

Bad Medicine

by Martha Wells

Mac was taking his morning constitutional on the path that led sideways up the mountain. The morning air was cold and clear, and the path's sudden turns took him out onto ledges where the pines dropped abruptly away, and the view of the town cupped in the little valley below made him stop a moment to admire it.

Coming around one of those abrupt turns, he saw a hiker standing at one of the natural vantages, looking down at Silverpan in all its quiet 6:00 am glory. Tourists were the town's mainstay, and though it was too early in the year for snow and the influx of skiers, it was still a place for those who liked hiking, camping and fishing. Mac was irritated at the interruption to his morning solitude, but prepared himself to be neighborly if he had to. This might be one of the guests at the hotel.

Coming up the path, Mac saw that the hiker was facing away from him. The sun hadn't quite reached this part of the mountain and the ledge was still cloaked in predawn shadow, so it was difficult to make out anything else. The hiker didn't turn around at the approach of the big elderly black man, who was making no effort to be quiet.

Mac stopped a few feet behind him, not wanting to startle him, and said, "Good morning."

The hiker turned and Mac saw his eyes. They were twin coals of white fire in empty sockets, unearthly, impossible, and glowing with a cold heat. Mac froze, caught by surprise and utterly vulnerable.

Then the last edge of the sun topped the peak on the other side of the valley, and yellow dawn light washed the ledge, dissolving the hiker in its radiance.

Mac stood there a moment, considering the empty ledge, the smudged imprint of hiking boots in the dirt and pine needles. Then he shook his head in disgust and said to himself, "I can tell right now this is gonna be a hell of a day."

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That afternoon Mac stepped out onto the kitchen porch of the Thundershield Lodge for fresh air, and saw the boy sitting on the stack of damp firewood, barefoot and shivering. His first impulse was to ask why the hell Charlie Jimenez' boy wasn't in school and did his mother know he'd lost his shoes? But he saw this boy was too old to be the Jimenez boy, though he was skinny enough and spare to pass for a twelve year old. And it was not nearly cool enough, even in the shadow of the peak whose rocky slope came almost down to the wide wooden porch, for a native of Silverpan to be shivering. Mac said, "You came here to see somebody, son?" The boy's head jerked in surprise. He hadn't heard the screen door squeak open. His big eyes were frightened and wary and brave all at the same time. He was Hispanic, maybe fourteen, dark hair a little long, jeans and sweater dusty and ragged. He said, "I need help." "Do you?" Mac answered. In these days, you had to watch out for vandals and thieves and serial killers and sociopathic children with guns, besides the other dangers you had always had to watch out for. He was also wondering if the boy was a runaway and only wanted a handout. The hotel didn't throw leavings out the back door as if people were stray dogs, but served them in a civilized fashion in the Church pantry on Main Street. He said, "Who told you to come here?"

"Arce Cardenas, a curandero who lives in Albuquerque. He told me to come to Silverpan, to the ski hotel and ask for Ben Murphey." The boy's voice had gotten softer and he wrapped his arms tightly around his knees, in nervousness or embarrassment or both. "I think I'm in the wrong place."

Mac sighed. "No, you're in the right place. Come inside and I'll hunt Ben out to listen to your troubles." The boy hesitated, and Mac added, "You've come a long way for this, son, you gonna turn to jelly just when you get to the doorstep?"

"No. No, I'm not." The boy jumped down off the firewood, came through the heaped dead leaves to the porch. "I did something stupid and I want to make it right."

"That's what they all say," Mac said, not unkindly, and held open the screen door. As the boy passed through, Mac glanced up at the mirror that was positioned above the inner doorway. It showed him only an ordinary boy, nothing less, and more importantly, nothing more.

He took the boy into the small dining room off the main kitchen, which in the old private mansion days had been a servants' hall, and now was a break room for the cooks, wait crew and busboys. Mac gestured for the boy to take a seat at the old spanish mission table and yelled back into the kitchen area, "Carl!"

His assistant chef appeared in the doorway, wiping his hands on his apron. "What's up?"

"Think you can find me a plate of the special for this customer?"

"I think I can scrape one up." Carl grinned. "I'm not hungry, you don't have to," the boy objected. "Yeah, sure." Mac eyed him sardonically. As if he couldn't tell when somebody was half-faint from smelling the dissipating aromas of lunch. "I don't have any money. It all went for my bus ticket."

"I didn't ask for your money." "It's his way of being nice, kid," Carl explained. "And it's no use to argue with him. Special coming up."

"Send somebody upstairs for Ben, too," Mac told him. He sat down at the table. The boy was looking around the room at the antique stable tools that hung on the walls, the schedules and stack of time sheets for the employees, the roll top desk piled with the sample books for the catering side of the business, the cellular phone. He shook his head. "I still think I'm in the wrong place." "We run four businesses out of the Thundershield Lodge, son. We run a hotel, with condominiums for seasonal visitors, we run a four star restaurant, we run a catering service for weddings, parties, and other social occasions, and we take curses off people foolish enough to get put under them. Now which one are you interested in?" "The magic." It was a whisper.

"I thought so." Carl brought a plate of the special, which happened to be trout with vegetables and rice, and a glass of ice tea. Mac watched the boy eat for a few minutes, and noted somebody had cared to bring him up with decent table manners. "What happened to your shoes?" "I sold them to buy a bus ticket. They were good basketball shoes, like the players on TV. That's how it started. I wanted to play basketball professionally, like those guys. The Lakers and the Celtics, you know."

Mac didn't know. He didn't read the sports sections of any of the papers the hotel took, and he hadn't watched TV since Ed Sullivan died. He nodded anyway. It was typical. There was always something they wanted: money, a token of power, health, or a dream fulfilled. "Hard work's the only way to get that, son." The boy was carefully scraping the last of the sauce off the plate with a roll when Ben Murphey came through the door from the back staircase. Ben looked a little like a younger Burl Ives and a little like Santa Claus, but the resemblance ended before it reached his personality. He glared at Mac. "Do you know that we have a wedding for sixty-five people to pull off in under a week?"

"Am I blind? Am I deaf? Of course I know," Mac retorted. He said to the boy, "Tell him your story." When he hesitated, Mac added, "Oh, he'll listen all right."

Ben's eyes narrowed at the implied threat, but he sat down at the table anyway. The boy took a deep breath and said, "My name is Anthony Rivera. I did a very dumb thing. Six months ago I paid a witch who lives in Albuquerque 30 dollars to make me a star basketball player. And now.... Now the witch says I owe more. I said I would get a job and pay more money, but the witch wants me to... To kill my sister. I said no, I won't do that, nobody can make me do that. So the witch is going to kill me, and I think something bad's going to happen to my sister anyway. She's only three." He looked down at the table, cheeks darkening with embarrassment.

"You're right." Ben sighed. "That was a dumb thing to do. Kids today.... There's always a catch in these deals. Don't you listen to your granny?" He picked up the antique crystal salt shaker and turned it around on the table thoughtfully. Mac knew that what he was actually doing was examining the boy's reflection in the facets, as he had examined it himself in the mirror above the entryway. No, you couldn't be too careful these days. Satisfied, Ben put the shaker down and said, "You sign a paper with this witch?"

"No." Anthony looked up, brightening. "Is that good?" Ben shrugged. "Wouldn't matter if you had. I was just curious. You couldn't bargain your sister's life away if you wanted to. It isn't yours to give. Did you see an improvement in your basketball playing?"

"Yes, I made the team in my school, and we won our first two games."

"Anything spectacular? Anything that couldn't be explained by the fact that you probably practice your brains out?"

"Well.... No, not really. And I do play every night almost at the YMCA."

"I think his witch is a con artist," Ben said, looking over at Mac.

"I don't know." Mac shook his head. "Why threaten the sister?"

"A play for more money."

"He offered more money."

"So she's a sick con artist." "He," Anthony corrected. "It's a man." "He's a sick con artist."

"He has a witch bundle that talks in his house," the boy offered.

"Did you see it?" Ben asked.

"Yes." "So he's a con artist with talent. I'll go down to Albuquerque and kick his ass, and he'll leave you alone." "No," Mac said slowly, thinking of the hiker up in the pass. "I think I'll go."

Ben's jaw dropped. "The wedding--"

"Will you climb off me about that wedding? Mrs. Rosenbaum is a civilized woman who knows she can't rush a master craftsman like myself in the practice of one of my arts. She also knows she can't switch caterers at the last minute without going into Albuquerque, and taking second best. It's us or botulism surprise at the barbecue place next to the trailer park. So I have more than enough time." Mac leaned forward and tapped the table for emphasis. "You got too much to do here." Mac had told Ben about seeing the hiker's shade on the trail this morning, and they had agreed the etheric gateway could use some extra watching. The Murphey family guarded the Way-Between-Worlds in the mountain that towered

over Silverpan pass, controlling the fancies and spirits that leaked through, keeping worse from getting through at all. Mac added, "We're here to practice our other craft, not run the hotel. That's a sideline." "Our 'other craft' didn't pay for your trip to Florida last year."

Anthony interrupted, "I can get a job and pay you every week." He was weak with relief that he was getting the help, that it only appeared to be a question of who and when. "We can't take your money," Ben told him. "It's a little family rule we have." "Why? We pay the curandero when he helps us." "The curandero won't touch mal puesta, black magic, even to save someone's life, because he can't afford to have his reputation tarnished by having anything to do with it. Well, we'll take on a case that involves mal puesta, but we won't take payment of any kind for it, not money, not gifts or favors. That's how we protect our reputation." Ben looked over at Mac meaningfully. "We make our living off weddings, tourists, and skiers." "I can cater a Jewish wedding standing on my head," Mac grumbled. "I'm going down to Albuquerque this afternoon, and if I get any more grief over it I might just do that wedding standing on my head, and you can explain my attitude to Mrs. Rosenbaum." The Florida issue had been a low blow and he hadn't gotten over it yet. "And when I went to Florida I hadn't had a vacation in twenty years," he added. Ben sighed, resigned. "Be careful, you ain't been out on one of these in twenty years."

Mac's brows lowered menacingly. "You be careful. There's no retirement in this business."

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After rescheduling meetings with the baker, the salad chef, and Mrs. Rosenbaum, and leaving detailed instructions with Carl about dinner and breakfast tomorrow in case this took longer than he thought, Mac went next door to McCullar's Grocery and Ski Supply for a package of athletic socks and a plain blue pair of Keds from the sale bin for Anthony. Then he gassed up the buick and started the drive down the pass for Albuquerque. Most of the time the drive took was spent explaining to Anthony who Muddy Waters was. It was nearing twilight when Mac pulled over to the curb of a wide residential street and said, "This house?"

Anthony nodded. This was one of the better neighborhoods. The houses were on big plots, most built in the Santa Fe style of adobe, with rock or cactus gardens, or green lawns watered at great expense. The witch's house was a two-story adobe with a square tower rising out of one corner, modelled after the cliff houses at Mesa Verde. It had big windows and a wide red tile inlaid porch that should have been welcoming. It should have belonged to an artist, or to someone with a fancy for indoor flowering plants and lots of children. It was not the house of a brujo, or a con artist.

Now Mac regretted not stopping at Anthony's house to drop him off. He said, "It much of a walk from here to your place?"

"About five minutes. We live in the apartments three streets over."

Mac turned off the car and put the keys in his jacket pocket. "You go on and walk home. This may take a little longer than I thought." He hesitated a moment, then looked over at the boy. "Don't you come back here. Ever. Not for any reason of life or death. You understand?"

Anthony nodded, biting his lip. "Yes." They both got out of the car. The sun was descending into the Three Sisters in a haze of pink, orange, and red, and pools of shadow spread up the house's walls, but Mac could see a man's figure seated on the steps. He took the car's side mirror and twisted it until he could see the front of the house. The mirror failed to capture the man's reflection. Mac nodded to himself, reached back through the open window and picked up an empty soda bottle and its metal screw-cap. Anthony said, "Be careful, mister."

Mac walked up the stone-paved path, past graveled terraces, artfully arranged rocks, cacti and yucca.

The man stood up from the steps of the porch, hands in the pockets of his battered army jacket. He might have been white under all the dirt and dust and beard straggle; it was difficult to tell. A good copy of a street person, Mac decided, though the WW II army jacket had been a mistake. No, he didn't need a piece of rock crystal to look through to see this creature's true nature.

As he came closer, he could see its eyes were empty black pits. It grinned, showing brown teeth, and said, "We been waiting for a visitor, old man, we just didn't expect you." The smell of death weighed down the air and made Mac wish for a can of lysol. He needed no more evidence that the witch who had threatened Anthony had nothing to do with the native magic of the southwest, the hybrid magic of the pueblo Indians and the Spanish settlers, than this. There was no magic on earth that could fashion a sending like this to speak to him. It had come from the gateway. He said, "I don't talk to the hired help when I'm on business. Why don't you step out of the way so we can get on with this?" He was holding the empty soda bottle in his right hand, his thumb over the bottle's mouth.

It said, "You are the hired help, you old bastard."

Mac said, "Vulgarity is its own reward," and shook the empty soda bottle and dropped it in front of the thing. The shade took a startled step back, then dissolved into formless color, swirling around like a dust devil. One end was drawn slowly down to the bottle and then the rest was sucked inside with a little pop of displaced air. Mac grabbed up the bottle and screwed the metal cap back on tight, then dropped it into the trashcan near the porch. "Hope they recycle you into something useful." He walked up the steps and, since he was evidently already expected, opened the door. The entryway was high and arched, finished smooth and tan with more adobe, decorated with Acoma and Zuni pottery tucked into wall niches. The witch bundle Anthony had mentioned hung near the corner where the short hall opened out into the big two story living room. It was made of shredded rattlesnake skin and coyote hair, and cackled at Mac in a high thin voice as he passed by. Big blackened antique rafters crossed the high ceiling, and there was more pueblo pottery, as well as Navajo blankets and sheepskin rugs, and Spanish colonial and American victorian antiques. If this was a friendly visit Mac would have admired the room mightily, but knowing a gateway wizard was here he could only think it represented booty. Looted treasure, symbolizing the local magic the gate wizard meant to eat out of the deserts and the mountains.

Mac didn't like the word magic. That word implied something outside your reality instead of at the core of it. But there was no other word for the music that moved the world, that people could hear if they tried hard enough, and no one could understand you if you didn't use their words for things. This being from outside wouldn't understand anything at all.

A step on the hardwood floor behind him and Mac turned to see the man himself. The creatures on the other side of the gate were shapeshifters; here their power was limited, and they were bound into whatever shape they had taken to come into this world. This one was Hispanic and nearing middle-aged, because that was what Anthony or anyone else he meant to fool would have expected of a brujo. The gate wizard said, "You've sprung my trap too soon. I was hoping for Ben Murphey, but I suppose he'll come after you." He paused, his smile laced with malice, "You're Aristide Quentain DuBois."

So I've walked myself into a trap. But they wanted Ben. Well, they got me instead. Mac's smile was dry. "You must have a friend down at the Albuquerque DMV. I don't hide my true name, I just don't go by it around here. And you don't want Ben to come after me. He's not as civilized about these things as I am." He was willing to bet he hadn't met this particular visitor from the gate before. The ones he had run into in the past had neither the desire nor the ability to make his acquaintance again. But that had been a long time ago, and this creature was young and strong, he could feel that much.

It said, "I'll have all of you eventually, so I suppose the order of precedence doesn't matter."

He knows as little about us when we're at home as we know about him, Mac thought. "Well, you try."

The gate wizard smiled, then Mac was somewhere else.

The room he stood in now was a small closed-in box of white-plastered adobe, lit by firelight. The heat was intense, the air thick with woodsmoke, human sweat and the odors of sickness. He swayed, dizzied as much by the atmosphere as by the sudden transition. A hand on his back steadied him.

Mac took a deep breath. First off, where the hell am I? He seemed to be standing with a crowd of other men, watching a ceremony. The small wooden altar was set up against the far wall; laid out in front of it were the corn fetishes, medicine bowls, flints, the other paraphernalia of a ritual cure in a pueblo. Which pueblo? Mac wondered. Acoma, maybe. The medicine men in the room were dressed only in breechcloths, their long hair tied back and black bands painted across their eyes. Mac looked down at himself and realized he was one of them, that was why no one had reacted to his appearance. The shock of that made the room blur, and reality trembled.

For a moment he was almost free, snapping up through time and back into his own body, but then the room solidified around him again. The gate wizard was holding him here, whether he was really in the past or if this was only some kind of a mental projection. And if it was the past, how far back? With the room stripped of furnishings and the men dressed only in the traditional ceremonial gear, it was impossible to tell if this was the 1800s or the 1950s.

The patient was a middle-aged man laying on a blanket in the center of the room, shuddering with pain. An old doctor, his body thin almost to the point of emaciation but with tough stringy tendons and muscles like small rocks standing out under brown skin, was performing the cure. He worked an eagle feather over the patient's body, flicking it back and forth across the man's stomach and chest. Then the doctor leaned over a bowl and spit something -- stones, thorns, or pieces of bone -- into it. Somebody with skill, power, and no conscience had introduced foreign objects into the patient's body that were slowly killing him. The doctor was working them out and into his own body with the eagle feather, then spitting them out into the refuse bowl nearby. Mac had always figured that nine out of ten of the witchcraft incidents documented in the pueblos and Spanish villages had been the products of superstition and hysteria, like the Salem witch trials. This was not one of those nine out of ten.

He had never seen this ceremony performed. He had learned his craft years ago from Ben's grandfather, when Mac was a young man and had first been drawn up into Silverpan Pass by a calling he couldn't understand. The magic the Murphey family used had diverged so much from the magic of the pueblos that it had become a thing in itself, and bore only passing resemblances to the native craft.

The doctor was leaning over the bowl to spit out the latest object when he gasped, and started to choke.

The others moved forward, trying to help, trying to work the object out with the eagle feathers, but nothing helped. Wheezing sounds were coming out of the doctor's throat, and he was desperate to breathe. Then he doubled over, clutching his midsection. The gate wizard was using this to learn. Introducing foreign objects into a human body was one of the basics of *mal puesta*. It didn't matter. Mac couldn't stand by and watch the curandero die from the thing he'd removed from the patient's body. He gave a mental nod to the gate wizard. Point one to you, he thought.

Mac pushed forward through the others and said, "Hold him down."

They complied, pinning the struggling man to the hard-packed dirt of the floor. Mac fumbled in the bowl of instruments and picked out an obsidian blade, a hand-chipped circle of black volcanic glass, wondering if he knew how to do this. Yes, he did know. Now was no time for doubts. He could feel the black glass radiating power into his hand. There was no spell to say: you focused, turned the right corner

in your mind and there it was. He made a slit in the man's belly, the obsidian cutting as clean as a medical laser. No blood welled up from the long deep wound, and he parted the flesh carefully. He could see a small bundle of cactus thorns had worked its way down to the stomach and lodged there.

Mac gently dislodged the thorns, tossing them one by one into the refuse bowl. The only person in the room still breathing was the old doctor, who was staring determinedly at the ceiling. The others were watching in amazed silence, afraid to move and disrupt what he was doing. Even the man they had been trying to cure had sat up to watch. Mac removed the last thorn, saw that the man's heart was still beating strongly, and pushed the incision closed with exquisite care. He rubbed the flat side of the obsidian blade along the wound, the skin closing beneath it with only a faint pink line left. He finished and set the blade aside, only a well-polished piece of obsidian again. The doctor coughed tentatively, and rubbed his throat. He nodded his thanks, and the room gave a collective sigh of relief.

Mac nodded back, and his eyes happened to meet those of the watching patient. It was the gate wizard. Darkness closed around Mac like the door of an unlit room slamming shut. Then he was standing in the living room of the Albuquerque house again, back in his own body, dizzy from the swift transition. The gate wizard was watching him with an expression half curious and half angry. An alien being looking through human eyes. Mac said, "And what did that teach you? How to cause the most pain with the least effort?"

The wizard's eyes narrowed. "I know all I need to know about pain. You are the one who doesn't understand. We live in a void, we need light, we need heat--" Mac dismissed this with a shake of his head. "Good try, but I know too much about you. In 1850 when the gate out of this world first opened, if one of you had walked up to old Nathan Murphey and asked honestly for help, he would've given it to you. There's been a lot of years pass, and a lot of you trying to break through that gate. If just one of you had come to talk instead of coming to fight, things could be different. But you don't bring bargains, you bring war." Mac stared hard at the gate wizard, who looked so human but wasn't. "God Almighty, man, here I am. Talk to me. Make me an offer this world can live with."

The wizard's face changed for a moment, moving through a variety of emotions Mac couldn't decipher. Then it said, "Yes, you do know too much about us."

Mac's feet left the ground and he flung his arms over his head, just in time to protect himself as he slammed into the glass skylight in the roof. He felt the bite of the glass on his forearms and then his fingers were wet with blood, and he was moving faster and faster into the darkened sky. Mac called his own power, wrapping himself in fire and air. Now his opponent couldn't release him a few thousand feet over the New Mexican desert and let nature take its course. It was night now and the rush of the wind was cold as the gate wizard's power drove him like a blown leaf over the city lights of Albuquerque and into the southeast. Mac hadn't flown under his own power in years, since he considered it a terrible waste of skill unless there was an emergency, and he had almost forgotten what it was like. He caught glimpses of the fainter glow of small towns, headlights briefly illuminating the smooth scars of highways. He tested the wizard's hold on him, but was careful not to exert his full strength.

Suddenly the headlong flight slowed, turned downward. Mac hadn't considered the possibility of being rammed into the desert's surface but in this form he knew it wouldn't do him much damage. Then he recognized the muddy gray band rushing up towards him for what it was. Mac crashed through the surface of the Rio Grande as if it were a mirror, water-shards scraping at him like the real glass of the skylight as he fell past. He was still breathing, not choking on dirty water, and that surprised him. He landed on the muddy bottom to a chorus of screams from a surprised gathering of brujas. Mac dismissed the fire with a shake of his head, and stood up unsteadily. He turned slowly, trying to take in his surroundings. From this angle the river was a long wide canyon, high walls stretching up to meet the gray

surface of the water overhead, muddy bottom covered with tangled weeds, sunken logs, tin cans and other garbage. There had been legends about witches congregating at the bottom of the Rio Grande, but they were just that -- legends. The gate wizard had made an air bubble on the riverbottom; Mac could see its boundary a few hundred yards off. It was a darker gray-green, and there were shapes moving past it that were probably curious fish. There were about ten brujas sitting on the wreck of an old powerboat that was sunk half into the mud, and they had been playing conchanita to judge from the cards that had scattered in their fright. "Oh, it's only him," one of them said in Spanish, and started collecting the cards again. All of them were old, and most wore the long black dresses that were the traditional wardrobe of widowed grannies, except for one nonconformist dressed in a multicolored bathrobe and beaded necklaces.

Mac's eyes went back to the top of the bubble. God damn interfering.... Do you really think you can keep me here like those helpless old brujas? He raised his hands, made his power into a spear of contained energy and pushed it against the spell forming the bubble. The boundary holding out the river trembled, and twenty feet away a hole formed and water gushed through like a gully-washing rainfall. The brujas shrieked again and Mac stopped his barely begun effort. Yes, he could break the boundary, but he could tell from the structure of the spell that the bubble was augmented with a trap that kept any prisoners from using their power over the air to fly to the surface.

The bubble shivered again, but the water slowed to a trickle. The wizard had gone much further than Mac had thought. If it had this much control over the earthly elements already, there wasn't much left for it to learn. "Mac?" a familiar voice said, "You okay?"

He looked around and saw one of the brujas coming towards him, stumbling a little on the uneven ground. He squinted and recognized Rosa, who ran a touristy botanica in Albuquerque. She was wearing old jeans and a sweatshirt, her long greying hair caught back in a ponytail. She was staring at him, her eyes shocked, and he realized he was dripping blood onto the filthy river bottom.

The glass had sliced through the sleeves of his jacket in two places, but the cuts weren't deep, just messy. Mac wiped the blood off on the scarf Rosa handed him. He was lucky he hadn't left his jacket in the car. "Just a byproduct of the war," he told her.

"He did that to you? Oh man, are we in trouble."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, honey. I'm glad you're looking well too. How did he get you?"

She sighed. "I started getting the idea something funny was in the air, you know? I thought it was a new bruja looking for trouble. All the regulars had been pretty quiet." She nodded toward the covey of old women playing cards on the wrecked boat. "That was because most of them were stuck down here. Then this strange man walks into my shop, and before I had a chance to do anything I was here."

Mac nodded, preoccupied. "Yeah, he was rounding up you ladies for practice, trying it out to work up to Ben and me." "I thought about trying to break out, but the spell won't let us fly. I can swim a little, but most of the others can't."

Even if they managed to break out of their prison, the brujas would be faced with the uninviting prospect of swimming up to the surface and fighting the current to the bank. Mac considered his options and wasn't happy with the result. "He's the strongest wizard who's ever made the crossover, the strongest I've ever been up against."

Rosa bit her lip. "Mac, I don't want to spend the rest of my life cooped up in this mud pit." "Rosa, if I don't break me a gate wizard tonight, it'll be a mighty short life for both of us." It's time to get clever, he decided. Mac cleared a small space on the ground by kicking weeds and debris aside. Then he sat on his

heels and scooped up a double-handful of mud on the cleared area, formed it into a rough head-shape, and made eyeholes and a mouth with his thumbs. Rosa had squatted down next to him, and now she said, "What's this?" "He likes to talk. I'm giving him an opportunity."

They didn't have long to wait. A distorted, craggy-featured face quickened into life in the mud. The gate wizard.

"We need to bargain," Mac said. "Do we?"

Rosa started at the sound of its voice. The creature might have been standing on the muddy flat next to them. "We do," Mac told it. "Ben will be coming after me by this time tomorrow. If you think you can handle him as easy as you have me, you're much mistaken." He saw Rosa glance sideways at him, but ignored her.

"What do you have to offer?"

"It's what you have to offer," Mac said. "You've learned how to curse a body with thorns, and you've learned the power of the air, but you don't have the most important skill. You can't shapechange in our world." The mud face couldn't betray emotion, but Mac thought he could sense the rise of greed. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that Rosa's face didn't change, and that she expressed her emotion only by blinking rapidly. "You'll need it to deal with Ben. I'll teach it to you, if you'll let me and the brujas out of here, and leave the Thundershield Lodge alone."

There was a disapproving rustle near him, and Mac glanced up to see that he had an audience of interested brujas gathered around him, like a pack of grandmother crows in their black dresses. God help him if they should start to offer advice.

"You'd betray your master?" the mud face said. "There are secrets of power in the Lodge he won't ever give to me, because I'm not his kind. Right, Rosa?"

Rosa nodded. All the brujas nodded too.

"A bargain, then. I'll let you leave the river, but you must bring me the secret before I release the women." "That's a deal." Mac smashed the mud face back into the dirt. Rosa shook her head and let out her breath in a worried sigh. "Shapechanging? Mac, what are you thinking..." One of the brujas snorted and said, "We don't always see eye to eye with you, but we didn't give you away because we know you won't leave us here if you get out. But you're a damn fool to give that bastard monster the shapechange, even as part of a trick."

"Oh, I'm going to give it to him all right." Mac stood and dusted his knees.

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Mac crossed the sky like a falling star, coming down to the house's graveled yard a will-o-the-wisp, and turning back into himself in time for his feet to touch the pavement. He glanced around the quiet street, and started when he saw Anthony sitting crosslegged on the car's hood, waiting in the dark. "Boy, did I tell you to go home?"

"I wanted to see if you were okay," the wide-eyed Anthony replied. "What are you going to do to him now?"

Can't tell these children anything, Mac thought. At least it looked like he was winning from the outside. He took his pocketknife and cut off one of the yucca stalks, then plaited it into a hoop about eight inches in diameter.

He stuffed the hoop into his pocket and walked back up to the house. Third time was the charm. And if the gate wizard won this confrontation, it would decipher the spell Mac had woven into the hoop and it would know one of the most powerful arts there was. Mac could've told himself that the wizard would have learned it eventually even if he didn't take this risk, but he was too old not to recognize that as a rationalization, especially since it wasn't a very good one.

The front door was open and the witch bundle silent in the foyer. The room was lit only by the moon and starlight coming in through the windows and the shattered skylight. Glass littered the living room floor, glittering like fairy dust. For a long moment Mac stood still, letting his eyes adjust. Then he made out the darker shadow near the end of the room: the gate wizard standing silently. "Well?" it said.

Sweat stung the cuts on his forearms. He had told Ben there was no retirement in this business, but he hadn't taken his own advice. He had let himself get slack, and that had allowed this to happen.

Well, he would make up for it now.

"You'll need this." He crossed the darkened room, stopping about three feet from the wizard, and held out the plaited hoop.

The wizard stepped forward, but hesitated.

Mac said, "Don't trust me? I'm the one with the most to lose." Then the sick sense of the presence of malpuesta overwhelmed him, and he felt the thorns start to form in his stomach. For a second he wanted to pretend he hadn't sensed the spell and continue to hold out the hoop to the gate wizard, anything to get it to take those last few steps towards him. No, if it thought he was lying that would be disaster. Mac let himself give way to the pain, doubling over and clumsily backing away a few steps. His imagination helped by presenting him with a vivid picture of what the thorns were doing to his stomach lining.

The wizard strode forward, eager, and reach down for the hoop. At the last moment Mac pushed it at him, slipping it up over the creature's arm.

It stumbled away from him, clawing at the hoop, its human form blurring, becoming molten. Mac tried to straighten up, made it about halfway. He said, "There's one thing I didn't mention." The wizard collapsed to the floor, writhing, formless flesh beginning to elongate into another shape. Mac thought it could still understand him. He continued, "Ben's my student, not the other way around. He came to the craft from another branch of the family. I'm training him to be my successor, the way I trained him to be the hotel's business manager. There are no secrets of the Thundershield Lodge that I don't already know."

An almost human mouth formed in the wizard's changing mass, just long enough to howl an inarticulate curse. Mac staggered, gasping, the pain in his stomach and abdomen redoubled.

The wizard's tortured body lengthened and shrunk simultaneously, becoming a long writhing shape that resolved into a four foot long diamondback rattlesnake. Mac would have preferred something less dangerous, but the wizard had been able to sense the strength in the hoop, and the shape it was imbued with had to be a powerful one.

Mac slumped against the wall, the pain almost enough to send him to his knees, and thought you overplayed your hand this time, old man. Sweat blinded him for a desperate moment, then he forced his leaden legs to move. He stumbled to the fireplace, falling heavily against the stone facing and grabbing the poker. The snake writhed toward him, rattle working frantically, searching for the human enemy but for a moment too confused by its new senses to find him. Mac brought the poker down with all his remaining strength and smashed the snake's skull.

The pain lessened immediately, and Mac sat down heavily in one of the sheepskin-covered chairs. Tradition held that foreign objects introduced into a body by *mal puesta* disappeared once the person who had put them there died. He hadn't bothered to mention that to the wizard, either. Mac reluctantly pushed himself out of the chair and winced at the twinge from his stomach. The damage had been done, and he wondered what his doctor would say to the sudden appearance of a bleeding ulcer in a man who had always had perfect health. He just hoped his insurance would cover it. The gate wizard's death would also have freed Rosa and the other brujas, who should be flying back to Albuquerque now like so many falling stars.

I needed this. I needed to be reminded. The only retirement in our business is the permanent one. Maybe one vicious gate wizard had done him more good tonight than those two weeks in Florida had. He stood, slowly and carefully, and went toward the front door and the cool night air.

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About the Author:

Martha Wells lives in College Station, Texas, with her three favorite things: her cats, her husband, and her tapes of Mystery Science Theater 3000. Ms. Wells is the author of five critically acclaimed novels: *The Element of Fire*; *City of Bones*; *The Death of the Necromancer*; *Wheel of the Infinite*; and *The Wizard Hunters*.

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