

Hannah. She looked petrified. "Yasaman has done a good job, but if you really want delicious food, you are welcome next week."

I wiped my eyes with my palms before I smiled at Hannah. She laughed in relief.

I really hoped Hannah liked Persian food. She was going to be having a lot of it at Grandma's for the foreseeable future.

## **A STRANGER AT THE BOCHINCHE**

*by Daniel José Older*

Gather, my children, I have a story. This was many years ago, before the Four Corners War, before steel towers devoured the sky, back when Brooklyn's gaslit avenues dipped and curved around great oak trees, and long-necked sauropods loped glumly in the East River, dangling steel rails from their harnesses for the brand-new suspension bridge. These were days of revelry and masquerades burning through the wide-open nights, when we were flickering shadows burgeoning along the dawn streets.

But this story isn't about us, of course. It's about you.

And on this night, a group of you gathered as you always have, night upon night, here at a dim saloon in old Crow Hill called the Bochinche, a few blocks from the penitentiary. And Ramses Garcia Garcia sat in his same spot as always, silent as always, and just seventeen, hands plunking away on the congas, eyes scanning the crowd.

There was a different face amid the revelers this night: a white face, which was unusual enough at the Bochinche, but also with large, bulging eyes and tiny beads of sweat trembling upon his upper lip. The stranger wore a rumpled pin-striped suit, and an ascot that seemed to clamp the folds of his fleshy throat. When Oba Ade Iku took the stage to begin another round of stories, the stranger glared at him, and Ramses Garcia Garcia glared at the stranger.

Rosie Gene Selwin sat in the crowd that night, and everyone knew her being there made Ramses play with that much more fire. Rosie sat just a few tables away from the stranger. She had her quill out and was jotting down sketches in a leather-bound tome. Rosie was the inventor of the crew; most nights she would spend at her regular table, dreaming up ideas for new machines and weapons to the strains of that sweet music. During the day you could find her in the workshop behind the Bochinche, tinkering and drilling, bringing those dreams to whirring, clanking, steaming life.

Ramses kept steady time on the congas, a gentle tap-tapping bolero strut, but his eyes tracked the stranger's every move. Oba Ade Iku sliced his hand through the smoky air, a warrior king chopping off his enemies' heads, and launched into another part of the tale. The stranger scribbled notes on a scrap of paper, his big eyes glued to Oba.

Ramses glanced at the girl he loved, and then returned to the stranger. Who was this man? Oba's story reached another height: the warrior king gazed over the shattered remnants

of an army from his mountaintop. The stranger stood, his teeth clenched, fingers squirming like fattened bloodworms after the rain. Ramses stopped drumming. The stranger reached into his jacket, threw two small packets to the floor. Ramses launched across the stage, spilling the congas to either side.

He bolted toward the stranger just as a billow of smoke unfurled from the ground. The Bochinche began filling with a thick shroud of gray. The stranger ducked past Ramses's swinging arms, dashing toward Rosie Gene. Ramses saw the move, and he hurled toward them as Rosie cracked a bottle across the stranger's face.

The gray smoke thickened. Ramses lost sight of Rosie, the stranger, everything. He pressed forward, shoving through the crowd, feeling for Rosie, coming up short. Nearly overwhelmed by coughing, he found his way outside, stumbled against a wall, and turned toward the masses fleeing the club. Rosie stood beside Oba. "I'm okay," she insisted as Ramses ran up. Ramses hadn't said a word in as long as anyone had known him. Rosie knew how to read the tiny details of his face like it was a language of its own. He started to shake his head. "Stop, Ramses. I'm fine. But . . ."

"That man got away with Rosie's notebook," Oba said. Ramses reeled, caught between good news and bad. That notebook was covered with Rosie's secret designs, pages and pages of mechanical weaponry and flying machines, transporters, intricate technologies Ramses couldn't begin

to make sense of. "We have to stop him," Oba said. "I suspect he belongs to the Olritch Scourlings. If they get ahold of Rosie's plans, things may become very dire indeed."

The Olritch Scourlings: an age-old fraternal order that had spent generations trying to open a gateway for their foul gods to worm through into this world. The Scourlings would've been another hilarious cosmic joke if they didn't command such vast wealth. They recruited their brotherhood from the upper echelons of Manhattan's elite, and met in a high-rise downtown that they'd gutted and turned into a shadowy temple. We used to sneak in and laugh at them, rich kids playing silly games, but Oba was right: in the past few years, the Scourlings had taken leaps and bounds toward opening their gateway, and their gods—the Visitors, they called them—were capable of unleashing catastrophe upon us all.

Ramses took Rosie in his arms, kissed her. She whispered a tiny prayer to him: "Take the skies, my love. I'll take the streets," and then turned and hopped on her unimotor. Ramses ducked back into the club as the sound of Rosie's revving engines filled the night. The smoke had mostly cleared out now, and he retrieved his pack.

Fifteen minutes later, he stood before the long, deserted stretch of President Street, strapped up, armed and ready to fly.

The half-moon hung low over Brooklyn tonight, illuminating the shuttered storefronts and a small park. Ramses

took a step, then another. Inside him, a tiny list unraveled as he broke into a run: our names, his dead parents and grandparents, the elders in his spiritual house. He gunned the tiny motor Rosie had pulled from the junk lot. A warm vibration thrummed to life against his back. He leapt once and hit the power charge. Flame exploded from the pack as the mechanical wings unfolded to either side. The ground fell away. Ramses flew.

Scattered gaslights illuminated the winding Brooklyn streets below. Flatbush Avenue sloped away from the dark trees of Prospect Park. It was four a.m., almost no one out but the night watch and a few straggling drunks. Airships hung just beneath the clouds like great, weightless whales. A mournful horn sounded from the harbor, but otherwise, Ramses's pattering engine was the only noise. He banked northwest toward the bay. Manhattan loomed tall beyond the Brooklyn clock tower. A single sauropod stretched its long neck out of the dark river: the bridge crews working late. No stranger stalked the streets, though. Almost no one at all.

Ramses swooped low over the tight alley labyrinth of the Harbor District, a clutter of apartment houses squished between the bay and the river. A movement caught his eye and he veered left and cut his engine, gliding along between the dark building fronts. Silence in the streets. Then a clatter of footsteps on cobblestone. There. The stranger stormed along an alleyway and ducked out of sight. A few moments later, Rosie, now on foot, crept along through the shadows after him.

This was back before the bombings; the Brazenvurst Cathedral still reached its twisted spires skyward. Ramses landed on a buttress and waited beside the snarling 'goyles and gnarled saints. Within minutes, the stranger darted from his hiding place and down the cobblestone street. Ramses slid back into the sky, catching a salty updraft from the harbor, and soared through the alleyway and around a corner, following the echoing footfall. The stranger ran into a tenement and slammed the door.

Ramses grinned, eased toward the ground, and landed running. Rosie would be crouched in wait somewhere, preparing. The wings folded back into his pack as he stepped into a dim front room. He took his time on the rickety stairwell. There was no point in showing up out of breath. He let another silent prayer rise inside him, the one said to call on one's warrior spirits before battle, and we gathered in the thick air around him. He unsheathed the machete as he walked into the corridor. At the far end, a single line of light cut the shadows from under a closed door. Ramses walked slowly to it, took a deep breath. And then, with a single kick, he flattened the door and sidestepped in, blade first.

Piles of magazines and ancient books cluttered the tiny room. No stranger. The bathroom, a mildewy disaster, was also empty. A single filth-covered window looked out on the dark sky over the river, the construction lights' glum miasmas in the night. No stranger, but there on the writing desk near the window—Rosie's notebook. Ramses snatched it, threw

it in his pouch. Stacks of parchment lay on the desk, messy, ink-blotched writing splattered across page after page.

*'Twas two-fold, the insult, Ramses read, and soon Frederick took it upon himself to find the blasted monstrosity and destroy it, but alas it lurked deep in the Morgath Woods, where its villainous acolytes patrolled and genuflected alongside the hulking, tentaculous mass, inventing stories and casting shells with trembling brown hands.*

Mouth hanging open, Ramses sat. The stranger's story went on, terrifying and achingly familiar, a broken, mutant version of one of Oba's tales: *Frederick huddled in the bushes as the devilish acolytes prepared their sacrifice, grabbing its horns and subjugating it swiftly upon the killing floor. The monstrosity writhed with pleasure, its cackles echoing into the thick swampy night and mixing with desperate mewls from the goat.*

Ramses shook his head, shuffled through the papers. Story after story formed a glimmering, twisted reflection of the tales Oba recited each night at the Bochinche. But these weren't Orishas or ancestral spirits; they were monsters, demons, phantoms of the deep.

Ramses went to stand, but something wet tightened around his ankles. Two greenish, pale tentacles, dripping with thick ichor, had emerged from the underside of the chair and now held each of Ramses's ankles fast against the wooden claw-foot chair legs.

Frantic, he reached for his machete. "Stop!" yelled a voice. The stranger stood in the center of the room. His trembling hand held a revolver at Ramses's face. "Don't move."

The stranger eyed him. "You're the . . . the drummer, aren't you? You've come for the notebook, I presume."

Ramses cold-stared him.

"Well?" the stranger yelled.

The tentacles tightened around Ramses's ankles.

"I don't know anything about it, really. I'm just a writer. I listen. I've been there before, you know, your little club. In disguise, of course. The Scourlings are a benevolent fraternity, mostly. We are curious. The elders sent me, gave me the smoke bombs. They want to know more about you, you know. They think your stories can help usher in the . . . the Visitors."

*The Visitors.* Ramses looked down at the tentacles that wrapped ever tighter around his legs. Clearly, the stranger's stories had helped him begin to open the portal. That, combined with the technology plans in Rosie's notebook, would allow the Scourlings and their mutant Visitors to rampage through the streets of New York unchecked.

Ramses's fingers were a few centimeters from the machete handle, but then what? He couldn't chop the tentacles away without getting shot. He kept his expression tight, ignored the beads of sweat that trickled down his back.

"The Visitors will come through regardless, yes? We're just here to help them along, really. But you have been here now, you've seen them, the gateway." The stranger nodded at the tentacles. "They like me. I can come and go as I please. But they are upset with you, I'm afraid." The stranger grinned. "Terrible things happen when they're upset." He took a step

toward Ramses, gun shaking. "So give us the notebook, yes? And then we'll see if they like you better."

The apartment door swung open; Rosie barged through. The stranger spun around, gun in hand, and in that split second, Ramses Garcia Garcia felt his heart crumble. The girl he loved would be blown away before his eyes, all while trying to save his life. But instead of a gunshot ringing out, the whole world dissolved into a bright white.

The stranger yelled and then something collapsed with a thud. The room was still a pale blur with only the slightest hint of movement in its midst. But Ramses could smell Rosie's perfume and then he felt her climb onto his lap. Her flash cannon. Of course.

"Stop!" the stranger yelled from somewhere on the floor.

"You have my notebook?" Rosie whispered.

Ramses nodded, barely suppressing his smile. He knew what to do.

"Then let's go," Rosie said, clutching him tightly.

Ramses leaned forward and slammed back against the chair, tipping it toward the window, and then clicked the ignition boost on his jet pack.

"No!" the stranger yelled, but his howl was cut short by the roaring engine and then the shattering of glass.

"Ay, m'ijo," Ramses's abuela used to say, her breath thick with tobacco. "Never leave a place the same way you enter."

Ramses thought of these words as he and Rosie exploded through the window and out into the midnight sky over

the East River. His vision gradually returned, and the dark city came to life around him. Up, up, up they surged, the chair trailing beneath him as tentacles clenched and squirmed against his legs. Flames danced along the wall of the tenement. He caught a glimpse of the stranger's bulging eyes staring out at him before smoke engulfed the whole facade. He handed his machete to Rosie. She held tight to him with one hand, and with the other she hacked once, twice, then three times at the seething tentacle. It screeched, squirted ichor from its gashes, and then released. The chair tumbled for an instant through open sky, and then a sauropod's gigantic head rose to meet it, mouth open. The chair disappeared with the snapping of those great jaws. The beast paused, its huge eyes wide and then, as if in slow motion, its neck seemed to become boneless. It crashed into the dark waters of the East River and vanished.

"A close one," Rosie said, surveying the city around them.

Ramses nodded, watched the plume of smoke rise toward the stars.

"If they had gotten those designs . . ."

Another nod.

The still-dark world around them seemed to be quietly careening toward some unknown catastrophe. They sensed the coming war, could almost smell it, felt their hidden enemies churning in the shadows. But they knew we moved with them as well, felt our strength and the wisdom of the ages course through them. There would be turmoil and strife

ahead, but there would also be stories and music; many long, joyful nights at the Bochinche awaited them, and there were still so many new machines to invent.

Ramses and Rosie held each other close and hurtled through the sky toward Brooklyn.