greenhorn always thought he was the smart one and the claim-holding con

man was the hayseed. The sap would bid the price up to where the "reluctant" claim holder could not refuse. Then the con men would usually skip town for a while, until the greenhorn abandoned the claim and went back home. They'd come back, pick the claim up again for nothing, or buy another for a dollar, and be at it again.

But I digress.

At the low end of the main street stood the stables, the undertaker, the butcher, the office of the Voice of the Gulch newspaper--the one Bonham didn't own yet--one of two general stores. Then Prake's Hardware, a few saloons, a dressmaker, a haberdasher, and the ethergraph office among other businesses. Right about between the high end and the low end stood the Hopewell Hotel, which is why it was the stagecoach stop: convenient to everything, as Julian Hopewell liked to say.

Above Hopewell's was the office of the Independent Mountaineer--Bonham's own paper--Mamzelle's Palace, a few more saloons, the barber shop, the other general store, the assayer's office, the bank, the Methodic Church (the Church of Our Lady of the Great Hullabaloo was just outside of town on account of the noise), and toward the end, the Hotel LeFay. The side streets branching out from the main street held the new schoolhouse, freshly painted red and white with its little bell tower atop it and the yard fenced in white pickets, and private homes. The Prakes and the Runnels lived next door to one another in graceful but relatively modest houses on Jackson Street.

Bonham's house was another matter.

It sat up a ways on the hillside, looming over the town as if to put the whole in its shadow. At least one of its real glass windows always caught the sun, paradoxically glittering and blinding the folks down below. We'll get a better look inside that pile of timber another time. Let's go back to the Hopewell. If you were looking closely at the second floor of the new addition, you might've seen Miss Annabelle's black cat slink out the window.

* * *

Misi curved his tail around the balustrade, then dropped lightly onto the kitchen porch roof. He could hear Ralph inside, half muttering, half humming as he fried ham; Misi could smell biscuits just about ready to come out of the oven, and heard the scraping of the pan that meant Ralph was making redeye gravy. Annabelle would be happy at breakfast.

He took a bigger lungful of the morning air. So many interesting smells: juniper and pinyon pine burning in the charcoal kilns down the road; dead dogs; dead men; live, extremely unwashed men; gallons, oceans of booze; the sour smell of Hoffman's brewery; freshly butchered pigs--perhaps he might lap up the leftover blood if he finished his rounds for Annabelle quick enough. Ink from the newspaper offices; sex; money; and hermetauxite. The place stank, reeked of hermetauxite; it was almost more than he could bear. It made his whiskers quiver, and crackled through his fur.

It's not that hermetauxite was unpleasant to a demon. Quite the opposite. Take catnip, thought Misi absently as he made his way unnoticed along the rooftops. When he was a cat, he found catnip nigh-on irresistible. He'd roll around, ecstatic and humiliated, in the little piles Annabelle would offer him. Hermetauxite was a thousand times more so; it took great force of will to resist it. All that kept demons from digging it out themselves and rolling around in it, so to speak, was that it made them vulnerable. If you were in a

hermetauxite frenzy, and a nearby human had strong enough magic, boom, there you were, captured and enslaved.

His mind went back, as it always did, to the trap Annabelle had set for him, how he'd howled and threatened as he tried to escape from her bonds until she'd said, "Be quiet!" and he found himself unable to utter a sound. *Eight years of it. I'll get free some day, and then I'll kill her*, he thought as he did every time he remembered that moment. Then a whiff of Annabelle's scent came to him across the breeze, and he softened, as he always did. *Maybe I'll hold her captive for a while, roll around in her for a bit, and then I'll kill her.*

Normally, demons never came near this much hermetauxite; it was impossible to resist, and lying there soaking in the metal's power in blissful lethargy led to capture. Better to avoid it in large amounts. Among Annabelle's standing orders, apart from the whole dismaying cat thing, was that he could not let himself get all worked up in a hermetauxite fit. It strained every nerve in his body, what with all this ore just lying around; it made him antsy, as he liked to say, but the order held. When he was good, she gave him both permission and pebbles of hermetauxite to consume, until its shine disappeared and it faded into just another dull rock.

And catnip. She gave him catnip.

As he stepped onto the roof of Mamzelle's Palace, the smells of sex, booze and money intensified. Not surprising. He came upon a small hermetauxite shield, and pissed on it in contempt; far inferior to Annabelle's little spiders, the particular magic animating this shield was weak enough for humans, but not for demons. Badly cast, too. From a distance, Misi couldn't see all the way through it, but at this range it was as if the building were made of glass. He stretched out his senses, listening for anything unusual, feeling for any trace of strange magic, and froze. Shivers washed over him.

There was a demon in the building below him.

Demons never came near this much hermetauxite on their own. It was too dangerous. Someone had to have compelled it. The unexpected truth came crashing down on him: *There's another captive demon here.*

Meanwhile in the Hopewell Hotel's restaurant, Annabelle was sitting down to Ralph's ham steak and redeye gravy, while Mr Hopewell hovered in the doorway. She saw him, nodded and smiled, then tucked into her breakfast with an obvious appetite. "She likes your cooking! You done good, Ralph!" he tried to whisper behind him.

Ralph nodded. "I gave her the last of the good butter, boss, just like you said!" he wheezed back.

Annabelle pretended not to hear and kept on eating. It really was an excellent breakfast; the redeye gravy was some of the best she'd ever had, but if what she was spreading on her biscuit was the "good butter," she pitied the rest of the guests.

Many eyes watched her surreptitiously, but she sensed a pair more persistent, and turned toward the window to meet the hard gaze of Sheriff Runnels. Her heart fluttered in recognition, and she kept herself from staring back with the same frank suspicion and interest. Instead, she gave him her shyest, sweetest smile, and gestured hesitantly at the empty chair opposite her. Runnels frowned and hesitated, looking around the street as if for something else that might need his attention, then nodded and came through the door.

Ralph saw him coming, and hurried up with a cup of coffee; Runnels murmured a thanks as he removed his hat and sat down opposite Annabelle.

"Good morning, Sheriff," she smiled.

"Morning, Miss Duniway. I expect you're off to see your schoolhouse today?"

She consulted the little watch that hung upside down from a brooch on her breast. "I have one-half of an hour before Mayor Prake will come to hand over the key. I am anxious to get started, though I imagine the children are indifferent at best!" she laughed. The remark got only a small, tight smile from Runnels, and she took another tack.

"Well--is Jamie looking forward to school? He does seem a shy boy."

"Here is my question, Miss Duniway," said the Sheriff, ignoring her conversational gambit. "What is a very pretty, obviously bright young woman like yourself doing in this town?"

"I beg your pardon?" said Annabelle, opening her blue eyes wide. "I--I'm here to teach school, sir, why else would I be here?"

"With what I assume would be a pick of assignments, that's what I wonder."

Annabelle blushed, and put down her fork. "I took the assignment, if I may speak frankly, because Mayor Prake offered a great deal of money for the position. I was first in my class, my professors recommended me, and Mr Prake took their recommendation. I must ask you, sir, what else you might be implying," she added stiffly.

"Nothing that would imply moral turpitude, I assure you, Miss Duniway," he answered, finally breaking into a full smile. He took a long pull on the coffee, rose, and returned his hat to his head. "I'm not so impertinent as to ask what you might need all that money for, but now I wonder that as well. Good day, miss." He tipped his hat, gave her one last look of meditative speculation, and left, boots firm on the floor planks.

He flusters me, she thought, and here's hoping I played off that well enough to throw him off the scent.

Annabelle was still turning over her conversation with Sheriff Runnels when Mayor Prake appeared at her side, took off his hat and gave her a warm, paternal smile. "Good morning, Miss Duniway. Are you ready?" Annabelle smiled up at him with a greeting, let him pull out her chair, and accepted his offer to help her with her shawl.

Annabelle kept a discreet eye toward the rooftops on the short walk from the Hotel to the schoolhouse, spotted a familiar, small black figure silhouetted against the sky near the whorehouse, and returned her full attention to the Mayor. "--Growing all the time," he was saying. "It never stops. Some of the new folks'll work through the night, getting a building up. No hammering last night, but if you hear it, don't be surprised."

"I heard quite a bit last night as it was," she said with a rueful laugh.

"I don't know how the men can work in the morning, the way some of them carry on all night," said Prake, with a shake of the head. "But when there's nothing to come home to--a man gets restless, I suppose."

"Tell me about you, Mr Prake. How did you come to be here? Surely you weren't a prospector?"

"Me? Goodness, no, miss," he chuckled. "I'm too old for that. Can you imagine your own father, gone down the mine? No, Simon came first, had a look around. College made him restless, I suppose. He couldn't seem to settle in, so I staked him the money to open up a hardware store here. I'd hoped he'd realize his foolishness and come home, but Prake's Hardware did so well we all came out shortly after. Would've been foolish not to!

I do believe Mrs Prake was the first honest--" he stopped, and shot her an embarrassed sideways glance. "I think I'm the first one who brought family with me," he amended. "Simon had a partner at first, but I bought him out and he headed back to Jackson. Simon went back home to Jackson himself, to work at my old ethergraph firm as an engineer. He's got serious talent in that direction, but he got bored. He was too used to life out here, I guess, and he missed us--Oh! Oh!" he suddenly cried.

Annabelle followed his horrified gaze. The white pickets surrounding the schoolyard were torn up, black paint splashed on the crisp red and white paint, and in big black letters: "NO SCOOOL TECHER GO HOME!!"

Annabelle put her hand to her throat. "Oh, my," she said in a faint voice. Who would vandalize a school? Or had someone already guessed why she was here and was sending her a warning?

* * *

Episode 3: Near-Revelations

Have you ever gotten an ethergram? I'm betting the last person in your family to get one was your great-grandma, your grandma maybe if you're closer to my age. It was exciting in those days, a big event when the ethergram delivery boy would bicycle to your house and come up the steps in his sharp blue uniform. Of course, now everyone just carries a spellphone. Not me. I don't care to be that available, thank you very much.

Come to think on it, I suppose you're wondering who I am at this point. I'm just the person telling the story. I'm not in the story per se; I didn't know any of the people I'm talking about. Hell, they were all dead before I was born, weren't they? I'm old, but I'm not that old. I'm only guessing at what they thought and felt. What they did--well, that's historic record, if you care to look it up. Not many do. Did you ever hear the name of Annabelle Duniway in school? If you did, you're a graduate level American History student. I'm just a Western buff. I learned all this for fun, believe it or not. Everyone needs a hobby.

There was that one flicker, but they got it all wrong, and it was so long ago they don't even show it on the classic flicker channel. Black and white, and old, but not a classic.

Is it fair that I tell you what they thought and felt, when there's no way to be sure? Of course it isn't. I'm a writer. We trade in unfairness and inequity; we know everything about the story, or we make things up so we think we know, and then we tell you what we want to tell you when we want to tell you, or don't tell you at all.

But I digress.

I was talking about the ethergraph system. In Scyer's Gulch there was only one ethergraph receiver, and it belonged to Simon Prake. He had his own little office a few storefronts down from Prakes Hardware. A talented man, one of the best ethergraph operators of his day, for that was back when the technology was new, and the operator had to have some serious natural ability. Simon had plenty, and the education to go with it. When he decided to leave his ethergraph engineering job in Jackson, the partners tried to keep him. Even offered him a full partnership. No one understood why he left.

* * *

Agent Duniway was not one to swoon when confronted with a shock, but Annabelle decided Schoolteacher Duniway should feel a little faint at the sight of the vandalized schoolhouse. She staggered gently into Mr Prake, who caught her elbow with a concerned murmur. "There now! Do you carry smelling salts in your reticule?"

She never needed them, and so, unlike most respectable women, she didn't even own any. "Oh dear...left them at the Hotel, sir!" she faltered. She made an immediate plan to find a vial somewhere, even if she had to order Misi to steal one.

"Never mind, dear," he said. "Let's get you sitting down. A cup of tea, perhaps. Come now, Mrs Prake will see to you." He guided her down the block to Jackson Street and his comfortable-looking house, the town's second-largest, sitting back from the street behind a brave little garden.

There working among the hollyhocks and young rose bushes were Mary Prake and her daughter Amelia, who came running up to open the gate. "Mama, look! It's Papa and Miss Duniway!"

"Goodness, Miss Duniway, are you unwell?" said Mrs Prake, hurrying up behind Amelia.

"She's had a bit of a fright, Mary," said Mr Prake. He steered the unresisting Annabelle through the front door into the parlor, explaining to his wife as they went.

"Go tell Cook to put the kettle on, Amelia. Georgie!" Mrs Prake called as they entered the house, "Georgie! Go fetch the sheriff." Georgie skidded into the room, took one look at Miss Duniway, and cocked an eyebrow at his sister, who glared back. Georgie gave an exasperated shrug and took off running.

Tea was served and Annabelle let the color return to her cheeks just in time for Sheriff Runnels to arrive. Annabelle kept her eyes down after a brief glance showed he was observing her closely without looking directly at her. "Who could have done such a thing?" Mrs Prake asked him.

"I don't know, ma'am," he answered. "But I'm putting Rabbit out to watch the schoolhouse tonight."

"It's not...?" said Prake.

"No, not for another week," said the sheriff, with a warning look.

The mayor thinned his lips. "Well. I suppose the best thing to do now is get a crew to put the fences back up and repaint the place. It's time for me to go down to the store, anyway, and there are always a few men dangling for work near there."

"I did tell you not to put the school so far back from the street," fretted Mrs Prake. "Oh, now, don't you both run off, who's going to escort Miss Duniway back to Hopewell's?"

Annabelle objected with a show of feebleness, but in the end, she took Sheriff Runnels' arm and let him walk her back to the hotel. "I heard you speak of a Rabbit, Sheriff," she said with a smile. "I cannot imagine you keeping a pet."

Runnels' face broke from its usual hardness into an affectionate grin aimed down the street. "Rabbit's my brother. He's my deputy. He's got good night vision--most of the time..." The smile disappeared.

At the door of the hotel, she slipped her arm from his. "Is there cause for me to be concerned, sir Should I leave town? I'm most inclined to stay, I confess, but if you think there's really a danger--"

"Nothing you can't handle, I would guess, Miss Duniway. Good day, now."

She gave him her reserved gratitude, and hurried up the stairs to her rooms. Nothing I can't handle...? Once behind closed doors, she opened the window and whispered, "Misi!"

Across the rooftops, the demon cat's ears pricked up. He was still prowling around Mamzelle's Palace, trying to find a prudent vantage point into the building, to no avail. Their magical safeguards were crap, but the actual edifice was hard to spy upon. His hearing was excellent, even for a demon, but so far all he'd made out was a great deal of groaning, and that the high C on the piano was a shade flat. And try as he might, he couldn't pinpoint the demon that had to be below him. It had to have sensed me, though, he said to himself.

"Misi!" Annabelle whispered again. "Come here right now!" He gave a small sneeze, rubbed his cheek once against the shingles, and bounded lightly along to Annabelle's open window. "What's the lay of the land?" she said, scratching under his chin as he stood on the sill. She gathered him into her arms, closed the window, and sat down, running her hand down his glossy back.

Dammit, I'm purring, he thought. "Unexpected," he said aloud. "Can I change, please?"

"No. Tell me."

"...I didn't get very far."

Annabelle stopped petting him. "Misi, you should have been able to cover most of Main street at the least--it isn't that long! How far did you get?"

"Only to the big whorehouse a few doors up the street," he squirmed, then let out a squeak as she dumped him off her lap.

"What kept you riveted to the whorehouse roof, might I ask?" she said in a cold voice.

"I..."

She crossed her arms, and the cat winced as if he'd been caught sleeping in her underwear drawer. "Misi, I order you to tell me."

"There's a demon in there!" he blurted. "Another demon. Has to be a captive--you know we don't come round a find this big on our own!"

Annabelle gaped, then put one hand to her mouth in thought. "Any chance it could be the source of the contamination?"

"None," declared Misi. "We can't control ourselves around it enough to do any kind of working of that magnitude."

"Why is it here, then? What would a demon want with a whorehouse?"

"What would its owner want, you mean," sniffed the cat. "I dunno. We make good bouncers. My grandfather was a bouncer at a whorehouse in Prague for the better part of the 17th century, and that was back before you lot figured out how to catch us. Good job, he always said... Accountancy? We're surprisingly good with numbers."

Annabelle sat back down in the chair and put her feet up on the footstool. "C'mere, kitty, I need to think." Misi jumped into her lap. "We need to get you into Mamzelle's."

"Why can't you go?" said Misi, flopping onto his back in her lap.

She ruffled the fur on his belly. "I'm the schoolmarm! I can't go into a fancy house, nitwit."

"You have before."

"Undercover!"

He lay purring as she gently rubbed his tummy. "Speaking of which, can you pet me just a little lower?"

"Pervert."

Down the street next to Prakes Hardware, Simon Prake sat in the ethergraph office, focused on a small ingot of hermetauxite. Notes on foolscap, and a stack of reference books, covered his desk; a thick tome lay open to one side. As the ethergraph operator for Scryer's Gulch, he was often busy sending messages back and forth, but in his interstitial time, he foiled with ideas for improvements to the ethergraph network.

As an up-and-coming ethergraph engineer in Jackson, he'd inscribed several spells of such grace they approached art more than technology, and though he'd never told his family, the patents on his work had made him more comfortable than anyone could have guessed.

Now, he felt he was on the verge of a great discovery, something that might revolutionize the way the ethergraph system worked--might change it into something else entirely. If he was right, every home might have its own sort of ethergraph device, a way to send messages back and forth without the individual services of an ethergraph operator; the new breed of operators could each handle dozens of calls an hour, and would no longer be required to have their own personal ethergraph equipment, or the kinds of education and raw talent operators did now. Those who did--skilled professionals like himself--would then be freed to improve the system, to be pure engineers. He'd never told the other engineers at Feargal and Feargal; after all, his work might transform ethergraphy or destroy it completely. Hard to say how things would play out, but he didn't want them trying to stop him.

He consulted the open reference book one last time, then held his hand over the ingot and let his skill flow into the hermetauxite. Its internal structure flared into his consciousness, blotting out the rest of the world. He wove himself in and out of the ingot's matrix. If I can just twist this part here, then--

"Simon!" came an insistent voice for what must have been the third or fourth time. The hermetauxite's inner map vanished as a small hand tugged at his sleeve. He opened his eyes, and stared down at his little brother.

"What now, Georgie, I'm busy!"

"Someone's done and torn up the schoolyard!"

"What?"

Georgie nodded emphatically. "Yeah, and painted a message on the side of the schoolhouse in black paint, it said 'Teacher go home!' Messed up all the work everyone did!"

"Don't say 'yeah,' Georgie, say 'yes,' like a gentleman. You're a Prake, not a barbarian." He gave the boy the eye. "What do you know about this, young man? Do you have idea who did it?"

"Why would I know anything about it!" protested his brother. He put his hands behind his back, but not before Simon saw a telltale smudge of black paint on his cuff.

"Just a thought," said Simon.

Further up Main Street, Mamzelle paced her upstairs parlour, an opulent affair done up in gilt and red velvet. Thick carpets brought all the way from far Araby muffled her agitated footfalls, and her satin skirts twisted and bunched as she marched fretfully around the room. "Écoutez-moi, dere's another demon here!"

Jed Bonham reclined on the settee, stretching out his legs and crossing them at the ankles. "Mamzelle, what would a demon be doing here? You say yourself it's reckless at best, suicidal at worst. I mean, look at you." Jed gazed at her through hooded eyes. "And I do like looking at you."

Mamzelle stopped pacing and retorted, "Eef you don't believe me, order me to tell you the truth!"

"All right then, I order you to tell me the truth."

"Dere's another demon here, and when I am free I will slaughter you like ze pig!"

Jed laughed. "Well, I did ask you for the truth. I intend to die of old age, in my own bed, surrounded by my loving family." At her derisive hoot, he added, "All right then, by my avaricious family. I never intend to free you, sweetheart. I'll just hand you over to Tony. Don't give me that look. If you're a bad girl, I'll hand you over to Nathan instead. He's the eldest anyway. See how you like that!"

"I wouldn't like eet at all!"

"Well, then," he purred. "Come over here, and be a good girl."

* * *

Episode 4: Detectors and Detectives

Most of you took spellcoding in school, but I bet you don't remember a lick of it. You haven't the faintest real idea what goes into your spellphone, or your EV set. How many of us become etheric engineers, after all--well, besides me. At least in the US--hell, most of our stuff is forged and encoded in China these days. Even if you remember your spellcoding, you couldn't read the encoding in your phone. And don't get me started on technical support.

In those days, we still made stuff. Oh, we're still mining hermetauxite, a little of it still in Scryer's Gulch--the "BB" is closed, but the Li'l Levy and the Madcap are still in production, have been for nearly 130 years. But it all gets shipped overseas now. Along with the jobs. Why, here in my own home town, the Chinese, or the Indians, or someone, bought a whole mill, took it apart and numbered the pieces, shipped the whole thing back to wherever it was and rebuilt it there. Took 1500 jobs with it.

But I digress.

In those days, we still made stuff, and that was the problem: some of the stuff we were making was coming out wrong, dangerously wrong, and Annabelle Duniway's job was to find out why.

* * *

While Annabelle waited a day for the schoolhouse repairs, the best use of her time would be to visit her students in their homes, get a sense of them. That's what a real schoolteacher would do, she decided the next morning, and it gave her a chance to scan for the anomalies she'd been sent to investigate without raising suspicion.

"What exactly are we looking for, anyway?" said Misi from a perch atop the wardrobe. "You might have said," he added sulkily.

Annabelle looked up at the demon cat as she buttoned up her bodice. "Daniel asked me to wait as long as possible before telling anyone anything, including you."

"Who's Daniel?"

Annabelle colored slightly. "Chief Howman. Remember? My boss?" She fastened a cufflike bracelet to her left wrist, then shook it in Misi's direction. "Like it?"

"Present from Daniel?"

"Stop it. It's a detector."

"What's it detecting?"

"Hermetauxite encoded with a certain pattern."

Misi flicked his tail contemptuously. "All hermetauxite is encoded, unless it's unrefined. Are you looking for a particular smelter's mark or what?"

"If that's all it was, we would have sent a squad of agents here, arrested the smelter and been done with it. This is subtle, and dangerous. Do you think you can control yourself enough to look inside the detector?"

Misi jumped down from the wardrobe onto the bed, and sniffed at the bracelet. "Gold?"

"Just a coating over the top. Hermetauxite against the skin."

"You don't have to tell me where the hermetauxite is." He sniffed again. "I think I can handle it." He lay down on the bed, tucking his four legs beneath him, and sent his inborn skill into the hermetauxite. Oh, so delicious! No, no, can't eat, must concentrate.

He wove in and out of the metal's webby spirit substance--smelter's mark, forger's mark--when he came to the caster's mark, he paused. Here would be the purpose of the detector. "If hermetauxite, then look inside"--standard, don't want to bother looking inside tin, but where's the security-breaking pattern--ah, there...if security overcome, then find marks...discard smelter and forger marks...boy, this pattern is really digging deep...if one of remaining marks matches this specific pattern at this specific depth--

"Pollution!" he spat, recoiling from the bracelet. "Oh, Mother of the Dark One, I won't be able to get that taste out of me for a lifetime! Who would encode such a thing! How can you wear such a thing! Get it away from me!"

"It's inactive inside the detector. I can't taste it the way you can, and I never was much of an encoder," she said, slipping her gloves on. "When I look inside, it's just a tangled mess to me. But no one can say I'm not the best wielder in the Department, least of all you, eh?"

Misi thrashed his tail. "You take perverse delight lately in reminding me of my state."

"Sorry, kitty," she soothed. "This is the first case we've been on like this--so magically oriented--and I guess it reminds me of old times."

"Me too," he said sourly. "I have to say, though, I've never seen an encoding like it. Few other than a demon would be able to see exactly what's going on--the pattern you're looking for is subtle, and it's really buried deep in the matrix. I have to admire the skill of the encoder who wrote it, even if it's disgusting."

"Whoever he is, he's wildly talented, possibly beyond his own safety, and he shows a disregard for the safety of others unlike anything we've seen. Thanks be that Treasury has an encoder even better."

"I don't like it," shuddered the cat. "This is dangerous, Annie."

Annabelle tied the ribbons of her bonnet. "This is the job I signed up for. Besides, if I die, you go free--it's hardly dangerous for you! And on that cheerful note, let's be about

the people's business." Misi grimaced, the expression overly large for his pointed muzzle, but when Annabelle opened the window, he slipped outside without further comment and went patrolling across the rooftops.

Annabelle surveyed herself quickly in the mirror: a dove gray poplin with thin white stripes, modestly bustled, but very becoming. Her straw bonnet made a simple, perfect frame for her face, and she allowed one or two little tendrils of golden hair to escape on her forehead and at her nape. She was supposed to be a teacher, but Annabelle never could resist a bit of dash.

Meanwhile, down at the Sheriff's office, John Runnels was in conference with his brother. "Naw, I got a week," said Rabbit. "I'll be all right."

"Oh, I don't doubt it, Rab," said John. "I'm just sorry to put you on a ridiculous assignment."

"Nothing too ridiculous about someone threatening the new teacher, right, Jamie?" Rabbit ruffled his nephew's hair, but the boy ducked his head. "Aw, I know you don't wanna go to school, but you gotta, kiddo! How're you gonna learn your figures, and history, and letters and such?"

"Already know my letters," grumbled Jamie. "I wanna stay with you and Pa here in the jail."

"Have to own he's a powerful help, Sheriff," called a voice from the corner cell.

"Aloysius, I don't need your assistance," said John. "Go back to sleep."

"But I am a help, Pa!" cried the little boy. "I help feed everyone--"

"'Everyone' is two or three men most days, Jamie," retorted his uncle.

"--And I help you and Uncle Rabbit patrol! I've told you all kinds of things going on!"

"True, but I think we can manage without you, son. It'll be hard, but we'll struggle through. Besides, you can patrol just as easily in the schoolyard. We'll go down to Prakes and buy your slate and pencil later today."

"I can go get it myself," mumbled Jamie.

"Naw, you'll tuck yourself into Mr Parson's hayloft and then say you can't go to school on account of not having a slate and pencil," said Rabbit, just as the door opened and Miss Duniway came in. The men all stood up; Jamie shuffled his feet and tried to hide behind his father.

"Good morning, gentlemen--Jamie," she said.

My, she looked pretty this morning, thought John. Stunning, in fact; he couldn't take his eyes off her. He knew enough about feminine style to know that hers was completely modest and appropriate. And yet she wore it so well that he couldn't help imagining what was underneath, and how that luxurious, golden hair might look spilling down her bare back. He shook himself inwardly. Her beauty was almost enough to distract him from that overly observant look deep in her cornflower blue eyes...her bright, entrancing eyes-- It had been too long since he'd been with a woman, clearly. He smiled briefly, and said, "Good morning, Miss Duniway. Let me introduce my brother, Deputy Robert Runnels."

"Everyone calls me Rabbit, miss," said the deputy, rather awestruck. He took her offered hand and shook it.

"Very well then, Deputy Rabbit," she smiled. "I couldn't help but overhear when I came in. Do you not have a slate, Jamie?"

"Oh, he'll have a slate, in time for school next week," declared his father. Jamie himself hung back.

"What can we do for you, Miss Duniway?"

"I came to see Jamie, actually. Since I have a little more time than I thought I would, I'm visiting all of my new students at home." Jamie shook his head at her, scowling, and Annabelle knelt down to look at his face. "You seem a little shy. I was shy when I was a little girl," she coaxed.

"Not shy. I just don't like you," said the boy.

"Jamie," warned his father.

"M sorry," he grimaced.

"No, you're not," said Miss Duniway gently.

All three Runnels stared.

"You don't like me at all," she continued. "You don't want to go to school, and I'm the schoolteacher. Of course you don't like me. I wouldn't like me, either, if I were you."

"You wouldn't?"

"Mm-mm." Annabelle straightened up. "It's all right, Jamie. I hope that when you get to know me a little better, you'll decide maybe I'm all right for a girl." She smiled round the room. "I'll leave you gentlemen to your business. Goodbye, Jamie! Sheriff, Deputy."

The men said their goodbyes and watched her out the door. When she was gone, Rabbit gave his brother a sideways look and let out a soft whistle. "I'll say she's all right fer a girl!" said the voice in the corner cell.

"Be quiet, Aloysius," said Jamie. "Can I go find Georgie?"

"Go on, son," replied his father, still gazing in absent concentration at the door. Jamie ran out, and John sat down at his desk, tumblers in his mind trying and failing to fall into place and unlock a thought.

Rabbit gave him a sharp look. "Lookin' kinda ponderous, Johnny," said Rabbit.

"What's on your mind?"

"Miss Duniway."

"She'd be on anyone's mind, I'd think."

"No, no, Rab, something's not right with her. She's up to something. I can just smell it."

Rabbit snorted. "Can you, now. Well, then, if you're sniffing around her, I'll be sure to stay out of the way of your nose."

John turned to his brother, brows drawn tight. "It's not what you're thinking."

"Oh, isn't it!" said Rabbit. He opened the door. "I'd best go down to the schoolhouse, oughtn't I?"

Left alone, John put his feet up on the desk. What could Miss Duniway be doing here? To marry money? A woman that fine could do that back east and have a much more comfortable life to boot. Was she a Brinkerton? Why would anyone hire an undercover detective instead of coming to him? And what was her angle? However and wherever she'd come, he didn't want her here. He had enough trouble with respect for the law as it was without Brinkertons moving in.

"She got ya by the short hairs already, Sheriff?" came the voice from the corner cell.

"Will you shut up, Aloysius? Go haunt somewhere else for a while!"

"Cain't," answered the voice in pragmatic tones. "I'm fair stuck to the spot, I'm a-feared."

John sighed, rubbing his forehead. "Then hold your peace or I'll send for Parson Bill." Apparently cowed by that threat, the voice fell silent. No wonder the Indians never lived

in these parts, he thought for the tenth time that day. Hermetauxite encouraged the wrong sort of energy.

* * *

Episode 5: Most Honored Cat

Some smart aleck in the peanut gallery pointed out that I called Tony Bonham, Jed's oldest son in one part of this story, and Nathan Bonham, the oldest in another. Well, smart aleck, here's how it went: Nathan was the oldest, then came Tony, and then Jediah Junior, called Junior to his great frustration--his middle name was Franklin, and he could never get anyone to call him Frank. I called Tony the oldest because he was Jed's oldest child in town, Lily being quite a few years younger, Nathan being in New York City whooping it up on his daddy's money, and Junior still being in his fancy boarding school. That's my story, smart aleck, and I'm sticking to it.

Any other questions or comments? No? I could've wished my children paid this close attention when they were still home. Damn kids, never listen unless you're doing something you don't want them hearing, like your private time with your spouse. By the time they're out of the house, your private time with your spouse is more likely to sound like snoring than anything else.

But I digress.

When demons meet, it's always hard to tell if they're fighting or courting. Maybe it's the same thing, I dunno. Maybe they don't know either.

Mamzelle stood on the second floor balcony of the Palace, sipping her afternoon cafe au lait as she watched the hurly-burly crowds below. More than a few men tipped their hats to her; she gave them a lazy wave of her elegant hand, and a curl of her cherry lips that at a distance could be taken as a sultry smile.

Before Jed Bonham enslaved her, she had only the disdain for humanity carried by all her kind. But now, she hated the men below her, and this town, with all her black cherry heart, and Jed most of all. The day she was free was the day she would kill them all and burn Scryer's Gulch to the ground.

She leaned against the balustrade, and dreamed as usual of setting fire to the Palace. The fire would nibble at the draperies, then slither through the walls, licking at the foot of the stairs, lapping at the valleys of the roof until the shingles shivered and the beams spread for the tongues of flame. In her mind's eye she watched the blaze chase down the hallways, consuming the couples inside each room--the girls she always sent to a quick, merciful, crispy death, but the men she roasted slowly, picturing them screaming in agony as they cooked.

Finally, the fire would reach the door of her own luxurious apartment. She saw the doors collapse in smoking ash, and then the fire almost creeping, circling around the enormous, despised bed. Staked to the bed would be Jed Bonham, naked and struggling, or trying to struggle; real stakes would be involved, and she'd drive them in as the fire approached.

"Staked to the bed." That always made her giggle.

Would she un-man him first? Mamzelle wasn't sure. Perhaps. Demons didn't consider humans meat very often any more, but she might make an exception. Then again, the last

thing she wanted was the taste of Jed Bonham, ever again. She would watch her by-then-former master writhe and squeal like a little girl, pleading with her to have mercy and kill him cleanly, but no, she'd watch as the fire crawled up the bedcurtains, chewed up the silk sheets, and slowly, slowly burned Jed Bonham to death, his blood boiling, his hair flashing up all at once, his handsome, brutish face distorted in terror and agony...

Oh! Such a beautiful dream! Through all the days and nights she spent shackled to Bonham's whims, the dream warmed and sustained her.

And now, another demon was in Scryer's Gulch. Would it help her? But how could it? A demon here was either a slave or about to become enslaved; a free demon around this much hermetauxite would be ecstatic but defenseless in minutes. She wished she could say she'd been young and stupid when she came to bask in the deposits after the white man found them, but no, only stupid. Arrogant and stupid.

Mamzelle returned her gaze to the street and reached out her senses into the crowds, hoping to see which one of the men might be the other demon. A good number of the men were strangers--so many arrived every day to try their luck, or to rob another man of his luck. But while some of them could be called demonic, none were her mystery demon. She closed her eyes, just before a jolt of recognition raised the downy hair on her arms. Not from the street--from nearby, quite nearby. Had it come into the Palace? It had--it was inside the Palace!

She bolted from the balcony, shattering her dainty coffee cup. Cafe au lait dripped down the front of the Palace as Mamzelle raced down the broad staircase, through the front rooms and the casino, scattering astonished clients and startled girls as she chased the thread of awareness to the back of the house. The kitchens? She dashed through the double doors into the steam and sweat, and stared wildly around her.

The head cook and his two assistants broke into agitated Chinese before the cook shushed them and said, "Miss Mamzelle okie dokie?"

"I'm fine, Chen," she answered in Chinese. "Has anyone--a stranger--come through here in the last few minutes?" Speaking Chinese was such a luxury; she didn't have to use the stupid accent Jed liked when she spoke Chinese, but now she didn't have time to savor it.

"No see nobody, Miss!" said Chen. In Chinese, he added, "I'm practicing my English, ma'am. It's a very hard language, especially after years spent studying my own." He shook his head. "A soul stuffed with the most elegant poetry of my people, and I end up frying eggs in a gwai-lo's bordello."

"Yes, yes, Chen, but is anyone possibly hiding in here!" she shouted.

He drew himself up all dignified and said, "I say it! No see nobody, Miss!"

Mamzelle made a search of the kitchen all the same, shooing cooks out of the way and a straggling girl back to the front of the house. No one. But she could feel it, right here in the room! She sensed eyes on her, and looked down.

There by the open door was a black cat with saucer-shaped amber eyes, chin white and dripping from a saucer of milk. "When did that cat arrive?" she demanded.

"I apologize profusely, ma'am," said Chen with a deep bow. "I am afraid I cannot resist cats, especially polite ones. This is a very polite cat. And we have mice. I thought--"

"Eet's all right, Chen," Mamzelle replied in English. "Jus' fine--okie dokie." She and the cat never took their eyes off one another. One by one, the hairs on the cat's back rose,

and it arched; Mamzelle's eyes turned a strange shade of red, and her incisors bit slightly into her lower lip. "Kitty, kitty," she cooed menacingly. "I wonder what I'd do eef you slipped into my room via deh front balcony. Such a sweet petit chat, I might eat you up." She looked over her shoulder at Chen, who instinctively backed away at her changed eyes and longer teeth. "Chen, you may give this cat whatever it wants, but don't tell Mr Bonham about it. He hates cats."

"Demon no eat cat, dui?" he asked, polishing his shaking hands with his apron.

"Demon no eat cat," she mocked, then relented. "No, I won't eat the cat, Chen."

Chen stopped wiping his hands, and cocked his head sideways, looking west across water he could not see, as he often did. "A poem I recall," he intoned, "by most honored Song poet Mei Yaochen*:

When I had my Five White cat,
The rats did not invade my books.
This morning Five White died,
I sacrifice with rice and fish--

"Chen, I have not deh time. I'm sure eet's a very nice poem." Mamzelle gave the cat a last, hard look. "Come upstairs some time an' see me, petit chat. I'm sure we have much to talk about."

Misi watched her leave the kitchen, the hair on his back still on end. He recovered himself enough to lick his chops and rub against Chen's legs in thanks before bounding out of the kitchen. Wow! What a demon! he marveled as he chased over the rooftops in elation. Never had he seen such perfect red eyes, such beautiful sharp teeth! Boy! You bet I'm gonna be coming up to see you some time, babe! Dammit, why do I have to be a cat? He paid no attention to where he was going, exulting in the sun on his back and the sheer joy of running on four legs, until he pulled up short.

Mamzelle was owned. She knew who and what he was. Judging by her abode, and the form she took, she belonged to Jed Bonham. If her master asked her, would she give him away? Oh, Dark One--Annabelle! I've put Annabelle at risk! He looked around wildly, but saw no sign of her on the street, nor at Hopewell's when he raced back to peer in the window of their rooms. Was he already too late? Had Mamzelle given them up already? What should I do?

*This is a real poem! <http://www.chinese-poems.com/myc5.html>

* * *

[Episode 6: One-Way Cat Fight](#)

You know, I'm getting too old and crotchety to tell stories like this. I might be back, but I don't feel like saying much today. I don't feel so good.

* * *

While Misi stood on the windowsill at Hopewell's worrying about Annabelle, she herself was still visiting students. She'd met Jamie Runnels and the Prake twins, and the two children of L.L. Lockson, publisher of the Voice of the Gulch. Now she walked back

up the boardwalk toward the great mansion on the hill to acquaint herself with Lily Bonham.

Just past Prake's Hardware, her detector bracelet buzzed and pricked at her wrist. She returned to the store, masking her excitement as she pretended to windowshop; the sensation faded. She strolled back up the street until the pricking became nearly unbearable: it came from the ethergraph office.

The door swung open and Simon Prake came barreling out, just avoiding a collision. "Oh--! Miss Duniway, please forgive me! I'm terribly sorry, I'm--I have an urgent ethergram to deliver to Mr Bonham."

"I'm calling on the Bonhams myself, Mr Prake," she smiled up at him.

"Please, then," he said, "let me escort you."

She took his proffered arm, and they walked toward the Bonham mansion. Such a pretty young man; she always had a soft spot for the boyish ones. If Simon were the source of the disturbance, charm or no she'd have to take him in, but the thought saddened her.

"What business brings you to Jed Bonham, if I may ask?" said Simon.

"You sound like Sheriff Runnels," she said. "He's always asking me questions like that!"

"I'm sorry--that was impertinent, wasn't it?"

"You're forgiven," Annabelle laughed. "I'm not calling on Mr Bonham. I hope to meet his daughter, Lily, and her mother."

"Bonham's wife, you mean," said Simon, his lips thinning. "Mrs Bonham isn't much of a mother to Lily. Lily's my sister Amelia's best friend, and my own mother tries...but I shouldn't gossip."

"I'm beginning to wonder about you, Mr Prake," Annabelle teased. "Impertinent questions, gossip. Is the ethergraph business so very slow?"

"Not at all," he grinned. "It's a very exciting business. Most days I have plenty to do, and then on the few days when I'm not as busy, I have my own projects to work on."

"Oh?" she prompted. She knew very well he was more than just an ethergraph operator; he was a highly skilled engineer, but she wouldn't let that knowledge slip.

"You see, I'm working on this new way of encoding hermetauxite for use in ethergraphy--I'm so very close! If I can just--"

He stopped abruptly, and Annabelle followed his icy gaze. There in the middle of the boardwalk before the Hotel LeFay stood Tony Bonham, coatless but otherwise elegant, a small diamond winking from his silk cravat. Tony gave Annabelle a very civil bow, but all he gave Simon was the briefest of nods. "Do you have an ethergram for me, Prake?" he said.

"It's for a Bonham, but not for you," snapped Simon.

Tony ignored him. "Miss Duniway, I haven't seen you since your arrival. I hope the town agrees with you? This business at the school hasn't troubled you too much, I hope?"

"Oh, no, not at all, Mr Bonham. Teachers are accustomed to resistance from their pupils, of all kinds. Were I to let a few misspelled words bother me, I'd have quit the profession before I began it!"

"And your accommodations? The Hotel LeFay's offer of lodgings still stands, miss."

"You're very kind," she said, watching Simon's darkening face out of the corner of her eye, "but I'm well-established at Hopewell's. Perhaps I might ask the parents to add a little room onto the schoolhouse for me."

"Even so--"

"The lady said she's fine, Bonham, drop it," grated Simon.

"You're an ethergraph operator. Don't you have an ethergraph to operate?" hissed Tony. "Miss Duniway, if you'd prefer some refreshment to standing in the street...?"

"You're very kind," she said again, "but Mr Prake was just walking me up to your father's house, to see Lily and your mother."

"My mother?" stared Tony. "Oh--you mean the current Mrs Bonham. My mother's buried in the Methodic Church graveyard, Miss Duniway. I have no other mother. But you will perhaps take tea with me some time soon?"

"Hardly the thing for a bachelor to invite an unmarried lady to tea, Bonham, don't you think?" said Simon.

"Forgive me, Miss Duniway," said Tony. "No offense was intended. Our ways are less formal here. Sometimes Mr Prake lapses into small town conventionalities. Until later, then," he ended, an inviting glance directed at Annabelle and a more sullen one directed at Simon.

Annabelle and Simon walked on toward the mansion in silence; she could feel the muscles in his arm, corded and tense as if to strike out at someone. "I suppose you're wondering what that was all about," said Simon in time.

"To ask, I felt, was to pry, sir," she murmured.

"True enough, I suppose, though I wouldn't have taken it that way. Tony Bonham playing the sophisticate galls me, to say the least. My education is better than his, and he knows it. Money doesn't always make for quality, Papa says, and the Bonhams are the best example of that I can think of!" His face looked anything but boyish, and if looks really smoldered, the Bonham mansion would have turned into a heap of ashes on the spot. He must have felt Annabelle's quiet regard, for he looked down at her, blushing. "Tony accused me of over-caution in my conduct, but I fear, Miss Duniway, that I too often speak my mind without enough regard for convention."

"I have a few engineers among my acquaintance, Mr Prake," she smiled. "Bluntness seems to be a common thread among them."

"True enough! Well, here we are." Simon knocked on the door, and Annabelle surreptitiously straightened her bracelet. She'd felt not a single tickle since they'd left the ethergraph office, and she wondered if this plain-spoken, handsome young man could really be the one she sought. How sad that would be.

The door swung open. "Yes?" sniffed an older woman in a plain black dress.

"Good afternoon, Mrs Walters," began Simon.

"Are you expected?" the woman interrupted.

"Are ethergrams usually expected?" he said in irritation. "I have an ethergram for Mr Bonham. That's my only business."

"And your lady...friend?"

Annabelle stiffened at the implied insult.

"I'm surprised you don't know our new schoolteacher. She's here to meet Lily and Mrs Bonham. Could you announce her, please, and tell Mr Bonham I have an

ethergram--" he ignored the housekeeper's reach-- "to be delivered to his own hand? I can entrust it to no one else, ma'am."

Mrs Walters sniffed again, but showed them both into the front parlor.

The room should have been bright and airy, with its tall windows overlooking the town. But its dark paneling and oppressive level of ostentation left Annabelle longing to be back in her simple rooms. A restless, uncouth hand had selected the furnishings, all different styles and time periods, but marked as expensive even by the untrained eye. Every tabletop struggled under the burden of a thousand little gewgaws, each proclaiming its owner's magnificence if not his taste.

Into this rich confusion came the Bonhams. Simon handed Jed the ethergram, while Lily greeted her new teacher affectionately. Mrs Bonham stood unmoving to one side. She wore a gas-green silk dress that played up her lush figure and the waves of dark red hair framing her beautiful, dissatisfied face.

Annabelle cast her mind over her files. Mrs Bonham was some years younger than her husband, a beauty who claimed to be from Chicago, though on investigation no one in its top social circles seemed to know who the former Charity Grant was.

Charity's gray eyes met Annabelle's blue ones with an appraising glance Annabelle knew too well; it told her there was room for only one great beauty in Scryer's Gulch, and it was Charity Bonham. Annabelle simply ducked her head in an outward show of shyness and submission, and focused on little Lily's artless prattling.

Meanwhile, Simon took Jed's signature in his receipt book, and excused himself in short order with one backward smile at Annabelle. Jed followed the smile, and joined his little daughter at Annabelle's side. He shook Annabelle's hand, and reluctantly released it; she felt Charity's hot gaze leveled at her in response. Throughout the conversation with Lily, Charity stood beside the sofa and chairs, unspeaking, unmoving but for the increasing swell of her breast, while Jed spared her not a glance. He focused entirely on Annabelle, commenting on her charming bonnet, inquiring whether he could send her a hamper to augment the lamentable food at Hopewell's (he could not), and generally doing his best to fluster a pretty young schoolteacher.

Annabelle pondered whether she should play that part, but decided her own honest reaction was best; she deflected every attempt at flirtation with a cool but friendly demeanor, ignoring anything with the least hint of impropriety. She kept waiting for an introduction to Mrs Bonham, but when one wasn't forthcoming, she sighed inwardly and said, "Mrs Bonham, I should very much like to hear your concerns for Lily's schooling."

"My concerns for Lily's schooling?" erupted Charity. "My only concern was to send her away! I'm sure," she continued, recovering herself, "that you are a fine teacher, Miss Duniway, but it cannot be thought that the rough life here at Scryer's Gulch can be good for the refinement of a young lady like our Lily."

The girl in question looked up at her stepmother with grave eyes. "Now, sweetheart," her father said, taking her hands. "We're not sending you away. I'd never send my own, my only Lily far from me, now would I?" The little girl shook her head. He put his arm around her and pulled her close to his side; she snuggled in with a sigh, and he kissed the top of her head. Charity clenched her hands, and for a moment, Annabelle wondered just how safe little Lily was in her own home.

Annabelle left the Bonham mansion and returned to Hopewell's. As she untied her bonnet strings, she heard a frantic scratching at the window. She opened it, and Misi came flying into her arms. "O DARK ONE, ANNIE, ARE YOU ALRIGHT?" he yowled.

"Be quiet, you simpleminded cat!" she whispered, detaching his claws one by one from her bodice. "This is my nice poplin!"

"I was so worried!" whimpered the cat.

"Calm down, what's happened?"

Misi related his encounter with Mamzelle. "If she knows who I am, she'll tell her owner, and then the jig is up!"

Annabelle put her bonnet away and patted her hair as she thought. "So Jed Bonham has a demon, running a brothel? Why would he waste a demon like that?"

"Aren't you at all worried? She knows who I am! Annie, we should be packing!"

"How would she know who you are?"

"What?"

"How many black cats do you suppose there are in Scryer's Gulch?"

Misi looked at her blankly. "A half-dozen that I've seen. But Annie, she can tell us apart, I swear she can."

"Come here, kitty," she said, sitting down and smoothing her lap; Misi jumped up, putting his front paws on her shoulders and his head against her neck.

"I was so scared for you, Annie."

"I know, sweetie. Answer me this: if the tables were turned, and you found a captive demon, would you tell me?"

"I'd have to if you made me."

"Yes, but you try all the time not to tell me what I want to know as a point of pride."

"True, but you always smoke me out."

"Ah, that's because I'm a professional! I've had you eight years now. How long do you think Bonham's had Mamzelle?"

Misi considered. "We didn't talk much, but just from her attitude, not long, I think. The sign out front of the Palace says it was established two years ago, so I'm thinking at least that, but not much more. You think she might hold out on him somehow?"

"If you were her, what would you do?"

"Hold out on him any way I could. And plot his slow, horrible death nine ways to Sunday. I plot yours, you know," he added self-consciously.

"I know you do, pussycat," she soothed, scratching him behind the ears until he flexed his paws helplessly. "I know you do."

* * *

[Episode 7: An Accusation](#)

So you're back, huh? Well, it's a good story. I think I might be keeping you from reading it. I get so wrapped up in all this stuff I know about the Old West, about how the Brinkertons would come in and take over a town, how girls would arrive thinking they were getting a nice job as a maid or something and get stuck in a whorehouse, all the exciting discoveries in technology that came straight out of the western expansion. Can you imagine a time when 35 miles per hour was breakneck?

But I digress.

The thing is, I worry that all my jabbering is more like a lecture. Well, it is. So I might stick my oar in from time to time from now on, but mostly, I'm just gonna get out of the way. That's what happens when you're old. You just get in the way.

* * *

The first day of school arrived. Georgie and Amelia stopped next door to pick up Jamie, who stood in the small garden, feet firmly planted, his uncle Rabbit even more firmly pushing him out the gate. "No arguments! If we catch you--and you know we'll catch you--your Pa will whip you till your behind lights up Main Street! And I'll just stand there and laugh, you watch me."

"C'mon, Jamie, it won't be so bad," said Amelia.

"Says you," he scowled.

"Jamie, c'mon," said Georgie. He grabbed his friend by the collar and marched him down the street toward the schoolhouse. "I see Lily in the schoolyard, Amelia, go on ahead." His sister ran to meet her best friend, leaving Georgie alone with Jamie. "Now, listen, Jamie, you can't do that again."

"Do what?"

"You know very well what! Harry Lockson's only six, which leaves you and me. No one'll think it's you, you're the sheriff's son. Which leaves me. T'ain't fair! If you're gonna do stuff like that, you should be a man, and not blame it on other folks!"

"I didn't do nothin, an I ain't blamin it on anyone!"

"Now, I ain't sayin it wasn't a fine thing. Made me laugh, anyway! But I'm still in trouble from tying Mr Hopewell's shoelaces together at our house when he wasn't paying attention. That was funny," Georgie said, his face full of fond memories.

"I didn't do nothin."

"Aw, c'mon, Jamie!"

By now the two boys had reached the schoolyard. Miss Duniway stood in the door ringing the bell; it was time for class. They walked past the rebuilt fence and into the repainted schoolhouse.

As soon as they entered, Annabelle's bracelet pricked at her wrist; she hid her surprise. "Children, please sit down. Little ones to the front, older ones to the back. I'll return in a moment."

"Wonder where she's going," she heard Georgie whisper to Jamie.

"Maybe she's gotta pee," said Harry Lockson. Georgie and Jamie guffawed. "But maybe she does!" Harry repeated in earnest concern.

Annabelle rolled her eyes, and walked quickly up and down the street, as if looking for errant pupils; her bracelet made not a tickle. The schoolhouse stood off to itself enough that she knew nothing came from a nearby building. No, it was in the schoolhouse, and it came from either Jamie or Georgie.

Neither of them were old enough to be fooling with the magical structure of hermetauxite--but someone in their families might be. Simon Prake was already on her short list of suspects; she sadly added another mark against him.

Now, she had the Runnels to consider, too. Sheriff John didn't check out as at all trained in the engineering way, but she'd had bigger surprises. Deputy Rabbit was a blank

slate; he hadn't shown up in her research at all. She returned to the schoolhouse and began the lesson, wincing to herself every time she passed Georgie and Jamie's bench.

The schoolday ended, just in time for Annabelle's patience to give out. Teaching a couple of squirming benches full of children was not as easy as she'd thought; as she entered her rooms, she sighed in relief at the relative quiet.

She'd savored it a full minute when Misi came tearing through the window. "Well? How'd it go?" he yowled. She recounted the day, and Misi whistled through his sharp teeth. "A kid, huh?"

"No, of course not! It's a member of the family, if it's really one of them."

"Not looking good for that Prake fellow, Annie."

"No." She worried her lip. "I really don't want it to be him, kitty."

"Hm, sweet on him, are we? I'd've thought the sheriff was more your type. Tight-jawed lawman and all that."

Annabelle ignored him. "What's going on around town?"

"A drunk guy knocked another drunk guy over the head down at the Lucky Pint. Now drunk guy number one is in the jailhouse, and Doc Horridge is standing vigil over drunk guy number two. He's not expected to make it, so we may have a hanging. Um, lessee. Oh! Chen gave me two chicken hearts! I like that man, even if he is a man!"

"I'm sure that was splendid for you. I meant, what's going on that might pertain to our reason for being here."

"Oh, that," he grimaced. "Annie, that stuff tastes so bad!"

"Next time go on patrol first, and then finagle chicken hearts out of sympathetic cooks. Well?"

"It's all over the ethergraph office. I saw traces at the assayer's office, too--actually traces all over town but nothing I could pinpoint. I can't get a really good whiff unless I'm right on top of it, and then, you know, it leaves me a little vulnerable." He shivered his whiskers. "But it's strongest at the ethergraph office."

"All right, then." Annabelle fetched her valise and brought it into the bedroom, where the curtains were closed. Carefully, she reached inside and pulled out a false bottom; within it was a small black book. "I need to send Chief Howman a message, Misi. Be quiet while I work out the code." She carried it back to the sitting room and began a complicated scribbling, flipping through the cipher book as she went.

Misi fell asleep, purring in the patch of sun from the sitting room window. When the patch shifted, leaving him in shadow, he woke up and stretched. Annabelle was just closing the book back up in the false bottomed valise; she wore her gloves and bonnet. "Where are you off to?"

"The ethergraph office. I'm sending a message to my 'Cousin Daniel' filled with all my news. I don't know how he's going to take our current hot suspect being an eight-year-old boy!"

"I'll be right here when you get back," yawned Misi. Once the door closed, he moved to the new patch of sun and promptly fell back asleep.

Meanwhile at the jailhouse, Jamie Runnels sat on the bench by the corner cell, kicking his legs. "I hate school, Aloysius," he said. "Did you hate it?"

"Cain't say whether I hated it er not, son," said the voice. "Never went. Mighta liked to. Woulda been nice to read, an sign my name as more'na X."

"But you got by, didn't you?"

"If'n you call this gettin by. Didn't really see myself stuck in a jailhouse cell fer all eternity. Didn't see it as my fate. Buuut I doubt school woulda helped me avoid this'n." Jamie pulled a little nugget out of his pocket, rolling it in his fingers. "Watcha got there, son?"

Jamie put it back. "Nothin."

"Aw, now, Jamie, you know ol' Aloysius ain't gonna tell nobody."

"What about that guy over there?"

"Him? He ain't even woke up yet. They're prolly gonna hang him by the neck anyways. Shore hope he don't end up here. Bad enough without gettin crowded to boot. Watcha got?"

Jamie crunched himself up in the corner, trying to get close even though there was nothing to get close to. "It's a piece of hermetauxite!" he whispered. "Found it just lyin there in the street by the ethergraph office!"

Aloysius let out a low whistle. "That's a fine thing, Jamie! Watcha gonna do with it?"

"Just keep it. I like lookin at it. I feel funny when I hold it in my hand, like I'm stronger or somethin."

"You be careful, Jamie Runnels. Who knows what's been spelled into that thing."

"It ain't been spelled on, Aloysius, it's just a nugget! My nugget. Don't tell!"

"I promised I wouldn't, didn't I?"

"All right, then." Jamie sat in the corner, throwing it up and catching it, until it was time for supper.

* * *

Episode 8: A Confession

Annabelle felt the same tingle at her wrist the next day when Georgie and Jamie entered the schoolroom together. Jamie's grim face and Georgie's flushed one told her the boys had been arguing.

When it came time for the children to go home to lunch, she asked Georgie to stay behind. "I don't know anything about it!" he blurted as soon as the other children were gone.

"Don't know anything about what, Georgie?" she said, narrowing her eyes.

"The school, miss. That's why you wanted to talk to me, weren't it?"

"'Wasn't it,' Georgie, and no, that's not why I wanted to talk to you. But as long as we're on the subject, what is it about the school that you don't know?"

Georgie's already-florid face burned even hotter. "I thought you wanted to know about who might've done that to the school, miss."

"And why would I think you'd know anything about it, Georgie?"

"Why...well, I thought...I mean, none of the girls coulda done it. I'm a boy, and so's Jamie and Harry, and...I mean, I thought you'd think it was one of us three."

"Was it?" said Annabelle, giving him a hard, but sympathetic look.

"I don't know, Miss Duniway," answered Georgie, swallowing.

"I see." Annabelle stood up from her desk. "Well, Georgie, if you do hear anything, you be sure to tell me or Sheriff Runnels right away, all right? Now go along home for your lunch." Georgie fled the schoolroom.

Annabelle fetched her lunch pail and sat back down to eat. Nary a tingle from her detector bracelet. If Georgie had the infected hermatauxite, he didn't have it with him now--or the vibration came from Jamie.

When the children returned from lunch, the tingling began again, and this time, she asked Jamie to stay behind to help her clean the chalkboard after school. Jamie sullenly took the erasers from her for beating outside, and her bracelet pricked her so hard she had to suppress a wince: It was definitely coming from Jamie.

Jamie returned more cheerfully, covered with a thin white dusting of chalk and very clean erasers. Beating something must have lifted his spirits; Annabelle praised his work, and he even gave her a shy smile. "If you apply yourself to your studies the way you applied yourself to those erasers, you'll be an etheric engineer some day," she said.

Jamie shrugged. "Don't think I wanna be that anyhow."

"Oh? You're not interested in magical technology? It's such an exciting time to study it. Is anyone in your family of that mind?"

"Naw," said Jamie. "We don't like that sorta stuff. We're all lawmen! That's what I wanna be, just like my Pa, and Uncle Rab. Can I go now?"

She sent him scampering home, a frown creasing her brow. She believed Jamie, but it might be time to get a little closer to the sheriff. She squelched the small voice inside that said getting close to the sheriff might be mixing business with pleasure.

Misi, on the other hand, had no such qualms. His mission, as he saw it, was to get closer to Mamzelle, and do it in a way that wouldn't endanger Annabelle. He might have to tell Annabelle the truth, and Mamzelle might have to tell Bonham the truth, but they could both lie to one another as much as they liked. He would just lie to her about whose demon he was.

Misi slunk along the rooflines, much preferred to picking through the alleyway muck, or dodging among the horses' hooves on the street. Too many other cats under the boardwalks to go that way, either. He didn't want to fight cats, or more precisely, he didn't want to kill them; he liked cats, but he certainly wasn't going to let one tear a chunk out of his ear or bite him on the head. Territorial little bastards. He crept onto the Palace roof, then down to the balcony.

He heard nothing from her room but her own even breathing--no human breath or heartbeat, no human smell, only the deep red vibration of his demon sense. He peeped through the open doors; as expected, she was alone, watching for him. She lay on a red velvet chaise lounge, her opulent body draped in a white satin negligee, her black hair loose around her exotic face. "Allo, kitty," she said. Her eyes turned an alluring ruby, and Misi licked his lips.

"Hello yourself, gorgeous," he grinned, strolling into the room.

"And oo's kitty are you, ehn?"

"Oh, that'd be telling."

"Ah, you're unfair to poor Mamzelle. You know my master. I should know yours."

"I have no master."

"Mon petit chaton, I wasn't born last millennium."

"You don't know my owner."

"I would like to meet heem."

"I'm sure you would, gorgeous, but you should be more interested in getting to know me." Misi jumped up on the table beside her. "It'd be better for both of us. Let me introduce myself. I'm Misiriplinapos Son of Misorianatus."

"And I am Mamzellarrainatta Daughter of Zelliniasipatiri," she replied, dropping the false accent. "Ow long has it been for you?" she added, taking it back up again.

"Eight years. You?" said Misi, rubbing his cheek against the chaise lounge.

Mamzelle took the hint and scratched him under the chin. "Forever, or a year. Take your pick. Eight years! Dieu Noir, 'ow 'ave you not gone insane!" She picked him up and put him on her lap. "You cannot change form? Eh bien, nor can I, except ze color of my hair, my eyes." Her hair cycled through red, brown, the palest blonde, white, and back to black. "E prefers blonde. Eef he orders it, blonde. Otherwise? Pfft." She waved her hand. "So. We have common cause, you an' I. Plans to make, ehn? We shall 'elp each ozzer."

Misi purred and flexed his toes as she scratched at the base of his tail. "Help each other how?"

"Trés simple. I kill your master...and you kill mine."

Misi stopped purring, his fur standing on end. With great effort, he smoothed it back down and resumed purring.

"What is amiss, mon petit?" she frowned.

"Nothing! You just surprised me. Yes, we will make plans, you and I." *What have I gotten myself into? I can't let her kill Annabelle!*

* * *

[Episode 9: Rabbit's Time of the Month](#)

Misi had almost fallen asleep in Mamzelle's lap, when she said, "Well?"

"Well what?" yawned the demon cat.

"Ow are we going to keel our masters?"

"Ah. That. Yes." Think fast, old boy. "Yes. There's a problem with that."

"Eh?"

"I'm under orders...general orders...not to kill humans." It's even true! he thought, though it hurt his pride to confess to such a weakness. It's so humilitating, being owned!

"Any human?" said Mamzelle in astonishment.

"Only allowed to kill humans my master wants dead," said Misi. Annabelle had only told him to kill one man, many years ago, and there really hadn't been any way around it; it was either him or them.

"Not me," said Mamzelle.

"Oh? Why haven't you killed everyone in town but Bonham? At least his family."

"E would make me suffer for it, and I am under orders not to keel his family, which pains me already. I wish to scrrratch out the eyes of dat Charity very much so. No, he tells me, keel if you need to, even if you want to, but be discreet." She shrugged. "Now and again, you just have to keel someone, *ehn?* So I keel someone nobody will miss--a newcomer--'ow d'you say--a greenhorn. Once a month, I go hunting--tonight, yes, I weel go! De humans think it is a giant wolf. Or a wolf-man. *Mais non, ç'est moi*, but I keep to de full moon. I play wit' dem. 'Oo knows," she added with a mischievous look. "Maybe we do have a wolf-man."

Down at the jailhouse, Rabbit and John stared glumly at the calendar. "Tonight?" said John.

"Yep," said Rabbit. "I guess there's no way around it."

"I got company fer the night, then?" said the voice in the corner cell.

"Shut up, Aloysius," the men responded automatically.

"I hate that cage."

"So do I, Rab," said John, "but I don't know how else to deal with it."

"Nope, neither do I. I wish I'd never been bit!"

"If wishes were horses, beggars would ride, little brother."

The door banged open and Jamie came running in, chalk dust still covering the tops of his trousers. "Where you been, to the bakery?" said his uncle.

"Huh?" said Jamie. He stared down his front, then beat at his clothes. "Dang erasers."

"Don't swear, son," said his father. "Beating erasers for Miss Duniway, huh? You must like her at least a little bit."

"I had to, she asked me to, an you told me to do as she says," sniffed Jamie. "I still don't like her. She's askin me and Georgie all kinds of questions."

"Oh?" said John, sitting down on the edge of his desk. "Like what?"

"I dunno. She asked Georgie about if he knew who tore up the schoolyard."

"Does he?" said John.

"Naw, nobody knows who done it! He keeps tryin to make me confess, an Pa, I didn't do nothin!"

"I believe you, son," reassured his father. "What other questions? What did she ask you?"

Jamie scratched his head with the hand that held his lunch pail. "She asked me if I wanted to be an etheric engineer, if you can picture it! She asked if anyone in the family was interested in that stuff and I said, no, we're lawmen! And that's what I wanna be, Pa, so I still don't know how come I hafta go to stupid Miss Duniway's stupid school!"

"Stop right there, young man, or it's the shed!" warned John.

"Aw, I'm sorry, Pa, don't switch me," said Jamie, hanging his head. He glanced up at the calendar, put down his lunch pail and walked over to his uncle, taking his hand. "Hey, Uncle Rab--it's tonight, isn't it?" At Rabbit's nod, he said, "I'm powerful sorry, Uncle Rab. I wish this didn't happen to you."

"If wishes were horses," smiled Rabbit. "Can't be helped, Jamie. Say, tell me what's going on down to the ostler's. You been down that way today?"

As Rabbit and Jamie talked on, John fell into a brown study. That was certainly an odd question for Miss Duniway to ask. No one in the Runnels family had the sort of education you'd need to be an etheric engineer--that was clear to anyone who knew them. Why would she ask such a thing? He wondered where it fit into her game, if she had a game.

And the schoolhouse vandalism still niggled at him. It was a boy's prank. No one else would have a motive to do it. It couldn't have been Jamie--he was too small to have torn out those pickets. So was Harry Lockson. There were a few other children--one or two out in the minefields, a Chinese boy, and then a couple of the working girls who used to live at the Hopewell had children. The miners' children were working and wouldn't be

allowed to come; the Chinese boy didn't speak English; and the whores' kids were just babies.

That left Georgie Prake. Perhaps it was time to pay a visit to the Prakes.

At the mayor's house, Mrs Prake and Amelia stood at the kitchen table, sorting through a basket of clothes just back from the laundress. "Go through the shirts to look for mending, Amelia," said Mrs Prake as she separated out the clothing into piles for each member of the family. "I do wish the laundress would do the sorting for us. How hard can it be, after all? She's already seen every inch of these things. Unfolding and refolding everything like this..."

"Here's something, Mama," said Amelia, holding up a shirt of Georgie's.

"Where does it need mending, dear?" asked Mrs Prake, her back still to her daughter.

"T'isn't mending, Mama, there's a stain on the cuff."

"A stain? That laundress! I declare!" Mrs Prake turned around and took the shirt. There on the cuff was a splotch of black paint. "Well, what on earth--! That Georgie! I've a mind to dress that boy in calico shirts like a miner if he's going to stain things like this. Where would that have come from?"

"Where did what come from?" said Georgie from the doorway. He froze when he saw the shirt in his mother's hand. "I put that under my bed!"

"Which is where I fished it out from when it came time to take the laundry," said Amelia with her nose in the air.

"You should have brought this to me straight away, Master Prake," chided his mother as she scratched at the stain. "I might've gotten this out before it set. Oh--perhaps not! Is this paint? How did you get paint on your shirt? Have you been hanging around those sign painters again? I told you those men are drunkards and not to go near them!"

"No, ma'am!"

"Where'd this paint come from, if you weren't hanging around those rascals?" she demanded.

A knock at the door interrupted them. Mrs Prake took off her bib apron and patted her hair as she bustled to the door. "Why, Sheriff Runnels, how nice to see you!" floated back into the kitchen.

Georgie made a snap decision: He snatched the shirt off the kitchen table and ran out the back door, leaving Amelia squeaking "Georgie Prake, where are you going?"

* * *

Episode 10: A Jailbird

The door of Simon's ethergraph office banged open, and a breathless Georgie stampeded in. "Simon! Can I hide here?"

"What have you done now? Close the door, madcap!"

The door banged shut. "Nothin--well, they think I've done somethin, but I haven't, I swear I haven't!"

"Come into the back room," sighed Simon, getting up from his desk. "But you have to tell me what's going on. What's with the shirt?"

"Mama's mad at me because I got a stain on the stupid thing," said the solid boy, stumping behind his brother into the back of the office. "I wouldn't mind if she did dress

me in calico like a miner, then I wouldn't have to worry so much about keepin my cuffs clean!"

"Let me see that."

"No!" he cried, snatching it behind himself. "I'm tellin ya, it's nothin!"

"It's a smudge of black paint, Georgie, I've seen it already." Simon crossed his arms. "You sure it's nothing?"

An echo of his name penetrated through the back wall of the office from the alley, and the anxious Georgie said, "Look, you gonna let me hide here or what?"

"Stay put, short pint," said Simon with a quelling look. Georgie sat down meekly on the floor next to Simon's workbench, and his brother returned to the front of the office to his work.

"Georgie!" called Mrs Prake through the back streets of town. "Georgie, you come back here! Sheriff Runnels wants to talk to you!"

John swallowed an exasperated breath, but now that she'd said it, he called, "Georgie! You're not in trouble, son, I just want to talk to you! That's all!"

Twenty minutes of fruitless searching, and the seekers returned to the mayor's house. Mrs Prake said, "Amelia, do you have any idea where he went?"

"No..." said Amelia, worrying her bottom lip.

"Truly?"

Amelia tugged on the end of one fat brown braid. "I don't, but I bet Simon does."

On application, Simon said he knew exactly where Georgie was, and pulled him by the ear out of the back of the ethergraph office. "I figured I'd let him hide here until someone came looking for him. That way, I'd know where he was."

"Aw, you're a fink, Simon Prake!" said the outraged Georgie.

"And you're a rascal, Georgie Prake, who apparently has some explaining to do," replied his brother. "Where's that shirt of yours?"

"What shirt?" grumbled Georgie.

Simon disappeared into the back room and came out with the wadded-up shirt. "This one."

"I didn't mess up the schoolhouse, I swear I didn't!" blurted Georgie.

"No one said you did, son," frowned the Sheriff. "But now that you mention it, what can you tell me about it?"

"Georgie," gasped his mother. "You've gotten into some scrapes, but I never dreamed--oh, Sheriff, you don't really think he did it?"

"Well, now, I don't know. There're only so many people who'd want to scare off the schoolteacher, and the suspicion is they're all under five feet tall. You're a big boy, Georgie. Strong, like your Pa. Strong enough to pull off pickets, perhaps?"

Georgie blinked back tears. "I didn't do it! Please someone believe me, I didn't do it!"

Sheriff Runnels nodded slowly. "We're going to the jailhouse, Georgie."

"Surely that's not necessary, Sheriff!" said the boy's mother.

"Afraid so, Mrs Prake. If you'll accompany us?" The Sheriff took Georgie by the scruff and marched him out of the office, down the boardwalk to the jail, the boy snuffling and miserable and feeling every eye on him in undeserved condemnation.

When they came in, Jamie was sitting in the corner talking to thin air. He jumped up, put something in his pocket, and returned Georgie's indignant glare with one of his own.

"What's goin on?" he said.

"In here, Georgie," said the Sheriff. He ushered his young prisoner into a cell and locked the door. "Mrs Prake, a word," he said, escorting the shocked woman outside. Once there, he said, "Now, ma'am, I'm just trying to frighten him a little. Georgie is a good boy, we both know that, but we can't have him tearing up the schoolyard just because he doesn't want to go to school."

"No, of course not," said Mrs Prake, dabbing her wet eyes. "But Sheriff--John! He wanted to go to school! He's been looking forward to it!"

Inside the jail, Jamie and Georgie stared at one another. "I'm not gonna fink on you, Jamie Runnels," Georgie finally said. "You're just a little kid, after all. But danged if this isn't somethin, lettin a friend down like this! Why doncha just fess up!"

"Because I didn't do it!" hissed Jamie.

"Where d'you think that paint smudge on my shirt came from?" Georgie hissed back. "You left the can of paint right outside your back door! I was a pal and moved it for you so no one would find out, you lummo!" They huffed at one another through the bars. "So you're just gonna let me take the blame, huh?" said Georgie.

"I'm not takin the blame for somethin I didn't do."

Georgie looked him over and curled his lip in contempt. "From now on, you're no friend of mine, Jamie Runnels. Until you act like a man and fess up, we're quits."

"That's fine with me!" shouted Jamie. He ran out of the jail, his eyes puffy with unshed tears.

Georgie sat fuming in his cell until he got up and kicked the bars at the mendacity of that coward of an eight-year-old. "You keep that up, yer gonna break that foot, son," cautioned the voice in the corner cell.

"What do you know, ya spook? You don't even have a foot!" said Georgie.

"Yer a brave 'un! Most folks jump a fair piece when I say somethin," said the ghost. "I tend to keep it buttoned, lest I skeer a body!"

"I ain't scareda you! Jamie told me all about you, you horsethief."

"Yep, that's what I wuz, but if gettin hung by the neck till yer dead don't change a feller's outlook on life, I tell ya, bein a jailhouse ghost surely does. I hear all manner'a things." The voice paused. "You really didn't do it, did ya, kid?"

"No, sir!" insisted Georgie, then added in suspicion, "What makes you think I didn't?"

"Like I said, livin in a jailhouse, you hear all manner'a things. I heard the guilty and the innocent, and after a time, ya learn to tell the diffrence. I think yer not guilty, kid, but it ain't our Jamie, neither."

"Who coulda done it, then?"

"I ain't zactly in a position to investigate, son. No, I'm fair graveled on this'n," sighed the voice. "Well, now that we've argied that'un out, my name's Aloysius."

"I'm Georgie. Georgie Prake," said the boy grudgingly. "You really believe me?"

"I do, Georgie Prake, an I'll see if'n I cain't put a good word in." Georgie perked up. "Though no one listens to me much," added the ghost.

Georgie sunk his chin into his broad little chest. "Aw, heck. One person believes me, and him the ghost of a horsethief."

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[About Scryer's Gulch and Meilin Miranda](#)

MeiLin Miranda writes the fantasy novel series "An Intimate History of the Greater Kingdom," and the free online serial "Scryer's Gulch: Magic in the Wild, Wild West." She is on Ravelry as MeiLin, where she issues knitting patterns based on her books. You can also find her at BPAL.org, where she indulges her perfume addiction, and at FountainPenNetwork.com, where she is beginning her fountain pen addiction. MeiLin lives in Portland, OR with her husband, two daughters, two cats and a floppy dog.

Visit her website, where you can talk with her and fellow fans, get bonus stories, wallpapers, and peeks into future books in the series: <http://www.MeiLinMiranda.com/>

And check out her other books at Smashwords: <http://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/MeiLinMiranda>

You can read all about the continuing adventures of Annabelle, Misi, the Runnels, the Prakes and the Bonhams, the mystery of the hermatauxite, and that pesky Aloysius in the ongoing free web serial, "Scryer's Gulch: Magic in the Wild, Wild West," updated every Wednesday at <http://www.MeiLinMiranda.com/scryers-gulch>. Episodes 11-30 will be gathered into another ebook some time in late 2010.