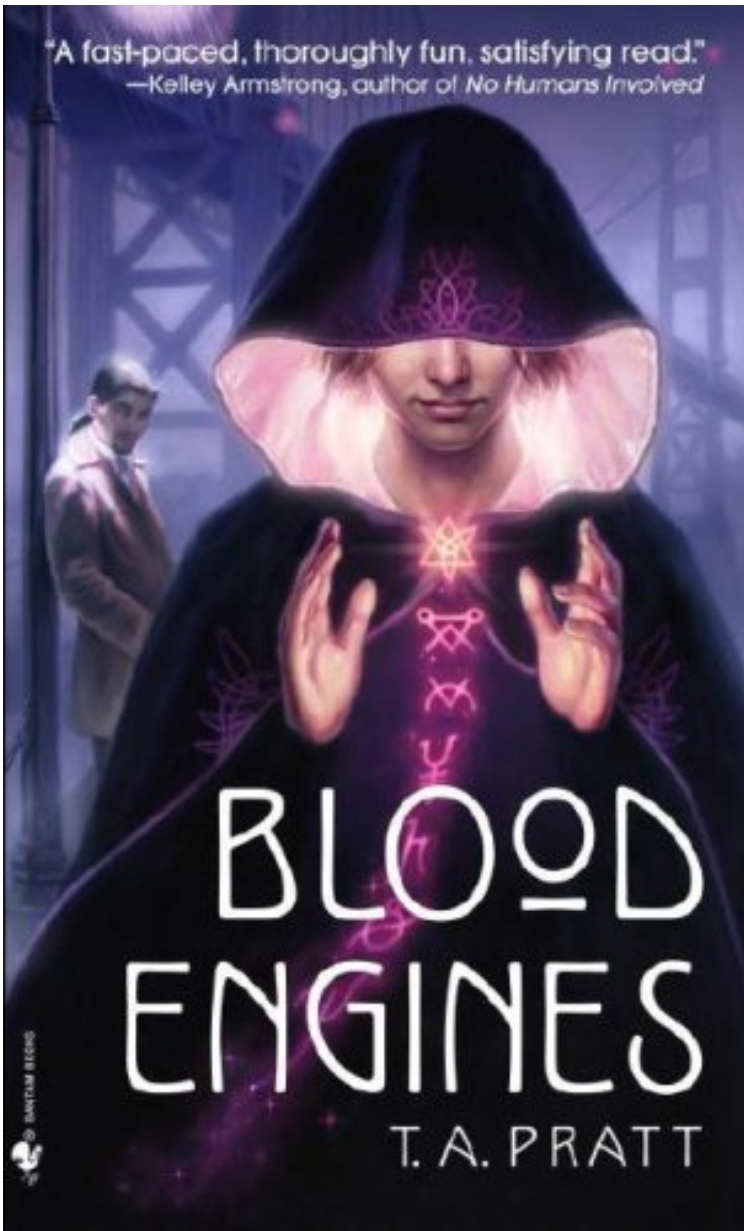


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Blood Engines



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurMeet Marla Masonsmart, saucy, slightly wicked witch of the East Coast.Sorcerer Marla Mason, small-time guardian of the city of Felport, has a big problem. A rival is preparing a powerful spell that could end Marlas lifeand, even worse, wreck her city. Marlas only chance of survival is to boost her powers with the Cornerstone, a magical artifact hidden somewhere in San Francisco. But when she arrives there, Marla finds that the quest isnt going to be quite as cut-and-dried as she expectedand that some of the people she needs to talk to are dead. It seems that San Franciscos top sorcerers are having troubles of

their own mysterious assailant has the city's magical community in a panic, and the local talent is being (gruesomely) picked off one by one. With her partner-in-crime, Rondeau, Marla is soon racing against time through San Francisco's alien streets, dodging poisonous frogs, murderous hummingbirds, cannibals, and a nasty vibe from the local witchery, who suspect that Marla herself may be behind the recent murders. And if

Marla doesn't figure out who is killing the city's finest in time, she'll be in danger of becoming a magical statistic herself. From the Paperback edition. Excerpt

Marla Mason crouched in the alley beside the City Lights bookstore and threw her runes. The square of royal-purple velvet spread before her on the ground was covered by a scattering of objects: a garlic clove, a withered cigarette butt, a two-headed novelty quarter, fingernail clippings, and the stone from the head of a toad. She studied the pattern the objects made for a long time, then sighed. It's no good. This alley isn't any better than the other two places I tried. I don't know where all the lines of force are in this city, so I can't interpret the scatter worth a damn. I thought I could triangulate, but even then it's too vague. There's something or someone of power over there, she gestured vaguely eastward, but I don't know if it's the guy we're looking for. I'll have to do a wet divination. The air smelled faintly of piss and coffee, but not even those familiar urban smells set Marla at ease. Her companion, Rondeau, stood slurping rice noodles from a waxed-paper box. I guess guts never lie, he said, prodding the noodles with his chopstick and plucking out a morsel of chicken. What are you planning to eviscerate? Marla wrapped up her velvet cloth and divining tools and stowed them in a leather shoulder bag. She stretched her arms overhead until she felt her joints pop, then sighed. She'd missed her morning workout, then spent several hours cramped in cattle class during a cross-country flight, and her body was feeling uncooperative. If I didn't have such high moral standards, I'd do a human, just because it's more accurate. Then again, this isn't my city, so it's not like I have a responsibility to protect these people. She was kidding, of course. Murder for mystical purposes incurred a nasty karmic debt, and it was wasteful besides. There were better uses for people. I don't know. A cat, maybe. Or a chicken. Nothing too advanced. I doubt Lao Tsung is trying to hide from me. Why do we have to look for him anyway? Why didn't you let him know we were coming? Rondeau wiggled his fingers around his left ear. Ever hear of a telephone? Marla snorted. He's not the kind of person who has a phone number. There are ways to get messages to him, but it would take a few days, and there wasn't time for that. I'm in a hurry. I gathered that, Rondeau said, wiping his mouth with a wad of napkins. I think my first clue was when you busted into my place, told me to pack a bag, hauled ass to the airport, and hustled me onto a plane. You didn't even let me sit by the window. His tone was aggrieved. My first time on a plane, and you stick me in the middle beside a fat guy with sweat stains. He was smelly. Oh, you noticed that, too? I think it's your keen powers of observation I value most. You know, I kept hoping you'd volunteer the information, but since you aren't, what are we doing in San Francisco? What's so important that you have to see this guy Lao Tsung right now? And why did you need me to come? Marla considered. She and Rondeau had saved each other's lives far more often than they'd threatened them. Keeping secrets was a useful habit, and deeply ingrained, but it paid to remember she did have a few allies she could count on. It's Susan Wellstone, she said, and found herself reaching almost superstitiously for the comfort of the daggers up her sleeves. Rondeau's eyes widened. Really? Her? Of all the movers and shakers in Felport, I never thought she'd be the one to move on you. Gregor, maybe, or Viscarro . . . He tossed his empty noodle carton in a garbage can. Marla shook her head. Gregor would stab me in the back if I ever gave him the chance, and Viscarro will be there to steal the jewels and gold fillings off whatever corpse falls first, but Susan's the only one willing to make an opportunity, instead of just waiting for one. She knows that if she loses, I'll destroy her. But she's a perfectionist. She doesn't intend to lose. She means to overthrow me. Rondeau frowned. So why isn't she hanging upside down in a vat of acid right now? What are we doing on the other side of the continent? You can't be running away. I better not have heard a little upward lilt at the end of that last sentence, Rondeau, Marla said, crossing her arms. I know you weren't asking if I'm running away. Rondeau held up his hands. I know better. I've seen you duck from the occasional social obligation, but never a fight. Yeah, well. Marla ran her hand through her short hair, bits of scalp flaking away. She'd never had dandruff in her twenties. Getting older had its advantages, but dandruff wasn't one of them. This isn't a fight I can win, not head-on. Susan's planning to cast a spell to get rid of me, but she hasn't thought through all the implications, and her spells going to wind up wrecking my city, too. I can respect her desire to kill me, she wants my position, and she knows I'm not about to retire anytime soon, but I can't forgive her for risking Felport. So Lao Tsung can help you stop Susan's spell? Lao Tsung knows where to find something that can help me. The Cornerstone. But don't go throwing that around to the local sorcerers. Ah, Rondeau said. An artifact? I hate artifacts. Things shouldn't look at you, and that old weird stuff always seems to be paying attention. I thought you liked

attention. Rondeau rolled his eyes. Were under a time limit here? One that gets shorter every minute we stand here talking. Have I satisfied your curiosity? Can I get on with saving my city and my life now? You never told me why I'm here. You could've left me behind with Hamil to, like, muster the defenses or something.

You might be the first one up against the wall when the revolution comes, but Hamil and I won't be far behind. Its . . . not like that, Marla said. Explaining the nature of Susans spell would be too complicated, and it wasn't something she was comfortable thinking about, beyond taking the measures necessary to thwart it.

Besides, I need you here to lift heavy things, guard doorways, and deal with any other shit I'm too busy to bother with. Rondeau grinned. A man likes to feel useful. Lead on. Do you think we can find a live chicken around here? Maybe if we search high and low. They set off toward the hanging paper lanterns, pagoda storefronts, and crowded afternoon sidewalks of Chinatown. I don't know why Lao Tsung decided to live in this shithole quakemeat city, Marla said. He came here to find the Cornerstone, but then he stayed. Rondeau

grunted. We've only been in San Francisco for an hour. You hate it already? Marla spat on the street. Pretty white city by the bay, my ass. Don't forget cool, gray city of love. Yeah, I feel the love, Marla said, stepping over a pile of dirty stuffed animals someone had left on the sidewalk. I think it's nice. You're just jealous because we don't have cable cars back home. He glanced up a side street. Not that I've seen a cable car yet. Its

January, Marla said. There should be snow in January. A little fog is no substitute. I feel out of place. Far from my center. Well, yeah. It was, what, your second time on an airplane? I thought you were going to strangle random strangers during the layover in Denver. Haven't you ever taken a vacation? Marla laughed, and Rondeau nodded. Me neither. This is my first one. This isn't a vacation. It's a matter of life, death, and

destruction, I know. That doesn't mean I can't take in the sights, right? What's the point of staying alive if you don't live a little? They entered the closely packed streets of Chinatown, where off-season tourists wandered among the food stalls and the stores, picking through wares spilling out onto the sidewalks. There were tanks full of tightly packed wriggling fish, and wooden crates filled with strange fruit. The street signs had both

English names and Chinese characters, and there were lots of fanciful architectural touches—faux pagodas made of wood on top of buildings, gold-painted facades, bamboo fences. I love this place, Rondeau said. There's nothing like this back home. Because our city never had a ghetto for underpaid, persecuted immigrant Chinese laborers in the 19th century, Marla said. I suspect San Francisco won't be offering you a position as a

tour guide anytime soon. I distrust, on principle, any city that encourages me to leave my heart behind when I go. Marla abruptly stopped walking, and Rondeau almost bumped into her. Hmm, there it is again. What? She waved her hands. Whatever the divination was indicating. A field, a hum, a vibration. Something. Not far from here. I don't hear any hum, Rondeau said. Come on, it's this way. Ah, Rondeau said, following her down the block. Might I suggest that we, say, ignore whatever magical you-dont-know-what were now moving

toward? Why borrow trouble? I cause trouble, I don't stumble into it. Not precisely true, but the plane flight and the necessity of flight had made her cranky, and she'd always had a curious streak anyway. Besides, maybe this magical something-or-other is what I'm looking for, the Cornerstone, and I won't need to find Lao

Tsung at all. Right, Rondeau said. Because we're in a Charles Dickens novel, and coincidences like that actually happen. After about a block of walking, Marla stopped. There. What? It's just a booth selling bootleg Jackie Chan videos. Oh. You mean that. There was a folded space there, between a tea shop and one of the areas many jewelry stores Marla could just see the shimmer. If there was a shop inside that shimmer, it wasn't

one meant for ordinary tourists. Want to go in? I thought you just wanted to buy a chicken and find a nice quiet alley to scoop out its guts. Why do you want to mess with the local mojo? Lao Tsung is a sorcerer, Marla said reasonably. Maybe another sorcerer will know where to find him. Sorcerers are all at least half

crazy by definition, Rondeau said. Present company excepted. So what if we get, like, attacked? Marla shrugged. Being attacked wouldn't be so bad. Right now, loath as she was to admit it, she was afraid. A fight would at least take her mind off Susans plot, flood her with adrenaline, and give her a workout—physical or

metaphysical, either would be welcome. If we were attacked, try not to get in the way. I bet this will be just like Big Trouble in Little China, Rondeau said. Weird herbs everywhere, stuffed alligators hanging from the ceiling, and a guy shooting lightning bolts out of his eyes. I'm trying to decide if that was racist or not. What?

Rondeau said. Me, or the movie? Marla ignored him, glancing around. There were people watching her, of course, or at least looking in her direction—it was a busy street. Ah, well. Fuck it. She grabbed Rondeaus wrist and slipped around a table of bootleg videos, into a folded place in the world. Into a sorcerers den. They

emerged into a large room with a décor halfway between herb shop and high-tech. The floors, walls, and ceiling were pristine white, with subtle curves instead of hard-angled corners, and tall dark wood shelves butted up against one another at strang (and probably occultishly significant) angles, crammed with tins,

bottles, jars, and plastic bags, most of which appeared to be filled with various kinds of dried vegetable matter. Marla wasn't interested in herbal magic; she'd never bothered overmuch with any herbs you couldn't grow in a container on a fire escape or find sprouting wild in a railroad yard. The air should have been a riot of odors, but there was a curious neutrality of odor instead, with just a hint of the antiseptic. A long stainless-steel counter stretched the length of the back wall. A concealed door behind the counter swung open, and an elderly Asian gentleman in a dark robe emerged, followed by a far less graceful young man, presumably an apprentice. Marla caught a brief glimpse of the space behind the door, where someone lay naked on an examining table, red welts across his skin. The door swung shut, and Marla turned her attention to the men behind the counter. The apprentice was actually a woman, dressed in boy-drag. She'd done an excellent job, but when Marla first moved to Felport, she'd found work waitressing at various bars in the less-than-respectable part of town, and still had a good eye for costume. She was in San Francisco, where drag was king, so she probably shouldn't be surprised. Odds were the old guy was the master, and the young girl was either apprentice or servant. The old man spoke to her in Chinese-Cantonese, probably, the prevailing dialect in Chinatown, but Marla shook her head. Nope, sorry. I can do English and I can get by in French, and my friend here can speak Spanish and knows a few swear words in a language that predates the fall of Babel, but neither of us can speak any kind of Chinese. What do you want? the girl asked, in clear, unaccented English. Marla looked at the master. He was expressionless but she suspected he could understand English as well as the girl could. I need information. The old man shook his head and bowed a fraction of a degree. We sell herbs, not information, the apprentice said. She was trying to watch both Marla and Rondeau, which was difficult, as Rondeau had begun absentmindedly wandering around the shop, prodding at things. I'm looking for a man named Lao Tsung, Marla said. The old man sniffed. The apprentice sneered, no longer pretending to be polite. And you think all Chinese people know one another? Marla rolled her eyes. Look, where I'm from, we keep track of all the important sorcerers who come around. Lao Tsung's been living in the city for years, and he's got power. He's not actually Chinese anyway. He's a very long-lived Mesopotamian, if that makes you feel any better. I figured you might know where he is, that's all. If you can't help me . . . The old man looked meditatively at the ceiling. One thousand dollars, he said, his English crisp and faintly British. That is the price of the information you seek. Marla frowned. Look, I could cut open a chicken and stir around its guts and find Lao Tsung. I've got the gift of haruspey. I just thought it would be less bloody to ask the locals. I don't want to step on any toes, I just want to do my business and leave. Haruspey will not work. Try it if you want, but don't come back after. Already you waste our time. One thousand dollars. Marla sighed and called Rondeau over. He was holding half the money, which was perhaps a mistake, but he'd insisted. If Marla died in an earthquake, he'd said, how would he afford to get home? He gave the bills to Marla, and she passed them on to the apprentice, who examined them and nodded. Lao Tsung is dead, the old man said, without apparent pleasure. Bullshit, Marla said. He's been alive for centuries, he came here specifically to get his cancer healed, and it worked. How can he be dead? The answer to that question will cost one thousand dollars. Marla was over the counter before the old man could even step back, pressing a dagger into his belly. He opened his mouth, presumably to loose some spell, and Marla shoved a wad of cash between his teeth, silencing him. As you can see, it's not about the money. I just don't like having my time wasted. And Lao Tsung was a friend. The apprentice was speaking quietly to herself, and Marla sighed. Rondeau? Yup, he said, and drew his butterfly knife, flipping it open with the ease bred of a lifetime on and under the streets. Okay, so be quiet, or I'll have to cut your throat or something, and I just got this suit, so that would suck for both of us. The apprentice stopped talking. You are not sorcerers, she said. You are thugs. There's a time and a place for magic, Marla said, but it's a bad idea to get too dependent on the abracadabras. She returned her attention to the old man, who did not look terrified, or angry, or anything at all; his expression was impossible to interpret. I'm going to take this money out of your mouth, and give it to your apprentice, and then you'll consider yourself paid in full, and tell me everything I need to know about Lao Tsung, okay? And if you get itchy for revenge, let me tell you who I am. I'm Marla Mason. I run the city of Felport, and if you haven't heard of me before. . . well, I can make a name for myself on this coast by doing something incredibly nasty to you. But like I said, I just want to do my business and be on my way. Agreed? The old man nodded. Marla took the wad of paper from his mouth and handed it to the assistant, who began straightening the cash on the counter, spreading the bills out, smoothing the wrinkles, making piles. The master must be a disciplinarian son of a bitch, Marla thought. So, she said. Lao Tsung. The old man mumbled something in Chinese. As we told you, Lao Tsung is dead, the apprentice said, without looking up from the money, apparently unconcerned with Rondeau and his knife. He was killed this morning by

frogs. Marla repeated those words to herself killed this morning by frogs considering the possibility that it was some idiom translating badly. He was killed by French people? she said at last, frowning. The apprentice looked at her, bored. No. By frogs. Hop, hop? Frogs. Lao Tsung lived in Golden Gate Park, and he was discovered this morning covered by small golden frogs. The frogs hopped away, and no one tried to stop them we assume they are poisonous. There are frogs in the rain forests venomous enough to kill a hundred men. What, they bite? I didnt even know frogs had teeth. No, they are just filled with poison, and sometimes their bodies sweat poison. The natives use frog venom to poison their spears, and have done so for centuries. But to find so many frogs, so virulently poisonous, here, in this climate, where it is far too cold and dry for them to live long . . . The apprentice shook her head. It is a mystery. She finished counting the money, and swept all the cash into a single pile and put it under the counter. My master is an expert on toxicology, among other things, and we have been commissioned by certain parties to determine the nature of Lao Tsungs death, and to discover if it was the work of another sorcerer or simply a strange happening. I want to see his body, Marla said. If Lao Tsungs body was here, haruspexy wouldnt have worked places like this, in folded space, tended to scramble the effectiveness of divination. Which made her wonder what her divination had been pointing toward. There must be something else, or someone else, with big magic nearby. The master spoke briefly in Chinese, and the apprentice nodded. I will show you his body, she said. Marla chewed her lip. The master seemed cowed, but he could still be dangerous. It couldnt hurt to separate him from his apprentice. Rondeau, keep an eye on the old guy. And I mean it. Watch him. Rondeau sighed and nodded. Listen, sir, I dont want to hurt you, but Ive got this knife, and if it comes down to it, I have other resources, too. But Id rather we just chatted while theyre in the back, you know? Ive never been here before, so I want to know about good restaurants and sightseeing, stuff like that. And if you decide you dont want to speak English anymore, we can take turns making comical animal noises at each other. The old man just stared, expressionless. Marla let the apprentice lead the way into the back room, where the dead body that used to be her friend Lao Tsung lay on a table. He didnt look any older than forty, his black hair in a long ponytail, his body lean and sinewy. Killed by a swarm of frogs. Swarm? Herd? What do you call a bunch of frogs? Marla asked. Its a murder of crows, a pod of whales, like that, so what are frogs? A colony, the apprentice said. Sometimes a knot. Sometimes an army. I think, in this case, an army. You may examine the body you may do anything you wish, youve made that clear but I would advise you not to touch it with your bare hands. We do not know the exact nature or the extent of the poison. Marla nodded and stepped closer to Lao Tsung. What a way to die. At least it was unusual. Then Lao Tsungs mouth opened. A tiny golden frog, no more than an inch and a half long, hopped out of Lao Tsungs mouth, and sat on his chest. It was a beautiful little frog black eyes, skin almost shiny. Lao Tsungs flesh began to turn red, until the place where the frog sat sported a welt as big as the others on his body. Then the frog jumped. After standing in silence for a while, and not hearing anything much from the back room, Rondeau said, So is the Alcatraz tour worth doing? Marla says its probably ghost-choked and psychically unsettling, but I think itd be interesting. You ever been there? Or are you like those New Yorkers whove never been to the Statue of Liberty, you dont do the tourist thing? The master turned, slightly, and glanced toward the door to the back room. Rondeau waved his knife around a bit. Hey, eyes front. Help me, the master whispered. Please. Rondeau narrowed his eyes. Theres no point in trying to mind-fuck me. I dont have any authority. Im just here to carry stuff around, run errands, and keep Marla company. I am not the master, the master said. He trembled. I am the apprentice. My master told me I would be his successor, heir to all his treasures, but it was a cruel joke. He stole my body, and trapped my mind in his own. In this. He raised his arms in disgust, then let them drop. Ah, shit, Rondeau said. He pulled a Thing on the Doorstep trick on you, thats what youre telling me? Rondeau flipped his knife open and closed, thinking. If this was true, Marla was in the back with a real sorcerer, one who was skilled and nasty enough to switch bodies with someone. Something like that, a meta-rape, incurred a serious karmic debt, but sorcerers powerful and unscrupulous enough to achieve the trick usually had ways to avoid paying the price for such monstrous acts. But if Rondeau went rushing back there to warn Marla, then the real master might do something bad, which Marla wouldnt be prepared for. And if this old guy was lying, Rondeau would have turned his back on the sorcerer Marla had told him to watch. Shit, he said. No course of action seemed like a good one. Okay, Ive got this knife ready to slip under your breastbone, so just start backing up. Were going to ease into the back room and you can tell your story to Marla. The old man whimpered. If my master finds out that I told you, he will kill this body. He has only left me alive to keep up appearances until he is ready to announce himself as his own successor. What he has done is a crime, and the council of sorcerers would not allow him to go unpunished. Rondeau hesitated. But his loyalty had to be to

Marla. Sorry, he said. If youre telling the truth, well try to help you. Maybe that was going too far, since Marla probably wouldnt give a shit about the hijacked apprentice, but Rondeau would help, if he could. I have to protect Marla, and that means letting her know what she might be dealing with. The master bowed his head and began to shuffle backwards toward the door. The frog jumped straight for the apprentice, who threw up her hands and spoke a stream of slippery words. The frog stopped in midair, dangling at roughly shoulder-level, kicking its legs. Nice bug-in-amber spell, Marla said. I dont know many apprentices who can do that to anything bigger than a mosquito. Thank you, the apprentice said. Your compliment honors me. She went to a shelf and took down a small glass jar, then put on a pair of heavy rubber gloves. She slipped the jar over the hanging frog and screwed the top on. Youd better poke some air holes in the lid if you dont want the frog to die, Marla said. I do not object to the frogs death. The tiny frog hopped around inside the jar, trying to scabble up the sides of the glass. Marla peered in at the little poison beast. It was a golden, almost metallic, yellow, without any markings at all. So thats what killed Lao Tsung, huh? With a little help from his friends.

Do you have any idea who might have unleashed the frogs? The apprentice frowned. Our investigation is ongoing. Please. Were all friends. Im not here to be a vigilante, or get revenge. Im just . . . curious. The apprentice nodded, curtly. Lao Tsung was seen yesterday in a conversation with a man who is unknown to us, an . . . eccentric stranger. The conversation apparently became quite heated. The man appeared to be Central or South American, and was clothed only in his underwear and some sort of cape. It is possible that he was simply an insane person, shouting as the deranged sometimes do. There have always been mad people in this city, even before you arrived. Stop, youll hurt my feelings, Marla said. Even if she had time for vigilantism, that description wasnt much to go on. She looked down at Lao Tsungs body. She might have touched his cheek with her fingers, but she couldnt, because of the poison. There was no time to deal with these emotions. Her life, and the safety of her city, were on the line now. Without Lao Tsung to tell her the location of the Cornerstone, she had no idea where to go from here. She didnt have any other contacts in this city. She sighed. When in doubt, start at the top. I beg your pardon? the apprentice said. I need to talk to the person who runs San Francisco. The apprentice sniffed. That is not the way we do things here. My master is the most senior sorcerer in Chinatown. North Beach is run by a strega named Umbaldo. Russian Hill, the Haight, the Financial District, the Mission, the Tenderloin, they all have their own leaders. No shit, Marla said. Imagine that. You think the city I come from is one homogenous mass? I bet you guys have some sort of council, right, some way to resolve disputes? Of course, the apprentice said. And that means somebody has supreme authority, right? The apprentice pinched her lips together. Yes. But it is an office, not an individual. The strongest sorcerers pass the duties from one to another, each serving for a few years. What a fascinating civics lesson. Whos in charge now? The apprentice frowned and didnt answer. The sooner you tell me, Marla said, the sooner I leave you alone, and get my business done, and get off this coast entirely. Okay? His name is Finch, she said. He runs the Castro. How do I find him? He is . . . not so easy to find. But he has parties, every Friday. They begin at nine or ten, though he is not always there in the beginning. I am told he usually arrives by midnight, when things are at their busiest. Thats tonight, Marla said. Great. Show me where he lives. She grabbed a pen and folded map of San Francisco from her bag. The apprentice peered at the map for a moment, then said, On this street. Marla wrote down the street name and the number. Will you be at the party? Marla said. The apprentice shook her head. My master does not approve of such activities. They are beneath his dignity. Marla nodded. Listen, Im not here to piss anyone off. I just want to do my business and get out of town. Let your master know that. Tell him he never has to see me again, and that I appreciate the help. My master respects strength, she said. But, as you dislike being made to wait, he dislikes being bullied. It would be best for you to complete your business and leave the city as soon as possible, or my master may feel it necessary to take action against you. I always did have a knack for making enemies, Marla said. Ill be leaving now. The door opened, and the master backed in, Rondeau guiding him. Hey, Marla, he said. You can let our gracious host go, Rondeau. Weve got what we need. Rondeau blinked. Um, well, but Save it. Were going. She took his arm and tugged him through the door after her. Pull the door closed. I dont want to turn my back on them. Rondeau did as she said, and then Marla ran for the exit, Rondeau following close behind. When they got outside almost knocking down a few pedestrians in their headlong rush out of thin air Marla hurried along the street, putting distance between the shop and herself. She glanced back, feeling distinctly that she was being followed, but the apprentice and her master were nowhere to be seen. Probably just nerves. Who else besides those two would want to follow her here? Marla, Im trying to tell you something, Rondeau said. Tell me over dinner, she said. Weve got a few hours to kill, and I think I saw an Italian restaurant earlier. Well. Yes. I imagine you did. We were in North Beach, after all. Dont you know

anything about San Francisco? Cable cars. Golden Gate Bridge. Fog. Hills. Gay pride. If you're coming here, wear some flowers in your hair. That's the gist, right? You do have a way of stripping things down to their essentials, Rondeau said. But, seriously listen. Across the bay, in Oakland, San Francisco's looked-down-upon stepsister, a former movie actor named Bradley Bowmanor just B to his friends, most of whom were dead or had conveniently lost touch with him sat in a trash-strewn, weed-choked vacant lot, dropping Valiums into a sewer grate, one pill at a time. I had one of those dreams, he said. I was standing under an overpass. Frogs rained from the sky, and some of them hopped under the overpass with me. A man in an old-fashioned beaver hat stood half in shadow by a pillar, watching me, and when I waved at him, he nodded. There were hummingbirds flying around my head, moving almost too fast to see. A woman in a purple cloak came out of the shadows, stepping on frogs as she walked, and then she tried to kiss me. When her lips touched mine, I found myself wrapped up in a cocoon, and I didn't know what I was going to transform into. What does it mean? After a moment, something spoke from beneath the sewer grate. It talked for a long time, its voice lazy and relaxed. Shit, B said. Is there anything I can do to prevent it? The voice spoke again, more briefly this time. B sighed. Guess I have to, then. Damn. I hate going into the city. The voice from below murmured. Dont, B said. Please. Coming here, talking to you . . . this is hard enough without stirring up all those old memories. He stood, slung his battered knapsack over his shoulder, and trudged toward home, lost in the fog of the past. Revue de presse "Pratt is a deft storyteller whose blend of suspense, magic, and dry humor kept me entertained and turning pages. Blood Engines is one of the most absorbing reads I've enjoyed in a long time, gluing me to the couch. I adore Marla, her done-at-all-costs character is someone I can relate to and want to cheer for. Best of all, I didn't figure the ending out until I got there. It's a book widower, and I can't wait for the sequel." Kim Harrison, NYT-bestselling author of For a Few Demons More "Blood Engines wastes no time: by page three I knew I was reading an urban fantasy unlike any I'd previously encountered. The characters and world are real, immediate, and unapologetically in-your-face, throwing you into a story that trusts you'll keep up with the fast pace without flinching. It charges along with crisp pacing, a fascinating range of secondary characters, and a highly compelling lead in Marla Mason. She may be one of the genre's requisite sharp-tongued females, but her ruthless pragmatism gives her a completely different feel from her fictional contemporaries. I genuinely look forward to the next book!" C.E. Murphy, author of Coyote Dreams "A fast-paced, thoroughly fun, satisfying read." Kelley Armstrong, author of No Humans Involved