

Weird Fiction Runner-Up: The Dregs of Dreams

The Dregs of Dreams

by Lauren D'Ambrosia

The metal door had no handles, just keyholes. It could only be slammed aggressively shut. This bothered her at first, the amount of noise that echoed up and down the stairwell announcing her every departure. It bothered her until she realized how very few of the other apartments were actually inhabited. It was the off-season in the port city of Yūchi. The dead season. The tourists from Jōchō would not swarm over and infest the real estate until high-season, when the tidal surges were at their peaks. During these extremely enticing weeks of the year, up from the sea came shimmering waves of turbulent mucus. It crawled up and inland, overtaking the coastal barricades that once served as barrier between land and sea. It rolled and spread its way through town. It danced in the streets. It climbed up and down the backs and bellies of buildings, and slithered back out to sea by dawn. It left everyone reeling with a strange, inexplicable ecstasy, and a lingering longing for perpetual night.

On the landing where she now stood, a half-dozen doors also stood. At six stories high, the residential tower rose fifty meters into the air. The lower half of the tower was unoccupied stem, functioning solely to elevate the building above encroaching ocean swells and storms, and other things from the sea. Of the doors before her, only one apartment currently housed occupants: a Yūchian family of sixteen. Two wives. Eight children under the age of twelve. One cousin. Three uncles. Two unrelated elderlies who joined the family during the daytime once and never left the pack.

She had never officially introduced herself to these people, her neighbors. She did not speak Yūchian well. But she made note of their movements. In Yūchi, rent was dirt cheap during the off-season. Landlords starved for tenants, tripe, and Supai parrots, a local delicacy, with too many feathers and gears to truly enjoy. No one inhabited any of the apartments adjacent to her own. It was agreeable, in a way. Quiet. No one could hear her. From her balcony at night, she could see the soft twinkling of spartan lights from the nearby buildings, illuminating the darkness like distress signals in a vast vacuum of noiseless nothingness. Not even the crashing waves from the ocean could be heard or seen through the assemblage of tall towers.

When the glittering sludge and the visitors alike flooded the streets during the summer surges, she would have to find a new place to live, in a new city. For now she could settle in. She could idle for awhile.

She had moved to Yūchi to begin work at the city's government run, foreign language school. Everyone wanted to learn the language of her native land. It was easy for her to get this kind of job, and it allowed her to live almost anywhere. It took little effort, and you were typically treated well. The locals thought you had special skills and knowledge. It was an easy job so far, and the streets of Yūchi were agreeably flat, making bicycling less strenuous, though the two-wheeled traffic was not always easy to navigate through. The tram lines did not run offseason. Nor did the trains, shuttles, conveyors, or purveyors of pedestrians. The local government had no interest in their permanent inhabitants. Profit,

not prosperity, was their agreed upon agenda.

The buildings that made up the city, whether residential, commercial, or industrial, were all titanic, feathery towers. Seabirds roosted in them. The glistening sludge could not climb to the considerable heights of their lowest windows. On certain nights, however, when the undulating ocean was particularly alive, the spray and vapors from the surge could be felt by the eyes, in the nose, and over the skin, a stinging and prickly, but immensely pleasurable sensation. Tears of rapture welled in eyes. Marvelous mucus leaked from noses.

Each day at the foreign language school she would be assigned to a new classroom. She was on rotation, there to supplement and assist the permanent language teachers whose mastery of the language was fragmented and strange. The demand for teachers was high, and the qualifications for employment exceptionally low. This did not stop the government from charging substantial prices for lessons. Education was not free. But it was purportedly “freedom.” Kakudo was the language of international business, trade, politics, and potential prosperity. If these poor plebeians ever wanted to make it out of Yūchi, they would need to communicate in Kakudo. For all they knew, they were receiving an optimal education. They should have known better. They should have known if they could not purchase fresh tripe, drink from the pipes, breathe in deeply the low-lying air, or listen to independently aired music waves, they also could not learn the skills required to forcibly obtain their freedom.

Tonight she was placed in C1 on the seventeenth floor. As she walked into her assigned classroom, murmurs unrelated to language learning skittered around the room. The primary teacher did not seem to mind the obvious distraction of the students, but did keep insisting that they speak their troubling gossip in the foreign language they sought to one day masterfully wield. An old man sitting by the door clutched a bladed weapon. It was long, thin, bowed, and apparently of little concern to the others in the room.

He hunched low and whispered surreptitiously to his desk-mate, “I brought this. If it’s erratic enough to come ashore now, at this time of year, it’s wild enough to climb higher, much higher, and to envelope more, much more.”

“It’s not wild. It’s confused, or sick. That’s what they’re saying.”

“Irrelevant,” asserted the old man, drumming two fingers, then three, then two on the oily hilt. “It’s ravenous.”

“Does it understand Kakudo? Does it understand language? I heard you don’t need a blade. I heard there are certain words you can speak to it now, and not need any kind of blade. I know it doesn’t like suigin, but I heard you might not even need a blade. I say this, because I don’t have a blade. When the visitors are here, the seifu protect the city. I have never needed a blade. I don’t have a blade. There’s that new foreign lady.”

She stopped. Looked at the man, looked further down, and fixedly at the blade, then continued walking. She did not have a blade either and did not understand what it was needed for, but instantly understood two things: the old man felt threatened and had a certain knowledge about how to proactively protect himself given his past experiences.

In the days that followed, a new station began airing on the dual-dial, dialogic, bird bots. Someone or

something had sent her one of these flying devices. She wasn't sure who, but three days into her relocation to the area, what she assumed was a normal and naturally occurring, green parrot landed on her kitchen windowsill. Upon closer examination, the Supai turned out to be an odd combination of local communication device, information distribution, and musical mechanism. The instant it began rattling off introductory instructions for operation, she felt certain it was not simply a parrot of the planet. Several years ago, not long after the sludge surges slid ashore for the first time in digitally recorded history, the privately owned government body took on the daunting task of designing a device that could be remotely controlled, could recall itself if need be, and that appeared aesthetically exotic to the keen adventurers' critical eye. From a distance, the shimmering, shuttering sludge was an enticing spectacle; the closer it came, the more divine and deadly its desirability. If flames attracted moths purposefully, one might make a metaphorical comparison here.

The new station aired a list of "the missing," fragmented names and numbers, assumed dates and times of disappearances, and locations from which they were supposed to have vanished. This consisted of mostly bedrooms, kitchens, windows, dive-bars, and all-night convenient stores. The time was always night, but few hours were not night at this time of year. Other stations rattled off daily and occasionally imaginative, but rarely elaborate explanations: unknown animals, unknown machines, inky enemies with ill intent, a secret desire on the part of the vanished to leave this deadbeat city in the dregs of night for greener grottoes, visiting unlisted relations, hunting, foraging, temporarily lost in the sinister stairwells of very tall towers. It seemed clear that if the government intended to openly admit to such obviously troubling occurrences, they would also have to provide some sort of strategic solution or cognitive cure. They went with the latter option. A remedy of words was always best. And why wield all the words themselves this time? Why not put the "weapons" in the hands of the timorous populace? It was soon announced that these new "weapons" would be distributed at the language school where she worked.

This news caused an immediate spike in enrollment. It was reported that Kakudo words, if uttered in the proper order, at the perfect pitch and volume, with the right emotional backing, could effectively fend off the encroaching leaks, seeps, and advances of the weighty, shimmering, vaguely whispering, sludge slicks. Yes. If they were to offer this new remedy of words, they must officially pronounce the true name of their beloved predator: the sludge - the touristic appeal that inspired fervent zeal in travelers with deep pockets and strange desires.

"Do not harm the surge. Charm the surge." was the recording now on repeat, replacing the airwaves that once spouted speculations as to the causes of the missing persons.

Of the new students, both young and old, there was a man who claimed to be an exmember of the city government.

"I didn't work there long, though they did like me at first. They said I had the right kind of malleable personality. But when they found out I was an actual resident of the city, a native so to speak, I was promptly dismissed." The depression in his voice came from the depths of a well recently emptied of all ambition.

She did not dare ask what employed his time these days. She did however make a point to remember him. Perhaps there were things he knew that others did not, things that might prove pivotal in the days to come when these linguistic placebos no longer sufficed to subdue the panic nor the physical threat.

By the week's end, the school had succeeded in teaching the majority of the remaining populace a

number of magical words and phrases. Memorization came first, followed by the practicing of dramatic deliveries. She would play the roll of the sludge, and correct the grammar and pronunciation of the words and phrases bravely hurled at her.

After a second week, classes had returned to their normal sizes. She assumed students had mastered the content, and had not simply gone missing. Many of the buildings that stood, swaying closest to the sea had been completely abandoned now, or were no longer occupied for more troubling reasons.

On the eve of the third week, even before night fell, the sludge swelled up and over the school.

Words were futile. Windows shattered.

Students and teachers fled out through the classroom door. They hid in the halls, uncertain of where to safely and sensibly flee to next. The old man with the blade took a fearsome stand against the sludge, but fell, his suigin sword skittering across the tiled floor. The ex-government employee had already been sucked away, slurped up, dragged out through the window. Perhaps he was miles out to sea by now. Possibly alive. Perhaps there were things he knew that the others did not. The old man could ask him; he was missing now too.

She picked up the sword without looking at it and exited rapidly into the hall. Passing the quivering clumps of students, she entered into the stairwell. She knew where she was going. She needed her identification documents. She needed proof of nationality. She felt no guilt in leaving.

No one knew her name.

She somehow managed to cycle home, snaking a stranger course than usual to avoid the drifting sounds of clamor and screams. Once at her building, she took the lift up to the first floor (this was as high as the lift ascended), then frantically climbed each ensuing flight. She noticed in passing, hurried though she was, that not a single apartment appeared to be inhabited on any of the floors. When was the last time she saw or heard her neighbors? She came to a halt before her door. She fished for her keys.

In the weeks that followed, Yūchi hired hundreds of itinerant workers to replenish the workforce now needed to meet the increasing demands of new influxes of fanatical, thrill seeking tourists (who were now required to sign lengthy waivers upon arrival). Suigin blades were now sold in mass quantities at every market and shop. One old man in particular, who was in fact not dead, sold appallingly expensive blades forged using deceptive blends of suigin and other, cheaper, less sludge-repellent metals.

“They want a thrill, don’t they?” he asserted in his defense.

We are not sure where she is now, but the government might know. Her things are gone, the blade is gone too, and the Supai bird bot has been tinkered with and taken.