

Intermediate Fiction Workshop Portfolio

Name

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My name is XXX XXXX, and I'm an English major here at Carleton. I'm aiming for the concentration in Creative Writing, so naturally earning a spot in this workshop would help me fulfill the requirements for that goal. It's not necessarily just about the credit, though. I love writing, and I think one of my strengths lies in characterization. If not a strength, it's at least a district I'm comfortable in, and one of my main motivations for writing stories in the first place. Most of my stories start off as characters in my head, rather than larger-scale settings or topics or anything like that. For example, one of the novels I'm working on (an excerpt from which I'm using as my portfolio piece below) originally started out as an afternoon daydream of a foulmouthed demon going on adventures with an inexperienced religious acolyte. Everything else, plot and setting-wise, came after I established how they worked as people, and I'm hoping to gain some experience and know-how from my professor and peers on how to polish up my strengths and round out my weaknesses – namely setting and descriptive prose, which I often struggle with. I've already taken the Fiction Workshop (ENGL2903), which is actually where I workshopped the story I've used here in my portfolio. I've also applied to the Special Topics in Writing workshop (ENGL3915) which is also focusing on fiction this year. I'm hoping to get in both. I've decided long ago that fiction writing is what I want to do, so any opportunity to improve my craft is an opportunity I'll try to use to its absolute fullest. Thanks, and I hope you enjoy the first few pages of my work-in-progress novel, *Bad Blood* (working title, some classmates were reminded a little too strongly of a Taylor Swift song...)

### *Bad Blood*

She woke with a yelp. When she snapped back into reality and closed her mouth, however, the shouting continued. It became quickly apparent that someone else was continuing where she left off - through the bars of the cage, she could see him silhouetted by a few dim beams of orange sunlight as he struggled to unravel himself from his bedroll in a wild panic. When he managed to free himself, his yelling trailed off uncertainly as he became aware that there was no immediate danger.

“Cursed demon,” she heard him mutter, as he sat back on the ground.

“Sun’s coming up,” she said, wiping the cool sweat off of her forehead and looking out through the bars. Dense forest surrounded them from all sides, and the birds were already beginning to sing. “We gonna get going or what?”

“You are in no position to boss me around, hellspawn.”

“Fine, we’ll stay put.”

“Hah! We shall depart immediately!” the acolyte retorted, standing up and sauntering towards the large cage that held her. “Your trickery will not work on me, demon.”

“For the fifth *blessed* time-”

She paused, grimacing at the unnaturally gentle word as it came out of her mouth. It certainly wasn’t what she had meant to say. What a sadistic blessing, she thought, as she watched her captor beam in satisfaction.

“I said,” she corrected, tugging uselessly at the blessed collar around her neck, “That for the fifth time, my name’s Ha-”

“As if I’d bother remembering the blasphemous, twisted name of a demon.”

“That’s why I’m reminding you, you little *kind-hearted ascetic*,” she said, wincing as she heard her voice raise half an octave and become intolerably gentle. “It’s Hatchet, and if you forget it again I’ll bury a hatchet - get it? - in your *hallowed grounds* so you remember. We clear?”

“Excuse me?” he asked, pressing his hand to his ear. “Pray repeat?”

“I’m gonna *make fertile thy lands of plenty* when I get out of this cage, so help me *holiest father!*”

He disappeared behind the carriage. Moments later, the large, black shroud was flung over the top of the cage. He hopped back into view only long enough to pull the corners of the black fabric over the exposed bars, banishing all light. This didn’t disturb Hatchet much, since she had no trouble seeing in the dark. That, and the multitude of tiny moth-eaten holes in the fabric allowed her to see outside with relative ease, provided she got close enough. She crawled to the other side of the cage and squeezed her face up against the iron bars. Squinting, she could make out trees, and... well, more trees.

“When’s breakfast?”

She thought she had been ignored, but eventually one of the shroud’s corners was gently lifted. “Not satisfied with the blood of the innocent?” her kidnapper demanded.

“That’s vampires. Demons devour the *souls* of the innocent. Didn’t they tell you that in bible school?”

The faint light of the outside world disappeared as the cage was once again flooded with darkness.

“But I can’t say no to bacon!” she shouted after him. “Make sure it’s a little burnt!”

Hatchet wedged herself into the corner, waiting patiently for the smell of cooking meat that would hopefully cover up the smell of the spacious cage - though she doubted any smell was strong enough to do so. It was clear the cage had not had a thorough cleaning since its last occupant had

left, though she had given up on holding her nostrils shut days ago. She was merely glad the floor wasn't covered in what remained of some beast's dinner. All she could do now was desperately hope that they had nearly reached their destination, because she doubted she would last another day in these conditions. She turned her attention to the iron manacles clasped firmly around her wrists, and gave them an experimental tug. The chain held fast.

"Fine. I'm not that hungry, anyways," she announced, annoyed. "Are we close?"

Amongst the birds she could hear a dusty scraping sound, which she recognized as another of his clumsy attempts to start a fire. "Why do you ask, demon? Do you fear for your unholy existence?"

"No, but I do gotta *steal away for a moment of feminine respite*," she hummed, voice soft and demure. Her face suddenly contorting in mental agony. "*Blessed Father*, what the *gates of heaven* does that even mean? Ugh, whatever! Lemme out of the cage for a minute!"

The acolyte gave a smug laugh. "Hah! As if I'd fall for such a rudimentary trap."

"What? You let me out the other night!"

"And you ate half of my provisions in the meantime!"

"I was hungry! *By the light of our Lord*, lemme out!" she demanded, gripping the bars. "I've been holding it in for a day and a half!"

"Saint's grace- fine. I shall release you for a moment, but I needn't remind you that the hallowed powers of my Lord shall make any escape attempts futile!" he warned, watching her cautiously through the bars. "A-as well as any murder attempts!"

"Yeah, yeah," she said, tugging at the heavy piece of iron clamped around her neck. "Don't think your cute little blessings will stop me from punching your head off if I wanted, though."

Her captor stopped unlocking the gate and glared at her.

“...Not that I’d do anything like that, of course,” she mumbled, but it was too late. He pulled the key out of the gate and set off towards the mule that rather unfairly been given the lone task of pulling both the carriage and the cage. She hurried across the spacious cage to catch up, leaping to the far corner just in time for the acolyte to pass directly beside her.

“H-hey, I’m just fooling around, right? I’m not actually gonna give you a black eye or anything,” she said, wrapping her hands around the bars that separated them. “Er, alright, maybe just one. But y’know, I *really* gotta-”

Her words were cut short as her captor disappeared behind the back of the carriage. She could hear the mule whinny, some general shuffling and before long he reappeared. She paused. He had not returned alone. His red, veiny face was testament to the weight of the tool he dragged along in the dirt behind him, before his knees buckled and it fell with a heavy thud against the grass and dirt below.

“That’s not my axe, is it?” she asked, as he heaved what was most certainly her axe up onto its head and rested it against the cage. Hatchet knew it was hers, because there was none other like it - the camp had spent a year’s worth of gold just to commission it. It was almost as big as she was, and the thick haft was reinforced with iron just to support the weight of its menacing steel head. It was completely and utterly useless to a human being - some could lift it, fewer could swing it, but none could do it twice. Normally she could wield it like a toy, but the collar around her neck made lifting even her iron-shackled wrists taxing.

“And... and what if it is?” the acolyte asked, holding eye contact for no more than a moment as he cautiously slid the key into its keyhole. “You can’t *honestly* expect me to release you without the means to defend myself.”

“Nah, but I *honestly* expect you to get your paws off my axe before I shove it halfway up your-”

“That’s *it!*” he said, tearing the key out of the gate. “You can wallow in your own filth for all I care - after I turn you over to the inquisitors, I’ll not have to clean it!”

“Oh yeah?” she asked, pressing her face against the bars. “Well, you best start repenting, because when- *praise be to the Allfather, whose eyes immaterial watch over his blind children. May his radiance enlighten the unworthy and lead us to paradise,*” she finished, with a rosy voice and an evil smile. Then she blinked. “You little *gift to the land of His creation!*” she groaned, clawing furiously at her collar. “You ruined it! That was the best one so far, you *chaste man of the book,* and this *radiant collar* of yours turned it into some kinda... some kinda... sermon! A *sermon!*” she repeated, as if the very concept of a religious service was abhorrent. “And you call *me* evil!”

“You *are!* You are evil incarnate! You’re a... well, a demon!” he sputtered, attempting to fit a gallon’s worth of venom into the word. He grabbed the thick haft of Hatchet’s axe and, with great effort, dragged it out of sight.

“Hey, where do you think you’re takin’ that?” she demanded. “That’s *mine!*”

She managed to belt out a few more infuriatingly pleasant and righteous compliments before he lowered the shroud, and the light vanished yet again. Sighing, she slid down the bars onto the cold, hard floor and reflected on her abysmal luck. Allowing herself to be captured *did* allow her to reach her destination faster, but it had the unfortunate side effect of... being captured. And though she was loathe to make the journey on foot, she was even more loathe to spend another waking moment in her current circumstances. Her plan to simply pull the bars apart and make her exit where considerably complicated with the introduction of the strange metal collar shackled to her neck. The blessing took her best aspects away from her - her physical strength and her cursing skills, which were known to make sailors wince. She could handle it when the acolyte, upon whom she wished a thousand extremely unpleasant and very creative endings, preached at her. But forcing

her to preach to herself was an evil of such enormity that she half expected the Prime, the very god she was being forced to unwillingly espouse, would take some measure of pity upon her.

“When my father finds out about this, he’ll pummel you senseless,” she grumbled, to no-one in particular. When there was no response, she said it again, louder, for good measure. She half expected a voice to chime in with some heritage-inspired guilt trip, but none came - leaving her alone in the dark without a target to verbally abuse.

“It’s quiet out there. You busy *enjoying a moment of solitary prayer* or something?”

She frowned. That usually worked. She rapped her knuckles against the bars, though the resulting sound wasn’t quite as impressive as she had hoped. She pressed her forehead against the bars, groaned dramatically, and lay down. Then, after remembering how cold the floor was, she sat up again.

“Hey, *bearer of holy wisdom*, I know you can hear me!”

There was no response, and she could hear what sounded like weight shifting on the creaky carriage. Then there was shouting. There had been a lot of shouting during her trip, but most of it had come from her - not so this time. She pressed her ear between the wide bars in order to better make out the indistinguishable haranguing, and all at once the edge of the shroud directly in front of her was lifted. She turned to face her captor, already preparing a slew of possible insults had a chance of slipping past the blessing, and froze when the face mere inches away from the bars turned out to be someone bigger, uglier, and probably much dumber than the young, scrawny-looking acolyte she had been expecting. He was apparently as surprised as she was, since he nearly jumped out of his skin - after his brain had a moment or two to process what he was seeing, that is. He reminded her of a shaved gorilla, or maybe a bear - he looked like he could smash bricks with his head, and she wouldn’t have been surprised to discover he did so on a regular basis.



He shouted incoherently, stumbling backwards and pointing directly at her face. “Ralf, there’s someone innere!”

Hatchet hurried to the opposite side of the cage, where the darkness was thicker. She could see the large figure point in her general direction through the opening in the shroud, beckoning to some unseen comrades.

“What? Where?” another voice shouted back. After a few seconds, three more people appeared. The first was the familiar young acolyte, with a look of extreme mental and physical discomfort on his face - no doubt due to the sword pressed against his back. The holder of the sword was ragged and wholly unspectacular, unlike the brute that had flung off the shroud. The ancient-looking man that staggered in behind them looked like a melting wax sculpture, the skin around his cheeks drooping down in mottled flabs. Even at her distance, Hatchet could see that the mangy spear he was holding was about ready to fall apart. All three wore armor even dirtier than they were, which was no small feat.

The average-looking man, who was undoubtedly the ringleader of the trio, stared directly at the dark corner Hatchet was hiding in. “What the hell are you talkin’ about, you blumberin’ idiot? It’s bloody empty!”

“Nuh-uh, Ralf!” The big man insisted. He spoke carefully, like every syllable was an exercise in mental fortitude. “I saw ‘em!”

“Oh shut up, you damned oaf!” the lean man cursed, tearing the shroud back down and once again submerging Hatchet’s her in darkness. She quietly crossed the cage to better make out their voices. “I went and told you there was no profit to be made from a one-mule caravan, but did you listen? No! No you didn’t listen, you pint-brained inbred! Now we’re gonna have to bury this kid in the ground so he don’t go tellin’ nobody!”

“B-bury?” The acolyte stammered. “You’re not going to... bury me?”

“I wouldn’t *have to* if it weren’t for this dumb animal! He could ‘smell the gold’, he told me. As if! Who sends a kid an’ a mule to haul a cage full o’ gold?!”

“But that’s just it, Ralf!” his partner retorted. “No-un’d suspect it! An’ it ain’t gold, but a person!”

“I’ve got half a mind to see if your thick hide’s blade-proof! Even the old man ain’t as dumb as you! As for *you*, boy, unless you can convince me you’re worth your weight in gold, I say you start askin’ The Prime for one o’ his miracles, yeah?”

“M-me? Worth my weight?” the acolyte stammered. “I can’t- I can barely afford food, let alone gold! And I’m on a very- an *extremely* important mission!”

“I ain’t hearin’ prayin’.”

“But- please, just, just listen! Even this cage was donated to me! I live off the generosity of others!”

For a moment, Hatchet thought the man had slit his throat or run him through or a slew of other bloody possibilities. She would be lying if she said she wasn’t slightly disappointed to discover that wasn’t the case.

“You aren’t gonna appeal to my sympathetic side, boy. But I admit, this cage here’s a lotta iron,” the voice said, deep in consideration. “Right, then. You gimme the keys, an’ I let you run down that road as fast as you can. How’s that sound?”

There was a moment of terrified silence. “I can’t, the demon-”

“You listening? I said empty your pockets. Or don’t – I’ll just empty ‘em while you’re drownin’ in your own damned blood. Believe me, I’m fine with either.”

“But the de-”

“Oi, you! Moron! Clean ‘im out!” the bandit leader commanded.

She heard a short struggle. The acolyte was no doubt being manhandled by the brute. Any resistance would have been about as effective as kicking pebbles at a mountain – Hatchet would have been able to toss him around like a toy even in her weakened state.

“Oh, what’s this, then? I thought I heard you say this cage was all you had - and I’m countin’ two keys. Less you thought I couldn’t count?”

“No, I- I-”

“You know what I do to liars?” she heard, and then came another struggle. There was thrashing, and then a sob. Then another. She didn’t expect him to cry. She had fantasized about beating him bloody, but never did she imagine he would cry. The sound was like a wrench in her ribcage.

“Now, you listen good, yeah?” the bandit demanded. “If you don’t tell me what this bloody key’s for-”

“Me,” she announced, shrugging off the immediate wave of regret. “The key’s for me.”