

# *The Town Drunk*

*Presents*

## *In the Shadow of the Fryolator*

*Lucy A. Snyder*

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Emma Legrasse cranked her Ford Festiva's ignition a third time, to no avail. She stared through the smeared windshield at the snow on the hood and dreamed of a frosted fairyland ruled by a benevolent Jelly Donut King. Dismissing her snacky fancy, she opened her cell phone and called her boyfriend.

"Yo," Benny answered, far too loudly. She could hear him typing furiously. A dragon roared through his computer speakers. "'Sup, Em?"

"Hi, honey, my car won't start—"

"More DOTs! More DOTs! Don't go near the whelps, dumbass!" Benny screamed in her ear. Through the ringing she heard a fireball whoosh and a computerized female voice groan in death. "What an *idiot!* Uh, whadja say?"

"My car. Won't start. I'm kinda stranded here at the diner. Could you come pick me up, please?"

"Sure, I guess, after the raid."

"*After?*" The darned raids lasted forever. There wasn't a bus, and a cab would cost at least \$50. She wouldn't get home until after midnight. "Honey, *please*, I've been cooking for 10 hours straight, and I've got to be back here at 8 a.m.—"

"Em, we've gotten wiped in this dungeon *twice*... we gotta take Zirconia out this time! I'm tanking; I *can't* leave now! Look, I'll see you later. Gimme a call if you catch a ride or somethin'."

The line went dead. Emma barely resisted the urge to smash the phone against the dashboard. Heaven forbid she ever got pregnant from his caffeine-addled sperm—she'd have to call a cab if she went into labor on a game night.

*Why do I put up with this?* she wondered. Almost immediately, she heard the echoes of her mother's lectures: a girl had to have a man in her life, men weren't perfect, a good girl made do with what she got...

Criminy. Benny was preferable to her mother's hand-wringing and dire tales about the fate of single women. Every time Emma reported a breakup, her mother inevitably brought up the urban legend about the elderly woman who was devoured by rats the day after her divorce. That story *never* got old.

She tossed the phone and her car keys back in her purse and rubbed her numb hands on her pants. She stared balefully at the snowy hood. Cars weren't rocket science, no matter what her ex-boyfriend from Flint had said. Changing a spark plug was easier than building a computer—which she had done, *thankyouverymuch*—or even just making a really good risotto.

Emma yanked the hood release and heaved the door open. The mucus in her nose froze with her first breath, and her sneakers sank ankle-deep in the powdery snow as she went to the front of the car. Her fingers felt like they'd been beaten with a hammer by the time she wrestled the hood open. She twisted on her keychain flashlight and examined the engine. The alternator belt hung limply on its rusty spindles, a section raggedly snapped apart. Viscous pink icicles dripped from the cold-gnawed edges of the belt. Had her transmission gone bad, too? Darn it.

Shivering, she slammed the hood shut and picked her way through the snow and icy car droppings to the back door of the Zuberoa Diner. She pushed into the warmly-lit hallway beside the employee lounge, stomped the snow off her shoes, and hung her purse and coat by the door.

A musky, fishy odor greased the air; she'd first noticed it around noon. She'd taken out the trash and searched the kitchen for errant sprats and prawns, to no avail. Maybe something had fallen between the counter and the fridge; she'd get one of the guys to help her pull it away from the wall if the stink persisted.

She spotted a gleaming, patterned trail of oil or slime leading from the door to the kitchen. Darn it, she'd told the busboys not to wheel their bikes through there. The tires always tracked mud and grass and who-knew-what onto the floor. Who'd be riding a bike on a day like this, anyhow? Probably Carlos; he was training for the Mountain Madness race.

Emma hurried into the kitchen and warmed her aching hands against the polished, insulated sides of the stainless steel Fryolator. The ghosts of French fries past filled her defrosting nostrils, and the warm, oily air stung her cheeks. The new short-order guy had forgotten the closedown checklist again and left the machine on. Oh well; she had hours to kill, so she might as well precook some fries for the freezer.

Mark, one of the busboys, gave her a look of surprise as he carefully loaded the last of the dishes into the washer. He had clear blue eyes and caramel-colored hair, and he always smelled like gingerbread.

"I didn't think you were still here, Miz Legrasse." He always called everybody even slightly

older than him “Miz” or “Mister.” Emma hadn’t decided if that was sweet or annoying.

“Well, I shouldn’t be, but my car won’t start,” she replied, her face caught between a reflexive smile and a frown.

“Oh, no.” His eyes widened. “I have jumper cables...”

She shook her head. “The alternator belt’s toast. I could use panty hose to get myself home, if I was wearing any. You don’t have any, do you?”

He blinked, shuffled his feet, turned a little pink. “No, ma’am, I don’t. May I give you a ride?”

She paused, gazing at the lean muscles in his smooth forearms. He looked like he ought to be a tennis pro serving aces in the Australian sun, or modeling tight jeans under hot lights, not hauling dirty dishes in a Cleveland diner that pretended to be Basque but mostly served the same Panerafied sandwiches and pasta you could find at any casual restaurant chain.

Mark was the most beautiful, polite, considerate, gosh-darned *charming* guy she’d ever met. There *had* to be something horribly, horribly wrong with him. Benny, after all, never once called her “ma’am” or “miz,” and he tooted out a silent-but-deadly on their second date. Mark’s sweet, innocent face was surely a mask for a serial killer. Or another Laird of Warmongrel addict.

“Thank you, but my boyfriend said he’d come get me,” Emma replied.

“Oh.” Mark still looked concerned. “Are you sure you’ll be okay here by yourself? I don’t live far from here... let me give you my phone number, just in case.”

Mark wrote his number in neat print on a yellow Post-It, said goodbye, and went out to his Jeep. Emma folded the note sticky-side in and stuffed it in her pants pocket. She locked the doors and hauled one of the tall stools from the bar into the kitchen. The heck with standing to cook; she’d been on her feet most of the day, and her arches were killing her.

She pushed the stool up to the wide maple cutting block, got a huge colander down from one of the pot racks, and opened the potato bin.

A glistening, cucumber-sized squid with huge eyes sat on top of the tubers, gazing up at her moistly.

“Greetings!” it declared in a voice like a trumpet half-filled with goo.

She gave a little shout, leaped back, and grabbed the nearest kitchen implement, hoping for a knife but coming up with lobster tongs. She brandished them as if they were Excalibur.

“Do not fear,” said the squid, scrambling nimbly from the bin to the cutting board. It stood on gray frog legs, the cascade of tentacles from its face and neck obscuring anything that might grow between them. Two manlike arms emerged from the fleshy ropes and shrugged them

aside. The squid-thing clasped its hands over its tentacle-draped belly and bowed to her.

“I traveled many leagues and searched for many years to find you, Princess.”

“P-princess?” she stammered. “W-what the heck are you?”

“I am H’telred, incarnation of the Great and Terrible God Beast of the Deeps,” he declared, gripping his tentacles with one hand and raising the other doll-sized arm in a salute. “I am the heir apparent to the throne of Y’harneth, our greatest city nestled in the briny depths of the Esoteric Trench. But I cannot take my place as ruler until I find my princess, my queen, the only living terrestrial descendant of our resplendent lord and master, Papa Nogad. *You* are that descendant, fair Emma Legrasse, and you are destined for far greater things than mere mortal minds can grasp.”

Nothing was ever as nice as the stories she’d read as a little girl. Her Prince Charming had finally arrived, and he was beyond froggy. “W-what kind of things?”

“Well. You know. Queenly things.” H’telred snagged a nearby red onion with one of his tentacles and used it as a stool. “Being waited on hand and fluke, drinking cosmic wines, enjoying the spoils of a conquered, subjugated Earth—”

“You’re going to conquer the Earth?” Emma felt dizzy.

“But of course.” He stood up and flourished his tentacles grandly. “I find my princess, make her my queen, take the throne, mass my undersea armies, take over the planet, and rule over everything as a living god.

“It’s all right there in the Books of Prophecy,” he added matter-of-factly.

“Aren’t you a little small for global domination?”

He flared his gills at her. “I am precisely the correct size at all times! In my natural state I’d be taller than this building. I merely shrunk myself down in the Astigmatic Eye of Hydron. Our minions in Boston advised me that the shipping charges would be prohibitive otherwise.”

“Shipping?”

“Yes, in lobster boxes. I arrived here today in one. A nice spongy bed of seaweed and some limpets to snack on—it’s quite a comfy way to travel.”

Emma crossed her arms over her apron, tongs dangling loosely from her left hand. “So about this queen thing—am I supposed to live in the ocean?”

H’telred’s tentacles bounced as he shook his torpedo-shaped head. “We can rule the world and all its seas from this fair city. The Books of Prophecy say that Cleveland is destined to rise as the center of power of the universe and gleam like a sanguine diamond over the slave cities that

fall before the arcane power of our aquatic armies.”

“How’s *that* going to work? We’re nowhere near the coast.”

H’telred sighed. “First we’ll raise an army in Lake Erie, and then we’ll invade Canada so the engineering minions can widen the Saint Lawrence River—look, we’ve spent *centuries* planning this. I have the overtime stubs to prove it.”

He blinked his membranes thoughtfully and gazed through the open door of the employee lounge. “Ah, excellent, there is a couch, and it is leather. I do despise tweed.”

He cleared his throat and knelt on one sticky knee. “Princess, I have spent aeons searching for you, and I do admit I am eager to take you as my queen so that I may plow your carnal fields and you may begin to spawn the first of many generations of fierce—”

“Wait, you want to plow my—you *want to have sex with me?*” Emma’s voice rose to a pitch only dogs could hear.

“Yes. On that couch. Soon would be good.”

“Um, not just no, but *heck* no!”

“Princess,” he pleaded, “until I’m back to my natural size, you’ll hardly know I’m there. Think of your destiny. Think of the power, the riches. Think of the sushi.”

He got down on both knees and clasped his hands. “Consider your adopted city. Can’t you just lie back and think of Cleveland?”

“Well, mother raised us Republican... so I guess in *theory* I might be okay with subjugating the Earth... but I need to know that I’ll still have... *stuff*.”

“Name your heart’s desires, and they shall be granted!”

“Um.” Suddenly faced with listing the things dearest to her, Emma found her mind as desolate as the salt marshes of an abandoned fishing town. “What about my mother? I don’t think she’ll approve of this.”

“We shall slay her together.”

“No! Well... *no*. I want her to be... *happy*. Yes.”

“Then our minions shall take her to the Space-Colored Caves, and there she shall slumber and experience a life of joy and peace inside a comforting cocoon of dreams.”

“I guess that would be all right... but what about my cat?”

“He shall be welcomed as the ambassador of a mighty predatory species. And he shall have fish.”

“What about ice cream?”

“Ice cream gives cats the runs. I’d be against it.”

“I mean, will there *be* ice cream?”

“Of course. The minions have a fondness for Antarctica Bars and Cool Air Swirls.”

Suddenly, an idea emitted a keening croak from the cloudy sea of her mind. “What about *Star Trek*?”

“Indeed, it has been cancelled, and for good reason, but you shall have every frame of *Star Trek* ever recorded—”

“No, I want *new Star Trek*. I want *more*. And I want it to be *good*.”

H’telred twitched his tentacles. “That, I’m afraid, isn’t doable. After they’ve served their purpose during the propaganda phase, we shall invite every actor, director, and producer to private awards banquets and slaughter them to feed the shogg—”

“I am totally not having sex with you if I don’t get new *Star Trek*.” Emma put her hands on her hips.

“Princess, be reasonable! Surely you would not forgo your destiny over this. What has the television industry ever done for you? They’ve insulted mighty Cleveland, scorned this beautiful Forest City, mocked the fair state of Ohio again and again! Hollywood has made your people the butt of jokes because they cravenly fear to offend the well-armed denizens of the American South. How could you, a Princess from The Queen City—”

“Cincinnati? I’m from Kansas City.”

“Kansas City?” H’telred pulled a tiny leather-bound tome from beneath his tentacles and flipped it open. “Your mother’s name is Sandy Lumley, is it not?”

“Uh, no, her name’s Edith.”

“Oh.” He closed the book carefully. “It seems there has been an error, and I have found the wrong Emma Legrasse. Well. I need to consult the white pages. And the Mapquest. Does yon lounge hold a computer?”

“Not anymore, the waiters kept downloading por—wait, you’re saying I’m *not* the princess?”

“Alas, no. You are destined merely for gibbering slavery. And I come now to regret taking

pains to keep you here after hours, for now I must seek the Internets at Starbucks and you cannot carry me hence—”

“‘Taking pains’?” She stared at the pink saliva dripping from his tiny, toothed maw and remembered the icicles on her broken alternator belt. “You sabotaged my car?”

“Well, the cold did make it rather painful to chew—”

“Rat bastard son of a bitch!” she raged.

She grabbed him with the tongs and dumped him into the nearest hot vat in the Fryolator. H’telred let out a split-second shriek before he burst in a jet of putrid steam. A gray slick of liquefied fat spread across the bubbling oil.

*Damn. I’m going to have to completely drain the pan and scrub it out,* she thought, dazed, watching the oil curdle to loathsome mayonnaise around the crisping tentacles.

Chilly realizations dawned on her. She’d just turned a tyrannical mini-demigod into very bad calamari. And he had royal minions. His freakish fish-men would surely seek dire vengeance on her once they discovered she’d popped their master.

But more importantly—she’d actually considered marrying a squid! What had gotten into her?

Well, most any attention from H’telred was bound to be more interesting than what she’d been getting. She stared at the tiny suckers curling into tough brown balls. Yep, sex with squidboy couldn’t have been worse than Benny.

Dammit. She’d almost been a princess. She’d almost been queen of the world. Her mother would never believe it.

Something hardened inside Emma like a French fry left too long in the vat. H’telred started to smoke. She fished him out with the tongs, doused his crackling corpse with cold water and dumped it in the trash. Screw her mother’s old wives’ tales. Screw years of waiting for cold frogs to turn into hot princes. She fetched her phone and called Benny.

“We’re not done yet—” he began.

“Yes, we are,” she replied. “You’re a nearly useless human being and a crappy boyfriend. I never want to see you again. Goodbye.” She hit the “End” button fiercely and deleted his entry.

She pulled out Mark’s Post-It and began punching in his number. A serial killer might have practical ideas about how to deal with fishy thugs. And if he was just a genuinely sweet kid working his way through school—well, she sure could use a ride home.

Another hand to clean the damn Fryolator wouldn’t hurt, either.

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**Lucy A. Snyder** studied to become a biologist, trained to become a journalist, and now provides tech support for a university that has an extreme troll problem. Her work has appeared in a wide variety of print and electronic publications, including *Strange Horizons*, *Farthing*, *Masques V*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *Chiaroscuro*, and *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Her short story collections *Sparks and Shadows* and *Installing Linux on a Dead Badger (And Other Oddities)* are now available.

Visit her website at <http://www.sff.net/people/lucy-snyder/>.