

DISMEMBRANCE

ELIZABETH BEAR, KYLE CASSIDY AND MICHAEL SWANWICK



COVER BY LEE MOYER

When Rose Fox called me up and asked if I had any ideas for panels at the 2012 Readercon I wasn't sure I did. I knew two things about Readercon: 1, it was the Gold Standard of science fiction conventions and 2, they didn't encourage people to show up in costume. I'd done collaborations in the past with both Elizabeth Bear and Michael Swanwick so it seemed kind of obvious that I could hang on to their cachet of Hugo awards and maybe do something that way. I suggested that the three of us create a story over three days and have Lee Moyer create a "cover" for whatever happened. Rose thought it was a great idea. Fortunately so did the futuristic law firm of Bear, Swanwick & Moyer. We solicited props from guests of honor Peter Straub and Caitlin R. Kiernan as well as Ellen Kushner (who has lots of fancy books out now, but I remember her for my stack of Choose Your Own Adventure novels.)

We had four panels, ostensibly two to photograph the story, one for Lee to create the cover and a final one to "perform" it.

The sessions didn't go at all like I'd expected. I figured Michael & Elizabeth would walk around creating a story, I'd snap some photos, and we'd all watch. Instead, Elizabeth Bear jumped up to a white board and explained how story plots work.

"What's Die Hard about?" she asked.

"A man in a building taken over by terrorists!" came a voice from the back.

"Wrong!" said Bear, "It's about a guy who wants to get back together with his wife. The terrorists are the thing that's between him and his goal. Now, who's our character going to be?"

And so it went from there. With the audience picking out story elements. Our main character had borrowed money from the mafia, but she also had a dark secret. She had something she wanted, and she had something to thwart her along the way. While we worked, Locus Magazine live-blogged it for all the people at home who were upset they couldn't be there — all of the panels were standing-room-only.

During the sessions, once enough of a plot had been decided on, I'd take volunteer models from the audience out into the hotel and photograph scenes from the story. As a result, I never knew exactly what was going on, because I'd missed most of it.

I wasn't sure at the end if I was going to go back and fix photos that we didn't have time to do during Readercon, but I think it's more honest if I just leave it the way it was. This is what we made that weekend; in essentially three hours.

Thanks to everyone who participated especially Elizabeth Bear, Michael Swanwick, Lee Moyer, our story contributors, models,, and the programming staff of Readercon.

Kyle Cassidy
Philadelphia
2 days later

In retrospect, it was a mistake to borrow money from the Mob.

Particularly when you were having marital difficulties.

When Venetia told her wife about the fix they were in — and told her as well that she had no idea how to repay the debt — Eileen threw the teapot across the breakfast nook. —

“Well,” said Venetia, “we probably can’t afford a new teapot, either.”

They slept in separate rooms that night.

The next morning, Venetia crept into the guest room to see if she could make amends. The bed was rumpled and empty, which was strange because Eileen was an owl. She always slept late.



Eileen was nowhere in the house. Venetia, increasingly frantic, was searching the back yard and patio when she got the phone call.





Tom and Bracken were evil men, but not brutal. They had no interest in harming the woman any more than was needed to get the job done.



They did their work dispassionately but efficiently. Swiftly, they removed a month from their victim's memories.



Then they cut off a finger.



Eileen could have killed her wife for getting her into this. She had no idea what was going on or who these men were or why they had done what they had done to her. But she knew Venetia. She knew whose fault this was.



They wanted money. Venetia didn't have any money or any means of getting it. She was, in short, totally fucked.

Her pleas cut no ice with these brutal men. They told Venetia that for each day she delayed they'd take off one of her wife's fingers and another month of her memories. They didn't give a damn whether she cared more about Eileen's body or her mind — both were on the chopping block.



Venetia's parents were rich. She could go to them. But it would be humiliating. Venetia took great pride in having built a life for herself without their help.

Then, too, there was always the temptation to wait until Eileen had lost two or even three fingers. Just long enough to revert her to a time before what Venetia thought of as her Transgression. Just long enough to save their marriage.

Just a few memories, and Eileen would love her again.

Just a few memories, and Venetia would never be worthy of Eileen's love again.

Venetia went to see her parents. But they were not in. They had just boarded the plane home from Yokohama. They would not be reachable until it landed, sometime tomorrow morning.



In the morning, Tom and Bracken called again. Venetia pleaded for more time. "Take as much time as you like," Bracken said, and by the tone of his voice Venetia could tell he was smiling. "She's still got eight fingers."



Venetia's parents were delighted that she had come to them for help. It was a victory for the bastards. It proved that she still needed them.

And they were so very nice about it.

Afterward, Venetia went into the bathroom and threw up.



As directed, Venetia brought the money to the Don's office, in a building downtown whose ownership was an open secret to all the world.

In the elevator, she suddenly realized that she no longer had the money.

And one of her fingers was missing.



Venetia's phone rang.

It was Eileen. "Venetia, don't say anything, just listen. Forget about the money. That's water under the bridge. Go to the Don's office and sign the papers."

"What papers?"

"Just do it, damn you. Why can't you ever just — do it?"

"I'm not going to do anything I don't understand. Why should I —?"

But the phone was no longer in her hand.
And she was missing another finger.



The phone rang again.

This time Eileen was crying. "Please," she said. "I know everything you did, and I forgive you. I forgave you a long time ago. I love you more than anything. So we won't have any money. That's nothing. We'll have each other. That's everything."



"I know," Venetia said.



"Go home," the man who had introduced himself as Don Purdom said. "Your family will be waiting."



When Venetia got home, there were two women waiting. One of them looked like Eileen's mother — only not quite. An aunt? The other she didn't know at all.

"Hello," she said, "I'm Venetia. And you are —?"

"Don't you recognize our daughter Julia?" the old woman said, in what was undeniably Eileen's voice.

"I . . . don't . . ."

"Oh, God," Eileen said. "Bracken Purdom took your memories too."



Don Purdom never forgot a face or a bank account or an opportunity. When Venetia and Eileen inherited Venetia's parents' wealth, he remembered how the old Don had put the squeeze on them twenty years earlier — and he'd known exactly how to get that money out of them.



