



75 Years in the Making

# A Sea of Stars Like Diamonds

George Phillies and  
Jefferson Swycaffer,  
Editors

**A Sea of Stars Like Diamonds**  
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The image shows globular cluster NGC 6397 in the constellation Ara (the Altar).

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## [A Sea of Stars Like Diamonds](#)

### **The N3F 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Volume**

George Phillies

Three-quarters of a century ago, sixty-four men from across America came together to found a new organization, the National Fantasy Fan Federation. Some founders were or became famous writers and editors, including Damon Knight, “Doc” Smith, “Doc” Lowndes, Ray Bradbury, Donald Wollheim, and Cyril Kornbluth. Forry Ackerman became the greatest SF collector in the history of the universe. Other founders are less well known. Most have long since passed from the scene, to be honored in our memories. One founder is still with us.

Our original purposes were straightforward:

- To unite all local fan clubs and solitary fans into a single organization capable of making single decisions representative of the majority.
- To prevent confusion and misunderstanding among fans, and to prevent local groups or cliques from exerting disproportionate influence on fandom.
- To sponsor and help finance worthy fan projects with the exception of subscription fanzines, or any projects not wholly amateur in intent.
- To better conditions with fandom and the sf and fantasy field, by speaking approval or disapproval of outstanding conditions in a strong and united voice.
- To provide an efficient administration of this federation, based on the democratic theory of self-government.
- To encourage and promote the growth of local clubs and sectional federations, and to cooperate with and assist the said organizations whenever possible.
- To formulate and put into effect all possible activities of present and future benefit of fandom.

Some of our purposes proved to be attainable. Others were more challenging. Our numbers and activities have waxed and waned. At apogee, the N3F had hundreds of active members. At perigee, only a single dues-paying member remained. Recent years have seen an increase in membership and activities; may that increase long endure!

In 1941, fantasy was an exotic hobby of the few, with fantasy widely defined to include science fiction, swords and sorcery, horror, and tales of the supernatural and the macabre. It is now 2016. Fantasy films dominate Hollywood. An entire television channel carries nothing but SF programs, and many SF programs are found on other channels. New media such as computer games and electronic novels transmit fantasy in ways that in 1941 were unimaginable--except by our founders.

It is seventy-five years later. In honor of this, our triaquarcentennial, our gold and diamond anniversary, we present this celebratory volume, *A Sea of Stars Like Diamonds*. We honor new writers, the winners of our Short Story Contest. We welcome stories from other Neffers. N3F Historian Jon Swartz gives us a history of N3F special publications.

## [N3F Short Story Contest...the 2016 Winners](#)

### **An appreciation by Jefferson Swycaffer**

The National Fantasy Fan Federation -- the N3F -- has for many years run an amateur short story contest. The late Don Franson was the contest's long-time administrator. He passed the job along, so that the tradition continues.

Every year, a treasury of new stories is submitted. Beginning writers of all ages, from all parts of the world, send in their offerings, which never fail to be creative, thoughtful, inventive, often surprising, always moving, and always wonderfully original.

Here are a handful of the more notable among these stories:

*The Bazaar of Forbidden Dreams* by Sean Gillhoolley was a delightful and truly entertaining contribution to the "cyberpunk" genre of science fiction adventure stories. Adspace and Edge are fun protagonists, each a bit twisted in a cyberpunk kind of way...but how could they not be, living in an even more twisted world? The clowns are eerie and horrible; the fight scene is brilliant. The description of the bazaar itself was luscious and rich, just an absolute treat for the reader.

*The Last Ordeal of James Willoughby* by Jeff Spitzer is a strong, engaging, entertaining, even believable story. The adventures of the protagonist in his efforts to come to know the aliens made it a strong and very creditable contribution to the genre of "First Contact" stories. The aliens were very nicely developed, and the protagonist's explorations are extremely well portrayed.

*Fabiana's Fairy Godmother* by Kristin Janz is a wonderful -- although also somewhat depressing! -- story. The story's contrasts, between the harsh and ugly reality of poverty in a Brazilian slum, and the wide-eyed magical idealism of a fairy godmother, make the story truly shine. It is a superb example of the use of "bathos" as a dramatic tool, i.e., the grinding together of two very disparate dramatic tonalities. The story certainly wrings a number of strongly conflicting emotions from the reader, and accomplishes its purpose brilliantly.

*Track Invasion* by Deborah Rocheleau is a delight. It is a satire worthy of the best SF satirists; one can easily imagine Robert Sheckley or Ron Goulart having created this story. It's funny, and ironic, and fantastic -- the situation is clearly impossible, unstable in all respects, yet this doesn't matter. The point is the conflict between the protagonist and the very uncouth crowd of clients to whom he must cater. The brands of viands are also funny: "pons dogs" are particularly clever (and perhaps also a little nauseating.) The reader will laugh (while also feeling a little sick!) That's the brilliance of this story: it grates humor against horror, creating dramatic tension without catharsis.

*The Rails That Bind* by Sean Gillhoolley -- his second entry in this collection -- is set in the same universe as *The Bazaar of Forbidden Dreams*. The story relies heavily on foreign language phrases to indicate the anomie and culture-loss of the cyberpunk universe. This has been a conventional trope for a long time -- *A Clockwork Orange* was one pioneer. It is fun to see Adspace and Edge again, and the whole rail-riding motif was absolutely gripping. The action scenes are heart-pounding, and very "cinematic" -- in that it is easy for the reader to visualize them!

## **The Contributed Tales**

### **An appreciation by George Phillis**

Jeff Spitzer's second contribution is *The Real World*, a classic Appalachian ghost story. There is loving description of the forested wilds of rural eastern America. Are the ghosts fragments of the dreams of the gullible and the superstitious? Here is a pursuit of truth motivated by love, but sometimes truth is only visible by inference.

Debora Rocheleau's second contribution is *Green Ship*, a tale of a vessel whose inexorable passage is measured by the chronicler, until it isn't. Is measurement control? Some characters act; others are acted upon.

Angela Parson Myers favors us with two works. *The Quarter Test* is the test that is all too familiar to those of us who passed through Army basic training. How well made is your bed? And in this case, who made it? *Halloween Story* speaks of absentmindedness, found love, and a painful decision. Any number of travelers have found themselves trapped in the land of the fey folk, but that's a two-way street.

From Kent McDaniel we have *Howard's Dilemma*, a story of supernatural vengeance that manages to be utterly free of blood and gore. No one is eviscerated, but justice will be done.

Contest judge Jefferson Swycaffer gives an adventure of failure and adventure in a lost and exotic part of the world. *The Jewels in the Desert* is an escapade in the spirit of A. Merritt and H. Rider Haggard, whose works the hero invokes in his defense.

As closers, I contributed two of my own stories. *Victoria and the Peri* is an adventure for a young lady who steps forward to protect a friend, and finds herself in far deeper water than she anticipated. *Inconceivable* is future SF with psionics, a story that the late John W. Campbell might have enjoyed.

## [N3F Non-Periodical Publications](#)

**Jon D. Swartz, Ph.D.**

**N3F Historian**

Of the hundreds of publications in which the National Fantasy Fan Federation (N3F) has been involved over the past 75 years, some were published by the N3F and others were “sponsored” in some manner when the N3F collaborated with others. Some of the most noteworthy publications in both categories are described herein. The many issues of *The National Fantasy Fan*, *Tightbeam*, and their predecessors -- and the various materials provided for new and prospective members -- have been omitted for obvious reasons.

### An Early Hardcover Book

Those items that were published by the club included a hardcover book: David H. Keller’s 1948 Utopian fantasy novel, *The Sign of the Burning Hart: A Tale of Arcadia*. The N3F has been included in SF reference books solely on the basis of publishing this book.

Dr. Keller (1880 – 1966) was the first psychiatrist to write science fiction (SF) for publication in genre magazines. He was very generous to fanzine editors during his lifetime, contributing free material for them to use in their zines. Keller was a prolific author, also writing under the pseudonyms of Monk Smith, Matthew Smith, Amy Worth, Henry Cecil, Cecilia Henry, and Jacobus Hubelaire.

### N3F Fandbooks

Other noteworthy club publications included a series of N3F “fandbooks” -- A Key to the Terminology of Science-Fiction Fandom (Fandbook No. 1), The Amateur Press Associations in Science-Fiction Fandom (Fandbook No. 2), Some Historical Facts About Science-Fiction Fandom (Fandbook No. 3), and The Trans-Atlantic Fan Fund (Fandbook No. 4), all published in the early 1960s. The authors of these four publications were Donald Franson (Fandbooks No. 1 and No. 3), Bob Lichtman (Fandbook No. 2), and Len Moffatt & Ron Ellik (Fandbook No. 4).

More recently, three additional fandbooks have been published: *Pseudonyms of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror Authors* (2010), *The Hugo Awards for Best Novel* (2014), and *The Nebula Awards for Best Novel* (2016), all three compiled by the club's current historian.

### Title Changes on SF Books

*Science Fiction Title Changes* appeared in 1965. This N3F publication covered SF books published under two or more titles. It was printed by offset, compiled by Michael Viggiano and Donald Franson, and was 47 numbered pages in length.

### A Club Cookbook

A club cookbook was titled *Neffers a Bad Batch* (2005), ran twenty pages, and consisted of six legal-size sheets. It was divided into three categories: “Punch . . .”, “. . . & Cookies”, and “. . . & Cakes & Stuff”. Lola Andrew, the club’s secretary at the time, was the editor. The four pages in the middle of the publication, labeled A, B, C, and D, consisted of a description of the N3F and a membership application blank.

### SF Art

The National Fantasy Fan Federation Presents A Portfolio of Illustrations by Virgil Finlay - First Series, 1946. Illustrations were reproduced from Famous Fantastic Mysteries Magazine, and the portfolio was edited by Walter Dunkelberger, club president at the time. Contents included six vintage Finlay prints, unbound and suitable for framing.

*Hannes Bok Illustration Index*, 1970. An index of the artwork of Bok, published by the Collector's Bureau of the N3F by C. W. "Ned" Brooks, Jr. The third, revised edition was published in 1994, and was edited by Brooks and Don Martin.

Some of the notable publications over the years in which the N3F has collaborated with others have been as follows:

#### 1944 Fanzine Yearbook

This slim yearbook was published by *Le Zombie* and the N3F by the fanzine's editor, Bob Tucker, who was also a club member at the time (and former president). It was "a catalog of amateur magazines published by the fantasy fan journalists." The fanzines are listed in alphabetical order and pertinent information about each is included.

#### A Fan Directory

The *1950 Fan Directory* was edited by N3F member Len Moffatt. The *Directory* was sponsored by the N3F and Forrest J Ackerman's Fantasy Foundation. It was published in August, 1950, and had information on 404 fans, 51 of whom were listed as being female. The *Directory* consisted of thirty-six numbered pages, not counting introductory material and covers.

In addition to the United States, fans were listed from Australia, England, Ireland, Scotland, Canada, France, and the Canal Zone.

#### An Early Anthology

*Geep!: The Book of the National Fantasy Fan Federation* was a 135-page paperback anthology of fannish writing and collected fiction, poetry, and articles. Contributors included Andrew J. Nagel, Jack Robbins, George Phillies, Ray R. House, Ron A. Nyren, Stacey Potts, David L. Travis, and others. Although it was not an official N3F publication, it was produced by N3F members.

*Geep!* editor Rose Secret and her husband, Michael Peralta (who contributed a short play they wrote to the book), both joined the N3F in the mid-1980s. Secret wrote that she had hoped the N3F would be an outlet for her writing; but, when that did not happen, she created this anthology and paid to have it published. Later in her writing career, Secret co-edited the anthology *Leviathan 2: The Legacy of Boccaccio* (1998), and wrote the critical work *Glorificemus: A Study of the Fiction of Walter M. Miller, Jr.* (2002).

#### A Sea of Stars Like Diamonds

This year, in order to celebrate the club's 75th year of existence, George Phillies, the club president, has edited this original "fanthology" of stories by club members. The title reflects the fact that it is the club's diamond anniversary. The objective of this fanthology is to showcase the work of winners of the N3F's fiction contests as well as the writing of other members of the club. Associate Editor of the fanthology is Jefferson Swycaffer, who is currently in charge of the N3F's short story contests.

## [The Bazaar of Forbidden Dreams](#)

**Sean Gilhooley**

**One: Sufian “Adspace” Gandapur**

Getting involved with the rich businessman was a bad idea, but I can only blame myself. I had a bad feeling when he approached us at that lame Rage, but the money blinded me. I unloaded those drugs fast, and five grand should have been enough, but I was always a bit greedy. When the barriers were thrown up around Manhattan we should have dumped him. For that I blame the new kid. Well, I guess I went along with it as well. A grand a day is good money, but I'm not sure it's worth it.

The people after the suit are heavy hitters. It's not that they scare me, but it seems an awful lot of risk for the reward. I guess that's all in the past now. The hermit hacker isn't that much further, especially if we take a *kamay* there. We should have the rich guy delivered to his destination and be back on the tracks before sunrise.

I lifted the suits' wallet when he climbed onto my board for the first time. I like to know whom I'm dealing with. Tom Concord. Impressive address. I know that building is serious money. Owned by the Chinese, and they are pretty picky about who can live in their buildings. I don't think he's American. He has a slight accent. British I think, though not one that stands out. It could be he grew up in a former colony. A good education system is one of the few benefits the British left behind. It could be Hong Kong. He's a lawyer. Corporate contracts according to his business card.

I gave him a pretty thorough pat down, at least as thorough as I could without him noticing. I'm not sure what he's carrying that's valuable enough to explain the level of pursuit that's been thrown at us. Sure, his suit is worth a small fortune. I think his pants alone are worth more than our crew earned tonight, but no one sets up a dragnet like this for fancy duds. His wearable computer is worth quite a bit. I can tell that. It's hard to be certain, but I think they are Rose Coloured Glasses. Those go for a couple hundred grand, but useless to anyone but the registered user. Not enough to justify the expense to catch him. It could be he's lying to us. He seems good at lying. I doubt even I would pick up on it. He must be great at poker.

He reminds me of this guy I knew back in Razmak. You couldn't trust a word the guy said, but he was hooked in, so you constantly found yourself dealing with him. I took care of him before leaving, that's for sure. They're probably still looking for me in Pakistan. I'm not stupid. I saw what was coming and got out while I could. Taking care of that guy was probably not the smartest thing to do, but I wanted to send them a message. Mess with me or my family and none of them are safe, not even the top dogs.

Our situation has gone to hell. I would ditch Tom in a second, but Edge wants to bring Streak into our crew and Streak's being professional and sticking with him. She's no fighter, but she has guts. She can learn how to fight, so long as she survives, so I guess we have to go help her out. I only agree because Edge wants me to. I'd do anything for her. I know she has my back. Most people are quick to say they have your back, but she's shown it, many times. She's also brave. I remember the first time we met. I know I looked a sight, covered in blood and viscera from those two organ leggers. Parasites. It was a pleasure to carve them up, but seeing Edge there, ready to come to my assistance, really gave me a warm, fuzzy feeling.

I've only been in New York for eight months and I have to admit that I find this city very exciting. There are plenty of cities around the world where you can eviscerate someone who

challenges you, literally, but only a handful that also provide a wonderful tourism industry. New York has it all – first class hotels, the latest theatric performances, the finest shops and boutiques, and some of the deadliest gangs of psychopaths on the planet. I've killed more people in the last eight months than in my previous thirteen years in Pakistan, though, to be perfectly fair, I didn't kill anyone until I was nine.

Edge uses her drone to scout the station area. Getting jumped by a gang while I'm watching the battle in the park would be unfortunate. I spot an airship in the darkness, flying along the north end of the park. At first it's just flying in a tight circle, though I can't see what it's circling, but it takes off all of a sudden, heading east, and I see that there are other aircars with it. This might be bad. A missile flares off from the aircar, streaking down and exploding. The night sky is lit up and the sound echoes across the park.

"Oh ma god, dat musta been Streak," Echo shouts and I look around, but no one is around to hear.

"You can do it. We can help," I say, pulling Echo in the direction of the explosion.

"You nuts? Dat a big 'slosion. I doubt dey alive."

We don't know if they were killed, but we don't know that they survived either. Tom called Edge a while ago, so she should be able to do a reverse call. I just need to get her to understand.

"Connecting people," I say, making the universal sign for making a phone call.

"Call who?" Edge says.

"We never forget who we're working for."

"Whatcha talkin' bout. I work for me," she says.

"Keep on thinking," I say, making a spinning gesture with my hand.

"And... Tom! He call before. Hang on," she says and does a \*69, but the operator informs her that that phone number does not exist, "Aight, dat don't work. I tink we need check it out."

We slip out of the station and head up along 122<sup>nd</sup> Street. Normally it would be dead quiet at this time of night, but the fighting and explosions have woken up the area pretty good. Gawkers hang from their windows and on rooftops. More gangbangers are drawn to the park every minute. There must be hundreds of bangers fighting in the park, and that explosion is sure to draw some official attention. Probably not any ground units, but maybe a flyover. Then again, it all depends on who fired that missile, because it came from one of the aircars, though they appear gone.

Surprisingly there are few guns being used. It doesn't really make any sense. Guns are easy to get, and they aren't that expensive, and it's not like the fights stop at a certain point. I must have killed six guys today with my knives. Of course I don't carry a gun either. Maybe I should get one. A nice AK-47 like the tough guys back in Pakistan like to walk around with. There are better weapons, but the AK is inexpensive and it does the job, so long as the range isn't too far. It's good for a street fight.

We give a quick check left and right when we reach Hillside Avenue. This is Hillside Strangler turf. It must tick them off to have the Knollwood Strangers on the other side of the park. Way to be creative guys. Hopefully the only people we encounter on our way are civilians. The bangers are probably all in the park. It's actually a good diversion, now that we aren't in the middle of it. We make good time now, moving with more speed than stealth. Eighty-fifth Avenue rolls past, then we reach a T-junction at Eighty-fourth and take a right onto Brevoort Street, which leads right to Metropolitan Avenue and the edge of the Xanadu 'clave. The wall of the 'clave should give us protection, and hopefully we don't draw fire from the guards. I'm

pretty small for my age, at least here in New York, and I've been told I look to be about ten from a distance.

The immediate area seems to be surviving better than the streets a few blocks out. There are businesses of all kinds, including restaurants. None are open now, unfortunately, because I've worked up a real appetite. The wall follows Metropolitan until it reaches Lefferts Boulevard, where it curves north. We take Lefferts on the opposite side of Xanadu to keep well away from their gate at Abingdon Road. Even still the guards watch us like hawks, their guns tracking us as we pass their field of fire. It's nice to see professionalism.

It takes a while, but we finally arrive at the tracks that run under Lefferts. The shops here are actually pretty nice. It's a bit surprising considering how much rot and ruin surround it. The train tracks run below, and there's a station here. The buildings on either side are tall; at least six stories, and they appear to be well maintained. I had no idea there was a nice neighbourhood in the middle of all this.

We walk down the stairs to the platform, intending to jog along the tracks heading north, but the platform is occupied. Clowns. They are far from their turf, but the bounty is drawing the nastier gangs to the area. Everyone else is chasing after the big bounty, Tom, but there's probably something for snagging us small fish as well, so we better avoid them. Of all the gangs we could have run into, why did it have to be the Clowns? These guys are seriously scary. Most Taliban would piss their pants if they stood beside me right now.

I give Edge a soft elbow, point back the way we came, and whisper, "Passion for the road." She nods and we turn, only to discover that our exit is blocked. Two Clowns stand at the foot of the stairs. One is massive, well over six feet tall, with these huge red floppy shoes. He has bright red hair that sticks out a half foot at least, and he's wearing a really large, red nose. His face is pasty white with a jagged red mouth, and his teeth have been filed into points. He smiles wide and displays a bad case of the drools. It hangs from his gaping maw like the egg-goo in Aliens. Really gross stuff. He's holding a two-by-four with a bunch of rail spikes in his right hand. His left hand looks like a puffy clown-hand, oversized and bloated, and strapped to each digit is the blade from a straight razor. His outfit is red, white, and gold, and it billows about him, disguising his form.

Beside him is an extremely short Clown, even shorter than I am. I don't think he even comes up to my chest. His bright green hair sticks up in points and he has a meat cleaver in each hand, caked with fresh blood and bits of hair. He has a small tuxedo on, complete with tails and a top hat, all done in forest green and his eyes look like dancing flames. He has a metallic smile as evil looking as his partners, and I hear a guttural growl from him.

I've been in some bad situations in my life. Hell, my life has been running from one bad situation to the next, with little downtime in between. I've been captured by the Talibs three times. Three times! I was always able to talk my way out, thank Allah. I don't think talking will work today, and, even though we are very good fighters, I think the odds are not good. I doubt we will even get off these stairs, but we better try to get to the platform. Maybe we can outrun them on the tracks. Going up is definitely not an option.

I charge down the stairs, hoping to take that group by surprise, but they are waiting for us. I hear Edge right behind me, as I knew she would be. We might go down, but we'll go down swinging. I hope Streak makes it out ok. Screw the suit.

The stairs go down to a walkway, raised about five feet off the ground, with more stairs on the left that lead down to ground level. Ten feet out are a couple of shops with closed gates. To our right are more gated shops. The walkway goes for about thirty feet and ends in another

set of stairs leading to a small grassy park area. It has a few graffiti-covered benches and a tree that's been burnt in several places. The ground is littered with used needles, crushed beverage cans, and the remnants of cardboards that have seen a few too many rainfalls. The lower walkway meets the grassy park, and beyond them both are the actual train tracks.

The Clowns charge to meet me, though their big floppy feet really slow down their effort, and this gives me time to choose my ground, though the options are limited. An eager Clown uses spring-shoes to bounce his way up onto the platform, but he pushes things a bit too far and I give him a good shove, sending him flying up the stairs to trip Humongo-Clown, but Mini-Clown does a gymnastic flip to hurtle the railing and land on the ground below. I run to the grassy area with Edge hot on my heels. The Clowns move to block both the tracks and the stairs back up. Edges phone rings, but we are too busy to answer.

It's a gruesome rogues gallery of evil Clowns. Pennywise seems to be the general look that they go for, but each is unique. There's one who is balding on the top with thick, bushy purple tufts jutting out on either side of his head and eyes so pale they look white, carrying a bloody machete. Another has a big pink afro, one blue eye and one brown eye, a long, zig-zag scar down the middle of his face, and he carries an oversized hammer, like the kind you use at a carnival to ring the bell. There's even a female Clown, or maybe it's a Trannie Clown, I'm not really sure. It's ugly as sin. It has a short orange Mohawk and thick sideburns in the same colour, raccoon makeup around the eyes, and vampire teeth. It carries no weapons except the sharp finger-knives it wears, making it look like some twisted version of Freddie Kruger.

Trannie Clown runs toward me and stops just out of my reach. He leans forward chest-first, angling a bright yellow flower toward me. I've seen this movie before, so I dive to the side as a stream of acid shoots out of the flower and onto the poor burnt tree. Mini-Clown comes flying in, doing some sort of ninja flipping kick nonsense. He flies past Edge, but she uses her sticks to block his razor attacks. I roll out of my dive just in time to avoid the hammer, which smashes down hard enough to break a section of one of the benches. A few more Clowns, probably stationed further down in case we came a different way, pull up on tricycles. I understand the desire to create a cohesive look to a gang, and it's important to be true to your theme, but these guys take it a bit too far. Not that I'm complaining, their purist attitude has given us the time to launch our own attack.

The situation is grim, to say the least. I see no way that we are getting out of this one. We stand back-to-back, Edge and I, as we have done many times in the past eight months, but never against such odds. The Clown with the purple 'do comes at me a little closer than he should. I stomp on his big goofy clown shoe, which prevents him from backing away from my daggers. I work on his body, but his poofy suit makes it difficult to know where it is, and my daggers come back bloodied, but only at the tips, about an inch's worth. Those are superficial wounds, but enough to drive him back. Edge is having a difficult time with Mini-Clown. Her normal tactic when facing a dual-blade opponent would be to move constantly, avoid attacks and wait for an opening, but back-to-back limits her moves. Avoiding an attack is likely to get me in the back, so she has to deflect the cleaver, which is whittling away at her weapons. That's not good.

Someone finally helps Humongo-Clown up off the ground and he comes charging at us. I grab hold of Edge and we dive toward the track some thirty or so feet away. Humongo-Clown plows right through Mini-Clown, who clearly doesn't see him coming and crashes against the wrought-iron fence. Humongo somehow manages to snag his clownsuit on one of the points of the fence, but he is strong and easily pulls free, tearing his suit to shreds.

We get back up and revert to our defensive position, but now we find ourselves completely surrounded. The trike riding Clowns block the way to the tracks, and Humongo-Clown is coming at us again, but slower this time, and with a few flankers for support. Min-Clown seems down for the count.

I give Edge a slight nudge with my butt and say, “Good to the last drop.”

She replies with, “We go down wit boots on.”

The situation seems dire, but then things change with lightning quickness. Humongo-Clown’s head starts to spurt blood, huge bucketfuls. People are up on the rooftop of the shops on either side using slingshots. The metal ball bearings they fire tear into the Clowns as effectively as any gun. I pull Edge down and watch as the Clowns either run or fall where they stand. The entire battle is over in seconds, and none of the Clowns escape. Once the Clowns are defeated the slingshots stop.

From the rooftops we hear voices, “Oh my gawd, it’s really them. Like wow!”

“She’s even hotter in person man.”

“He looks so much scarier on my monitor. He’s kinda cute.” What on earth is going on? Who are these people? It’s too dark to see their features, but I count eight of them, and they parkour their way to ground level. I’m taken aback when a girl approaches Edge. They could almost be twins. The girl is wearing the exact same outfit, and I mean exact, down to the rips in her jacket. They have the same haircut, and though their faces are not identical, they are pretty close. It’s eerie, especially when I notice two more who look the same. And there are two that look like Streak, right down to her awful haircut, which Edge will have to talk to her about if we survive. There are three who kinda look like me, though one seems to have spent an inordinate amount of time at the tanning salon. One looks like a knockoff Minecraft character, but so pixilated you can’t tell what he’s (or is it a she?) supposed to be. They all carry slick-looking slingshots and they come over and start patting us, not like buddies but like you might to an animal. This is one weird looking gang.

The doppel-Edge speaks first, “I’m glad we got here when we did. Those Clowns were out for blood, though you guys were doing a great job!” she says, both thumbs up enthusiastically.

One of the boys comes forward and says to me, “You’re my hero dude. I want to be just like you.”

I don’t know what to say. They don’t make an advertisement that covers this one.

“Who be you?” Edge asks in confusion.

The weird pixilated person speaks up, a guy, “We’re your *otaku*,” and a smiley-face emoji appears, briefly, on his pixilated chest (at least I think it’s the chest – it’s around that area).

“There is no substitute,” I say. *Otaku*. How the heck do we have *otaku*? Famous people have *otaku*. People on the vids have *otaku*. Professional athletes have *otaku*. Even some scientists have *otaku*, but why would anyone try to mimic our crew? How would they even know about us?

“What ya mean y’are *otaku*?” Edge asks, still confused.

Edges counterpart speaks again, “We saw you on the Darkzone. You guys are amazing. We’re here to help get you back with your two friends, who are safe. We just saw the attack by the airship. Good thing they were in a *kamay*. Those things can really take a beating, can’t they? But they made it to Shangri-Law, which is a Chinese enclave nearby. I was surprised they were allowed in. Normally they only allow Chinese. Maybe they are *otaku* as well, neh?” she says in a stream, her excitement palpable.

“What da Darkzone?” Edge asks.

One of my doppelgangers speaks, “Are you kidding? It’s just the coolest show about life in the abandoned zone. We all watch it. That’s how we learned about you, and it’s why we knew you needed our help. Your Q ratings are off the hook.”

“Me what ratin’? Is y’all for reals or what?” Edge says with incredulity.

One of the Streaks speaks next, “Q rating is how popular you are, how recognizable. Yours is still modest, from a global perspective, but in terms of New York you guys are really well known. Everyone is impressed with how you’ve dealt with so much adversity. You should be proud of yourselves. We sure are,” she says like a bottle of carbonated sunshine that’s been shaken so much it explodes its sunshiny goodness all over me. Disgusting.

“You too can have a body like mine?” I ask, pointing to our clothing and theirs.

“He wants know why y’ave dem clothes as we,” Edge explains.

A different Edge speaks, “Oh, that’s simple. You can download the specs to your 3D printer in a few seconds. It’s really easy, and we are just a small group of *otaku*...there are plenty more out there. Not everyone is out to get you guys. We don’t care about the bounty. We just want to help you out,” she gushes with warmth and acceptance. These are some seriously strange people.

“Aight,” Edge says, coming to terms with her newfound fame, “Ya know where is Streak and da suit?”

Pixeldude speaks up, “Ooooh, he wears a suit does he. I suspected he might, but you can’t really tell on the vids, can you? Is he one of those James Bond types?” and then in a really awful impersonation, “Hello Miss Money Penny.”

“Can ya take ta friends or not?” Edge asks with irritation.

Original Edge copy speaks up, “Of course we do, let’s go now. I think your idea of taking the tracks toward the Parkway is a good one.”

The sun won’t be up for another hour, but already the sky is starting to get brighter. We walk along the tracks, some of the *otaku* scouting ahead, and make good progress. The sounds of battle still drift over from the park, but it’s distant and not an immediate concern. It’s amazing that we all managed to get out of that mess. Now we just have to linkup and finish the job. Once we get Tom to the hacker we can get back to our coffins for some overdue rest. It isn’t long before we reach the Jackie Robinson Parkway. We walk up the onramp and stick to the shoulder, heading west, back towards Highland Park, back toward the battle. The eastern end of the park is forest as far as the eye can see looking south, a dark forest that can hide a small army. I am happy we are walking in the relative safety of the parkway.

“Shangri-Law is on the other side of Woodhaven Boulevard,” one of my doubles says, pointing, a little over a mile away.

We move quickly, quietly, and cover the distance while the sun still struggles to climb above the landscape. As we come to the end of the forested parkland the sound of music can be heard to the south, competing with the gunfire that has dwindled significantly.

One of the Streaks says enthusiastically, “Oh my gawd, can you believe the luck today? It’s the Bazaar of Forbidden Dreams! Can we go, can we go, CAN WE GO?!?!?”

Alter-Edge says, “It might be a good idea for us to head there and get your friends to meet us. Some friends just told me that the enclave is surrounded by four airships with soldiers flanked out. We can’t get in to get them, so they’ll have to figure a way out of there. Don’t worry about telling them where to meet, the *otaku* have that covered. Let’s go enjoy the fun. I heard a rumour that Lumobanja is shooting a video there, and that music sounds awful familiar.”

Edge looks at the *otaku* then looks at me and says, “Ok, we might as well have some fun.”

### **Two: Courtney “Edge” Duschene**

When I first met Adspace he was surrounded by a bunch of “orderlies” from King’s County. They like to go after kids just out of puberty. The organs are formed enough, but not too damaged by drinking or drugs. No one pays for diseased organs. I could tell the kid was new to the area, because no one is stupid enough to walk down the middle of Linden Boulevard at midnight. Even in the day it’s risky. The weeds growing in the street should have been his first clue, but now that I know him I realize he probably would have done it no matter what. He was on his own and trying to draw the attention of a gang willing to take him in. It worked.

Adspace looks like a scrawny punk, even more so back then, and the “orderlies” underestimated him, two point oh. Even still, both guys were huge. Over six feet tall and thick like bulldozers. I doubted the kid would last long if they put their hands on him. They didn’t have knives or daggers, but they did have syringes with something nasty. It’s supposed to help preserve the organs, but it doesn’t do much for your lifespan. One came at him, making to grab hold of the kid, while the other pulled out the syringe and casually came forward to “administer it”. The kid whips out his daggers, cruel-looking things that they are, and gutted the one nearest him. He did this crossways move from either side that slit the guy stomach open and his freakin’ organs came piling out. The guy was dead but didn’t know it for a few minutes. He just looked at the kid with this stupid look on his face, as if to say “did you really just do that to me?” What a dumbass. The other guy throws the syringe to the ground and pulls out this steel baton kept tucked behind. Well, tried to pull it out is more like it. The kid was inside the swing and slicing like a butcher, which I later found out was his job back in Pakistan.

I was heading out to do a smuggling run when I came upon him. I considered helping him, but he took care of business before I decided. I introduced myself from a distance and when he put his weapons away I came a bit closer. His first words were said in a strange accent, though strange accents aren’t all that strange in New York, but he spoke perfect English...or so I thought at first, “If you want to impress someone, put him on your blacklist.” The more I talked to him, the clearer it was that he spoke in advert slogans and taglines. Funny kid, but the best friend I have. I take care of him and he takes care of me.

The Bazaar of Forbidden Dreams is the stuff of legend, and I’ve always doubted its existence. It just seems to be too good to be true, so it probably isn’t. But here it is and it’s everything I thought it could be, and more. According to all that I have heard about it the Bazaar changes location each night, and only exists during the night. Some of the stands have already been broken down, their inventory packed away, but the merchants still linger. It’s probably because of *Lumobanja*, and now that we are here I am positive it’s them. It’s hard to believe that a band so popular would be here in the abandoned zone, near Highland Park of all places. I bet you hear gunshots in the video.

We first breach the outer ring of stands, which are mostly closed. They deal in pharmaceuticals of all kinds. Some sell the standard street drugs, but that sort of thing can be found anywhere and this is the Bazaar of Forbidden Dreams. Forbidden is the key word. Forbidden includes but is not exclusive to illegal. Meth, coke, weed, horse, ecstasy, mephanon; these things are illegal but easily found, so don’t expect to find any here. Sometimes you get a worthless piece of junk, sometimes you get a cool piece of tech that will slowly kill you, and sometimes you just get a really amazing deal on some next generation tech that the corps want to

see field tested. Most of the drugs on sale in the outer ring are designers, though they have slim pickings this close to closing.

The music is loud enough now to be easily heard, but it's still not at concert level. 'Turn it to eleven!' I think. There are three stalls still open in pharma ring, at least from what I can see. There might be more on the other side. I wander over to one, but there are already three customers fighting over the last of the inventory. The next one is selling little white pills and little purple pills.

"I call the white ones "Oblivion" and the purple are "Stardust"," the pharmacist says.

"What dey do?" I ask the obvious.

"Well, the white ones should give you this crazy rush of energy for a couple of hours with lots of hallucinogenic activity for about six hours, and about halfway through there should be this tranquil feeling. The purple should make you feel that you have a great sense of purpose and focus, along with a huge boost to your confidence level, but it only lasts about two hours, and you should not take more than two in an eight-hour period."

"How much?"

"I can give you a bag of whites with 500 pills for two thousand or 300 purples for twenty-five hundred," he says, a look of doubt on his face.

"Gimme two bags of purple," I say and hand over my roll of five thousand. That's half of my night's take, but I need to bankroll my next deal. I can probably double my money with the purples.

"That's the last two I have," he says, smiling a perfect shining white smile and hands me two plastic bags filled with purple pills, which I stuff into my backpack.

"What about you buddy?" he says to Adspace, "I have three bags of the whites left. How about I give 'em to ya for fifty-five hundred so I can close up?"

Adspace gives the guy a look as if to say 'do I look like I just fell off the turnip truck', but says, "Expect more, pay less," and gestures down.

"Alright, all three bags for five thousands. That's as low as I can go."

Adspace smiles and hands over the five grand he made tonight, "Do the dew!" in exchange for the three bags of white pills. He opens up a panel on his board and sticks one of the bags in it, and the other two go into his backpack.

"Thanks kids, now I can go the band. I can't believe *Lumobanja* is here!" the pharmacist says and runs off with his lock-box of profits.

We push closer to the center, the music now at a decent volume. This ring sells weapons, guns mostly, but some melee stuff as well. Some sell stolen military gear, some offer unique designs made by the seller, and some are selling experimental newtech. I spot an old Asian guy who sells *katana*, and I recognize him. He's considered a master swordsmith and someone once told me he is a national treasure in Japan. I'm not sure what that means but it sounds important. I walk over and look at the display of swords being inspected by a biker in full combat leathers. He's not wearing his colours, but he is decked out for battle. It's hard to tell his outfit, but I would bet he is either Rock Machine or La Quinta Diablo. He looks like he could eat me for breakfast and still have room for Adspace, though the kid is kind of scrawny.

We continue along the ring, checking out some of the newtech. A lot of it looks cool, but I know it's experimental. You never really know what you're getting. I knew a guy who lived on my street, a real badass. He was a real jerk too, but that kind of goes with the territory. Anyway, he was showing off this gun that he claimed he picked up at the Bazaar. I figured he was talking *drek*, as per usual, but now I'm not so sure. The rifle had this flip-out vidscreen and he could

program the flight path of the bullet in advance, but it didn't work out very well. Maybe he screwed up in the programming. He wasn't the smartest guy on the street. He ended up shooting a little kid down the block. What a jerk. I heard he got geeked by someone who wanted his newtech gun. Red wedding style.

Most of the weapons dealers have packed up for the night, but a few are still open, busy with customers, and not the type you want to mess with. Near one of the gun dealers is a boulder of a man wearing a black trench coat that seems to absorb light. He is looking at shotguns, which look too small in his meaty paws. At first I think he has some new variant on brass knuckles, but then I realize he has round metal implants over his knuckles. He shows a shotgun to his buddy and I see that he has a steel plate in his forehead, rounded and polished. He looks gruesome, and I must make a face because he turns to me and goes "BOO!" and I jump. They laugh and I slink away.

Luckily the Bazaar is considered a sanctuary. Using violence here would draw fire from the entire crowd, just to get things back to business. That's why it's such a perfect spot for Streak and the suit to hookup with us.

As we pass a merchant one of the customers picks up a huge machine gun. It's the biggest gun I've ever seen, even in the movies. I'm not sure how he is even able to hold it, but then I notice that it's strapped into a harness that goes around his shoulders and waist, and there is some sort of weird extend-o-arm thing connecting harness to gun. The guy is pretty huge, well over six feet tall and a good four hundred pounds, maybe more, but the barrel must be ten feet long and is so wide the bullets must be the size of a golf ball, but he is able to maneuver the rifle around with surprising ease. It smoothly glides from left to right, up and down, and the guy seems impressed with the weapon, so the haggling begins. I stay to watch.

The exchange is fast, like a ping-pong match, and a price is settled upon: fifteen thousand. That seems pricey, even for a machine gun, but the guy hands over the money, removes the machine gun from the harness and puts the gun back on the table, keeps the harness and walks away.

By now the tribal drumming can be felt deep and I find myself walking in its groove. Several large drones can be seen flying around, capturing the scene for the video. The singing accompanies the drumming, but I don't recognize the song.

"Is dat real *Lumonbanja*?" I ask.

"For sure," my twin says, "It's their latest track. It hasn't even been released yet. Well, not officially. I think it hit the net about ten minutes after they arrived and sang it here. That just adds to the street cred."

We pass the next ring, experimental tech. Sometimes it's a new sensor gadget and sometimes it's just the latest line from a hot new fashion designer. You really never know what you'll get. The customers in the weapons ring are generally large men who are already armed to the teeth, sometimes with armour as well. This ring is different. The customers are armed to the teeth, but some are women, and they are generally not huge, with a few exceptions. The weapons ring guys have crew cuts and military tats, while these people look more street. They have lots of tats too, but also piercings and wild, colourful haircuts. Some give the impression of being ninja; their wearable computers hooked right into the base of their skull.

A bald guy with an obvious bionic eye has a chrome prosthetic arm in his real hand while the merchant attaches a weird looking prosthetic to his stump. The prosthetic does not look human, but has a large triple-claw like the kind you see on those stupid coin-operated games, the ones where you drop a clawed hand down into a pile of toys that I've never seen anyone win. I

stop to watch the crab-hand installed and it only takes a minute. When he's done the merchant pushes a small button near the base of the arm and the claw whirs into activity. It spins like a fan, then it shoots out about ten feet, grabs hold of a crate of goods and pulls it over to him. The owner of the crate is not pleased but says nothing while retrieving his goods. Sanctuary or not, that seems a good idea.

At another table is a woman with two gleaming prosthetic legs. Her feet do not look human, but are birdlike. Three pointed toes in front and a fourth to the rear, pointing backward. Throw a circle round that and you have a peace symbol. A section of her thigh suddenly separates from the main leg, revealing an opening that holds a small pistol.

"I want to hold a larger gun. This has no firepower," the woman says, her red Mohawk bouncing about like roosters as she cites her problem. She has a thick leather neckband with small pointy metal spikes and elbow guards with larger ones. She pulls the pistol out, a .45 of some sort, "Look at this thing. I can pop a civvy with this, but it won't get through even low-end body armour. I want something with punch, like an Eagle."

"That would require larger legs, but that would look weird on your small frame," the merchant says.

"I don't care how it looks. Pretty legs don't keep you safe. Do you have what I need or not?"

"Try the next ring. The cyberdocs have better inventory," he says, giving up on the sale.

The last ring before the center of the Bazaar, where the music is playing, is medical tech. It's not just fancy prosthetics either. They have four clinics, each in eighteen-wheelers. They offer all the latest genetic work, can attach bionic eyes and ears, and I've even heard they can create unique organs that they manufacture with biological 3D printers. Larger lungs, improved livers, even new organ types, like sonar or gills. At least that is what I've heard. Who knows how much truth there is to those stories, but I do see the eighteen-wheelers. Even the stalls here have curtains to provide some privacy.

A woman comes dancing down the aisle between stalls. She wears tall black leather boots that go halfway to her thighs, and the shortest chainmail microskirt I've ever seen. It reveals all. She wears a vest and nothing beneath, which does little to contain her large breasts. There's a glowing green tattoo of a thorny plant that starts at her crotch and goes all the way past the valley of her breasts and ends at her face, which looks like a Venus Flytrap. Her head is framed by the glowing green, but the face itself is red, like a mouth, with sharp white teeth at her chin and above her eyes. It's a rather disturbing image, and she is just the vanguard of a chain of dancers, each more bizarre than the next.

A large bare-chested man with huge biceps and triceps and hairy goat legs is next in the chain. If it's a costume it is an amazing one, because the goat legs look incredibly real. He even has a goaty smell about him and two small horns protrude from his skull. The legs still linger in my thoughts as the next person passes by; a chubby woman in a tight spandex suit with a calico pattern and whiskers that protrude from beneath her nose. She also has a long thin tail that moves back and forth. That could be mechanical, though the spandex is not forgiving and I don't see where a drive mechanism is hidden. Next there is a really tall, really thin man. His skin is pasty white and his hair is black, long, and grimy. His eyes are yellow and almost provide light they are so bright. He is wearing an old tuxedo, but one that is several sizes too small. He has tails, but they barely reach his butt, though he has the buttons done up the front. The pants end just below the knees and are tattered. He smiles right at me, revealing sharpened teeth like the Clowns had, and even though he is not very close I can smell his breath. It smells like death.

The chain of dancers continues as my twin pulls me along to the center, where the band is almost done. They have setup a small stage for the musicians, but the singer is down in the pits with us. There is a large crowd between us, but I can see his head bob in and out of sight as he sings and dances, and the crowd is dancing along with him. I grab Adspace and pull him towards the band, dancing and laughing. We throw our hands in the air and start grooving our way through the crowd. We reach the stage and the music is slamming. Adspace is pulling at my arm and saying something, but I just smile and nod, with no idea what he's trying to say. He tries a few more times but then smiles and shrugs his shoulders. There are three drummers banging away at huge drums that are easily eight feet tall, and the sound hits me like a hammer. I love it, pulling off the hello kitty and allowing my hair to fly free, banging my head up and down until my locks form a wall.

Suddenly the lead singer is there before me. He takes me by the hand as he sings and we dance together, his eyes looking right into mine and I feel like we are moving as one, in perfect synch with each other. It only lasts for a minute and then he lets go and moves on. The drones and crowd all seemed focused on me, but all I saw were his dreamy eyes. He has really nice cheekbones that give him a fierce look, but his eyes show a softness that reveals his inner self.

My twin comes over gushing, "You are soooooo lucky. I can't believe you will be in the new video. You are the coolest chick. You and Streak."

I hope she gets here before the band packs up and leaves.

## [The Last Ordeal of James Willoughby](#)

**Jeff Spitzer**

Opinions differed about James Willoughby. To some he was a brilliant naturalist, a meticulous observer of plants and animals in the Great Smoky Mountains. He published studies on the hibernation behavior of bats, the life cycles of aquatic insects, and the recovery of ramp (a.k.a. wild leek) populations. His works were required reading in advanced biology courses.

But to those who had actually met him, Willoughby was a hopeless fruitcake. He showed up at conferences in tattered denim and mud-caked hiking boots. He was often heard talking to himself, even debating himself. Though physically attractive and robust, he was socially awkward, sometimes ducking behind doors to avoid his colleagues. He had no friends or family and spent most of his time in the woods, as far from humanity as he could get.

Probably because of his odd behavior, doubts about his scientific credibility arose in certain quarters. Attempts to reproduce his work yielded inconclusive results. There was talk of a committee to investigate his research. Then one day, as if to escape his detractors, he set out on a mountain trail and never returned.

Willoughby remained in oblivion for over a decade. His name suddenly resurfaced when some hikers discovered an uninhabited cave in a remote area of the Smokies and found a stack of mildewed notebooks marked J.W. The hikers spent two days reading. Then, astonished and confused, they emptied their backpacks, crammed in the notebooks, scrambled down the mountain, and headed to the nearest police station. Soon the controversies about James Willoughby were reignited.

The fate of Willoughby himself remains unknown, although many who have studied his strange legacy have formed their own opinions. A condensation of the events he recorded is presented here.

### FROM THE JOURNALS OF JAMES WILLOUGHBY

May 22: Cataloguing saprophytes at the higher elevations

This morning I had the most astounding encounter of my life. It occurred on the periphery of a heath bald (elev. approx. 5000 ft.). I had awakened just before dawn and emerged from my tent into a silken mist. Falling away behind me was the chattering spruce forest; ahead lay the most formidable bald I have ever seen---no trees anywhere, their places taken by a towering, impenetrable jungle of steel-branched rhododendron and laurel, wrapping the mountain peak like a hood.

Movement in a rhododendron bush caught my eye. Some animal, about the size of a young child, seemed to be nestled in a matrix of long, shiny leaves and pink blooms. Thinking it to be a cat or a bear cub, I kept still while the mist began its gradual rise. Now I thought my eyes were playing tricks. Reclining lazily within the twisted branches was a naked, motley-colored, flaccid, misshapen creature, entirely beyond my experience or imagination. It seemed perfectly content as it chewed on a cluster of petals. I crept closer. A breeze rolling over the mountain brought me a fragrant, patchouli-like aroma, evidently ascribable to the unnatural being.

It sat there like a large, fat toddler fascinated with a colorful plaything. Its squat head seemed to have partly melted into a puddle of jowls. Two peaceful, lidless eyes and gnarled structures, possibly ears, adorned its forehead, but I saw neither a nose nor hair. Teeth and tongue revealed themselves when the creature's jaw descended in an apparent yawn.

Its two arms and two legs were roughly humanoid in shape but possessed a startling elasticity. The arms stretched out leisurely to half-again their length and dainty fingers picked off flowers, while the flabby torso never moved. The color of the creature's skin varied from albino white above the breast to beige in the mid-section to a deep orange in the lower extremities. The texture of its skin brought to mind a plucked chicken.

This was clearly no terrestrial form of life. I had stumbled upon a dwarfish, aromatic alien.

Protruding from its chest was a most peculiar appendage, attached at its center and resembling an upside-down conch. At first I took it for an ornament because of its metallic sheen, but when the creature batted it idly, it twirled like a lopsided propeller. I saw that it was actually a body part. Its purpose eluded me completely.

I kept watch throughout the morning. Shortly after noon, a second alien, an exact copy of the first, crawled out of the dense foliage. The two of them babbled fervently in a language as inscrutable as the voices of an aviary. Their fragrant aroma intensified. I sensed that they were happy to see each other. After yielding its place in the bush, the first creature disappeared into the thicket. The second arranged itself in their snug little alcove and began chewing a pink blossom. Had I not witnessed the exchange, I would never have guessed it had taken place.

Who are these sweet-smelling Lilliputians and how many inhabit the bald? I saw no more though I watched until dark.

#### ***June 5:***

After two weeks I have learned a few things about the aliens. First, they station themselves at regular intervals around the bald. In a single day I have counted forty-four. There may be a whole population deep within the bushes. Second, I can now see small variations in their anatomy, reminiscent of the slight differences one finds in identical twins. Could they all be from the same brood? Or have they achieved a remarkable degree of genetic control?

Their skin, which is always fully exposed, seems to be their olfactory organ. Their fragrant scent arises from the shiny appendage on their breast. I would love to examine this conch-shaped organ more closely. If it hasn't a role in mating, I cannot imagine a use for it.

I am still probing for access to the heart of the bald. The massive interwoven shrubs refuse to be violated. After a few yards of pulling, squeezing and twisting, I am too exhausted to go on. If only I could transform myself into one of these wee elastic creatures.

#### ***August 10:***

Today I finally penetrated to the center of the bald---the fruit of two months of excruciating labor. I have carved out an above-ground tunnel beneath the lowest branches. Access is still difficult, but assured. And my efforts were richly rewarded.

A whole colony of them dwells on a grassy field, the last shrub-free half-acre of the original bald. Approximately two hundred aliens were there; an exact count was impossible. I could not tell the differences in gender, but there was a range of sizes; infants and children seemed to be present. Scattered about the field were numerous ceramic-like fragments. I am only guessing but they could be the remains of the vehicle that brought these creatures here.

I found the aliens in a state of extreme torpor. They lay supine in the shade of bushes and hardly stirred. The heat and drought must torment them. Their skin looked dry and scaly, and their limbs had lost their amazing elasticity. Even when I approached within arm's length they were too lethargic to respond.

A new scent---much like hickory smoke---emanated from their breasts. Inhaling this essence, I felt an overwhelming thirst myself. A single urgent thought possessed me.

Returning to my campsite, I took my canteen and stewpot down to the spring, filled them with water, and struggled back up the hill. I crawled through my tunnel and quietly set the pot beside one heat-stricken creature. When he lunged for it, the pot overturned. He vainly tried to save the water, finally burying his jowly face in the sedge and emitting agonized yelps. I hurried back to the spring, refilled the pot, and this time managed to pour some of the water over his parched body. Judging from the sounds he made, it was an enormous relief.

I went down and up the hill all day fetching water. As word spread throughout the colony, they all dragged themselves across the field for refreshment. By evening they were able to walk and chatter. I tried to communicate with them, but they responded neither to words nor to gestures. When I touched one of them, the whole crowd waddled in terror into the bushes.

They allow me to penetrate their fortress, accept my aid, then shun my attempts to befriend them. They react as instinctively as animals, yet their intelligence cannot be doubted. Have these creatures traveled light years only to keep aloof? Why won't they trust me?

I've lost my canteen, probably in the tunnel. If it doesn't turn up tomorrow, I'll have to buy another one in town, which means six days wasted. Best to save that errand for the future.

### **August 20:**

Flowers and leaves are their food of choice. They also like beetles, which are slow enough for them to catch. They eat partridgeberries and mushrooms if I set them out. So far I have detected no waste products; their metabolic systems must be extremely efficient.

They use fragments of their spaceship (?) as bowls to collect rain. They bathe two or three times a day, apparently out of urgent necessity.

The children spar and roll in the grass. The adults spend most of their time in the bushes, idly chewing leaves or playing some kind of game with rocks and ceramic chips. Occasionally two adults will separate from the larger group and perform a fascinating dance in which their bodies elongate, intertwine, and quiver amid bursts of squealing and twittering. A strong lilac scent billows up from their breast organs. If I am close enough to inhale it, the most pleasant sensations permeate my body.

### **October 26:**

Since finding the colony I have been troubled by bouts of vertigo. These occur every ten days or so and always catch me unprepared. To avoid fainting I must sit on the ground and focus my eyes intently on an object. Minutes later the ordeal ends, leaving me shaken and confused.

Today I experienced such an attack. Had it not delayed me, I might have prevented a catastrophe, which I shall describe here.

Every day I patrol the entire perimeter of the bald. My rounds begin at dawn and end in mid-afternoon. Having checked all the alien sentries, I crawl through my tunnel to the edge of the field. I spy on the colony until convinced that no new disasters---like last month's incident with the hawk and the infant---have befallen them.

This morning, on the north trail, I began to feel dizzy and immediately lowered myself to the ground. I tried unsuccessfully to focus on something. The distant hills became a spinning blur of autumn color. I lost consciousness. Ten minutes later I awoke, still dazed and wondering what was happening to me. When I reached the 38th sentry, he was enjoying a catnap, as they frequently do in their tedious posts. Suddenly he snapped awake, and a searing ammoniacal odor filled the air. A volley of angry barking erupted in the woods. I saw that a poacher and his dog had ascended to the edge of the trees and positioned themselves a few yards in front of the alien. The man leveled a shotgun from behind a spruce tree.

Jolted from my own worries, I hurled myself at the protruding gun barrel. The astonished poacher struggled with me for the weapon. It discharged between us with a blast that slammed us both to the ground. We faced each other in a moment of shock and paralysis. With my ragged hair and the hellfire that must have burned in my eyes, I was surely the portrait of madness. The man scrambled to his feet and fled back through the woods with his dog. I pursued them down the steep slope although in my state of wild alarm I had no idea what to do with them. That issue was abruptly taken out of my hands. They both tumbled onto an outcropping rock and slid off into bottomless space. The man's scream of terror froze my heart.

Back on the bald I saw that the alien was gone. The shotgun was nowhere in sight. A trail of milky fluid, resembling the hemolymph of an insect and smelling like ammonia led into the bushes. Nearby I found the shiny scent-organ, ripped from the little one's breast by the buckshot. More of the noisome fluid seeped from its mangled wound. This organ is a remarkable composite. Though it gleams like polished steel, it is more porous and elastic than human flesh. I have preserved it in an airtight plastic container.

The incident with the poacher must not be repeated. I'm not sorry for the man; his kind brings wanton violence to the mountains. I grieve for the helpless sentry, lying dead somewhere or in mortal agony. Here and now I swear an oath to protect the colony from further harm.

***November 28:***

I have learned how they overwinter. They hibernate in parts of their spaceship, which they cover with mounds of earth and dead leaves. They erect these mounds beneath the bushes.

I myself will spend the winter in an abandoned bat cave on the south face. When the snow comes I must be available if needed.

***December 31:***

I have developed a theory about the aliens. Their ancestors landed here at least two centuries ago, and the blasts from their ship destroyed the trees on several peaks. Thus were created the balds, which are known to be that old but whose origin has always been a mystery. Survivors of the journey and the landing joined up in the forest. There they lived for years, encountering the Cherokee and the early settlers with results as violent as human nature. (What a shame that we humans, who should be their greeters and hosts, student and teachers, ambassadors of our planet, are feared and distrusted by them.) As new shrubbery covered the balds, the little ones retreated to these safe havens. In all my explorations I have never found signs of these creatures elsewhere. This may be the last surviving colony.

They still face many dangers. When their skin dries out, they become vulnerable to insects. Flies and mosquitoes feast on their white upper bodies, leaving painful welts. Every day of summer I must check their rain bowls. I don't know how to protect the children from birds of prey (two infants carried off). And of course there is always the threat of human intrusion. The sound of an airplane causes them no alarm; I have to scare them into the bushes. This problem concerns me greatly.

Did this colony choose to remain on Earth or were they stranded by their brothers? Are they scouts for a larger invasion? What happened to their tools and weapons? Surely a race that achieved space travel must have possessed technological wonders; yet these creatures cannot even produce fire. I think their earthly stay, their confinement on the bald, and possibly inbreeding have caused their minds and bodies to deteriorate over the centuries. Only their scent-organs, marvelous broadcasters of their emotions, remain healthy.

They rebuff all my attempts to communicate. My fellow humans would likely be offended by such discourtesy and treat them as unwelcome immigrants. Cruel men would be

spurred on to savagery by their awkwardness and timidity. I must shield the little ones from these perils.

### ***Second Year***

#### ***January 6:***

Another day of light snow. I made it through the tunnel and found their winter cocoons undisturbed. Even their slight movements have ceased. I cannot tell if they're alive, but I maintain hope. I must hike to the cave while the trails are still open.

#### ***January 8:***

Heavy snow. I cannot leave the cave. Thank God I have plenty of food and firewood. I spent the day reading Muir and Thoreau. The snowy vista is breathtaking. I hope that someday the little ones can appreciate the beauty of this planet.

I had intended to add some poems to my chapbook, but it's gone. It must be lying under snow at the campsite. A pity, for the mountains and my ruminations on the colony inspire me.

(The chapbook, canteen, Swiss Army knife, cans of food---all missing in the last six months. I must keep better track of my things.)

The dizzy spells are milder and less frequent now. My head is clear. The pure, icy air restores my health and invigorates me. But I sorely miss the fragrance of my little ones.

#### ***April 3:***

They are stirring! The first sleepyheads have risen from their long winter nap and are nibbling dandelions and buttercups. I made sure their rain bowls were full.

#### ***April 10:***

I counted as carefully as possible: 206. All but four survived. I rejoice! I anoint myself with their essence.

#### ***June 20:***

Another baby was killed by a hawk. I didn't see it happen, but the bird must have dropped the child from the air. The grieving mother bleated and slapped the ground as she clutched the gored remains. Her agony lasted all day and into the night. Eventually several of them dug a hole, buried the child, and crowded around the mother. The whole colony gazed up at the midnight sky and gabbled a somber chant that rose and fell discordantly for over an hour. Though it was gibberish to my ears, I imagined they were singing about a homeland that had only become a legend.

As they mourned, a piney smell arose from their congregation and spread above the field. When it reached my nostrils, a heavy sorrow weighed upon my heart and sapped all my energy. Later, quite bemused and listless, I made my exit. Their effusions overpower me like an addiction. They may be causing my dizzy spells. When I inhale these aromas, I feel emotionally bonded to the colony. Their problems become my obsessions. It has always been my rule to observe the natural world without influencing it; now I cannot resist the impulse to intervene. When the little ones need me, I hasten to their rescue.

#### ***July 17:***

Today I used my hatchet to cut two slender trees near the bald. Hard work. I dragged them uphill and, one by one, maneuvered them through the tunnel. I am determined to build shelters for the children. If they can learn to play inside them, they should be less vulnerable to the birds. I plan to add three or four trees per day.

#### ***August 7:***

A setback. While cutting I was overcome by dizziness. I twisted my ankle and fell into a chasm, where I lay unconscious for an hour or so. My vision is still blurred, and it is hard to write. I will have to pace myself more intelligently.

**August 8:**

Better today except for my ankle, which is sore and will not support my weight. One tree harvested, but I couldn't get it uphill. My little ones are okay.

**August 22:**

Four trees today. I must go downhill to find the right size. Another dizzy spell, just before supper, and I couldn't eat anything.

**October 10:**

First shelter finished, It is simply a log roof supported on several clusters of logs. I camouflaged it with rhododendron branches. As soon as I withdrew, they all waddled out from the bushes to investigate. They chattered and squealed, and the children tussled playfully under the roof. I think they understand its purpose. I tried again to communicate but was totally ignored.

**December 6:**

I took a chance and left them during their hibernation period. I descended the mountain and rode a bus to the library to Asheville. Several books on Appalachian history contained anecdotes about goblins and strange woodland odors. To uninformed persons this would be typical mountain folklore, but I am sure it supports my theories.

While in town I had a close call. A spell of vertigo, the worst yet, hit me and I passed out. I woke up on a gurney in an emergency room. A doctor and an ambulance driver were talking about me. The doctor asked me questions but I didn't answer. They're not to be trusted. They'd find a way to keep me down and helpless.

My head was throbbing. The doctor probed around my skull, shined a light in my eyes and ears, then went to get someone else. The driver followed him out. I forced myself onto my feet and staggered out of the hospital. Somehow I found my way to the bus station.

I will never abandon my darlings.

**Third Year**

**July 8:**

My health continues to ebb. The vertigo leaves me clammy and nauseous, with headaches and double vision. I have no appetite and am nothing but skin and bones. Some days I can hardly move. Yet I do not falter when the little ones need me. I've built them shelters, maintained their water supply during drought, found netting to stop the insects, caught trout in the vain hope of strengthening their bodies with protein. I've guarded their beds in winter and scattered their sentries whenever a poacher or hiker ventured too close. Today another crisis befell the colony. The outcome is still in doubt.

This afternoon they were all in the field. The children were tumbling in and out of the shelters. Suddenly I heard distant engines. The airplane from the south has become a regular menace. It flies over the bald on alternate weeks. Every time it passes I must shoo my angels to cover.

I leaped into the open, shouting and waving my arms. Fleeing from my commotion, one group waddled toward the corner abutting the precipice. A nest of wasps awaited them. The angry villains shot out of the ground and hailed down upon my little ones, mutilating their torsos

into purple, suppurating lumps. Fifty victims bleated and writhed in the grass. The ammoniacal stench---their alarm bell---flooded the air. I hobbled across the field, flung netting over them, and took the wrath of the wasps upon myself. My face and arms accumulated a dozen painful stings. The swarming devils chased me back to the tunnel, where I finally eluded them.

Ignoring my own distress, I crawled through the tunnel and lurched down to the spring. A patch of beebalm grows there. I stuffed the minty weeds into my shirt and pants, clawed my way uphill, and struggled back to the field. For hours I applied poultices to my suffering dear ones. It was futile. All fifty of them died in hideous torment.

I wept and shouted my rage: "Why did this happen? I only wanted to protect them. They cannot survive without me."

Ten yards away the colony gathered to watch. I heard an undercurrent of gurgling voices. Their expressions never change, and I couldn't determine their reactions. I smelled nothing, as if their scent-organs were being suppressed to hide their feelings. Exhausted and ill, I stumbled through them. They retreated before my step, then followed me as far as the tunnel.

"Do you understand what I've done for you?" I cried. "I am your savior!"

They only stared. Their faces remained immobile. Not a trace of odor came my way.

### **July 12:**

Today was the first time in four days that I've seen the colony. The disaster with the wasps left me sick at heart as well as in body. I could not stand on my feet. The vertigo would not abate. July 14:

This morning I felt well enough to negotiate the tunnel. They have buried the dead, probably at night to escape the wasps. I noticed freshly turned earth near the precipice.

Within the burial ground is a flat, table-sized surface of rock, which I had overlooked until now. It is surrounded by laurel and is safely removed from the wasp nest. There I was surprised to find all the articles I have missed over the years---my canteen, Swiss Army knife, magnifying glass, wool socks, many open and rusted food cans. My chapbook was there with pages torn out. A shotgun, most likely the poacher's, had been dissected.

In addition there were tools and implements which looked like relics from the pioneer days, along with Indian arrows and beaded jewelry. Although this discovery supports my theories, it left me mortified. I had forgotten that the little ones are intelligent beings. They have been studying me while I, in my egregious vanity, believed I was studying them. They and their ancestors have been gathering data on humans for perhaps two centuries.

As I sifted through their cache, lidless eyes stared from the bushes. I heard no sound, caught no scent. There were all around me.

One of them waddled into view, making low, rasping sounds. He held the round edge of his scent-organ, and for some reason this made me think: The time has come. Now we will communicate.

I sat on my haunches. He began to chant the mournful gibberish which I have heard on sad occasions. The others took up the chorus, too. They all stepped out of the bushes, and I was completely surrounded by tremors of sounds, escalating to a crescendo. Their leader pointed the tapered end of his scent-organ at me. A jet of liquid shot into my face. I fell backward, blinded, and began coughing and fighting for breath. I thought the caustic oil would dissolve my eyes and lungs. They kept up their dreadful chant as I rolled in agony on the ground. Then they quit. I could hardly see and I had to strain for every breath. The little ones had disappeared into the bushes. I got to my feet and made for the tunnel.

I have no idea what day it is. My life is ebbing away. When I returned to the colony, they rushed at me, pointing their scent-organs, and I had to flee. They still blame me for the wasp attack. Even after my long devotion to their community, they won't accept me back. I am crushed. I don't want to live. But if I die on this evil mountain I will not die alone.

Thus ended Willoughby's journals. Unfortunately they gave no hint about the location of his mountain. Many adventurous souls have searched for it without conclusive results. One hiking party did find some clues, but its members disagreed about their significance. They found ceramic fragments on what might have been a heath bald. The site had been ravaged by fire, and the verdure was in various stages of recovery. One fellow ventured that Willoughby, in his half-blind, vengeful state, had cremated the aliens and possibly immolated himself at the same time. He insisted that the ceramic shards supported Willoughby's account. But another man argued that lightning fires were well-documented in the Smokies, and no remains of any creature, let alone aliens, had been discovered. Also, if the aliens had stolen Willoughby's equipment---and even his book of poems---why hadn't they taken his journals?

Questions persisted. What if the aliens had escaped the fire and fled to other parts of the wilderness? What if Willoughby's eccentric mind had finally snapped and he'd created a colossal fantasy? The vertigo that plagued him may have been a symptom of his madness. Or was it a symptom of his addiction to the alien scents?

Local historians and naturalists still tell the story of James Willoughby around campfires. They speak of the marvelous scent-organ, supposedly preserved by Willoughby, as if it were the Holy Grail. Hardy adventurers have scoured the hills for it, or for any definitive answers. But the ancient mists of the Great Smoky Mountains know how to keep their secrets.

## **Fabiana's Fairy Godmother**

**Kristin Janz**

“I hope you don't think you'll be assigned to a princess,” the woman told the fairy. “It isn't like the old days.”

The fairy squirmed on the seat of the plastic chair that faced the woman's desk. The chair was human-sized, so the fairy's feet did not quite touch the floor. “I don't want a princess!” she squeaked. It was not entirely true. But these days, no fairy could become a girl's godmother unless the agency approved her application, and it was best to tell humans whatever they wanted to hear.

The agency woman stared sternly down the bridge of her nose at the fairy. The fairy thought the woman pretty, in a severe way, but her gray suit with its wide shoulder pads was neither stylish nor flattering, and the only jewelry she wore was a sparkly bracelet on her left wrist. “There are too many stories,” the woman said, “of fairy powers being wasted on frivolous gifts to princesses, while those who needed assistance were ignored.”

“What about Cinderella?” the fairy said.

“Cinderella had a roof over her head, three meals a day, and a warm place to sleep.”

“But she wanted to go to the ball!” the fairy chirped. She couldn't help bouncing a little in her chair, and she clapped her white hands together. Oh, what a tale that was! The pretty scullery maid in her shimmery dress, her glass slippers that rang out like bells on the ballroom floor. Not real glass, of course, how horrible it would be to have a shoe crumble at the end of a pirouette, and to land with your bare foot on the shards --

“We are not in the business of sending girls to dances!” the woman said. “Have you been listening to anything I've told you?”

“Yes!” the fairy exclaimed, delighted to be asked a question with such an obvious answer. The tips of her wings fluttered, stirring up a breeze that lifted the edges of the loose papers on the woman's desk.

The woman slapped her hands over the papers. Her bracelet tinkled like fairy chimes. “Sometimes I think we should have left you with the princesses. These are real little human girls we're talking about, not pets for you to dress up as fairies and show off to your friends until you're tired of them.”

#

After her interview, the agency sent the fairy home with a glossy brochure printed in bright, cheerful colors. The title of the brochure was:

Rules for Fairy Godmothers.

1. Do not offer to teach your child to fly. Mortal children do not have wings, and can be injured or killed jumping from trees or tall buildings.

2. Do not offer to find a fairy lover for your child.

3. Do not attempt to help your child marry the prince, or the president, or the prime minister. This is unhealthy for both child and statesman.

4. Do not discuss life in the fairy realms.

5. Do not invite your child to visit you in the fairy realms.

6. Do not give clothing as a gift. Most mortals do not consider spider silk frocks appropriate attire.

So many rules! The fairy felt a heavy weight on her chest, like lying down and having someone pile large flat stones on her. Had helping mortal children always been so complicated?

But oh, it was so worthwhile! Other fairies had shown her pictures of their children, beautiful brown girls with big gap-toothed smiles, skinny arms thrown around the necks of their fairy godmothers. Some girls sent letters, and pencil crayon drawings of trees and unicorns and stars. The fairy wanted to decorate her bower with clever drawings and letters that said, Dear fairy godmother, I love you very much and I hope you will visit me soon, because I am waiting for you. She wanted a mortal child to talk about at parties; she wanted to be able to tell the other fairies how much better her child had done this year in algebra, how her child was speaking to boys with greater confidence, and receiving compliments on her hair and complexion. In fact, the fairy wanted so badly to help a child that when she thought back on her interview -- the parts that she remembered -- she was so anxious that she could not keep her wings from twitching.

After a week of waiting that felt like an anxious eternity, the fairy's application to become a godmother was accepted. She was assigned to a little girl named Fabiana, in Brazil. Fabiana and her mother and sister lived in a house of red cinderblocks glued together with a mortar so soft and crumbly that they could pick holes in it with their thumbs. The roof was a sheet of corrugated steel coated with frosty white zinc, the floor was dirt, and the door had been fashioned of old wooden boards of various sizes, nailed to long planks and then propped in front of the entrance. Sometimes an older brother lived there too, sometimes Fabiana's father, who was not the father of the older children.

Fabiana was seven. At first she did not seem to know what to think, and cringed when the fairy tried to touch her hair. But after a while, seeing her mother at ease with the fairy and the human woman from the agency, she emerged from trying to hide behind her mother and gave the fairy a shy but affectionate hug. Fabiana and the fairy were exactly the same height, so it was easy for Fabiana to whisper in the fairy's ear: "You're so pretty! You look just like I wanted you to."

"See!" the mother cried. "You said you wanted a fairy godmother, it's all I heard about for months, and see, now you have one." And the mother laughed, and she kissed the fairy, and so did the sister (although the sister's kisses were more reserved). The agency woman took pictures of everyone and promised to print copies for Fabiana and her family.

Fabiana and the fairy went for a walk, Fabiana leading her fairy godmother by the hand, showing her the neighborhood. The house faced a two-lane paved road, and cars and buses rattled along in a constant racket of honking and clanging metal, but the narrow alley behind the house and the street beyond that were rutted dirt. Bikes and scooters rushed past the two of them, kicking up clouds of swirling dust that made the little girl cough until the fairy conjured a dust-free bubble to surround them, and then Fabiana gazed up at her with such gratitude that the fairy thought her heart would burst.

Fabiana had a narrow, pinched face, and she was so skinny that her collarbones stuck out like rails above the loose neck of her faded Sleeping Beauty t-shirt. The young men on scooters, or sitting on upturned buckets behind their houses, hooted and whistled at the fairy as she and Fabiana passed by. "Oi, fairy!" they called. "Nice ass!" And, "Show me some fairy love!" Some were so pretty that the fairy was tempted, but she remembered Rule Seven: *Do not become romantically involved with any mortal who lives within one hundred miles of your child, or who is acquainted with your child in any way.*

The fairy did not know what to talk to Fabiana about. If life in the fairy realms were not a forbidden subject (Rule Four), she could have chattered on for hours about the parties she had

attended in the last month alone, and all the dresses she and her friends had worn, how they had styled their hair with live flowers and birds. She could have talked about sailing down rivers that flowed from lost gardens, of banquets under silk pavilions, where guests ate and drank so much they dropped like flies on the grass and slept for two days while friends celebrated around them. But she was not permitted to speak of those things, and since Fabiana did not seem to have any stories of her own to volunteer, the fairy had to try and think of things to ask her.

“Do you like school?” the fairy asked.

“Yes,” said Fabiana. “It's okay.”

“That's good,” said the fairy. “You should study hard. If you do well in school, you will have a better life.” That was one of the things that her agency pamphlet on being a good fairy godmother had recommended she say. “Science and math are especially important.”

“Why?” Fabiana asked.

The fairy stopped. She tilted her head from side to side, considering. “I don't know,” she said at last. “But someone told me that they were. For mortals.”

“Did you study science and math?”

“No.” She didn't *think* she had. But it was hard to know for certain. Who could remember what had happened last year, let alone centuries ago? She had a glimmer of memory sometimes, almost a dream, a young mortal with intensely bright eyes, drawing diagrams for her with bits of sharpened charcoal, trying to explain something ... the fairy could not remember. “Fairies don't go to school.”

“Then I don't want to go to school either,” Fabiana said.

“Oh, Fabiana, you must!” The fairy snatched her pale hand away from Fabiana's brown one and clapped both hands together under her chin. She hopped up and down, and her fluttering opalescent wings lifted her several inches above the ground. “Fabiana, you must never stop attending school, because if you do then the agency won't let me be your fairy godmother anymore.”

“Oh.” Fabiana's face was downcast. “Don't go away. I like having a fairy godmother. I like you.”

The fairy was so happy, she could feel her face and wings glow. “I can't stay here, Fabiana, but I'll always come when you call. I promise.”

The girl threw her arms around the fairy, burying her face in the fairy's shoulder, and the fairy knew she had said all the right things.

#

The fairy told all her friends and cousins about the little mortal girl. She decorated her bower with photographs of the two of them, mounted in heart-shaped frames cut out of lined white paper and covered by pencil crayon drawings. She hung a huge Brazilian flag from the ceiling, filled her shelves with handmade pottery and lapis pendants and purses decorated with seedpods and carved nut shells.

At first, the fairy visited Fabiana every week. Fabiana grew rounder, her cheeks fuller. Rule Eight said, Do not give your child fairy food, and Rule Nine said, Do not give fairy gold or precious stones to either your child or your child's family, but it could not possibly be wrong to take Fabiana's mother shopping for human food, and then for a refrigerator to keep it and a microwave and new pots and pans with which to cook it. And if she gave Fabiana's mother the Brazilian money she received from the merchants as change for her fairy gold ... well, the agency did not need to know about that. So Fabiana did not look so hungry anymore, and the entire family had lovely new clothes. Every time the fairy visited, Fabiana's mother greeted her with

kisses, and even the older sister deigned to smile when the fairy swooped into their tiny one-room house.

The fairy visited every week, but then her very best friend was having a party, and of course the fairy had to help her decorate and cook and find the perfect dress, and that took two weeks, and then the party itself lasted two weeks, and it was another two before the fairy felt sufficiently recovered from the festivities to leave her bower, and then the most delightful fairy man who had seen her dancing at the party came to throw himself at her feet and pledge his undying love.... Almost three months had gone by before the fairy remembered Fabiana, and that she was overdue for a visit.

#

“Fabiana?”

The fairy thought she must have come to the wrong house. The shack was empty, not only of people but of possessions: the new refrigerator and microwave, the water bucket and plastic wash basins and pots and pans, the scraps of foam mattress that the family used to sleep on, all their blankets. The door was gone, and the corrugated steel roof, and part of the front wall had been knocked in, smashed brick cinder blocks strewn all over the dirt floor.

But then she saw the Snow White key chain she had bought for Fabiana, forgotten under a pile of kitchen rags, and as she poked through the rags she saw some of the old, frayed underwear that Fabiana and her sister used to wear.

Had the family moved to a different city? The fairy dove out the doorway and fluttered into the street, barely missing a speeding car that swerved to avoid her with a volley of Portuguese curses from the driver.

“Fabiana?” the fairy called. “Fabiana!” The house next to Fabiana's had a curtain instead of a door, tied back to take advantage of the cooling evening breeze. The fairy poked her golden head inside. “Hello, do you know where Fabiana is?”

The interior of this house was much like Fabiana's had been. A large, sagging woman sat on a stool, watching a tiny television set with terrible reception, two girls and a boy curled up next to her. One of the girls was doing homework, although there wasn't much light.

The woman saw the fairy, and leaned over to switch off the television. The girl who wasn't doing homework protested. The woman didn't say anything for a moment, just looked at the fairy.

The fairy wondered if perhaps the woman was not very clever. She was about to repeat her question, when the woman finally spoke.

“They're gone. They didn't feel safe after those men came and took everything.”

“Men? Why would they do that?”

A slow smile curved the woman's mouth. “I'd heard you fairies were loopy, but I never believed it before.”

Loopy? The fairy tossed her head and flitted away, although not without a backwards flick of her hand to turn the television set into an ancient laptop computer with no modem or network controller. Cries of dismay followed her down the street to the next house.

The man in the next house wouldn't talk to her, nor the two women sitting in the alley behind the house after that. Eventually she learned that Fabiana's mother had moved the family outside of town, near the river, though no one would tell who was responsible for driving them away.

The fairy found them living under a blue tarpaulin, in an encampment of other families. The mother and older sister wouldn't speak to the fairy, and turned away when she tried to speak with them. But Fabiana ran to her, bawling. She threw her skinny arms around the fairy.

"You didn't come!" Fabiana wailed. "I called you, and you didn't come!"

"But I didn't hear you call!" the fairy protested. And yet, even as she said it, a worm of doubt wriggled inside her. There had been a day when her thoughts returned to Fabiana again and again, though she hadn't known why. But she had been so deliciously distracted by her lover, and it was so difficult to hear or remember anything else when one was in love....

"Tell me what happened," the fairy said.

It had been half a dozen young men, not from the family's immediate neighborhood, but from a few streets over. They had insisted that the family must have fairy treasure stashed away in their tiny house, and when the family denied it the youths had torn the place apart searching, and beaten Fabiana's father and older brother. The father had spent a week in the hospital with broken bones, and when they released him he didn't come back to Fabiana's mother. The brother had left, too. The thieves had taken everything of value. Fabiana's tears started anew when the fairy produced the tiny plastic princess she had rescued from the rubble.

It took the fairy several hours to track down the men who had robbed Fabiana's family. The two teenage boys who often hung around in the alley smoking and drinking beer, watching younger children play football, said at first that they didn't know anything and hadn't seen anything, but that was before the fairy filled their ears with the sound of tinkling bells, and made their feet itch and itch until the boys tore their running shoes off and scratched long, bloody gouges on their soles and between their toes. We'll tell you anything, they wailed at last, just make it stop! And they did, and she did, though not before letting them itch for another five minutes or so, to teach them a lesson for not telling her the truth right away.

She did worse to the robbers. One she made unable to sleep, because mortals went insane and died after only a few weeks without sleep. Another she paralyzed from head to toe, all except involuntary muscle functions, so that he could not open his eyes or respond in any way to those around him, but still heard everything spoken in his presence and kept his ability to feel physical pain. One she cursed with unquenchable thirst, another with insatiable hunger. The fairy delighted in imagining a new punishment for each one. No thief in that town would ever dare to steal another child's fairy gifts.

#

"This is not acceptable," the agency woman said.

But the fairy was angry. She made no concessions to human custom, ignoring the chair set out for her and hovering cross-legged at eye level, her wings fluttering a furious rhythm.

"Stealing is unacceptable. Stealing my gifts is unacceptable. They're lucky I didn't do worse."

"This is exactly the sort of abuse that the agency exists to prevent," the woman said.

"Spiteful fairies inflicting vengeance on any mortal who squints the wrong way at one of their favorites. Or any mortal who doesn't show enough appreciation for one of their gifts. Or who forgets to invite them to a party."

"They beat up Fabiana's father! They could have killed him!"

The woman made a dismissive gesture with her hand. The silvery jeweled bracelet on her brown wrist jingled as she moved.

"They wouldn't have beaten him at all if it weren't for you!" the woman said. "We told you not to give them money. And what do I hear? The girl's mother bragged to everyone in her

neighborhood that you gave her more money each time you visited than she'd ever made in a year of work."

The fairy hadn't really heard any of that. "What's that on your wrist?"

The woman jerked the sleeve of her suit coat farther over her wrist, shoving the bracelet inside with her fingers. "Never mind what's on my wrist."

"It's a fairy bracelet, isn't it? Oh! You had a fairy godmother too, when you were a little girl! Was it me? It wasn't me, was it?" She clasped her hands together. "I'd feel so terrible if I've forgotten!"

"No," the woman said. "No, it wasn't you." She looked tired, tired and sad. The fairy longed to throw her arms around the woman, to kiss her hair and smooth cheeks until she smiled. But humans couldn't forget their sadness the way fairies could.

"You can't be a fairy godmother anymore," the woman said. "For Fabiana, or anyone else." She paused. She fiddled a little with her bracelet, almost as if she didn't realize she was doing it. "I'm sorry."

The fairy was sorry too. But maybe it was best. She didn't ever want Fabiana to look at her with this woman's sad, tired eyes.

"Can I at least say good-bye?"

#

The fairy took Fabiana to Brasilia for their last day together. They rode the bus. The fairy had wanted to take Fabiana on a winged horse, so they could see the airplane-shaped layout of the city from high above, and swoop down over the roofs of the government buildings, perhaps even wave to the president. And if he happened to notice how pretty Fabiana was ... but the agency woman had forbidden it.

The agency woman had not been happy to hear that the fairy was taking Fabiana to Brasilia's two big shopping centers. But that was what Fabiana most wanted to see; she had not been interested in architectural masterpieces, or walking by the shores of the artificial lake surrounding the city, or attending a football game. So the woman had relented, on condition that the fairy must not buy Fabiana any more clothes or toys.

"Look!" Fabiana said, her eyes wide. She pointed to a full-sized poster display in a store window. "The lady in the picture looks like you."

"She doesn't look like me at all!" the fairy protested. "She doesn't have wings."

"But she has such pretty hair," Fabiana said. "Like gold."

All the models in the pictures decorating store windows and floor displays had golden hair and pale hands and faces. The fairy thought it was strange, now that Fabiana had drawn her attention to it. Most of the women shopping looked more like Fabiana.

Jewelry wasn't clothes, not really, so at a store that sold inexpensive trinkets the fairy let Fabiana pick a charm to wear around her neck on a silver chain, and Fabiana chose a unicorn with rhinestone hooves. The woman at the store grumbled when the fairy tried to pay with a small coin of fairy silver, something about cleaning out her cash register.

"Here," Fabiana said, "let me see the bag," so the fairy handed her the plastic bag of reais notes and coins from the pizza shop where they had eaten lunch, and Fabiana counted out the proper amount.

"You can have the rest of the money," the fairy told Fabiana, after, trying to give her the bag. But Fabiana shook her head.

"I don't want those men to come back," she said.

"They won't. I made sure they won't bother you ever again."

“There's always other ones,” Fabiana said.

It was dark when the fairy took Fabiana home. The agency had found the family another house in a new neighborhood, so they wouldn't have to live under the blue tarp anymore. It was still only one room, like the last house, but this one had a door that could be locked from the inside, and a window with glass panes.

Outside the house, Fabiana clung to the fairy, pressing her wet face into the fairy's shoulder.

“I'm sorry I won't see you anymore,” the fairy said. “It's made me very happy to be your fairy godmother.”

Fabiana didn't say anything, and that made the fairy sad. She didn't like to be sad.

“Be a good girl. Listen to your mother and sister, and study hard every day.” Fabiana made a face, but that was the sort of thing the agency recommended fairies say. Perhaps if they found out she was still saying all those things, they would ask her to be a fairy godmother again, and she could help another child as she had helped Fabiana.

The fairy flew away into the cool night air. When she looked back, she saw that Fabiana was still standing outside the house, watching her go, the silver and rhinestone unicorn pendant sparkling around her neck like a fairy charm.

## Track Invasion

**Deborah Rocheleau**

The most dangerous part of Mark's job was running the food up to the suites. Out from the pantry, across the sweltering lot inside the loop of the race track, up the elevator and down the long row of suite doors. It wasn't the distance, or the heavy carts, or the unbearable heat he hated, but the stretch from the pantry to the elevator. That's where the patrons always tried to attack him.

They'd smell the food in the warmers he was touting, maybe spot a case of beer on his cart, and begin crawling toward him, jaws chomping. This area of the speedway wasn't technically off-limits to the general public, and patrons from the grandstands often wandered down toward the VIP suites in search of shade or—failing that, an employee to nibble on.

They'd raise their arms (if they had any left) and limp toward him, eyes on the food (he hoped). If any got too close, he had a small souvenir-sized Louisville slugger he kept strapped to his belt to beat them off.

This time, there was a whole posse of racing fans on his tail, the numbers of their favorite drivers stitched on their matching vests. Mark could have outpaced them, if he weren't hauling thirty-two cases of beer and a bottle of Cerebrospinal wine. At the sight of the wine, the racing fan marked #47 started gurgling in delight, only to dislocate his rotting jaw with the force. Sweating, Mark shoved the cart faster. Only a few more feet to the elevator. If he angled the cart right, he could get it loaded in one shot...

The wheels of the cart caught in the concrete. The beer sloshed forward, the wine bottle almost slid off. Mark grabbed the bottle, just before he felt a set of bloated fingers latch onto his collar. He turned, face-to-face with the foul-breathed patron. The yellow eyes locked on Mark's. One hand on the cart, the other clutching the bottle, he didn't have time to grab his slugger. Instead, he smashed the patron over the head with the wine.

The fingers released him. As the patron stumbled back, licking at the wine now soaking his head and shoulders, Mark rushed for the elevator, the cart jolting over potholes. Mark let it roll itself the last few feet as he pressed the Up button, doors sliding open just in time for him to slip in after the cart.

Only when the doors were closed, the elevator grinding upward, did he dare relax, cradling his head in his wine-sticky hands.

His manager would not be happy.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Where's the Cerebrospinal?" His manager, Dan, asked. They both stood in the dim back room of suite 508, surrounded by the refrigerator-sized food warmers Mark had hauled up on his last trip. Mark opened up a warmer and started pulling out trays of food; fried lobes, braised medulla oblongata, and six expertly seared corpus callosum.

"I must have forgotten it." Mark said, hoping the wine stain on his shirt didn't show. Why hadn't he just reached for his slugger?

"I've got a room full of sixty-eight brain-starved patrons in there," Dan said, jerking his finger toward the suite door. "They won't 'forget' they ordered a one-hundred-fifty dollar bottle of wine."

Mark stared at the mounds of brain, bubbling in their trays, then at the door, beyond which he knew what he'd find. The backrooms were a blessing, their concrete walls and

“employees only” signs keeping out VIPs and common patrons alike, a much-needed respite from the crowds that flocked the speedway day after day. Mark wasn’t here to relax, though. He had patrons to serve.

“I’ll tell them,” he said, turning toward the door to the suite.

Dan’s jaw dropped open, practically dislocating itself, much like Racing Fan #47’s had.

“Do you want to get eaten?” he asked Mark.

“Maybe.” Mark shrugged, straightening his dress-code mandatory hat. Honestly, he’d just rather take responsibility for mistakes (his own, or someone else’s) than hide behind corporate excuses, constantly complaining about how his “higher ups” were failing their jobs.

Also, he wasn’t too anxious to go back down and face Fan #47 again.

Ignoring Dan’s protests, Mark grabbed a tray of corpus callosum, holding it before him like a shield, and shoved through the door into the suite.

The room was full, far more patrons inside than the fire code allowed. It was practically deserted, however, in comparison to the stands on the other side of the track, visible through the glass front wall of the suite. The VIP suites were built on the inside of the track, right in front of the checkered finish line, so that their premium-paying guests could see the cars up close and gleaming. Mark wasn’t himself a racing fan, but he imagined he’d cheer louder than any of them when someone, anyone, won this race. He could go home then—or at least hunker down in the pantry with the other employees, safe in the fact they wouldn’t have to serve any more cranium-craving patrons. The race had been going on for weeks, the pit crew fueling and refueling as the drivers kept lapping the track, putting off the inevitable. When the race ended, the Track Invasion would begin, a scheduled event in which the gates to the track would open, and the fans—so carefully corralled, herded, controlled up to that moment—would swarm onto the oil-slick track.

Mark wouldn’t envy the drivers when that moment came, when they had to step out of their cars and face the screaming crowds. Here, at least, in this suite, he only had to deal with one patron who wanted to rip his brains out.

“There’s been a mix-up,” Mark told the hostess. She was wearing a yellow dress that clashed with her now green-tinged skin. She was also extremely hunch-backed, her muscles decomposing at a rate that made Mark wonder how she held together at all. “I’m afraid we don’t have your bottle of Cerebrospinal wine.”

In response to his apology, she didn’t so much speak as gargle. Mark didn’t know if a gargle could theoretically sound happy, but this one certainly didn’t. He backed up a few paces, holding the tray of brains in front of him, knowing she’d take his own if not satisfied with her service.

“I’ll just...get that bottle for you,” he said, even as he knew what the words meant. He’d have to go back down. He’d have to face the crowds, the uncontrollable patrons free to swarm where they liked, maul who they liked.

As he backed toward the door, his foot caught on something and he tripped. Brains sloshed across him as he fell to the ground. Looking up, he saw a patron child in front of him, its missing baby teeth leaving huge gaps in its mouth. Glancing at his feet, he saw that he’d tripped over the child’s dragster toy, popping off its wheel.

Even as Mark held his hand up in alarm, the child began to scream. All around the suite, adult-sized patrons jumped to their feet in defense of the little one, this rich spoiled child who’d never want for brains, never know the heat of a grandstand seat, much less the pain of hauling forty pounds of beer up four flights of stairs.

Mark struggled to his feet, careful to make no sudden moves. The patrons watched him

with yellow and green and orange eyes, though thankfully, gorged as they were on catered brains and cerebellum beer, they didn't move too quickly.

When the hostess cried out, throwing back her head and screeching, Mark made his exit, bolting out the door to the safety of the back room. He slammed the door behind him, catching a finger or two in the frame, then threw the bolt and propped himself against it till the knocking on the other side ceased.

Sinking to his knees, Mark breathed a sigh of relief, wiped his sweating brow. He'd survived another incident in customer service. Next time he doubted he'd be so lucky.

\*\*\*\*\*

Racing Fan #47 and his posse were gone by the time Mark came back down, thank goodness. He took the long way around the lot this time, through the tents selling ice to decomposing patrons, making his way back to the pantry. He breathed easier when he saw the trash compactor, as it meant he'd reached the part of the lot where very few patrons ventured. When he passed the compactor, though, a huge metal contraption of bolting doors and hydraulic pistons, he stopped cold. Standing in front of the open door of the compactor, head poked halfway into the dark inside, was a girl. A patron girl. Stained white tennis shoes, a purple dress, and ratty month-old pigtailed.

Mark fingered his bat and glanced at the compressor's control panel, the yellow caution sign and the decapitation warning. He wasn't afraid of the girl attacking, not really. Small patrons could be fierce, but were easy to dodge. At the sight of that head in the compactor, though, the warning sign, he knew it would be so easy to push the button.

One less patron to worry about.

But no. His job was to serve the patrons, no matter how agitated they got. No matter how much he hated them.

He approached the patron, banging the warped metal of the compressor to get her attention. She lurched back, startled, shoulders thrown out of joint by the movement. She turned yellow eyes on him, but the pupils dilated when she saw the leftover fried lobe in his hand.

"There you go," he said as she crawled forward on all fours and snatched the lobe. "What filthy rich suite do I have to deliver you to?"

Looking at the lanyard around her neck, though, Mark saw she didn't have access to the VIP suites. Now he was in trouble. Policy dictated he should turn her over to security, who'd send her back to the common throngs in the stands. The thought made him shudder, and even though he knew that she, as a patron, needn't fear anyone ripping her brains out, he didn't like to think of sending anyone to that.

So he pulled a few more lobes of brain out of the warmer and threw them along the concrete, making a path to the pantry. He tugged the near-empty cart along, keeping an eye on the patron girl who, every few feet, squatted down to gobble up a dropping.

She was apparently quite hungry.

Dan and Charice gave out a "hey!" when Mark entered the bunker-like pantry, its concrete walls and box fan a welcome relief after the heat of the lot.

"I've been worried sick," Dan said, leaning back in the sighing chair behind his desk. The light from the ancient computer monitor glowed across his pale face. "I thought you died..."

His voice trailed off when he saw the straggler following Mark into the pantry.

Dan didn't wait for Mark to explain. Instead he reached under his desk and pulled out a Glock pistol.

"Dude, Dan!" Mark stepped forward and grabbed Dan's trigger hand. (After working

with the patrons this long, the thought of a loaded gun didn't faze him much). "I didn't even know you had that thing."

"I will not have patrons in this pantry," he said, scowling at the girl. "It's completely unsanitary."

"She's barely even a patron," Mark said. "She's from the stands."

"Then why is she eating the suite food?"

Mark looked to the girl, the last of the fried lobes hanging out of her mouth. Her teeth were sharp but few and far between, so that she had trouble chewing.

"None of those snobs are going to eat these leftovers," Mark said, patting the heater with its near-empty trays of picked-over brains. "Could you stop being such a control freak?"

Dan ran his hand over his face and glanced at the computer on his desk. Another order was printing out, a long one.

"If anything goes wrong," he said, grabbing a bottle of Sriracha sauce and pointing it at Mark, "You're responsible."

"I always am," he said. Then, smacking his forehead, he remembered the wine. There was one very rich, very angry hostess waiting for him in 508. The thought of her reminded him why he hated patrons so much, and so made him question his decision to rescue one from a trash compactor.

He watched the patron girl wander around the towers of beer packs and racks of wine, sniffing out something new to eat. He couldn't leave her alone. She'd clear out the pantry in no time.

"Charice?" Mark turned to the stout, gray-haired woman sitting on a stack of beer packs, smoking a cigarette. Charice would do anything for a smoke break.

"Watch the kid for me, will you?" he said.

"You mean the zombie?" she said, flicking her ash. Dan widened his eyes at her, mouthing the more acceptable term "patron," at her. Charice snorted.

"It's not that bad," Mark said, grabbing a bottle of Cerebrospinal off the shelf. With his other hand, he wielded his bat. "I'm the one going out to face the freaks."

"While I'm stuck with just the one," she said, then rolled her charcoal eyes toward Dan. "And I don't mean the kid."

#

Mark was sweating all over on his way back from suite 508. The constant buzzing of the race cars as they zoomed around the track gave him a headache, and his pulse hadn't yet slowed from his second encounter with the hostess. She'd seemed ready to go for his brain if he'd given her the chance. Instead, he'd thrown the bottle at her head and rushed out the door. He almost forgot about the patron girl, until he trudged into the pantry and saw Charice leaning against the door of the freezer, her arms crossed in front of her.

"Where's the kid?" he asked, glaring into Charice's sunken eyes. From a distance, she could be mistaken for a patron, she was so haggard. They all were, after waking up at 5am for days on end, working twelve hour shifts nonstop. Charice had been working here longer than anyone Mark knew, and it showed in every wrinkle and bite mark in her leathery skin.

At Mark's question, Charice rolled her eyes and shrugged away from the freezer door. Mark rushed forward and threw aside the heavy bolt, heaving the door open. The frozen air inside hit him as he rushed into the dark, almost tripping on a bag of ice. There, in the corner, he spotted her, his patron girl, perched on top of a crate of cerebellum sandwiches.

"What were you thinking?" he yelled at Charice.

“It’s not like she can die,” Charice said.

To be fair, the girl didn’t seem too distressed, licking some cerebellum relish off her bony fingers. Mark stretched his hand out, making clicking noises to coax her toward the light, then out the door.

Charice took a step back when the girl emerged, standing behind a barricade of beer cases. The girl, though, apparently satiated by her feast in the freezer, paid her no heed, glancing instead around the pantry with blinking eyes.

“Lunch came while you were gone,” Charice told Mark, pointing to two tin-foiled trays on the computer desk. Mark dashed toward the food, already salivating. His appetite left him, though, when he peeled back the foil to find half-eaten Salisbury steak and cold mac-n-cheese, the noodles so unfortunately resembling brain gyres. Despite his revulsion, he dished himself out a helping of food and started shoveling it into his mouth.

A tap on his foot made him look up, only to find the girl nibbling at his boot. He pulled out his bat and prodded her away with the end.

“If only it were contagious,” Charice sighed, watching the girl at the end of the bat stretch her arms out toward Mark, head tilted in the classic zombie pose.

“You’d really want to be like them?” Mark asked.

“If it got me into one of those fancy suites, yes.” Charice rolled her head, her neck making a bone-crunching crack. “It’s eat or be eaten, hon. Not that my brains would be worth eating. Not like yours, all fresh and firm. You should take up smoking. The smell deters them.”

To illustrate, Charice lit a cigarette and blew the smoke in the girl’s face. In response, the girl opened her mouth as if to scream, but a high-pitched moan came out instead, like a baby’s babbles that would never mature into words.

“Do you have kids?” Mark asked Charice, realizing in the weeks they’d worked together, he knew as much about his fellow employee as he did the patron girl.

“I wouldn’t be working this job if I didn’t,” Charice said, walking over to the wine racks and rearranging the bottles of Cerebrospinal.

Mark thought of the patron children in the suite, not so much playing with their toy cars as sort of shoving them around with their limp arms. He wondered if this girl had toys, or parents for that matter and, if so, how they’d managed to let their daughter wander so far. He imagined a pair of irate patrons coming after him, arms raised and eyes glaring at the one who’d stolen their precious child. The image was terrifying. Almost as terrifying as the thought of what would happen to the girl when the race finally ended, when Mark retreated to the safety of the pantry, and the girl was left to wander amid the masses of patrons, utterly alone.

She shouldn’t be his responsibility. But she was, had been from the minute he offered her that fried lobe. Eat or be eaten. He thought. Kill or be killed. Well, he’d failed to kill, and if he was doomed to be eaten, he might as well make sure the girl was safe.

Just then, Dan rushed into the pantry, near bald head gleaming. Sweat stained the pits of his shirt, the catering logo stitched across his chest beginning to fray.

“I need this receipt run up to 508,” he said, breathless.

“I’ll do it.” Mark stood up, spilling mac-n-cheese over the floor. The girl picked up a noddle and popped it curiously into her mouth, before spitting it out in disgust.

“No fair,” Charice protested. “You just want to get the tip.”

“Trust me,” Mark said. Hurrying toward Dan, he snatched the receipt out of his hand. “They won’t be giving any tips.”

He shoved the receipt into his pocket, returned to the corner where he’d left the girl.

Then, grabbing his bat in one hand, the girl's arm in the other, he strode out the door.

He didn't head for the suites, though. Once outside, he turned instead toward the tunnel that ran under the track, leading to the stands.

The tunnel wasn't crowded, more carts and trolleys zipping through than foot traffic. The few patrons they did pass Mark simply pushed aside with his bat. The girl resisted being dragged, trying to claw at his arm, but Mark held firm, even as the ceiling rumbled above them, racecars zooming just a few feet above their heads. Another lap, bringing them closer to the end of the race.

When they reached the other side of the track, the atmosphere changed. Patrons, patrons everywhere. Disgruntled, overheated, sick of paying for overpriced cerebellum beer. They swarmed the walkways beneath the grandstands, searching out shade and brains and places to sit. There were no gates here, no security guards to corral the unruly crowds. Mark held the girl close as he forged through the clawing masses, searching for somewhere deserted and safe where he could start scanning for the girl's parents.

He jumped when he felt teeth sinking into his forearm, pulled at his slugger. When he turned, though, it was the girl, taking a bite out of him. Apparently, her feast of twenty minutes ago had already worn off. If he didn't get her more food soon, she was liable to take his arm off.

Glancing around, he spotted the food tents boasting deep fried brain stems and pons dogs. The patrons amassed around the stands, forming not so much lines as mobs, money-stuffed hands already extended to purchase some much-needed food.

Brandishing his bat, Mark shoved into the thick of the patrons, swinging at any who tried to resist. Clearing a circle around him, he made his way to the counter, where a terrified-looking vendor stood cowering behind her cash register.

"Pons dog. Now!" Mark yelled, taking a swing at a patron with a mullet, incensed at having been cut in line.

The vendor's eyes widened, but she turned and pulled a dog off the rotating grill, barely managing to put it in a bun before shoving it at Mark. He gave it to the girl, then beat his way out to the safety of the dumpsters, where few patrons lingered (even zombies, it seemed, had a sense of smell).

It occurred to Mark, as he watched the girl gobble up the dog, that maybe he ought to treat the patrons more gently. They were people, after all—hungry, irritable, but people nonetheless. Just look at the girl. She wasn't so bad, if you kept her fed and occupied (though she could be a little monster if you turned your back for even a minute). As an only child, Mark had never had to deal with kids, his own or anyone else's. He didn't think he'd done too bad so far, keeping her fed, supervised, and alive—or undead, as it were.

Then a herd of drunk teen patrons spotted him, laughing as they charged toward the dumpster, and he realized now wasn't the time for philosophical musings.

Throwing the girl over his shoulder, he rushed toward the cover of the stands. There was a cluster of patrons around the bathrooms, but otherwise the spot was clear. Mark backed against one of the massive pillars holding up the grandstands, wishing there was an unoccupied bench around where he could sit and collect his thoughts. At that moment, though, a voice blared over the speakers above his head, announcing the final lap of the race. Almost over, he thought, though now he couldn't celebrate. He needed more time, needed a way to find the girl's parents in the multitudes.

When the speakers sounded again, though, this time announcing a last chance bargain on pons dogs, Mark realized how he would contact the parents. He'd use the speakers, of course,

inform the crowds all at once that a young girl in a purple dress had been found wandering around the VIP suites. He just had to make it to the control tower—the technological hub of the whole speedway—and he'd have access to every speaker in the park.

Thinking fast, he figured that the shortest route to the tower was the elevator up to the pent house suites. Thankfully, it wasn't far. Setting the girl down again, he led them both toward the western-most grand stand. A catering cart zipped by, and he managed to flag it down and get them a ride, though the sight of the patron girl earned Mark a suspicious look from the driver. It was worth it, though, to ride for a little while in peace, the mobs barreling out of the way of the speeding cart. It barely stopped long enough for Mark and the girl to jump off, the driver anxious to get back to the safety of the kitchens.

Regaining his balance on the concrete, Mark looked around. There was the elevator, not twenty feet ahead. And better yet, a security guard, standing vigil by the door. It wouldn't take long for Mark to show his employee badge, then explain the situation with the patron girl. Then they'd be able to wait for the elevator in peace while the guard, with his police-issued bludgeon and pistol, kept back any unauthorized patrons.

Before Mark could even flash his employee badge, though, the speakers blared again. A voice shouted excitedly, making the system crackle. Ladies and gentlemen, we have a winner! The race is over. The crowds are going wild!

Mark ignored the sports announcer's exultations and took a step toward the elevator. The guard, though, motioned him back, spreading his arms wide and pointing toward the numbers on the display above the elevator, going steadily down.

9...8...7...

When it reached "G," the doors opened, and a wave of patrons spilled out. Dozens of them, more than it seemed possible to fit in such a small space. The guard threw himself forward, trying to protect Mark and the girl from the stampede, but they were too strong; patrons pressed around them, bodies smooshed into every empty space, all rushing in the same direction.

Toward the track.

The Track Invasion had begun.

Mark moved with the crowd to avoid being trampled. The guard, trying to stand his ground, soon succumbed to the mob, his hand reaching desperately up as the bodies overtook him. Mark watched his face as the mob took him under, his mouth open in a final scream.

They were too fast, too many, pouring from every direction, down the grandstand and under all the tunnels leading to the gate at the finish line. When they reached the tunnels, the crowds pressed even tighter, so that the patrons around Mark couldn't even reach out their hands to grab at him. Mark kept a hold on the girl, desperate not to lose her, though he didn't know why, seeing as he wouldn't be alive to protect her much longer.

The light returned, glaring in his eyes as they emerged from the tunnel, the one right next to the garage suites were Mark had spent so much of his time. If he could only break free of the crowd, he could make it to the pantry—but no. If he tried to fight, to resist the crowd, he'd only meet the same gruesome fate as the guard.

The pavement turned dark and smooth beneath his feet: they were on the track now, asphalt still hot from the race cars that had driven round and round, their pointless competition drawing all these patrons to the speedway. Well, the drivers would get their due now, all their screaming fans swarming around them, hoping to be the first to eat the brains of the new champion.

Mark felt pressure on his hand. The crowds were so dense now, he was barely moving.

He looked down, half-expecting to see the girl holding to his fingers in fear. But no. She was reaching up his arms, his shoulder, trying to climb on top of him for a better view above the patrons.

Not patrons, Mark realized. Now that the race was over, they weren't his customers, no longer his responsibility. Now he could call them what they were.

Individually, they weren't so bad. One-on-one, he could begin to pretend the girl was more than a monster. What was it about a crowd that transformed them all—the patrons, the girl, Mark himself—into something terrible?

They were zombies. Nothing but zombies. Selfish, brain-hungry, inescapably contagious. He was one of them now, had to kick, claw, trample his way out if he wanted to survive. He hated them, every last one. As for the girl... he hadn't killed her when he had the chance. He'd tried to help her, not that she looked like she wanted to leave now, squirming off his shoulders and reaching for the head of the zombie in front of her. He didn't let go of her hand. But frail as she was, quietly decomposing, her shoulder simply popped out of joint.

The crowd consumed her in an instant.

Mark stood on tip toe, trying to see above the many rolling heads. In front of him, he saw smoke, like that from a high-speed collision. Sure enough, when he got closer he saw an overturned racecar—#32, the champion—with zombies already pouring over it, covering it in a quilt of rotting bodies.

Back pressed against a sunken ribcage, zombie teeth gnawing on his neck, he stopped trying to fight, closing his eyes and letting the current move him. He thought of Dan, his dedication to quality, even in the cooking of brains. Charice, with her unnamed children at home. He hoped they'd survive. He hoped they moved to the country, somewhere far from the crowds and the hysteria, spending many a peaceful night on the front porch with a shotgun in lap, enjoying the simple life.

He felt the bottle smash against his cranium a moment before he fell backward, into the sea of flailing limbs. Someone—a zombie? A merciful human? The vengeful #47 fan?—had struck him from behind. He still clasped the girl's dismembered arm in his hand. It gave him some solace, in those last moments before he blacked out, sinking below the trampling feet of the zombies, to know that till the end he grasped some last piece of his humanity. Eat or be eaten. Kill or be killed.

He wondered how they'd cook up his brains.

## [The Rails That Bind](#)

**Sean Gilhooley**

Fruitisia “Streak” Jiminez

0300hrs, August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2030

Queens, New York

23 72<sup>nd</sup> Road, Apartment 4D

I wake to the sound of my bedroom door rattling. If I weren't a light sleeper my *pedo* foster would have laid me months ago. Putting the deadbolt on was smart, but it's a strong lock, weak door. He can kick his way through, but he won't. Too noisy. That'd wake his baby momma. The sound of rattling stops, replaced by barefoot pitter-patter – he's heading back to his bedroom. He'll probably rub one off. I share the room with two other girls. A couple nights ago our foster starting feeling me up, right in front of them. That's when I knew it was time to go.

Who am I foolin? I'm not going to fall back asleep. The *pedo* might grow a pair and come back. I should just get my stuff and bounce.

I throw the blanket aside and jump from the top bunk, landing as silently as a cotton ball falling through fog. I put on my gear - blue jeans, dark-green hooded-sweater, green sneakers, and my prized possession, a white concert t-shirt from the 2028 Feral Dogs Rock Hard tour. I unlock the deadbolt as quietly as possible and creep into the dark bathroom, real *kosa kosa* like. I don't want to attract any attention so I sit in the dark. I also don't want to see the filthy walls, the moldy bathtub, or the cockroaches that hang around in the darkness. I can hear them, and that only makes me take longer.

I feel grungy but I can't take a shower here. The *pedo* might still be awake. I go back to my bedroom, relock it, and grab my board from under the bed. I shoulder my backpack and tuck my hair under my Yankees ballcap before pulling up my hoodie. It keeps people guessing. You use every little trick. I climb out the window and onto the fire escape, which vibrates under my weight.

It's that weird time of night when the nasties are off the streets, but before the workers come out. You might come across the occasional *kabwet* dropping off a passenger or a cop, though you normally only see them for the monthly shakedown. There are always streetwalkers desperate enough to be trolling this late. I jump the last ten feet to avoid pulling down the fire escape ladder, and I almost land on a homeless dude (man, woman???). The alley is filled with them, from street to dead end. Most alleys in Forest Hills are the same. The lucky ones live in small tent cities that started popping up about ten years ago. At first the cops smashed them, but they kept popping up. The cops don't bother tearing them down anymore, at least not here in the Hills. It's a Sisyphean task.

East is Flushing Meadows. We don't really get trouble from that side because of the big fence, though I think that's to keep us from them. To the west are three conjoined enclaves. Europeans I think. We don't get trouble from them either, but it's best to keep away. The security is tight and they have a real shoot-first-don't-bother-asking-questions policy. North is Rego Park, which is like Forest Hills; same crap, different pile. South is where the nightmares are found. Highland Park. I'm smart enough to avoid it.

I carefully make my way down the alley, thankful there's still one working streetlight. It doesn't give much light, but enough to avoid stepping on the huddled bodies. I peek around the corner. No one's around so I take a left and move as quickly as possible, sticking to the shadows

whenever I can, quiet as a corpse. I'm heading to 71<sup>st</sup> Avenue subway station. It's less than five blocks away, but those five blocks are ruled by two gangs; small-time dealers called the Head Stonez and the Cutters, also small-time, but prone to violence. Being a Rail Tie will keep both off my back, but I'm not in yet. I'm still *freyed*. I avoid some bangers along the way.

The subway station is a different story. A group of Cutters block the entrance. They're easy to spot in their dorky multi-coloured beanie-caps. They are strictly smalltime losers, but tougher than I am. There's another entrance a block over, so I creep that way. I move behind a tireless, stripped-down car on blocks and cross the street when the coast is clear. The way ahead is dark. I've been here many times in the daytime. So many that I know exactly how many steps down to the first landing, and that the third step from the bottom is broken. I leap over the last three steps, landing with a dull thud. I've been walking in near dark for a while now, so my night vision has kicked in, but the marketplace ahead is lit and that throws it off. I find myself unconsciously in stealth mode. Such instincts often keep me alive.

At first I don't see the guy in the trench coat, lurking in a doorway; but I sense him. Luckily he doesn't notice me at first, because I'm past him before he moves. He starts walking toward me and I break into a sprint, my clunky railboard slowing me down. I hear his quick footfalls rapidly closing on me. My mind turns to defense and I whirl on the junkie, railboard raised like a club. I'd hate to break it over his stupid face. The guy, unshaven and wearing filthy rags, takes two more steps, and then comes to a sudden stop. He studies me, licking his crusted lips, scanning my body up and down. I try not to think about what's about to happen as I slowly back up. I let out a little scream when I back into someone. I should have checked for a wingman.

The junkie turns and runs.

I feel behind me, my hand follows up, past my shoulder, up, past my head, up until I can reach no further. I turn with a look of despair that morphs into desperate joy. Standing before me is Johnson, a local merchant. He doesn't like people who are bad for business. He can get downright violent. He's well over six feet tall with a really broad chest. If I didn't know him I'd be worried, but Johnson's like a big bro.

"What are you doing up so late Streak?" Johnson asks in his deep baritone voice.

"Up early, neh," I correct him, "Bigup Johnson! Thanks. Dat *tecato* was gonna geek me, fo' sho'."

"Druggies! *Figurati mijo*," Johnson says with a huge smile, "Guys like that are bad for business. Why you up so early?"

We walk to the marketplace, "Good *joss*. I joinin' da Ties today."

"Congratulations. The Rail Ties have some serious bandwidth. Not that I've ever met an old one," Johnson says, glancing at me.

The marketplace is on the main concourse, where they used to sell tickets. That was back when the subway stopped here. It doesn't anymore. Hasn't since 2020. Budget cuts. The boroughs were decimated. It wasn't long after the subway station closed that the chains were broken and people moved in. At first the cops turned a blind eye. That changed when "merchants" moved in and forced the homeless out. Overnight a black market opened; guns, drugs, drones, illegal medtech, you name it. You can even find freelancers - prostitutes, arsonists, assassins, and saboteurs. It's the freakin' Wal-Mart of the underworld. The cops tried to shut it down but they were sent packing, dragging along their dead and wounded. They only tried that once.

“Ya become a banger or stay *freyed*,” I say to Johnson seriously, “Anyway, gotta bounce. Biz. Later.”

“Ok, you take care Streak,” Johnson says.

I walk through the market, one of the few customers. Most of the merchants try to make eye contact with me, but I keep my head down. I need to install the engine on my board. It’s the priciest part and it’s taken me a while to save up enough scratch. The Kiwa 9000s Servomotor is the engine that will change my fish-style surfboard into a fully functioning railboard. I’ve researched board styles online and settled on a model that’s popular down south. I like it because it has a wide body, so it’s easier to ride. The Kiwa is the most affordable of the mid-range engines: good power and no issues with overheating. That’s a problem with repurposed engines, like a cannibalized Segway. I hand over the cash, almost all that I have, leaving me just enough for the membership fee and some food.

I do the install in the market where there are plenty of people around. I pull out schematics and a portable soldering kit from my bag. I connect the wires, first to the board, using my soldering iron, and then to the Kiwa engine, and then slide the engine smoothly into place. The hard work is done. There are only two things left to do – make my mark and meet with Chrome Agnon.

I pull out three cans of spray paint (purple, red, and black) and start to decorate my board. Each board is unique and its design should say something about the rider. Everyone knows the one rule of the Rail Ties: that the entire gang will deal with anyone who harms a Rail Tie. I’ve spoken with some Rail Ties and there are three unwritten rules also:

Live for today, because there might not be a tomorrow.

Your board is an extension of you. Treat it well.

Treat every ride as though it will be your last. Do it without reserve.

The third one seems the same as the first one, but I didn’t want to sound stupid asking lots of questions. I hear someone clear his throat behind me. Glancing back I see my buddy Cool Ryder. He’s a year older and a big reason why I’m joining the Rail Ties. He’s holding his railboard in stealth mode, so it looks like a skateboard. Every railboard has to be able to pass as a mundane thing. His board is some sort of ice-flame thing painted in blues, whites and greys.

“*Mambo vipi* Ryder,” I say between sprays.

“Yah, here ta oversee for ya,” he says.

“Cool,” I say and step back to admire my work. My board is a credible likeness of a manta ray, if seen on acid.

“Ya should add some flappy wings, so it look like you be flyin,”

I glare at him but say nothing.

“When ya ridin?” Cool asks.

“Eleven.”

“Where?”

“Queens Plaza.”

“You walkin?”

“To Woodhaven. Den subbin it,” I say.

\*\*\*\*\*

The old timers go on about how beautiful Forest Hills was twenty years ago. Must be selective memory. The Hills are *gomi* now. We take Queen’s Boulevard, which cuts straight down the middle of Forest Hills and Rego Park. The service road is now a tent city stretching from Seventy-Fifth Avenue to Sixty-Seventh Avenue, about a kilometer long. There are

thousands living in it, and it even has restaurants and small shops in tents. They have it bad, but the stories coming out of the abandoned zones are worse: rape, murder, slavery, and cannibalism.

The way ahead is daunting. To either side stand massive apartment buildings, twenty stories tall. They dominate the landscape for several long blocks. Despite being poorly maintained and in a decaying neighbourhood there's a long list to get in. Armed guards watch the entrance and walk the grounds, including the fenced parking lots. The local bangers know to keep their distance. The guards must have a soft spot for homeless families because they've allowed the tent city to grow across the street.

The next few blocks are mostly abandoned or boarded up buildings. They are in various stages of falling down, though all have squatters. I feel eyes as we pass. Across the street a large crowd of day workers has formed: lousy pay and uncertain work.

We continue and pass ruins. A small group emerges from the rubble, but scuttle back when Cool flashes some signs. I didn't notice we had walked into Raif turf. I'm too focused on my test. I've planned for years but now I don't feel as certain. One wrong move on the rails and I'm dead. I've focused on becoming a Rail Tie, but riding the rails was always deep in the back of my mind.

We reach 67<sup>th</sup> Avenue and the ruins of a subway station, though this one's not a market. Cool Ryder holds up his hand and I stop, "*Chotto*. Thugs turf. We be *kosa kosa*, ya?" he whispers before creeping forward.

The Bone Thugs bopped in a few weeks ago and they have a strong rep for crazy. They're in the network but break the rules all the time. I try to avoid them. I was already on the alert, but it's still good advice. The old subway station is hidden in a field of rubble that provides plenty of hiding places, and the Bone Thugs enjoy ambushes. There isn't a standing building for hundreds of feet. My eyes bulge and my teeth chatter.

The neighborhood dropped a little further down the food chain when the Thugs stormed in. They came in quick, on motorcycles, killing everyone in their path. They annihilated the gang that was using the subway station. What was their name again? Jock Rockets? Rock Jockets? Mock Lockets? Who cares? No one remembers the losers. The cops haven't even tried to push them out. We leave Forest Hills and enter Rego Park.

At 66<sup>th</sup> Avenue we start to see whole buildings again, though they are run-down. To either side, for the next few blocks, stand tall apartment buildings. They are the kind of apartments where you better know how to do repairs yourself. The "super" only comes around on rent day. They are quick to point out the large waiting list for your place if you complain. Sloggers are out now, heading to their jobs. Having them around makes me feel safer. The streets are not actually safer, however, since ninety-nine people out of a hundred will run at the first sign of trouble. Still, even the illusion of safety brings some comfort. I try to ignore the hulking ruin that stands at 63<sup>rd</sup> Road. It was leveled a decade ago. No one claimed credit, but it was probably a radical Islamic group like Al Qwanza or Bookem Dano. Almost two hundred died, some killed in the blast, most in the fire. The experts said it was planned that way.

At 62<sup>nd</sup> Avenue we pass the old recreation center that's become a weird business. All of the windows are painted black and there is no sign with its name. The recreation center closed down five or six years ago. Cutbacks. Austerity. Keeping costs down was important we were told. Often. Schools were hit particularly hard. When my class reached fifty kids I decided to stop going. No one would be upset if a few kids stopped showing up. The teachers didn't do much teaching anyway. They made us to read out-of-date test prep books.

Ahead is Woodhaven, which has a working subway station. Armed guards can be seen behind a fence that's been thrown up recently. Concrete blocks prevent vehicles and a sandbagged machine-gun stands next to a dark SUV, which can be moved to allow entry. I count no less than seven well-armed guards. This wasn't here a month ago. I can see the gleaming shopping district of Woodhaven. Security is heavy, but you can find lots of great stuff there. A hundred dollar shirt at Woodhaven only costs you fifty elsewhere. That keeps poor people out. Rich people want to shop free of riff-raff. If you don't come to spend money security will make your visit short. Thankfully there's a subway entrance a good hundred feet outside the shopping district. As we leave the darkness of the tunnel the guards watch us like hawks. The machine gun swivels in our direction, but when it's clear we're heading to the subway the guards relax. We hop over the ticket turnstile and find our way down the stairs to wait on the platform for our subway.

The E is packed and I'm bounced between people who don't appreciate my fish-style surfboard. Several give me death stares all the way to Queens Plaza. The air-conditioning is off again. New York gets hot and humid in the summer and subway cars without air conditioning quickly become fetid stewing pots. Today is no exception. It's worse when you have a panicky 'claver going on about their hypertension or Ebola or whatever.

Most of the people have their monthly Work Visa hanging from metal chains around their necks. Some flash visas like lift tickets on a ski jacket, five or six coloured plastic cards strung together, dangling like *grift*. Some hide theirs. Either they spend the extra green for an RFID visa or hide it somewhere safe, like an inner pocket or purse.

When we are stuck in a power out I notice a *bosozaku* in our car. Her Elvish glo tattoos first draw my eye. She's a little older than me, with a bright orange afro and has overalls to match, with lots of pockets packed with stuff. She's on a bench leaning on a tall skateboard that stands between her legs. We reach Queens Plaza. The authorities generally ignore you so long as you're *deer napadeer* – that's how you speak around authority to avoid drawing attention. We make our way to the *ronday* outside the station. We're early. I'm supposed to meet with Chrome in an hour. The subway track runs above ground, built thirty feet above on wooden legs. This must be one of the old lines. There's nothing to do but chill until Chrome arrives and hope the cops don't start hassling us.

About ten minutes in a young boy with caramel coloured skin and thick, black hair like a troll doll strolls in and sits down next to me, smiles and says, "The best seat in the house," while patting the curb. I give the kid an awkward smile and look away. He's wearing a concert t-shirt: *Nitro Microphone Underground Dope Hype Tour*. Japanese hip-hop. They were popular a decade ago. He carries a long skateboard painted like a shark, complete with a dorsal fin. He flips a small lever and it extends an additional two feet in length, the feral grin growing wider. I'm not doing my run alone.

"Blow some my way," the boy says, and blows me a kiss.

Cool seems about to react, but I sign him down. The kids cheeky but he seems harmless. His eyes lack the predatory leer.

"*Mambo vipi*. You ridin today?" I ask.

"High performance. Delivered," the boy says, nodding and sticking out his hand, thumb raised.

"I Streak. Dis Cool Ryder," I say.

“Adspace. The right relationship is everything,” He says and gets up, shaking our hands. Cool looks at me and I return the look. Something about Adspace seems not quite right. Not bad, but off.

“*Wagwaan* Adspace?” Cool asks.

“The relentless pursuit of perfection,” Adspace responds, his smile never wavering.

A tough looking girl strolls in and stands next to Adspace, “*Mambo vipi* Adspace. *Llevado del barraco?*” she asks, checking us out.

“Always there in a pinch,” Adspace says, and adds, “Made from the best stuff on Earth.”

“Adspace is kinda funny,” I say.

The girl shakes her head in understanding, “Ah, *wakata*. Adspace be from sumfukistan. Learned from free vids. Lotsa verts. I’m Edge.”

She’s older than me and wears motorcycle leathers, midnight black at the sides, but shifting to silver in the front, with boots that go halfway to her knee. Strapped on her wrists are gold bracers and silver shin guards sit just below her knees. Her hair is contained in a pink Hello Kitty swimming cap, and she wears a pink headband with a flipdown HUD.

“Wyziristan,” Adspace says, putting his arm around Edge’s shoulder, “The best a man can get.”

Around a quarter to eleven another playa arrives, oversized skateboard in hand. He squeaks out a name: Chipper. Could be he burped. His board is boring, geometric shapes in shades of brown and green.

Close to our time a bold looking boy strides in. His slick athletic wear shows off an exceptional bod, the kind that stirs feelings. He wears an antique WW1 pilots’ leather cap and goggles and has a thin moustache. He carries an extra-wide skateboard decorated with a dancing flame. He has a strong chin and two cute little dimples, one on either side of his ‘stache. I take one look and know he’s Chrome Agnon. I’m in love. I allow myself a brief fantasy about riding tandem with him and miss his introduction.

“...is excellent, so let’s get down to it boppers,” Chrome says, “Hey Edge, whatchu doin’ here?”

Edge nods her head at Adspace, “Overseer.”

Cool speaks up, “Cool Ryder - overseer for Streak” he says, pointing at me.

“*Mambo vipi* Cool. Name’s familiar,” Chrome says,

“Chipper.”

“Your overseer?” Chrome asks the confused Chipper, “No prob, I’ll do it. First your board has to pass inspection. Let me see them,” Chrome says, arm extended, hands waving impatiently at Adspace, who steps forward, “The best seat in the house.”

Chrome looks over the landshark design, turns the board this way and that. He clicks something and the board grows smaller, back to its original size, the sharks’ grin receding. Chuckling Chrome pulls out a small eyepiece and examines the motor. He hands it back without a word and then looks at me. I give him my board and wait for judgment. A few minutes later, after eyeballing my work, he hands it back without comment.

“You too sunshine,” Chrome says, gesturing for Chipper to hand over his board.

Chrome examines Chippers’ board and seems impressed, “Good wiring job. Clean solder. What’s with this canister?” he says, pointing to a blue tank, slightly smaller than a Red Bull can.

The boy smiles, “*I fabrik*. To go *rapido*. Fasto fast.”

Chrome whistles, "*Gaoda shang!* Turbo? I want to talk to you about this later. I could use this. Alright, now the hard part. I'll be leading you to HQ. Keep up. If I stop, you stop. Stay together. Fail to arrive at headquarters and you fail the test. Am I clear?" Chrome asks.

"Clear," we say.

"We got it. We got it," Adspace adds.

"Good, climb up to the tracks," Chrome says.

Adspace leaps onto one of the wormy wooden beams and scampers up like a monkey, "It's not just a job. It's an adventure."

We can see pretty far from up top, but there still isn't much to look at. It has a safe rep with a price tag to match, but Hunters Point is a dump. The buildings are bleached of colour, the people shuffle like zombies, and everything is dull and lifeless. The faded billboards are peeling and show companies that went out of business years ago. Cools' bright blue hair seems more of a bluish-grey. These streets are for getting places, not to hang out.

"Ok, listen up," Chrome says, "We're taking the Seven all the way to Seventy-Fourth station. It's above ground the whole way so enjoy it while it lasts. The Seven is slow and unreliable, so we shouldn't have to do any track jumps. Once we reach Seventy-Fourth we change to the E."

"Track jumps?" Chipper asks.

"Never let them see you sweat," Adspace says.

"Yeah, none for the first part of the ride, but do a beta to get the kinks out if you want. Even if a train comes up we can outride it. Be prepared to track jump once we're underground, though. Express trains move fast, especially going the other way. I've seen more than one initiate hit one head on," Chrome says, and adds in an off-hand way, "It's quick."

I feel a vibration through my feet and a screeching sound coming from the tunnel; a train is approaching.

"Ok, the Seven's coming, let's go. We want to stay in front of it. If you don't arrive at Seventy-Fourth with me, just go home," Chrome says.

Adspace takes lead and leaps, hitting the track and taking off, gaining a big lead and outpacing Edge, who tries to keep up to record the ride. I'm next, with Cool Ryder following. I've ridden shotgun a few times, to get the feel, but I've put off a solo run until now. I launch from the platform, landing on the board on my stomach just before I hit the track. I gain speed too quickly and feel myself being pulled backwards suddenly, like that feeling you get when a roller coaster passes the bottom of a drop and starts going in a new direction. I'm shredding track and can barely catch my breath, but I assume Chipper and Chrome are behind. I hear the train pulling into the station we just left. My railboard picks up more speed and I feel myself sliding back, and for a second I think I'm going to fall off. I cling with white-knuckle desperation, and my vision clouds. I realize that I forgot to breathe, so I take a deep breath.

We move at a rapid clip, faster than the subway behind. The track is above ground so we'll see a train ahead long before we slam into it. I feel more comfortable with my board and loosen my grip. Queens passes by underneath, a decayed ruin with pockets of order, just like Brooklyn. Both are better than the Bronx, though. For a while it's ok, but the further from the city we get the worse the neighbourhoods are.

We cross dozens of train tracks that once served as the arteries of a busy train yard, but which is rarely used these days. We pass into Moneyside. Is it an oasis or a mirage? The streets are busy with people and vehicles, workers and shoppers, a vibrancy that is rare in my experience. Moneyside falls away to Woodside, which is the difference between night and later

that night, more commerce going on. We cross highway 278 and enter Jackson Heights, where the hustle and bustle disappears. Jackson Heights is a desolate wasteland of collapsed buildings and vacant lots packed with tent cities and bangers who sleep away the day. It has a real homey feel to it.

74<sup>th</sup> Street station was closed years ago. Jackson Heights is a pretty bad area, but no worse than Forest Hills. 74<sup>th</sup> Street station might be closed, but the next one, Jackson Heights Station, is still open and the underground tunnel that connects them still exists. We follow the tunnel and Chrome takes out a key that opens one of the service doors, through another short tunnel and out a door onto the E train subway platform. A few people look surprised when we come through and they move to the other end.

“Ok gang, the ride has been easy so far,” Chrome says, “Real easy. Now things get tricky. We head underground on a busy line at a peak hour. At first we head away from traffic, taking the E to Sutphin Boulevard, then we switch to the J. That’s when things get hairy.”

The platform isn’t busy on this side, but across the way are a few dozen sloggers. Not suits, but coveralls and steel-toed boots and carrying lunch boxes. Real workers. The kind that work long, hard hours and still can’t afford anything nice. They are staring at us. Most people think we’re crazy because we leap onto subway tracks and ride fast through dark tunnels. People try to avoid the insane. Maybe they’re afraid it’s catchy, like a really terrible song you can’t stop singing in your head, all the time. That little spark of lunacy suddenly makes sense and then spreads, and before they know it they’ve quit their job at the factory, left the wife and kids, and moved to Colorado to grow pot and paint. Crazy-ass shit like that.

Chipper and Chrome leap onto the track and trail the E train as it passes, then Adspace with Edge are hot on his tail, and finally I go with Cool behind me. The crowd stares in awed fascination as one after another we leap onto the track and shoot forward into the dark tunnel. As I make my leap I see some recording us with their cell-phones. As I gain speed into the darkness, my world shrinks to a narrow beam that bounces in sync with my board, causing visual chaos. The other riders’ lights revealing a partial glimpse of what’s coming, small moving puzzle pieces. Light bounces off the tracks, creating a strobe effect that spins faster as I do. Images speed past so briefly that it takes me a second to understand them, and by the time I do I’ve already passed; a security door, a side tunnel, rats eating a corpse, a half-built tunnel, an abandoned station platform, mole people (wtf?), glowing graffiti tags. Some of the tags are warnings; some are guides, and a few I don’t understand, though I’ve studied every Rail Tie tag there is. Cool gave me a little book that explains each one, though I promised to only show it to other Rail Ties or to someone I choose to mentor.

The distance between riders has grown and I take the time to look back – Cool is hot on my heels, recording everything. He smiles and waves. A souvenir DVD will be a nice touch. I hurtle forward faster and faster. It’s difficult to focus and I lose my sense of up and down, left and right, and for some reason I don’t care. It’s not that I want to die. I don’t. I just don’t seem to care for some reason. My mind spins and I cling to the dim light beams that bounce ahead, growing duller and duller with each passing moment. I feel sweat collecting along the edge of my training bra, soaking the armpit of my t-shirt until it’s dripping. Then the fear hits and keeps me frosty. I’m able to block out some of the confusing distractions. I lock my eyes onto one of the beams ahead and stare at it. It is my sole purpose, right now.

Going even faster I start to narrow the gap. My breathing slows and I feel my calm restored. Everything goes silent except my pounding heart, which beats like a team of Kodo drummers. The beat is quick, but I breathe deeply and focus and my heartbeat slows...and

slows...and...slows. As the nearby concrete walls zoom past I understand on a deeper level that a single wrong move will mean the end of my life. Even an inch off will mean certain death. Rather than scare me I suddenly see things clearly. I push my board even faster, laughing, loosening up, relaxing a little, and as I look back I see that I'm drawing further and further from Cool, who has a look of concern, then panic.

Without warning the beams ahead grow larger. The subway has come to a sudden stop, forcing me to do the same, but there is no time. I am about to smash into the subway car. There is no way to avoid it. There isn't enough space between it and the concrete wall. I will hit the train and be instantly killed. Or maybe I'll fly into the wall and be instantly killed. Or for a really dramatic end I might slam into one of the other riders to increase the kill count. There's no time to think, barely enough to act. Everything seems to slow down. My light beam shines on Chippers' face; which has the look of absolute horror as I bear down on him. I'm going to plow right through him like a linebacker through a cheerleader. The steel-tip at the front of my board will probably decap the poor kid. Chrome is trying to wave me down. Someone shouts "*aguas*". I see a sign of a brown circle with a white J in it behind a grime streaked glass window. The engineers control booth is empty. I wonder if I'll make the evening news. Not the local crap, but the national stuff. The ones they show at six-thirty. Wouldn't that be something? I'd be famous. Of course that only happens if Cool leaks the footage, which he won't do, but he should. He should get what he can for it. He's sure to get an amazing shot of the collision. That might be some HBO shit. Out of my peripheral vision I notice a set of parallel tracks to my left. The express train uses it. Cement pillars separate the two tracks, but there are gaps every ten feet or so. The gaps themselves aren't that wide, maybe eight feet across. I quickly calculate the wiggle room between my board and the two cement pillars. I figure there's less than three feet. That isn't a lot of room for error, so my leap has to be perfect. I wish I'd done a track jump while we were aboveground, but I don't have long as the moment to make my jump is now, so, without thought I coil my bodily energy and uncoil, hurling myself sideways, pulling my board across the gap, between the cement pillars, and onto the opposing track. I hurtle forward along the track, past Chrome and the other initiates who stand with mouths hung open, clearly in awe at my utter coolness, past the J train that I almost became one with, only to find that I've fukushima'd myself – there's another train heading toward me and I still haven't passed the train I almost slammed into. Time seems to slow down, as the brown circle with the white J grows larger and larger, coming to dominate my entire perspective. Suddenly the track on my right is free and I hastily do another track jump. Once again I'm able to thread the needle, squeeze through the narrow gap between cement pillars, but I've pushed my luck and I clip my ankle against one of the pillars. My right foot is engulfed in searing pain. It feels broken, but I need to pass this test, so I continue on my journey alone, ahead of the pack, but confident I can find my way. I just have to keep from passing out from pain, which grows stronger by the moment. The glowing tags guide me and I keep a steady, brisk pace to the next platform.

When Chrome arrives I'm already sitting on a bench at the platform, my foot propped up and my face tight with the throbbing pain. He leaps from the track, throws his railboard around behind him like some sort of rock god descending from the heavens, skids on the tiled floor, and rushes to me. Others start to arrive and huddle around me, assaulting me with rapid-fire questions and comments.

"Are you ok kid? I thought you were a goner there," Chrome asks grimly.

"I good. Pays to be *asacopaco*, neh?" I say between gritted teeth.

"How bad is your foot?" Edge asks; concern etched in her face.

“I tink it broke,” I answer.

Chipper seems upset and Adspace keeps tutting and shaking his head.

Cool arrives with a desperate look on his face, but my smile visibly relaxes him, “Are you ok Streak? You have serious *joss mijo*.”

“Live today. Tomorrow will cost more!” Adspace shouts.

Chrome pulls some white gauze wrap and an exacto-knife out of his backpack. He cuts the laces from my shoe. I gasp in pain, but manage to hold back a scream, barely. I turn several shades closer to white. Chrome gingerly removes the shoe and begins feeling my foot and I bite back a scream. Then he uses the gauze to wrap it tight. It’s already swollen to the size of an orange and is an ugly shade of purplish-green. Edge throws my shoe in her Gouci bag.

“You’re lucky. I don’t think it’s broken,” Chrome says weakly.

I smile, but the pain is intense, “Lucky me. I guess I’m finished,” and my smile transforms into the most wretched face of despair.

Edge comes over and holds her hand out – two blue pills, “Take. Dat a *minkyata* move but it took guts. *Oralay!*” she says encouragingly.

I reach out for the pills without a second thought and throw them down dry. I hope the pain will stop soon. I close my eyes for a few moments. Chrome pulls the group together.

“The hardest part is next. Solo run, fifteen-minutes spread. Get to Avenue X station. HQ is there. Adspace goes first, then, Chipper, and Streak is last,” Chrome tells us.

Adspace goes, and fifteen minutes later Chipper takes his turn. The pain is finally a dull throb, and my head is clear. The blue pills have now kicked in fully. Maybe I should have only taken one. I felt a bit loopy when Adspace went, but by my turn I feel almost normal. If I’m gonna do this I should just do it.

I open my eyes, “Let’s do it.”

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The J/Z line runs southwest until it reaches Broadway Junction, where it veers west and I have to change lines again. Once I hit 85<sup>th</sup> Street station the stops come frequently. The Z is in service during peak time, which means either taking the time to slowly trail the J, a local, or risk the parallel track of the express Z train. I speed off into the darkness with Cool hot on my heels. It isn’t long before I see a dot of white light ahead. It grows larger and larger, into a blinding white light. Should I be jumping tracks again? Just as the light envelops me I burst from the tunnel into broad daylight. I’m on one of the raised tracks again. I’m not sure how I’d forgotten that these tracks go aboveground. I accelerate through Jamaica Avenue.

A large park looms off to the right, a fair distance from the tracks, but it grows closer as I pull out of Kew Gardens and into Forest Park, and then Woodhaven, each made famous in the vids. Gangs that fight over squalid pieces of turf have turned the area into a war zone. Even this early in the day I hear gunshots, near and far, at more than one location along my route. As I pass the 104<sup>th</sup> Street station there’s a large battle going on in the street below. I slow my board to get a better look, but I don’t want to be hit by a stray bullet, so I don’t linger. Today’s featured weapons are knives, chains, and two-by-fours with nails. The Equity Angels are battling the Forest Park Rangers, and the Angels seem to be losing.

At 75<sup>th</sup> Street the subway line stands above the edge of the forest, and below is a sprawling city of the dead – Mount Hope Cemetery in Highland Park. Some of the more gruesome gangs call the park theirs. While the neighbourhoods around the park have reputations, the park itself is far worse. The graffiti tags show that five gangs claim the park; Macabees, Mayhem, the Highlanders, the Knollwood Stranglers, the Forest Park Rangers, and the Cypress

Hill Ghouls. I feel a chill in my spine as I pass and the track turns south and follows Crescent Street, avoiding the worst of Cypress Hills, then veers west at Fulton Street. Within a few minutes I arrive at Broadway Junction where I switch to the C.

Peak hours are almost at an end, and that means fewer express trains. I'm starting to feel comfortable in the near-darkness of the subway tunnels. The glowing tags give me a giddy, warm feeling and I find myself relaxing. I pass a tag warning riders of an intense route in a tunnel that forks off to the left, which I note for a future ride, when my ankle feels better, and I continue to the right. The high beam of the C train comes up behind me, pushing me faster. As I pass Nostrand Avenue I do a track jump onto the local, landing a few feet in front of the A. I quickly outpace it, but the look on the conductor's face is priceless. He probably thought he had a jumper. I ride into the darkness well ahead of the A, and once my dark vision is back I track jump back to the express, which I ride to Hoyt-Schermerhorn.

Hoyt-Schermerhorn is a medium security station, so we mundane our boards and get blendy with the crowd. It's mid-afternoon but the station is busy. Nearby are the Brooklyn City Hall and Court Houses, and there are cops and drones covering every corner. Plenty of people from the boroughs come to the area for work, and some call it Manhattan Lite. There's a similar area in Queens, but not the Bronx. Not that I've ever been to the Bronx. I follow the G line to Church Avenue, where it becomes the F line, and take that straight to Avenue X. When I reach McDonald Avenue the track pops above ground and I ride above street level the rest of the way, which is good since my foot is starting to throb again and the breeze helps keep my focused.

At Avenue X station I smile at Cool as he helps me walk up the stairs.

"Ya did it," Cool says.

I laugh and ruffle his hair, "I sure did," as we come out of the station.

The others are there waiting on the sidewalk in front, "Ok guys, you have all passed the test. Congratulations. Follow me and I will take you to the swearing in ceremony," Chrome says, waving us to follow him as he walks down Shell Road.

To the right is a massive train yard, walled off from the public. To the left are the ruins of a city. Half-collapsed buildings surrounded by rubble. The area is aptly named Gravesend. Gangs don't waste their time here since it was picked clean years ago and it's not worth fighting for. The train yard was once busy, with goods coming into New York every day, but things have changed. These days the ships go right into Manhattan and unload at a massive depot there. As we walk Chrome explains that the yard is still used, but only a small portion of it, and most importantly, its automated defenses are active. They are pretty good too. Not good enough to stop a ninja from creating special access points for the Rail Ties though. Not good enough to notice that the Rail Ties have taken control of an entire warehouse. Once a month a guard comes around to "check things out", and the Rail Ties pay him a nice amount for his silence. Low-paid workers are the chinks in the corporate armour.

Chrome veers off of the main road to a side door in the chain-link fence. He leads us through the yard, making seemingly random left and right turns, until we come to a large warehouse. He opens a door and loud music can be heard from behind a door at the end of the hall. We walk down the hall; Chrome opens the door, and inside is my idea of heaven.

The room is massive, easily fifty feet high and twice as wide and long. Train tracks run into the building through huge dropdown garage doors and three old train cars stand inside. The train cars are tricked out with neon lights, strobes, and there are hundreds of wires feeding into them. People are inside the trains, working with equipment. Dozens of large speakers surround the room, sending pounding bass and hyper guitar riffs at the crowd, which is huge. There are

thousands of people shouting and pointing, generally in unison, at a large wall-screen. It becomes clear that they are watching me. I can see myself flying along the track, a train suddenly in the way ahead, the desperate leap from track to track, truly threading the needle. The crowd groans when I clip my ankle, but then applaud a few minutes later when I take the blue pills and tell Chrome that I want to continue.

These are my kind of people.

## The Quarter Test

**Angela Parson Myers**

I had a restless night, but I'd expected to. Not that I'm superstitious, but my best friend had died in this room less than a week ago. Massive stroke. Marie found him when he didn't come down to breakfast.

No, they didn't sleep in the same room. Not that they didn't love one another, she assured me, but they were in their mid-80s, and neither of them slept well anymore. In separate rooms, they didn't disturb one another, and they were able to enjoy their days together more when they felt rested.

Some people might object to sleeping in a room where a person had recently died, but he had been more than a friend—almost like a father. And it's not like death is new to me. I'm 65 myself, and I've seen quite a few people I loved pass on. Besides, the condo has only two bedrooms, and if I wanted to help Marie with arrangements—and I did—it was only logical to stay in her home.

I crawled out of bed and flipped the blankets back up over the pillows. That was about as far as I usually got with bed-making at home, where I had no one to please but myself. I resolved to come back and do a better job after I dressed. Marie was a persnickety housekeeper and wouldn't want it left like that.

I chuckled. Making the bed had always been a point of contention between Bill and Marie. Bill had been a sergeant in the Army, and he believed in the quarter test. Marie had never gotten the hang of tucking the sheets so tightly that the coin would bounce, so one day she threw the pillows at him and said, "OK, then YOU do it!" And so it had been from then on for more than fifty years.

I scraped off the last bit of whiskers and foam, slipped into the shirt I'd wear to Bill's funeral today, and walked back down the hall to the bedroom—to find the bed already made, bedspread tucked tight as a drum under the fluffed pillows, and a quarter lying on top. *Hah! She beat me to it. And it looks like she finally got it right.*

I'd watched Marie scurrying around, nervously removing the last speck of dust and straightening the antimacassars—yes, she actually used those doilies on the backs of her chairs—in an attempt to forget she no longer had anyone to clean for, so I wasn't surprised. I just put on my tie and jacket and went to eat breakfast before we left for the funeral home.

It wasn't until after the funeral, when the last person had left the gravesite and Marie had dried her eyes and started slowly back up the hill to the car that she suddenly turned to me and said, "Oh, Charles. Thank you for making the bed. You know I never could do it to suit Bill, but you got it perfect."

## The Real World

**Jeff Spitzer**

-The early settlers of the Great Smoky Mountains left behind many disturbing tales, some of which have risen like the mist into legend and myth. I heard one of them from Sarah Bell, a clerk at the Heritage Crafts store in Gatlinburg. Sarah's ancestors had come to the Smokies in the 1820s, and she herself had lived there all of her twenty-eight years. She was a pretty, robust, unfashionably dressed woman, an easy talker with a broad knowledge of the area. She had graduated from the same college which had just appointed me assistant professor of chemistry.

One day I visited the crafts store to look at musical instruments. Sarah and I took an instant liking to each other, and we spent an hour playing hammered dulcimers. We began dating. Sarah loved to hike in the mountains, which to me were almost a foreign country. She led me up and down rocky trails and told me about her backpacking trips, encounters with animals, and scary, but spiritually healing, nights in the forest. Once, while we sat by a stream, she told me an eerie tale handed down from her pioneer ancestors, the great-grandparents of her great-grandparents.

They had come with their two daughters and built a cabin in a remote part of the forest. They lived off their crops, a few chickens and hogs, and a cow. The parents were fanatically religious, but their angry piety brought them disaster and an ungodly retribution.

Their older daughter, Mary, became pregnant after a liaison with a Cherokee boy. To hide the family's shame, her parents imprisoned her in the attic, where she languished in a sickly condition. Finally she gave birth. But as soon as she fell asleep, her parents took the baby into the woods and left it to die. When Mary awoke to their treachery, she forced herself up, bleeding and emaciated, and staggered over the landscape in a frantic search. Two days later she was found dead with the lifeless body of the child in her arms. The parents placed them in the same coffin and buried them near the cabin in what eventually became the family cemetery. The sparse settler population was told that Mary had died of a fever.

On the night of the burial the younger daughter awoke and saw a vision of her dead sister. Mary's ghost demanded milk for the baby and warned her sister not to inform their parents. The frightened girl crept down the ladder and hid a bowl of milk on the hearth. The ghost made her do this every night, and in the mornings, before anyone noticed, the girl put away the empty bowl. But one night her father caught her and forced an explanation. When she told him of the ghost, he flew into a rage, accused her of conjuring, and chased her out of the cabin. She ran to her sister's grave and cowered by the headstone. He pounced on her there, but before he could deliver his blows they were both shocked into breathless silence. They heard the unmistakable cries of a hungry infant rising mercilessly from the grave.

After that, a bowl of milk was set out regularly. Whenever it was forgotten, someone received a shimmering visitation by the dead mother. The secret was kept from generation to generation, and the tradition of the milk went on until the twentieth century, when the cabin was finally abandoned.

“So what do you think?” Sarah asked me.

“Just another Appalachian ghost story. I've heard lots of them.”

My reaction seemed to displease her, so I tried to show more interest. “Have you ever seen the place?”

“My mother took me there when I was a child. The cabin was still standing. She told me about the ghost, and I was so scared that we had to leave. Even today I sometimes have nightmares about it.”

“Surely you don't believe the story.”

“I don't know. A lot of honest people in my family have sworn that Mary appeared in that cabin. They couldn't all have been crazy.”

“Sarah, for Pete's sake! Are you living in the real world?”

She turned away, embarrassed, and I apologized. I considered her a bright, level-headed woman, and we were heading toward a serious relationship. Her admission to superstitious fear surprised and disappointed me. As a scientist I felt obligated to demonstrate the limits of natural law.

“Will you take me to the cabin?” I asked.

“Are you serious?”

“Of course. I bet it will help you sleep.”

“I'm not sure I can still find it. It's been twenty years.”

“Let's give it a shot anyway. I know you love an adventure, and you must be curious about the place.”

“Yes, but I've never gone near it. Maybe we don't know as much about the world as we think.” Her words sounded like a challenge.

“Then let's find out what we don't know. Let's get our bedrolls and spend a night in the cabin. This ghost should be put out of her misery.”

We shared a laugh, then decided to go that very day

It was late afternoon when we arrived at the trailhead with our backpacks and bedrolls. The trail through the valley took us into a section of forest spared by twentieth-century logging companies. Interspersed among the myriad weeds, shrubs, and young trees were giant maples and poplars, some over twenty feet around the base. They towered above the forest like primitive gods holding the secrets of life and death on their unreachable limbs.

“They probably rose out of the ground with our ghost,” Sarah remarked with a little nervous laughter.

A mist, spawned by an earlier rain, bore a faint odor of volatiles from plants and decaying matter. Sarah led me off the trail many times to search for the cabin, but we kept running into barriers or pinning ourselves to thorny shrubbery. Our arms and legs accumulated scratches and insect bites. Once, Sarah recoiled as a banded copperhead wound arrogantly across our path. When we moved on, my eyes were darting wildly in every direction.

“I hope we find the place before dark,” she said.

“Maybe this was a bad idea. Do you want to go back?”

“No. You were right. It's time I settled this matter. I don't like to think of my ancestors as a bunch of nutcases.”

“If we're lucky we'll figure out what was bothering them.”

Her determination boosted my confidence. As the daylight waned we pushed on with greater urgency. Our hike had become a mission, and every bend in the trail held new hope of success. We let ourselves fall into the stealthy embrace of night.

Suddenly Sarah put up her hands. “Wait! I think it's around here.” We took out our flashlights and aimed them down a broad, gentle slope. Again we abandoned the faintly moonlit

trail. After picking our way through tall rhododendron bushes, we emerged into a dark theater of huge trees. The steadily mounting clamor of katydids, tree frogs, and cicadas reached a peak, as if nature were giving us a last warning.

“Yes, I remember this,” Sarah said. “The cabin is here somewhere.”

We swept our beams over the ground, moved a few steps, and repeated the process.

“What's that?” I cried.

Two eyes, at the level of my shoulders, reflected back from a rhododendron thicket. When Sarah gasped, the eyes disappeared. We heard a soft crash and the sound of an animal scuttling away.

“A raccoon?” she guessed. “It must have jumped from a branch and run.”

“Scared the hell out of me.”

We both laughed at ourselves.

“Look! That might be the cabin,” she said.

We advanced toward a shadowy structure about twenty yards away. I happened to glance behind us and noticed that the raccoon, or whatever it was, had decided to watch us from a safe distance.

“Yes, this is it,” Sarah said. “And the graveyard is just beyond those trees.”

We stood before the doorless entrance to the black ruin. Its walls resembled a rail fence, so wide were the gaps between logs. An empty window gazed at us as if we had disrupted its drugged sleep. The roof sagged like a hammock, and much of the chimney had crumbled.

The two small rooms of the cabin were completely empty. Our flashlights illuminated a thick layer of ash and dust on the floor, especially around the cold, barren hearth. The density of the surrounding forest would have reduced all wind and rain to their mildest terms, and one could easily imagine the dust to have lain undisturbed for decades. A mouse scampered across the floor and out its private portal. Other than that, only the intricate cobwebs, like the remains of some ancient artwork, testified to the presence of life.

“Do you want to stay?” Sarah asked.

“Definitely. Just think how many people lived here. Is it okay with you?”

“I'm fine. Of course, that could change if our ghost shows up.”

I climbed a wobbly ladder and peered into the attic, where the children had slept. My light beam struck the hovering trees through gaps in the roof. A choking closeness gripped me. Did I fear this room, where the ghost had first appeared? No, I decided, old campfire tales would not affect me. I held my breath and spent a minute upstairs inspecting nothing in particular.

“I'm hungry,” Sarah called.

She took sandwiches and a canteen from her backpack, and we had a late dinner. At first, every noise startled us. But after a while the seamless shrill of insects imparted a reassuring rhythm. We sat close and enjoyed a tender hour. We kept one of the flashlights on because the darkness was nearly total.

Eventually we opened our bedrolls and prepared to sleep. I felt a pleasant agitation, as if I were starting a new experiment. I wondered if the mere contemplation of death and graveyards might induce nocturnal visions in susceptible people.

Sometime later I awoke to find Sarah tossing and turning in her bedroll.

“Uncomfortable?” I asked.

“I can't sleep. I'm too wound up.”

“We can talk some more if it'll help.”

“I don't want to keep you up. Don't worry, I'll fall asleep.”

Her good humor had dried up and she sounded testy. Hoping to soothe her nerves, I yawned loudly and tried to sound calm and unconcerned. Then, as I began to drift off again, she suddenly sat up, jolting me awake.

“What is it?” I asked.

“She's here,” Sarah whispered.

“The ghost?” I said facetiously. “Where?” I swept my flashlight over the room.

“I think I saw her.”

“There's nothing.”

“Listen.”

Then I realized that the deafening insect choir had softened, as if all the members close to the cabin had finished their parts. A nearly imperceptible breeze had invaded the cabin, bringing with it a musty odor, quite alien to the forest.

Sarah began fumbling in her backpack. She pulled out a bowl and a second canteen.

“I brought this just in case,” she said. She poured milk into the bowl and placed it inside the stone fireplace. “I think we better go.”

“Wait. Let me look around.”

I checked the attic and searched outside the cabin. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary except the insects and the unfamiliar odor. When I returned, Sarah had tied up her bedroll and zipped her backpack.

“There's no one here,” I said.

She shook her head. “I saw her. I can feel her.”

“You're upset. The mind can invent all sorts of...”

“No. Trust me. Mary is watching us.”

“Okay, okay, I won't argue. But let's do one thing before we leave. Come with me to the graveyard. See for yourself that no baby is crying in the ground. At least we can lay that part of the story to rest.”

Sarah was flustered but, when I took her hands, she settled down. I could tell that she didn't want to disappoint me, and I gave her a reassuring hug.

“Are you up to it?”

“Okay,” she said, “but stay close.”

With our flashlights we fought through the bramble to a stand of old poplars. Sarah found some half buried stone slabs, which might have been markers. Their earthen mantle wrapped them so firmly that we couldn't tear it away.

“I'm sure this is the cemetery,” she said.

“And what do you hear?”

The graves yielded up only silence. Her downcast eyes acknowledged the obvious.

“Satisfied?” I asked.

“Well, you know how stories change.”

“Yes, they do. And we're always hoping there's more to the world than we can see. You know what I think? Ghosts appear only to people who believe in them.”

She smiled at my teasing. “I suppose you're right. I must have dozed off and started to dream.”

“Do you still want to go?”

“No. I'll stay if you like.”

“Let's finish off this ghost once and for all.”

I enjoyed a feeling of triumph as we made our way back to the cabin. Sarah reopened her bedroll and went over to get the bowl.

“Oh, my God! Look!” she cried.

I stared incredulously the fireplace. The bowl was empty.

“She was here,” Sarah said.

“Now take it easy. There's got to be a reason for this.” I wracked my brain feverishly.

“Wait! It was the raccoon, of course. It followed us, hoping for a handout, and probably couldn't believe its luck.” I laughed out loud, but my glee only irritated Sarah.

She studied the hearth closely with her flashlight. “Do you see any tracks?”

I knelt beside her. Our own footprints were clearly etched in the dust, but no trace of another intruder was present. Inside the fireplace, close to the bowl, the dust was completely undisturbed. The silent testimony left me shaken.

“Well?” Sarah demanded.

“How the hell do I know? Let's just get out of here.”

She said nothing more---which was fine with me---as we made our way back to the real world.

## Halloween Story

**Angela Parson Myers**

At the boundaries of the worlds, the barriers often are thin. I had known that ever since I was old enough to know what parallel worlds are, so I am completely to blame for what happened. Funny how that doesn't seem to make me feel any better.

It was the night of the autumn equinox. I was on my way to the ritual, and I was running late because I had changed clothes four times trying to find just the right combination of tunic and cloak. Titania had personally asked me to be sure to attend to meet a niece of hers. I had heard about this niece.

As I approached the crossroads we call Starpoints, I noticed that a mist had risen from the stream that intersected the roads, filling the juncture with fog. If I had been paying attention, I would have turned and walked through the grove instead of taking the road, but my mind was on Titania's niece, and I stepped into the center of Starpoints with my head in the clouds figuratively as well as literally.

And stepped out here.

I realized immediately what I had done and turned to go back, but it was too late—it was thirty seconds after midnight. Summer was gone, the fog was gone, and the passage between my world and this one was gone.

I am young as faeries go, and from a relatively poor and very traditional clan, so I had been way too busy learning my craft to go traversing the parallels. I had no idea what world I had walked into, and though, like most young faerie-folk, I had often daydreamed about what adventures might befall me on such a journey, it suddenly seemed much less desirable an activity.

Fortunately I had fasted all day to prepare for the ritual and the festivities after, or I would have been sick right there in the stream. The stream in this world didn't need that. It was already dark-watered with a peculiar odor. Instead, I tried to remember what little I had been taught about traversing, only to realize that it all pertained to preparations before you traverse, not what to do just in case.

But one rule I could remember might still apply: "Learn as much as possible about the people and culture of the world you are entering before you go so you can fit in without endangering yourself or others."

So I swallowed hard and looked around.

As I said, the stream was dark and odorous. I could see shapes in the darkness of the water and in the weeds on the banks as if someone had thrown trash there. It smelled faintly of rotting vegetation. The filth indicated it was a lonely, unloved stream with no nixies living in it. The kind of stream that flows through areas where trolls live.

Instead of hard soil or cobblestones, the crossroads were made of some solid, stone-like substance. The lawns were raised about a hand's breadth above the roads, and stone-like paths ran across them. Beyond the paths, instead of the trees of the forest, sat buildings that made me gasp. They were tall as mountains and broad as cliffs. Far too large for dwellings, they must be gathering places of some kind. Though why so many gathering places would be in one area, I could not fathom.

They were square and ugly and made of many small stones fitted together. So much stone, like dwarves' cities. Was this then a world of trolls or dwarves? Horrible thought. They're both such unpleasant creatures—no sense of humor at all.

Signs sat on the lawns in front of the buildings. Reluctantly I left the crossroads to look at one of them. "Loomis Laboratory of Physics," it said. The words meant nothing to me, but I was encouraged by the letters. They were Roman. So this world and mine had some history in common. That should be helpful. The plants around the buildings looked familiar, too, though they had been forced to grow into small, square shapes with flat tops. I had heard of worlds where the plants were strange and dangerous. I was glad this wasn't one of them.

As I approached the corner of the vast building, I heard laughter. Coming down one of the stone paths were two inhabitants of this world. I was relieved to see they resembled faerie-folk, but quite ugly. I could handle that.

One was dressed in black with a long, black cloak, the other appeared to have been wrapped from head to toe in strips of white fabric. As the one in black turned his head toward me, I saw long canine teeth jutting from between his lips. Were these folks carnivorous? That could mean trouble.

"Hey, grade cothume!" he yelled, then laughed and took out his fangs. They were on a plate he had held in his mouth, and under them were perfectly normal teeth.

"Great costume!" he repeated, and his companion turned to look at me.

"Yeah," this one agreed, sounding a little muffled because of the fabric wound around its face. "Especially those ears. Those are great ears."

I didn't know what was so great about my ears, but if they found them remarkable, they must be different from theirs, which were hidden by the high collar of the black cloak and the wrappings. I was, however, happy to discover I could understand their speech. The accent was strange, but it seemed to have Latin and Saxon roots, much like my own. Fortunately, faeries are gifted when it comes to language, unlike the trolls, gnomes, and dwarves, who can barely speak their own.

"I love that Medieval costume, too," continued the wrapped one. "What are you supposed to be, an elf?"

"No," I said, "I'm a faerie."

"Aren't you a little tall for a faerie?" asked the black-cloaked one.

"No, just about average."

They laughed again.

"I'm Count Dracula," said the black-cloaked one. "As if you couldn't guess. And this is my friend, the Mummy."

"I am honored to make your acquaintance," I said. "I am Kris of the Greenwood."

"OK, Chris Greenwood, want to walk back to the Halloween party with us?"

"As you wish."

There was, after all, no point in staying at the crossroads. I would not be able to traverse it again until next midnight at the earliest.

Count Dracula and the Mummy kept up a running conversation as we walked. I was trying to figure out the word Halloween. I had worked it down to Holy Evening when I became aware we were approaching a crowd. I couldn't see much yet, but the noise was increasing.

We crossed another broad, stone road and walked between two more of the huge stone buildings. The open glade beyond was surrounded by similar buildings and roiling with strange-

looking creatures. Count Dracula and the Mummy stopped at a booth and picked up cups filled with a golden, foaming liquid.

“Here, Chris, have a beer,” said the Mummy, handing me a cup.

I sipped the liquid. It wasn’t beer by my standards. The taste was as weak as the color. But it was liquid, and I was thirsty. When I looked up, Count Dracula and the Mummy had disappeared into the crowd. I hadn’t even had a chance to thank them.

I stepped back into the shadows to watch, hoping to learn more about this world. By the time I finished the beer, I had decided this melee was a ritual much like the one I had planned to attend in my own world. It was wilder, less organized, but still a ritual. At one end of the glade were musicians with instruments that resembled a lute and drums as well as some I couldn’t name. The face of the creature standing in front was painted with black and white patterns that probably had a mythological meaning. He was gyrating as he shouted something that might have been a chant of sorts while the instruments were played so loudly I couldn’t make out the words. It had a heady beat, though.

Creatures in the glade in front of the musicians were jumping up and down and throwing their bodies around to the rhythm of the music, so I guess they were dancing. Once in a while, two of them would wander off into the shadows, and I could see they were participating in other parallels to our ritual, also. By watching that, I learned that what I had assumed were many kinds of strange creatures were really only one kind that looked very much like faeries. The only difference was in color, for some were very dark and some very pale, with all shades in between. Only their clothing, including, in some cases, frightening masks that covered their entire faces, made them look strange. The clothing seemed to be an important part of their ritual, for they always put their disguises back on before they came out of the shadows.

“Hello, handsome,” said a voice beside me, and I jumped. She laughed. “Come on, I’m a good-looking princess, aren’t I?”

“You startled me,” I admitted, wondering if she really was a princess or if it was just another disguise.

“Who are you?” she asked. “Mr. Spock?”

“No, I’m a faerie.”

Her face fell.

“The really good-looking ones usually are,” she said, and walked away.

Had I said something wrong? I’d had the feeling she wanted me to join her in the shadow rituals, but something seemed to have changed her mind. Well, there were plenty of other creatures to watch.

I turned my attention to the booths along the perimeter of the glade. They weren’t very different from the booths that sold food and drink at faerie rituals. Most of them seemed to be selling the pale beer, but some were selling food. My stomach was so empty it ached. I wondered what kind of coin they used in this world and if they would accept mine. I had just been paid for a lavalier I made for the Duchess of Greenwood, so my purse was full. I walked up to one of the booths and pulled out a coin.

“Would you accept this in exchange for one of those sausages?”

The man took the coin and looked at it while I looked at him. He was wearing no disguise. Now I understood why they thought my ears remarkable, for his were short with rounded tips. I pulled my hair a bit forward over the pointed tips of mine.

“C’mon,” he said, “this ain’t real money. Don’t screw around with me, ya little faggot. I’ll call the cops on ya!”

“It’s real gold,” I hastily interjected. I didn’t know what he had threatened me with, but it sounded unpleasant.

He looked at it again—carefully.

“Nah,” he said, and flipped it toward me.

Another hand reached it before mine and grabbed it out of the air. I turned to face the most beautiful woman I had ever met. Even Titania would have seemed plain beside her. Her face was faerie-pale, but her hair was a deep red I had never seen before. Her eyes were the color of walnuts. She was simply dressed in a black, one-piece suit that covered her from neck to wrists to toes and fit everywhere as tightly as my hosen fit my legs, but she had no tunic over it to preserve her modesty. A small, silver emblem lay on her right breast, and I found myself fascinated by it.

She laughed, and I managed to breathe again.

She put my coins into a pocket in a belt she wore around the swell of her hips just below her tiny, supple waist. She took out one of her own coins and handed it to the vendor.

“Give the man a hot dog.”

“Whacha want on it?”

She looked at me, and I looked back at her.

“Give him mustard and relish.”

She took the sausage, now resting in bread and covered with yellow, pasty sauce and green chunks and handed it to me. I took a large bite. I was hungry enough to eat a roast ox! It wasn’t bad. The sausage was rather mild, but the yellow sauce and green chunks were tangy.

“Thank you.” I could have eaten a dozen more.

“I think that redneck was wrong,” she observed.

“About what?”

“I don’t think you’re a faggot.”

“I don’t know the meaning of that word,” I admitted.

She smiled smugly. Stopping at another booth, she bought a couple of beers and handed one to me.

“My name is Tiffany,” she said as we walked through the crowd. “I’m a grad student in English lit.”

“My name is Kris. I make jewelry.”

“I wondered why all the rings and cuffs and stuff. Did you make them?”

I admitted I had, though I didn’t think them excessive. I had, after all, been on my way to a ritual.

“I like it,” she said. “You’re very talented.”

The musicians had quit playing, I noticed. Some of the vendors were taking down their booths, and the crowd was beginning to thin. We wandered south out of the glade and emerged near a harvested field. To the east, the sky was growing pale.

“Dawn is breaking,” I said, suddenly feeling melancholic. “Summer is gone.”

“You sound so sad.”

“I am lonely, Tiffany. I am lost in a strange world far away from my home, and I miss my family and friends already.”

“I thought you sounded a little foreign. But a good-looking guy like you shouldn’t be lonely for long.”

“Do you really think I am good-looking, Tiffany?” I was beginning to feel a little light-headed. Perhaps the beer was stronger than it seemed. “I think you are beautiful.”

I pulled her to me and kissed her. Then she kissed me. Then I kissed her again.

That was nearly five months ago. Tiffany and I found a great jewelry store downtown that will take my work on consignment, and I'm beginning to build a reputation for my original designs. We have a nice little apartment near the campus. I walk every night at midnight to the crossroads near Loomis Lab where I entered this world, but I haven't been able to traverse the juncture yet, not even at the winter solstice, perhaps because the two worlds don't seem to share the same timeline. It's almost as if they are bridged by rituals instead of dates. I've started thinking about the possibility of having to spend the rest of my life in this strange world.

It could be worse. Tiffany is more beautiful, loving and intelligent than Titania's niece could ever be. She understood when I explained to her what I really am and where I came from, and she's helped me learn about this world so I can stay out of trouble. She wants me to stay with her, she says, and she's asking if fairies and humans can have babies together.

But this world is crowded and dirty, and most of it is ugly. I miss the open fields and ancient forests of my own world. I miss flowers growing wild in the fields and cottages made of living trees instead of pieces of dead ones. I miss hunting on horseback and bargaining with the dwarves for gold and silver to make my jewelry.

March is approaching, and with it the vernal equinox. If ever I am to get back to my world, it must be then, but I fear my heart is not in it as it must be. I keep balancing one world against the other, and when I finish, it always comes down to two final points: Titania is going to be mad as hell at me for standing up her niece, and if I stay here with Tiffany, I'll have to get my ears fixed.

## Victoria and the Peri

### **George Phillis**

A full moon floated above the mountains, shining brightly into Victoria's bedroom. Her watch chirped once, softly, to be swiftly stifled. It was time!

Quickly, she pulled on jeans, sweatshirt, and black ski mask. Her sleeping bag went under her blanket, the bulge giving the illusion that she was still in bed. Ever so gently, she eased open the latch on the screen, pushed it away from the house, and slipped out the window. Her parents were sound asleep. Her older brothers and sisters were still watching TV. This was not the moment to be caught. She'd never be able to explain what she had to do, not in time.

In time! The nagging pressure which filled her dreams for the past week was more insistent than ever. There, up at Table Rock, her friend was waiting for her--needed her badly. Her friend could wait no longer, not with the full moon a skull-white galleon floating above the Pacific Range.

The yard was empty. She slipped from shadow to shadow, locked in a very real game of hide and seek. You can't, she told herself, be seen when you aren't moving. Not after dark. Not when everything you wear is dull black, darker than the very shadows that hide you. She reminded herself of other hide and seek games played by the light of the moon. She had lain still on rough ground, her brother's toes not three inches from her nose, without his knowing she was there. If she had to, she could do it again.

The cold dew soaked her feet. But she'd forseen that. Extra socks and all her hiking gear waited in the treehouse at the end of the lot. She had hidden them there earlier this afternoon. If someone found her now, she might be able to explain why she was outside at this hour--"I'm memorizing a constellation for the Science Fair" would fool Dad or Mom--but if they spotted the pack, they'd be sure she was running away.

That would be the end of her rescue expedition. And the end of her friend, too, she somehow knew. She was certain of that, though she didn't know why. Grimly, she switched from sweatshirt to looser clothing, laced up her boots, and pulled on her jacket. Table Rock was six miles away, and 4000 feet farther up. She had a long climb ahead of her. This far into autumn, most of it would be cold. She couldn't chance a flashlight, not for much of it, though there was sort of a trail. With a full moon, a clear sky, and some caution, the climb still ought to be possible, even for a not-at-all-grown-up seventh grader. Getting back home in time would be the hard part. She'd worry about that later. Maybe her friend could help.

Her family lived right at the edge of town. The path took her by only one other house. If she met Dr. Pickering, its eccentric resident, she would just tell him the truth about where she was going and why. He wasn't a grownup, not really, no matter how old he was. He'd believe her. He might even come along.

The town lights faded behind her. Under the pines, it was pitch dark. A few stumbles, taken with her alpenstock, reminded her to raise her feet. Dr. Pickering, of course, wouldn't have an alpenstock, he'd have his walking stick, a beautiful piece of dark wood topped with a tiny silver skull.

As she walked, her memories took her back in time. When had it all started?

Perhaps with Donny Martin, which meant that it really started with the Martin boys down the street. They were half-way reasonable--for boys, anyway--or would have been, if their parents hadn't let them bother the birds with their air rifles. Mr. Martin wanted to protect his

apple trees, but the boys' idea of protection started several blocks away. She had told Timmy and Tommy Martin to stop. When they didn't, well, they got to hit her back first. Of course, being able to beat up on either of them, even if they happened to be a grade or two older, helped. She played basketball and soccer; they just sat in front of a TV set. Dumb!--like her older brothers, though Mom hardly let her brothers watch TV at all, at least by comparison with most kids. Dr. Pickering, of course, said television programmers were as bad as dope pushers--that was a bit much. Once Timmy and Tommy had realized that they outnumbered her two-to-one. Their younger brother Donny promptly pitched in on her side--"Just to make it fair," he'd said.

Why did birds matter? she asked herself. Dr. Pickering told all the kids Indian stories about the Spirit of Table Rock, who did not abide violent death on her mountain. Certainly the Indians had never hunted on Table Rock. Her State History book last year said so. Now the mountain was a game preserve. But Indian stories, probably stretched a bit for the little kids, didn't really answer her question, even if the County Historical Society did have a genuine painting of the Spirit, made a hundred years ago by the state's greatest artist. She had seen the painting, and thought it a bit strange. The Spirit wasn't shown as an Indian girl at all, but as a white girl, wearing a long cape, with armor and a sword like one of King Arthur's knights.

The trail began to curve upwards, not enough to slow her down, but enough that she began to breath more deeply. The lightest of breezes shook the branches, setting fuzzy moonshadows shimmering at her feet. That was good, she told herself. If someone saw her, they would think it was only the wind shivering the pines. Her thoughts drifted.

Last Spring had been Donny Martin's accident. She had almost gotten into a lot of trouble over it. And she hadn't done anything wrong, only looked guilty at the wrong time. Donny had been playing on the Majelski bridge--General Ignatius Pavel Majelski to her history teacher--during Spring flood. It was a stupid thing to do, and he knew it. In Summer, the St. Olaf river burred gently through its stones, so you could wade from one side to the other while schools of minnows swam by your toes. Playing on the bridge then was one thing. But in Spring, the Saint Olaf roared icy-cold off the mountains, its swift current raising white foam as it swept over boulders. If you fell into the Saint Olaf in Spring, you could get hurt, even if you were the county swimming champion. During Spring flood, you crossed the bridge carefully, keeping well away from the edge.

But Donny Martin had to be different. She remembered him clowning on the railing, while she and her older brothers watched from downstream. Her brothers thought it was funny--boys could be awful stupid. Then Donny slipped. Ever so slowly, like the first leaf of autumn, he went over the edge toward the water. Her brothers ran for help. What could she do? She couldn't possibly go after Donny herself, not in that current, not in water chilled by mountain glaciers. She sprinted for the water's edge. Donny's head was still above water. Someone was in the river supporting him. Despite the wild rush of the current, Donny and the other moved closer to shore.

Victoria reached the bank as they stood up in the shallows. Donny was white as a sheet, coughing and shivering from the cold. The person with him was a girl--a girl who didn't look much older than Victoria. Who was it? She knew everyone in her class at Ford Middle School, and most of the kids in the next two grades. It was no one she had ever seen, either, and she would have been hard to miss. She was tall, if not growing-up tall. She had to be a real athlete. Even if the river hadn't proved it, you could see how much muscle she had on her arms. Her hair was a brilliant red-brown, matched by blue-violet eyes and a rosy complexion.

Forgetting the danger, Victoria stepped into the water and pulled Donny over one shoulder. He didn't have the strength to walk to shore. For the girl, she only had time for a brief

handclasp. The girl's fingers were steely-strong, like a grown-up's. Whoever she was, she didn't seem to be in any trouble. She was breathing heavily, but not gasping for breath. She certainly wasn't shaking with cold the way Donny was, though she was soaked to the skin.

Victoria remembered very clearly what happened next. She dragged Donny up onto the bank in a fireman's carry, just like they'd taught in the Girl Scouts. He was obviously more scared than hurt. The other girl, who still hadn't said anything, had somehow kept him from swallowing too much water. When Victoria set Donny down, she took her eyes off the stranger, just for an instant. There was a sound like tearing silk, so soft she wasn't sure she'd really heard it. Then there came a sudden stillness in the air, the absence of deep breathing. Even before she turned around, Victoria knew that she was alone, that when she looked back to the river no one else would be there.

Moments later, two neighbors came running down the path. Her brothers had found help. The neighbors thought she had gone in the river to rescue Donny. Her clothes were pretty wet, after all. If that story got back to her parents, she would be in real trouble. Luckily, Donny said she had stayed on shore. Then Donny wanted to know where the other girl was, the one who had dived into the river and saved him.

No one had seen the girl leave. One neighbor said that the girl might have fallen back into the river. After all, whoever she was, she must have been on her last legs when she staggered to shore. Who was it? He wanted to know. What was her name? For an second, Victoria had the sinking feeling she was about to have an argument with a grownup, the kind you could never win. She had no idea who the other girl was, but the neighbor wouldn't believe that. Grownups never ever believed that children didn't know each other's names. As she opened her mouth to try to explain, knowing it wouldn't work, she found that she knew the answer. Suddenly, she had a vivid memory of looking into the other girl's eyes while the girl introduced herself. "Adara," she had said.

The problem was that the other girl hadn't said anything. Victoria had sharp memories of every moment, from the instant she reached the river bank to the instant in which the other girl vanished. There was no time to have looked into Adara's eyes, no time to have heard Adara speak. There was just an extra memory, like a piece still in the box after you finished a jigsaw puzzle.

The police, the rescue squad, and a reporter from the local paper arrived. Donny got an ambulance ride with police escort all the way to the county hospital. He looked all right to Victoria. She suspected that the grownups were bored and wanted to have some fun. After all, the last crime in Table Rock had been three weeks ago, and that was a purse snatching.

At a neighbor's insistence, more policemen fanned out downstream, looking for Adara. They didn't find her. No one knew who Adara was. The police wanted Adara's last name. Victoria didn't know, and said Adara must be visiting from someplace--after all, she knew everyone at Ford Middle School, and Adara didn't go to school there. Victoria couldn't shake the feeling that she had seen Adara before, even if they'd never met. But where? She couldn't remember. The reporter listened politely to Victoria's story. He pretended to believe every word, but kept looking at the water, mumbling "A grown man couldn't swim the St. Olaf in flood."

The reporter asked hard questions. Victoria hadn't seen Adara dive off the bridge, but Adara must have, to reach Donny so quickly. Adara hadn't been wearing jeans or sweats or anything common. There had been trousers and a short-sleeved tunic, woven in dark and light green, with yellow thread--gold lace, thought Victoria, not saying it--on cuffs and collar and chest. And there was a pin--a golden sun-disc, thought Victoria--on her chest. Where did Adara

go? Victoria hadn't seen her leave. She was just gone. Adara was a heroine. If the reporter could find her, her picture would be on the front page of every paper in the state. Finally Victoria told him to stop asking. If Adara's parents learned their daughter had dived into the St. Olaf, never mind how good the cause, they might be very angry with her. After all, she could have died. Maybe she wouldn't want people to find her. The reporter stalked off, leaving Victoria to walk home by herself. At least Mom didn't notice her clothes were wet.

Victoria came out of her reverie. The easy path was at its end. The rest of the climb was a series of meadows, separated by steep, rocky pitches through which rough steps had been cut. The air was crystal clear. The breeze had blown itself out. Despite the full moon, constellations burned bright in the heavens. They were familiar friends: Andromeda and Cassiopeia and Cygnus. She was climbing briskly. Soon the ocean would be visible to the west.

There was a sudden rustle and crackle behind her. Victoria started, swallowing an outcry, then froze in place. Slowly, she looked over her shoulder. In one small group of trees, branches swayed heavily, as if stirred by an unfelt wind. Something must have flown into them, she thought. An owl, she told herself, only a big owl.

The climb to the next meadow was short, but so steep she was almost on hands and knees. Now she heard more creaks and groans, and saw trees shudder, though the air was completely still. She wasn't afraid of the dark, but her ears insisted that something was following her. She tried to believe that she had spooked herself, that the sounds were all in her imagination. Finally she stopped and rummaged to the very bottom of her pack. Her great-grandfather's hunting knife, carefully sharpened, buckled to the side of her belt, placed where she wouldn't fall on it if she tripped. A visiting aunt from Los Angeles had left behind a canister of tear gas. Victoria slipped the can into a coat pocket. You're being very silly, she told herself. You're afraid of shadows and little noises, at the time of day when you should feel safest. After all, if you can't see it, it can't see you.

She glanced at her watch. It was well after one. Despite the darkness, she had travelled nearly four miles. She leaned back against a rock and sipped at her canteen, peering all the while into the shadows. She didn't see anything.

Not that I'm afraid, she said out loud. I'm bigger and meaner than any wild animal left in the state.

She had faced beasts on this mountain before. Lower down, opposite Table Rock, was a vertical sheet of stone covered with strange inscriptions. If you stared hard, they looked as if they had been melted into the rock in great sweeping curves. When asked about people who wrote in spirals, Dr. Pickering talked about the unique example of the Phaistos disc. No matter what you asked Dr.

Pickering, he knew the answer. Dr. Pickering's house had a real library, two and a half stories tall, with book shelves from floor through two mezzanines to the house's beamed roof, and a little telescope on a balcony up near the top. But Phaistos was on Crete, six thousand miles away, so it couldn't have anything to do with the Table Rock inscriptions. The inscriptions were supposed to be an ancient Indian astronomical clock, just like Stonehenge. She'd learned about Stonehenge last winter, reading while her brothers watched TV.

She had gone to photograph the shadows as they lay on Mid-Summer's day. If it was a clock, it must have been used in Mid-Summer. The guidebooks said it was used in Winter, to find the year's end, but that was silly. In Winter it rained; there were no shadows. She set up her tripod on top of Chimney Rock, fifty feet above the parking lot, and waited for noon. A group of high school boys arrived below her. She listened in horror to their words. The inscriptions

appeared in her town's High School insignia--the Table Rock Titans--so the boys below her, from Centervale, wanted to blow them up as a prank. "My dad checked," he prated--another Dr. Pickering word--one of them, "Them cuttings is all a big fake, not something worth money." She had checked, too. The first explorers in the valley, 150 years ago, has drawn the cuttings.

She carefully took pictures of the boys and their car, then hid the film under a stone. Even if they grabbed her camera and searched her, she'd have evidence. Finally she stood up so they could see her. "I heard what you said," she shouted, "And I've got a camera if you try it."

The boys, standing fifty feet below her, shouted back, using words you weren't supposed to know, let alone use. They tried climbing up after her. Chimney Rock had one very steep and narrow approach, the chimney of its name, and a series of sheer walls which you needed ropes and pitons to climb. She threw two large stones down the chimney. The first was a warning. The second they had to dodge. The boys retreated, cursing. They gathered dry wood. "Come down," they called, "or we'll burn you out." That wasn't very clever of them. The flames would block their path to her. The smoke would bring the Forest Rangers. She called them names, not as nasty as the ones they used, mixed with tearful pleas not to burn anything. They put a match to the wood, just the way she wanted. Safe for a time, she blithely ignored them and took her pictures of the sun's noon-time shadows. Dr. Pickering was surprised to learn she'd used solar noon, not twelve o'clock on watch time, even though he'd explained the difference to her last year. Sirens in the distance announced the Volunteer Fire Department. The boys took off in their car. Calmly, Victoria told the firemen what had happened, then persuaded them not to scale the cliff in a rescue attempt. They didn't need to save her. After all, stone didn't catch fire, and she was upwind of the smoke. After the Sheriff caught the boys, and spotted the dynamite in the back seat, they did give her a ride home, in a real fire engine.

She came back to the present. Meadow followed meadow. The air was so chill that her breath formed little clouds which sparkled with trapped moonlight. She was only cold when she paused to catch her breath. She heard the snap of breaking twigs behind her. Something large and heavy was following. Or perhaps two somethings, one which climbed and one which flew. The twig-snapplings and the branch-wavings lay in different directions. She stopped once and again to look. They only moved while her back was turned. She tried turning suddenly to surprise them. Once she caught a hint of motion. Her stomach knotted. The shadow looked very big, too big to be real. She felt at her knife, and at the can in her pocket.

Then she laughed at herself. She was behaving like a little kid, afraid to go to bed because she had seen a horror movie, full of vampires and witches. There couldn't be anything out there, so there was nothing to fear. She was being frightened by her own imagination.

It didn't matter. Even if something were out there, out where nothing could possibly be, she had to go on. She had a debt to Adara, one impossible to repay. Besides, she told herself, whatever they were, they were behind her. If she turned around, she would be walking toward them.

Her impossible debt to Adara had had an innocent beginning. Last weekend, she and two classmates had marched off on a picnic, not knowing that the county was in an uproar. Five hardened criminals had escaped from State Prison, robbed the Ninth National Bank of Centervale, and headed for Table Rock State Forest.

Her recollections of the morning were still confused. Five strange men had found the picnic, and invited themselves into the conversation. One girl, regularly told not to talk to strangers, stood up to leave.

“No!” one man shouted. “You come with us!” He drew a knife. Victoria bolted for safety, but was tackled by a second man. Roughly, the girls were dragged into the trees. “We won't hurt you,” one of the men announced. “We just need hostages.” Jennifer's companions took his words at face value. Victoria had watched too many news stories about hostages elsewhere in the world. She thought about escaping. How could she do it?

“That will be quite enough!” An unexpected voice. Adara! Wearing the same green color, but a different outfit with long sleeves, a full-length over-shoulder cape, and green leather boots. Adara stood upon a low stump, her back against an ancient Douglas fir, one foot propped on a protruding lump of wood. The men still towered over her. “You will let them all go!” Her voice sounded of absolute determination.

Two convicts grabbed for her. Adara punched one in the jaw. Incredibly, he toppled over. The second she pivot-kicked in the stomach. He sailed backward, grunting in agony. “Get her!” shouted a third convict. The other men jumped on Adara, landing in a flurry of struggling limbs. They couldn't pin her, but she didn't have enough room to throw a good swing. Not pausing to think, Victoria grabbed a melon-size rock, brought it over her head, and hit one of the Adara's assailants. She had all of her weight behind it.

The distraction gave Adara the moment she needed. Two men fell to the ground.

Autopsies later revealed multiple shattered bones. The remaining prisoner, shaking off the effects of Jennifer's stone, whipped out a knife and plunged it at Adara's face. There was a cling of metal on metal. From someplace, Adara had pulled her own dagger--really a more-than-girl-size sword, noted Victoria--and blocked the prisoner's blow. He stepped back. Adara went after him, her blade a flicker of silver light. He parried once, raising gold and violet sparks. She stripped the prisoner of his weapon. He fell to the ground. Heart attack, read the medical examiner's report. Victoria was positive he'd taken a sword thrust to the chest.

The second prisoner, still clutching his stomach, drew a pistol. “No witnesses means no trouble,” he announced. He took aim at Victoria. The barrel loomed enormously wide, a black mouth swallowing her every thought. She was too frightened to dodge.

Suddenly, without seeming to move, Adara was standing between Victoria and the pistol. The man snarled and fired. For the shortest fraction of an instant, Victoria's eyes insisted that Adara was gone. Then she was back, seemingly unhurt. The prisoner deliberately squeezed off two more shots, equally without effect. He cursed. Victoria heard a burst of shots, one blending into the next. At the last, Adara staggered backwards, then gestured intricately with one hand. The prisoner's eyes glazed. Adara looked about, as if to check that

Victoria was unhurt. Adara's own face was dead white. Victoria could see blood splashed on Adara's tunic. Before Victoria could say anything, Adara vanished, disappearing like a light bulb had suddenly been switched off.

Drawn by the sound of gunfire, the law arrived. The County Sheriff had very little to do. Three felons were dead, a fourth had a broken jaw, while a fifth seemed in a trance. The three picnickers gave three very different stories. The other girls had seen Adara, but gave completely contradictory descriptions of her and what she had done. Five of the convict's bullets were found in a tree. To reach their target, they would have had to pass through Victoria. The sixth bullet, despite an intensive search, had vanished. Dr. Pickering told Victoria's parents that the bullets were terrorist rounds, packed with deadly nerve poison.

Victoria spent the next night in the hospital, with neighbors and relatives--people she ordinarily saw once a year--trooping through to see that she was all right. She would rather have been in her own bed. The parade was enough to give her nightmares.

And nightmares there had been: hazy dreams of being trapped, neither here nor elsewhere, unable to move. The dreams were more horrible than terrifying; not enough to wake Victoria up, or run crying to Dad, but enough that she remembered them in the morning. She dreamed herself at Table Rock, looking at the sky through fever-wracked vision. In her dreams, Victoria knew she was seeing through Adara's eyes. Night after night, the dreams repeated, with the moon taking its slow course through the sky. Jennifer thought of the moon as a mottled Christmas ornament, or perhaps as the ball of stone once visited by astronauts. To Adara the moon signified a gate slowly swinging open. With the dreams came pain. A tearing agony in her shoulder was a great spike, nailing her in place. There was someplace else she wanted to go, someplace only a step away, but with her shoulder pinned that someplace was an uncrossable distance from her, no matter how hard she strained to get there.

In the dreams, Table Rock was a glowing opal pillar. Around the pillar, some tens of yards out, hovered a ring of light--a warding circle. Victoria looked up 'ward' in the big dictionary, finding that a ward could be a protection from magic. The dictionary scared her. How could she know things in her dreams before she knew them while she was awake?

The ward made Adara and the rock invisible, so that picnickers ate and drank and saw in Table Rock only a cold black stone. Outside, beyond the circle, massed the lurkers in the darkness, they who waited to shatter the wards and claim Table Rock. Adara was confident she could beat them, yet terrified of what else would happen. Victoria couldn't tell what frightened Adara. Adara's thoughts were shrouded in a shower of brilliant grief, the ending of a goal toward which Adara had worked longer than Victoria could understand. Adara was maybe a little older than Victoria; in the dreams, she had waited for--something--through vastly impossible times.

Victoria's daydreams were interrupted by a light. Up the mountainside she could see a pearly glimmer, rosier than the moon glow. It was the opalescent color from her dreams. At first she was heartened. She wasn't chasing shadows; something was really there. Fear took slightly longer to arrive.

What was she doing? Here she was, miles from home, climbing a mountain with only moonlight to aid her, all because of a dream. Suddenly her climb became absurd, like the astrology column in the paper. Telling the future from dreams was for people from a hundred years ago, not for sensible girls who went to school and watched movies and helped their fathers wash the dishes. But she had really seen that eerie glow ahead of her--seen it!--while she was sound asleep, before she saw it in real life. That wasn't possible except in make-believe.

If you thought they were just dreams, she asked herself, why are you hiking up a mountainside? It's the middle of the night, when you should be safe in bed. Victoria asked herself what her parents would say when they found out. That scared her a lot more than anything else. They really let her do a lot, compared to some other kids. Kelly Pierce's mom wouldn't even let Kelly play softball if there were boys on the team, let alone soccer or basketball. But if she went beyond the limits they set, and this had to be beyond the limits, Mom and Dad really were pretty rigid.

The final slope was piled with boulders, forcing her to test her footing with each step. Halfway up, she stopped to catch her breath. The sounds behind her had drifted away. She looked over her shoulder, and immediately wished she hadn't. Not more than a hundred yards behind her, a black amorphous mass crept along the ground. At the front floated a pair of emerald lights. Eyes! came the unbidden thought. Eyes! Her flashlight, unused until now, hung by her canteen. Desperately, she grabbed for it, hoping the light would reveal some harmless trick of shadow. So what if she lost her night vision! The flashlight would last long enough for

the two hundred yards to the rock. She pointed, pressed the slide, and let four D cells worth of light stab out.

It was the size of a small van, with a glistening blue-green shell, a half-dozen multi-jointed legs, and a ridiculously small head which turned up to stare at her. Below the eyes something moved from side to side. Like a spider, she recognized, it has the fangs of a giant spider.

A shriek died in her throat. Just as in her worst nightmares, she was too scared to speak. Her knees sagged. Then she spun around and scrambled up the slope, jumping from rock to rock. No matter how fast she moved, she knew the thing would be faster. And it was chasing her. It wanted to eat her.

She scampered to the hill crest. Table Rock was as she had dreamed, an enormous uncut opal whose luminescence outshone the full moon and threw shadows up at the sky. "Adara," she croaked. "Adara? Where are you? Please!"

Silence answered her.

"Adara?" she called again. Shivering with fear, Victoria ran toward the rock. Perhaps the ward from her dream would protect her. She found Adara slumped on the ground, her head propped against a small boulder. Victoria's legs buckled with relief. Somehow she managed to keep walking, sinking to the ground only when she reached her friend. Adara's face was pale. Her tunic was streaked with dried blood.

"Adara?" she asked.

"Victoria?" Adara's voice, when it finally came, was high-pitched and remote. "Have I your name aright? I wasn't sure you'd hear my call, or that you could be here in time."

"Of course I came!" Victoria answered. "I owe you, I owe you my life." Then Victoria realized what Adara meant by 'calling'. "You sent the dreams? How? That's impossible! We've got to run! There's a thing chasing me. Come on!" Victoria slipped an arm under Adara's shoulder. Adara's hands were cold from the Fall air, but where her cloak had sheltered her she burned with fever.

"A thing?" Adara asked nonchalantly. "Large and green? Oh, don't worry. Kreesha can't climb stones. It'll have to circle around."

"But... besides, you need a doctor. You must be awful sick. I can feel the fever." Victoria calmed down slightly.

"One of your doctors... that's all I'd need. Victoria, there's no time left for talking. I know what to do. I've had the last week of lying here, stumbling no farther than the spring while I maintained the Shield, to think about it." Adara gasped for breath. "Unless you want armies of Kreesha crawling around. And the ones in the trees are worse."

Victoria was baffled. This wasn't like anything she'd studied in school. It didn't match the plot of any movie she could remember. Her Dad's gentle lessons on choosing the right didn't seem to apply. What was she supposed to do? "I owe you my life, don't I? That fellow would've killed Kelly and Penny and me. Can't we call the Sheriff? No, I guess not. He's a grownup. In monster movies grownups don't believe in the monsters until it's too late."

Adara sat up. "There are three things to do. Third, I stop the Kreesha. Second, you delay the Vandamond --the flying things. I can't, not and get the tool I need for step three. Don't worry. The Vandamond aren't as tough as the boys on your street, only uglier. First is the hard part."

"You're going to fight that green thing? But it's the size of a truck. And it's got teeth like crowbars."

“Mandibles,” Adara corrected dreamily. “They're mandibles. Move side to side. Not mounted in bone. No, the first part is harder. The bullet is still in my shoulder. You'll have to take it out.”

“Adara, we've really got to get you to a doctor. I mean it. Those bullets were poisoned,” Victoria said.

“I noticed. The iron is worse. It keeps me from gating home. I'd take it out myself, if I could reach,” Adara answered.

“What do you mean, gating? Where is home?”

“It's easier to show you. I'm not imagining things, though I've had a week of lying here to try.” Adara was coldly matter-of-fact.

“Here? For a week? Through night and rain? Didn't anyone help you?”

“Within the ward, I cannot be seen, save as I will.” Adara took a deep breath. “Passers-by think me a tree stump, and Table Rock its usual gray self. The rest was not--pleasant. The days were nice and sunny, so I slept then. The nights, and this high it was sleet, not rain, I endured. My cloak helped some. I didn't have a choice. If I'd walked away, the Kreessa would have had the Gatestone. When the full moon reaches the zenith, they may yet take it. Now, slip off your pack and belt. There's too much iron in them. Even so, I can't do this for more than an instant, or gate far enough to get what I need. Not against the iron in my shoulder.”

Victoria felt the hill tremble under her knees. It was early evening again.

They were surrounded by acres of luminous flowers, blue and violet in the twilight. The air smelled of cinnamon. Victoria stood, still holding hands with Adara, and stared into the distance. The mountains, the whole Pacific Range, were simply gone. Gentle hills rolled out to the horizon. A flock of brilliant-orange birds with long, billowing wings glided out of the sunset. Victoria's hand tightened around Adara's. They were back at Table Rock, the moon floating imperturbably overhead.

“Do you believe me now? That's gating. You saw me do it before, when I left you last time.” Adara trembled with exhaustion. Her voice was nearly gone. “I'll tell you how to do it. Don't be afraid. I won't bleed to death, I've got, ummh, protections.”

Victoria wanted to argue, but there was nothing to say. If it was a dream, well, what you did in a dream didn't matter. If she was awake, she had to trust Adara. Numbly, Victoria propped her flashlight behind them, then did Adara's bidding. Adara looked grimly into the distance, showing no sign of pain while Victoria followed directions. Despite the depth of the incision, there was very little blood. Only at the very end, as Victoria fumbled to pry out the bullet, did Adara's guard slip slightly. She squeezed her eyes shut, holding back a groan while tears streaked her face. Victoria ransacked her pack for a bandage, while Adara distantly described the Vandamond. Adara's voice stopped. Adara was gone, here one instant but not the next, like a coin in a magician's palm. Where was Adara? wondered Victoria. Was that what we looked like, when we went there? Adara had vanished like a ghost, to a half-heard rustle of tearing cloth.

Victoria loosened the sheath of her knife, and put on her heavy leather gloves. She was terrified. She had never been in a fight before, not in which someone could really get hurt. She had to stay. She didn't have a choice. All she could do was wish she was back home, safe in bed where she belonged. Adara had told her a dozen things not to do, as though she were in fights like this all the time. Perhaps she was. For Adara everything seemed possible.

Victoria peered into the darkness. Where were they? She stepped back against a tree, just as Adara had told her, grateful for the solid wood against her spine. The creatures couldn't fly in

tight circles. They'd have to come more or less straight at her. And they were cowards; with any luck, Adara had told her, she'd only have to fight one of them at a time.

One? she asked herself. Only one? There shouldn't be any. I'm not supposed to be here. She tried to squeeze back tears. Her gloves were harsh against her eyelids. The flashlight beam caught something in the trees. Blood red eyes stared in at her. She looked away. One would attack while the others watched. There was movement to her right. The flashlight beam lanced out again.

Seeing a monster in the dark was not so bad, the second time you did it. She had run in blind panic from the Kreesha; she only wanted to run from a Vandamond. A Vandamond was a miniature winged lion with human face and fingered paws. She had seen stone-cuttings of it, in a picture book about Rome or Babylon or Prussia or someplace like that. She wondered if the artists had drawn from life. Except for the wings, it really was pretty small. It swooped in on her. She brought up her alpenstock.

She hadn't expected it to hit so hard. The impact tore the pole from her hands. The Vandamond tumbled, recovered, grabbed a tree limb, and threw itself straight down on Victoria. She screamed, put up a hand to fend it off, and grabbed her knife. Its hind claws dug into the wood as it thrust ahead. The weight pushed her off balance, away from the tree. She slipped sideways, started to fall over, and stabbed blindly upwards. A wild screech filled the air. The Vandamond's front paws were little pincers reaching for her eyes. Its jaws clamped excruciatingly around her arm. Teeth worried away at her heavy coat; wings beat at her head. She stabbed once and again. The jaws went limp as it fluttered to earth.

Victoria's heart pounded. Where were the others? If they both rushed her at once, she wouldn't stand a chance. She picked up her flashlight. There were so many places for them to hide.

The second creature took her in the small of her back, knocking her to her knees. Too late, she remembered Adara's warning to stay against a tree. She tried to catch herself, and dropped knife and flashlight. She reached around, grabbed a section of wing, and tugged. The creature worked its way up her back towards her neck. How could she fight something behind her? She got one leg under herself and tried to stand. The Vandamond was hideously strong, but almost weightless. As she rose, the third came gliding across the field at her. Despair tugged at her heart.

With a final surge of strength, she pulled the creature from her back. Its claws slashed through her jeans into her legs. She slipped one arm around its neck and held it in a hammerlock, oblivious to the slices its claws dug into her thighs. Her free hand located the tear gas. She held her breath. The flying Vandamond took a blast of Mace. It dropped from the air, paws pulling at its eyes. She pushed the can into the final creature's face and squeezed the release. It screamed and flopped convulsively. She threw it down and jumped on it, once and again, listening to bones crunch.

Adara stood next to her. "I finished off the last one," Adara announced. She carried in her right hand a long silvery sword, which gleamed wetly in the moonlight. "I suppose I should put this one out of its misery." She stabbed once. The battle madness faded from Victoria. She noticed that the tear gas had vanished with Adara's arrival, looked down at the creature, saw what she had done to it, and threw up. Adara held her gently.

"I tried my best," Victoria said. "I'm sorry I.."

"Victoria, you beat them. By yourself. They were as good as dead when I arrived here. So don't apologize."

“Can I, can I help against that big bug? I'm pretty much out of tear gas, but I have a good knife.” She looked at Adara, who had somehow found time to change to clean clothes. “You look better than when you left.”

“Time passes faster there than here. So I only feel like a worn-out dish rag, without looking the part. The Kreesha is mine. Cold steel won't help much, anyhow. But it can't win. I won't let it. The only question is how much damage it will do. Just stay behind the Gatestone... behind Table Rock.” She pushed Victoria into position, obviously favoring one arm.

Victoria peeked around Table Rock. Adara stared in a single direction, as though she knew exactly where the Kreesha was. After a few moments of increasingly anxious waiting, the beast rose over the hill-crest. Behind the

Kreesha loomed another and another. Except for the first, they were all ghosts, through which the stars shone. Row after row of the creatures could be seen, phalanx after phalanx. An army of them filled the sky, then another and another. Their numbers were mind-numbing.

The united will of the Kreesha drove palpably through the air. They wanted Adara's Gatestone--Table Rock. To take it, they had only to force away its single wounded defender.

Adara stood like a tree. Her shoulders were straight. Despite her shoulder, she held her sword before her, its point a waiting lightning rod. Gradually she let her grip slide. Her head sank. The sword shook slightly. She shifted her stance and straightened her back. All was the same as before. Except, realized Victoria, that Adara had yielded half a step.

Victoria watched impatiently. Could Adara possibly win? She had done impossible things before. The real Kreesha hunched unmoving, carefully back from Adara's reach. How were they fighting? The contest must be elsewhere, some hidden place which Victoria could neither see nor feel. Adara's head began to nod. The very tip of her sword fluttered. She pushed it back up and shook her head, as if trying to clear her thoughts. She had lost a fraction of a step.

Minute followed minute. Once and again, more and more often, Adara's strength flagged. Each time, she managed to recover, but not before losing another bit of distance. Initially, she had been twice her height away from the stone. Now she stood next to it. Another half-pace back, and the stone would be exposed. Adara was trying desperately to hold her place. Victoria could see the strain on her face. However strong Adara might be, the union of millions of Kreesha was stronger.

Victoria had been told not to interfere. But watching while a friend, if a very strange friend, lost a fight was foreign to her. Besides, only Adara stood between the Kreesha and the whole world. Victoria picked up a stone, noted its heft, and looked for another. She wasn't the superstar of the softball field--there were too many more interesting things to do, like reading, and going on picnics, and looking through the microscope Mom had given her--but she had a pretty mean throw. “Adara?” she called. An answer whispered across her mind. “When you removed the bullet, the favor bond passed into your hands. I cannot ask your aid again.”

Adara glanced at the Western ocean. Moonlight danced off the water, forming a beckoning silvery highway which invited her off to infinity. There was her escape, if she wanted it. Her friend, who had protected her mountain's peace and come through the dark to rescue her, could come with her. She had needed to shield the Gatestone until dawn, but that deed was beyond her strength. The Stone was lost. Only the manner of its passing remained to be chosen.

“No!” Victoria shouted. She pitched rock after rock at the Kreesha's glowing eyes. The first two clattered off Kreeshan hide. The third struck its target. The Kreesha jerked back, its concentration broken. In the heavens, the Kreeshan host wavered out of focus.

Adara's delight soared around Victoria, exultant as a thousand wedding bells ringing through cathedral naves. Their thoughts were linked. Victoria felt Adara as a hollow shell of pain-etched consciousness, holding steady against bitter fatigue. Adara set her hand firmly against Table Rock. The opalescence flooded out of the stone into her. The air crackled and shimmered. Saint Elmo's fire glimmered over her sword and sparked from the top of her hair. The power of the Gatestone, disciplined by Adara's uncompromising will, displaced her utter, bone-aching exhaustion.

Night turned to day. The Kreesha, exposed in all its malignant beauty, reared back. The Gatestone's opalescence coalesced into a single blinding drop of liquid light, which floated unstoppably through the images above. The Kreesha, a stringless puppet, fell to earth. Steam poured out of its carapace. Its ghostly supporters dissolved into fiery chaos.

"We did it!" Adara shouted. "We did it! This day they'll surely rue."

"They're dead?" Victoria asked weakly. Now she felt the pain in her legs.

Her jeans, she realized, were sticky with blood.

"Enough that the rest will learn table manners." Victoria's last sharp thoughts were of Table Rock, reduced to powdery gravel. Then they were someplace else, someplace warm and bright. Afterwards Victoria remembered fragments of images, of an alabaster tub filled with steaming water, of Adara dressing her wounds with an astringent cream, and of a bed softer than goosedown into which she sank in a dreamless sleep.

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Morning. Victoria awoke, still dreamily sleepy. Sunlight streamed through one set of windows. Outside were tall mountains. Snow covered the heights, while pine trees perched like brooding owls on the slopes. Another set of windows was dark. Pressing her nose against a pane, she found that she could see a night-lit field. Why, it was Table Rock, just as she had left it. Table Rock was shattered to gravel. A less observant girl than Victoria would never have noticed the anomalies. The steam from the Kreesha's joints did not rise. Away from the battlefield floated a bat, frozen in mid-flight.

Victoria felt somewhat rested, so it had to be morning, no matter how Table

Rock looked. By now, Mom and Dad would be in a complete panic. She had to get home. Her clothes must be a mess. Then she realized that she was wearing her own nightgown. Her regular clothing, mended well enough that even Mom probably wouldn't notice, at least on an old pair of jeans and older coat, were draped on a nightstand. The Vandamond claw-marks on her legs were barely-visible scratches. Her memories of the Vandamond seemed oddly distant. She could remember what she did, and remembered feeling afraid then, but she didn't feel afraid now. Adara had somehow managed to fix everything.

She stepped from the bedroom and wandered through marble-panelled corridors, her toes sinking into richly patterned Oriental carpets. Paintings and tapestries lined the walls. A swarm of bees, cast in gleaming gold, sipped from bejewelled silver flowers.

She was drawn by distant, gentle sobs. She found Adara sprawled on a couch, her face pressed to a pillow. She hadn't changed her clothes. What was wrong? Last night, Adara had been deliriously happy.

Adara looked up. "You slept well?" she asked. Adara's eyes were bloodshot. Her complexion had recovered a little of its rosy hue. "We'll get you back before people notice that you're gone. You saw the windows, didn't you? While you slept, time passed here, but it didn't pass at home, so it's still night there. I'm, I'm just sad about Table Rock--it took so long for me to build, and then I destroyed it. I needed its power to stop the Kreesha."

“You destroyed Table Rock, no matter what it meant to you, to save me?”

“The Rock was doomed. I made too many mistakes. Killing that thug, never mind that he had a knife at my throat, upset the, the Rock's balance. Once I was hurt, I couldn't get home-- here, I mean--to fix it. The iron in my shoulder--iron won't easily gate--was just too much for me. The unbalance let through the Kreasha and the Vandamond; with the rock gone, they can't reach your plane again. That's why they wanted the rock; it would have let them gate freely from plane to plane. No, the rock was doomed before you came. Either I used it against the Kreasha or I used it to run away. That's no choice--I was bound by the favors we traded. You started the bond with the birds. After the birds, there was the boy in the stream, my stone clock, and those men. Finally there was last night, so I owed you.”

“What if I hadn't come?” Victoria asked.

“I'd have done the same things. Though with three Vandamond at my throat, a chunk of iron in my shoulder, and no sword to handle the Presence, well, I might still have lived through it. I think. I'm really pretty tough,” Adara said.

Victoria hid her doubts. “Couldn't you get help from someplace? I mean, I'm not that dense. Those things were from outer space. You are, too, to do the things you do. How did you get here? A flying saucer? You must have a dad and a mom, though. Or are you older than you look?”

“No, not another planet. The True World is all about us, like the place we saw. It's just farther away. Farther than any star you can see. But there's no flying saucer, only the trick I showed you for stepping from plane to plane.

“I'm not a Martian, I'm a... a peri,” Adara said.

“A persian elf?” Victoria asked.

“Well, I've been to Persia; those carpets are Persian,” Adara answered.

“An elf! The Spirit! No wonder I recognize you! You're in the County Historical Society painting--'The Spirit of Table Rock'. No, that's impossible! That painting's a hundred years old!” Victoria said disbelievingly.

“Yep, that's me. But I'm not much older than you, not in what counts. We just grow up slower than you. I suppose in calendar years I'm a older. But I'm not a grown-up. I'd rather be home, with friends, and brothers and relatives. But I can't! I can't! I ran away. I had to,” Adara said.

“You had to run away? Why Victoria?” asked.

“My people were doing wicked things. I said they were wrong to do them. And I'm old enough that I can't be hushed like a baby. The wicked people killed my friends. They tried to kill me with thugs, and soldiers, and finally with monsters. The hrordrin makes a Kreasha look like a field mouse. I got away, by the skin of my teeth.” Adara gestured at a suit of mail hung carefully on the wall. Deep circular slices were etched across its silvery rings. “So I ran as far as I could. I ran so far that I've never seen another person, one of my people, again.”

“You must be lonely,” Victoria said. Adara's muteness was her answer.

“Maybe if I asked my parents, you could come live with us. Would you like that?”

“Me? Oh, Victoria, it's not that I don't like you, but--we really are very different. It wouldn't work. Perhaps I could visit, if your parents didn't know who I was,” Adara said.

“They'd know. They know your name already, and what you look like. And Mom knows everything. She knows if you're thinking something bad before you think of it yourself,” Victoria warned.

“Victoria, you have to go back now. An hour here is an instant at your home, but your mother is approaching your bedroom door.” Adara took Victoria's wrist.

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They stood in Victoria's room. In her palace, Adara had been exotically remote. In Victoria's bedroom, she looked more like a girl visiting overnight from Centervale.

“So we can have a picnic sometime? I think Kelly and Penny would like to thank you for saving them,” Victoria asked.

“Sure. Give me a week? I'm a bit tired. But I'll be there.” They paused awkwardly.

Victoria's door swung open. “Are you having a nightmare, Victoria? Oh!” It was mother. Adara smiled and vanished, leaving behind an afterimage of violet flowers on a rolling knoll.

“I was just looking at the stars, Mom. Is something wrong? You shouted.” Victoria glanced around the room. Her clothing was back, almost where it belonged.

“There is someone else in this room, and she vanished like a ghost,” Mother announced.

“Oh, Mom, there are no such things as ghosts. And no one is here. Maybe it was a peri.” Victoria giggled.

“Yes, dear. Now go to bed. What's a peri?” Mother asked.

“Persian for 'elf'. Crossword puzzle clue. In the Times absolutely every single Sunday. Goodnight, mom.” Victoria yawned and slipped under her coverlets. Her mother straightened a corner of the quilt, then looked under the bed. “Is there a monster under there?” Victoria asked innocently.

“Now, why should I think that? Nor one of your friends, either,” Mother answered. Someone else was hiding in the room, but where?

“Don't worry, Mom, I'll protect you from monsters,” Victoria said.

“I'm sure you will, Victoria.” Mother pulled the quilt up to Victoria's chin. It must have been a shadow.

“I'm sure I have.” Victoria closed her eyes. The terror on the mountain seemed so long ago it hardly mattered. Adara had done that, somehow, healing Victoria's mind while she healed Victoria's other wounds.

“Yes, Victoria, I know. Happy dreams,” Mother said.

## [The Jewels in the Desert](#)

...A Quentin Corey Story

**Jefferson Swycaffer**

Quentin Corey staggered aside when Lieutenant Mark Ambrose clipped his head with the spanner. Pain and shock slowed his reactions, although he was more stunned by bewilderment than from his injury. He darted around to the other side of the camouflaged car, his frantic steps kicking up streamers of sand. Above, the blazing North African sun shone down impersonally.

“Ambrose!” Corey shouted, whirling to meet the Lieutenant's insane charge. The change in the man was astonishing: one moment he had been humming an aimless and pleasant tune, while toiling under the hood of the inexplicably lamed car; the next, he had lunged with the spanner, and nearly knocked Corey's head away. Corey darted back again, moving away from the blind, idiotic hatred that disfigured Ambrose's face.

As a younger man, Corey might have stepped in and removed the bulky tool from the Lieutenant's grasp; he still knew all the tricks. But at forty-eight, his energy already sapped by the heat and the weeks-long North African campaign, he wasn't sure he could master the brash and sturdy English soldier.

“Put down the wrench, man! Talk to me!” Corey's urgings were answered by a frantic rush on Ambrose's part. Corey dodged farther around the car. As Ambrose leaned forward, trying insanely to cut down the distance, Corey slammed down the vehicle's open hood. Ambrose's arm, caught between the hood and the frame, kept the latch from closing, and he extricated himself quickly. He continued his attack, ignoring the rivulets of blood that ran down his sleeve.

“I don't want to hurt you,” Corey implored. “Put down the wrench.” He mopped at his brow, and felt about him for a weapon. His machete was inside the car, and he didn't imagine that Ambrose would allow him the time to fetch it.

Ambrose said not a word, and moved swiftly after him.

Blast, Corey swore silently. I don't like to strike a madman. Ceasing his roundabout retreat he braced his long legs, puffed out his chest, and took a boxer's stance nearby the car. Ambrose rushed up to meet him. Corey parried the first vicious blow with his left arm and jabbed at Ambrose's nose and eye with strength and skill. Ambrose fell back, his nose bleeding, and darted forward again. Corey endeavored to parry the next blow, but his left arm refused to raise. The spanner took him in the side of the neck, just below the jawline. He dropped into the burning sand and lay very still, but didn't lose consciousness until Ambrose hit him on the head, several times, with vicious force.

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Corey awoke sometime after dawn. For several hours, he lay on the warming sands and gazed at the slanted horizon. The blows to his head had been dangerously heavy; sometime during the night he had been sick. The day had baked him, and the night had frozen him, and with what diminished intelligence was left to him he gave thanks that he was alive. It wasn't until late morning that he was able to rise to his knees. He approached the scout-car, and was not surprised to see that Ambrose had fled.

He crawled into the car, and examined himself in the driver's side mirror. He thought he could detect an unevenness in the sizes of the pupils of his bloodshot eyes, but no matter how he squinted, he couldn't be certain.

The waterbags had been taken.

Quentin Corey, not for the first time in his life, admitted the likelihood that he was about to die. He looked again at his face, to reassure himself of his strength of will. He found little comfort in the reflected image: his high brow and clean brown hair were smeared now with sand. His soulful blue eyes were bloodshot and blurred. His strong jawline was shadowed with stubble, and his lips were cracked and dry.

He checked through the car, hoping to find something to give him a vestige of hope. Ambrose had taken all the water, but had left the tinned provisions. Corey hungrily force-fed himself a box of biscuits, and washed them down with a can of soup, which he drank in one long swallow.

About him, the sands of Cyrenaica grew blazingly hot again, following the daily pattern unchanged over the long centuries. He wouldn't be travelling today, so Ambrose would enjoy a two-day start on him. And Ambrose had taken the maps.

Blast and blast again! Corey swore. We drew those maps to guide General O'Connor to Beda Fomm. Without them... He leaned back and relaxed. Without the maps, the British forces would continue making breakfast of the disorganized Italian divisions. Beda Fomm would fall, just as had Bardia and Tobruk. The maps would be helpful, but not vitally necessary; the loss of one unarmored scout car might never even be noticed.

Still, I'm in a tight spot indeed, without water.

A happy thought occurred to him, and he crawled out of the car to peer into the radiator. The water there was none too clean, but the sight of it cheered Corey as much as the discovery of an uncharted oasis in the desert. He quickly drained it into a makeshift water-catch, and drank thirstily.

By the time the evening sun began to tinge the sands with red highlights and blue shadows, Corey felt almost whole again. His head throbbed slightly, and was tender to the touch, but he was going to be able to travel.

But which way? It was over one hundred miles to the wells at Bir Hacheim, and nearly as far to Msus, over more difficult ground. Corey was far from certain he could make it to either destination. In his time he'd crawled quite some distances over the baking floors of the harsh American deserts; he'd nearly died once in a gunfight and pursuit that took him over two hundred miles in the bottom of California's Death Valley. But Quentin Corey was a scientist, nominally an anthropologist, but in this wartime, a newly-trained radiation chemist and geologist — his knowledge of desert formations had led him to the North African Campaign — not a survival expert. He breathed deeply and tried to think.

Ambrose's footprints, still distinct in the loose sand, trailed away due south, into the trackless flat Sahara.

What had driven him mad? There had been no warning whatever. The young Lieutenant had been charming and hospitable, eternally interested in the stories the more experienced Yank had to tell. Corey smiled, even now, remembering the lad's open-armed kindness. The two were united in their hatred of the brutal Italian oppressions, both here in Libya and away in Ethiopia. Ambrose had been slated for transfer to Piatt's force in the invasion of Eritrea; he had positively itched to get away to where the fighting was the thickest.

And as a mapping team, the two had gotten along famously. Ambrose's keen eye and faultless sense of direction had complemented Corey's skill with transom and compass. Nothing in the lad's personality had given Corey any reason to suspect his sanity.

For a long moment, he looked to the north, where the British divisions were having a heyday. He thought about the beer that would be found wherever troops messed. He thought about the comforts, rough though they were, of the military camps.

Then he turned and strode off into the south, following Ambrose's footprints. Even faced with the risk of dying of thirst in the middle of the desert, he could not force himself to leave Ambrose. Explanations for the youth's behavior occurred to him: a sudden cerebral aneurism might have incapacitated his mind; perhaps a familial tendency to insanity had expressed itself under stress. Even now, Ambrose might be lying in a helpless heap, just over the next rise, or he might be circling a short distance away, fuming and raving.

A darker suspicion rose to Corey's mind: Ambrose might have had a very good reason indeed to want those maps kept from the British. And the lad was armed: the standard-issue service revolver was missing from the car. Corey shrugged. It was his nature to give a friend the first benefit of the doubt, and young Ambrose had been a good friend so far.

The bag of provisions at his left hip nicely balanced the makeshift waterbag at his right. He wished idly for a walking stick, but quickly realized how useless wishes were for a man in such a desperate situation. The sun set over his right shoulder, sinking redly into the blistering desert sands.

And in St. Louis, my wife will be teaching her first class of the midmorning, while snow falls outside the windows. My daughter will be studying arithmetic and letters, and frisking through the snowdrifts. I pray that this war never engulfs them as it has me; I pray that my country can avoid the firestorm that has been unleashed.

He strolled on through the darkness, feeling with his feet for the impressions of Ambrose's footprints in the sand. So long as he stayed moderately alert, he was in no danger of losing the path, although he checked his progress every half an hour with a handflash. At times, the going was over hardpan or fields of crushed rock; always, Ambrose's trail led straight on, due south, as if, impossibly, he were heading for some clandestine rendezvous in the midst of the empty waste. Corey followed, and tried to extend his meager supply of water.

Overhead, the constellations blazed. He watched mighty Orion set into the west, eaten away star by star by the knife-sharp horizon. He watched the slow swing of Sirius and Canopus, and marvelled at the liquid brilliance of the Milky Way. A shooting star smashed across the sky, from behind him to well in front, its path the same as his: due south. He saw its trail extend for an alarmingly long time; he even saw it fragment, with tinier firetrails paralleling the major streak of light. In the deadly silence, he even fancied he could hear it sizzling as it passed.

Dawn began with the ghostly zodiacal light, pale and cool and blue. Then, with a suddenness that would never cease to be surprising, it was light. Corey saw, with dismay, that Ambrose's footprints continued, steadily and unwaveringly leading to the south. Corey decided to make the best use of the few hours between the light and the beginning of the devastating heat, and stepped up his pace. Shortly thereafter, the sun splintered across the eastern horizon, and bleached the landscape into a harsh chiaroscuro of painful whites and cool, pooling shadows.

In the middle distance, across a wide valley and built terraced upon a steep hillside, a city stood.

A city that could not possibly be there.

I know this desert, Corey reassured himself. I've flown over this region with the British reconnaissance forces. In happier times, he'd flown also with the Italian survey, taking high-altitude photographs of the sandblown wastes. We could not never have missed a ruined city like this one. He squinted, trying to resolve the edifice into an illusion of escarpment or scarp. He'd

seen cliff-faces that had been carved by persistent winds into regular crenelations, convincingly castle-like; he'd seen the Fata Morgana mirage across the Straits of Messina, and the tall castle that sometimes appeared at the Bab el Mandeb where the Red Sea ebbs into the Gulf of Aden. But not even the most convincing mirage had ever held the crystalline reality of this city, and no natural formation of stone or clay had ever shown the meticulous natural details of a man-made city.

And was it truly a ruin? As he watched, running his eyes up and down the citadels, houses, towers, bridges, and terraces, he saw brilliant scarlet flags simultaneously run up a dozen poles, and shaken out to loll in the windless air. Most astonishing, the peal of a horn — a ram's horn, without possibility of doubt — carried across the miles. The music was an anthem, a fanfare, a morning-song completely unlike the traditional Islamic morning call to prayer. Shivers of fear and excitement thrilled along Corey's spine: this city, impossible as it was, was a forgotten relic of a pre-Mohammedan era.

Ambrose's footprints beelined toward it. Corey shook his head and made shift to follow.

The closer he got, the more solid became the city's reality. He could see motion -- curtains waving in windows, wind-blown detritus rolling down the streets. But there were no people. He paused and knelt: Ambrose's trail was at least a day old.

What has he found? How can this be? Corey remembered Arabic tales of lost cities, djinn cities, to be found in the desert. He also remembered European and American fantasies of forgotten cities with beautiful white Queens. He shook his head, and hastened on.

As he neared, he began to climb. His descent into the valley had been so gentle as to be virtually unnoticed, but now he had to climb up a winding trail to approach the city. The trail was thin and unkempt, little more than a wild track in the sandstone. There were no vineyards, no plowed fields, no ranges of cattle or sheep. If the city were peopled, whence did they derive their sustenance?

Corey took a deep breath and marched on. He was beginning to dislike the direction his suspicions were taking him.

Soon all doubt was dispelled, as he passed between two gigantic gateposts, and entered a steep courtyard. He had little difficulty in identifying the functions of the various fixtures and facades. The well, central and vital, stood in a position of veneration, raised upon a platform and covered by a sturdy well-house. He approached carefully, and looked down into the pit. The scent of water arose to his nostrils. Looking about in the shaded well-house, he found the bucket and rope, and lowered away. The rope was taut in his hands when he hauled up a bucketful of surprisingly cold water. He drank deeply, then laved his hands and face. Stepping out again into the courtyard, he surveyed what he could see of the city, measuring the distances and angles with a professionally trained eye. To the left was the temple, built with the universal qualities that rendered holy buildings sacrosanct: it was of simple post-and-lintel construction, but elaborate care had been taken in the carving of the columns. Across from it, as opposed as church and commonwealth had ever been, was the market.

Corey's eyes narrowed: the stalls were empty, and no wares showed on display. There was not a person to be seen, no matter where he looked. But the market stalls were shaded beneath bright awnings stretched over poles. If this city was deserted, it had not been so for long. And the fact that the architecture had obvious functions did not relieve Corey's apprehensions: the particular styles of the carvings were almost completely unfamiliar to him.

A peculiar tightness gripped his's throat. He strode about the courtyard, looking in all directions. The windows of the high houses stared back at him blankly, blindly. Yet there were freshly-cut flowers in the window boxes.

A sound behind him caused him to whirl, but there was nothing to be seen.

His heart pounded, as his suspicions began to congeal into an unpleasant certainty. He shouted aloud, a wordless halloo, knowing, even as he did so, that it would echo horribly against the high, blank walls.

"Ambrose," he shouted, hoping that his friend would be able to hear him. Again the echoes resounded, overlapping and fading like gigantic laughter.

"Hello! Anyone!" The tall whitewashed walls threw his voice back and forth, and the shout was swallowed in thick nightmarish silence.

Corey shrugged, and turned about. He stopped short at the sight of the enormous black man who stood before him. The man was a living image from a storybook, a harem guard of an Arabian Nights sultan. He wore a brilliant red sash about his waist, and two enormous scimitars were stuck through it. Other than that, he wore only short trows and a torque of massive gold. The hilts of the man's scimitars were also of gold; Corey didn't doubt for a moment that the gold was solid. He did toy with the idea of whipping up his machete and giving the man a lesson in skilled swordplay, but knew that such an action would be desperately wrong.

The man, a bald-pated giant, lifted one muscle-knotted arm and pointed. His meaning was obvious; Corey turned and proceeded in the indicated direction. In silence, the two walked up streets so steep nearly as to be ramps or ladders. They kept to the broadest ways, between tall buildings of stucco and of stone. As they walked, the buildings grew more massive, built on a grander scale. Finally they arrived at what could only be the palace, a central keep built on several levels, and overlooking the whole of the city and the valley beyond. His guide waited behind as he entered.

This whole dumbshow of menace has a purpose. I need only discover what it is. Corey stepped into the darkness of the palace entryway and waited for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. What he saw astonished him. Overhead was a high arched ceiling, built of pyramided cross-beams laid at right angles. It was a primitive essay at a dome, but was impressive nonetheless if only for its sheer size. He strode out to the middle of the floor and gazed up and the cyclopean beams, stepping upward and upward to finally meet in a small square of flat ceiling. The angles and shadows were enhanced by an intricate skein of carvings of a style he had never known before. When he looked down again, he saw that the walls, too, were adorned with carvings, painted in soft glowing colors. At the head of the room was a great carved throne, a titanic block of solid sandstone carved in the shape of a stolid inhuman god.

"This can't be real," Corey muttered.

"Then I must be an apparition," chuckled a soft voice behind him.

Corey closed his eyes, and turned slowly about. When he dared to look again, he saw a beautiful woman, her skin as pale as ivory, her long straight hair as dark as coal. She was dressed in a soft clinging robe of purest white. Corey reprimanded himself for not having expected her appearance. She confirmed his hypothesis about the city; she vindicated his alarms and suspicions. He knew, now, where he was, and he wanted nothing more than to be far, far away.

He was trapped, but that would be no excuse for rudeness. "No, ma'am. You seem real enough." He smiled, that killer smile which, in his youth, had charmed many a miss.

"Welcome to my city. It is called..."

"Opar. Kor. Koth. Shangri-La." Corey smiled to show that he was joking.

“Silly man. My city is named Hedrun, and I am...” She paused. “Will you not guess at my name also?”

“Of course,” Corey said gallantly. “You can only be Ayesha” — he pronounced it 'Assha,' — “or La, or Zenobia, or Dejah Thoris — “

She laughed at his clowning, as he had hoped she would. “I am Chanda. And what manner of foolish names are those you gave me? Are they fitting?” She made a pretense of anger. “I would not be flattered if you had named me 'ugly,' or 'flatulent,' or 'dunce.’”

“Never,” Corey said in mock horror. “The names I listed were all of beautiful women—“ He saw the look that crossed her face, and quickly added, “But none so beautiful as yourself, of course.”

She smiled. “You are as kind as any courtier. I'm so very happy to meet you.”

Corey wondered at her beauty, and at her childlike and naive manner. He tried to bring the discussion around to a more serious matter.

“This city — where are the inhabitants?”

“You saw no one?”

“None at all.”

“Then they have gone.” She walked about on the stone floor of the palace as if moving slowly through a dance. “They have all gone away and left me.” Her dance grew stately and formal, and conveyed a deep sense of regret. Corey fancied that he heard the faint echoes of an eastern orchestra, plaintively weaving an adagio upon the air.

“There was a guardsman,” he objected. “He guided me here.”

“Oh,” Chanda laughed. “There are always guardsmen when they are needed.” Her meaningless little dance continued, then faltered and slowed. The drifted near to Corey and tossed her arms around his neck. “But I am so lonely here.” Her voice husked low. “So very lonely.”

Not for the world would Corey have touched her now. The danger in cavorting with a strange woman in a North African city was serious enough — positively dire, he knew from bitter experience. But this giddy, irreverent woman seemed touched by the gods with a special madness, and he knew that that implied an equally special protection. And here, of all places, where the rules were vague and unsettled...

“I am glad to allay your loneliness for a few short hours,” he said gallantly. “But first I am bound to search for my lost friend.”

Chanda stepped back, smiling an enigmatic smile of secret triumph. “Your friend is tall and handsome, young and strong?”

“Yes,” Corey began; Chanda stopped him from speaking further with a knowing glance.

“He is raven-haired, and his locks are curled? He has an unmanageable little tuft of hair right here” — she indicated the top rear of her own head — “that stands upright on its own, no matter how he tries to smooth it?”

“Yes.”

“And his name is Marco Ambrose?” She pronounced the last name 'Am-broze-ay.'

“Yes.” Yes, I'm fairly sure, now, that it is...

Chanda lifted her chin and stared with reproof at Corey. “Your friend is no courtier, and he is no gentleman. He treated me with great disrespect — I am a Queen, you know — and then he tried to steal a very big handful of our rubies.”

“Rubies,” Corey said dumbly. But it fit; it fit. All of the elements were there, and he knew how they had to go together. Ambrose had been trapped by greed; now Corey knew that he

was in deep danger of being snared by hesitancy. This city was a trap, and the jewels were not the only bait.

“Yes. Our rubies.” Chanda looked at him appraisingly. “Would you like to see our rubies? Our emeralds? Our tourmaline, opals, diamonds, our sapphires, beryls, garnets? Do you crave the sight of gold and silver, of hammered copper, of bronze spheres and brass staves? Shall you then dip your hand secretly into the caskets and try to bear away what you covet? And shall I have a guardsman chain you, also, to a wall?”

“As you had done to Ambrose.” He gave the name the English pronunciation.

“Yes. As I had done to Ambrose.” She spoke the name the way she had before.

“I am not a thief.”

“I believe you.” Her stern gaze softened, and she approached him once more. “But I can read your heart, and I know what you truly want.” She stepped back, and laughed at his expression of consternation. “Come. I will take you to your friend, and then I will show you our treasure-pit. You will steal nothing from it, other than the sight of it, which I will permit you to carry with you.”

“Ambrose first.”

“First, Ambrose,” she agreed.

She clapped her hands, and a stern giant appeared, another guardsman. He was either the same man who had guided Corey hither, or a man as indistinguishable from him as his twin brother. At a gesture from Chanda, he padded silently away, only to return in a moment with a brightly burning torch. He then turned away and led them through a narrow door in the back of the great high chamber.

The way was as narrow and cramped as the passages in a dream. Dressed stone walls gave way to carved tunnels, rough-hewn from fissureless basaltic rock. Deeper and deeper beneath the surface of the desert valley they descended, hemmed between ragged stone and bending slightly beneath a dangerously low ceiling. Chanda's feet skipped lightly over the rough, uneven floor, but Corey's boots seemed determined to trip over every knob, and to slip upon every slick place. The guardsman in the fore showed no distress at the descent, just as he — or his twin — had shown no reaction to Corey's momentary resistance when summoned to the palace. Huge, thick, wearing only the thick trousers and golden torque, with his gigantic scimitar loose at his side, the guardsman bore the fluttering torch before him in one great fist. He and Chanda were backlit, and Corey, behind them, was fascinated by the contrast between the two. The guard showed a hard-edged silhouette against the torchlight, a solid block of man-shaped obsidian, striding as if recently emerged from the cold black rock of the tunnel. Chanda glimmered, and the light warmed him. It was as if she were slightly translucent; her thin gown certainly was, and Corey could see every detail of her slim body in glowing outline. Against his will, he began to feel the stirrings of lust.

Steady on, old man, he told himself sternly. You're in peril most dire, and a misstep means worse than woe. Getting myself in trouble over beautiful women in far-off lands is purely a matter of my past. He tried to comfort himself with homely images of St. Louis — a baseball game in the fall; ice-skating over the pond behind his home in the dead of winter; his Great Dane Rembrandt barking a vast, exuberant welcome...

The darkness closed in upon him, and the tunnel behind him slowly filled itself with images of dread. Not for all the rubies in India, nor all the luscious women in the West, would he have dared to turn about, nor to leave the flickering circle of light cast by the smoking torch.

How long they went on, he would never know; the time drew out, and the number of fumbling steps seemed uncountable. The weight of the world above him seemed infinite, and then more than infinite, as if the stone overhead went up, not only to the desert floor, but beyond, to the stars, blotting out all of the light of heaven.

He was recalled to himself by a hiss of indrawn breath from Chanda. It was the first inelegant action he had ever seen her perform, and it shocked him to reality. She and the guardsman had come to an abrupt halt.

He peered past them, and saw a set of empty shackles stapled to the rock wall.

“Is Ambrose gone, then?” he asked stupidly. “Has someone else come and taken him?”

Chanda turned to him, although he could not see her face in the darkness. Her voice was strained. “No one could have come here.”

“He must have freed himself, then,” Corey snapped, and stepped past her and the guardsman to peer at the shackles. They had been shattered by a point-blank discharge of Ambrose's revolver.

Corey rounded on Chanda; she may have been a Queen, but at that moment she was to him only a stupid child. “Why didn't you take away his revolver?”

“His what?” Chanda asked in a small voice.

Corey inhaled deeply. He yanked the torch out of the guardsman's hand and started on down the tunnel as fast as he dared. Chanda and the guardsman made shift to follow. Corey used a portion of his breath to explain to them, in winded phrases, what had happened. “A revolver. A gun. Oh, blast...” His mind scrabbled for an analogy. “It fits in his hand. It's like a bow and arrow. But it doesn't take any time to string, aim, or fire.”

“It is a caster of death? It is a —” “She spoke a word that Corey didn't recognize.

“Yes.”

“I have one of them in my chamber, in the palace above. We are not primitives.”

Corey nearly fell over himself in his astonishment at that remark. He recovered, and swept down the tunnel at top speed, refraining from suggesting to her how useful such a weapon might be to them if she had thought to bring it.

When the tunnel suddenly let out onto a ledge overlooking a great rounded cavern, Corey had to struggle to avoid pitching headlong out into space. The torch slipped from his fingers, and he burned the palm of his hand grabbing it to prevent it from falling. The trail turned sharply to the right, and wound down the inside wall of the cavern. Although the chamber was vast and dark, he could see the glints everywhere of jewels and gold, reflecting his torchlight. And across the cavern, near the far verge, was another torch. Corey stopped and narrowed his eyes. Beneath the torch, working in its light, Ambrose knelt, scooping handful after handful of gems and goldwork into his knapsack. He spied Corey at the same moment. The distance was too far for any shouts to be intelligible.

“He profanes the pit of treasures!” Chanda cried. “He will have to be punished. His fate will be grim and painful, and years shall pass before his release from the suffering!”

Corey winced at the thought of the skill that a years-long punishment by torture would have to imply; he wasted no more time in observing, but instead plunged down the trail toward the cavern's bottom.

As he sped on, bits and fragments of the treasure became clear in the torchlight. He saw only the tiniest fraction of the whole wealth of the subterranean cache, and only fleetingly. But the value of it all was already past his ability to conceive.

He saw man-high vases of glittering red porphyry, tightly sealed with close-fitting lids of beaten gold. He saw life-sized statuettes of noble gods and goddesses, strewn about as if they were toys, each cast flawlessly of gold, and each inset with emerald flakes for clothing, with rubies for tiny, beady eyes. There was a family look in the deep carven features, and Corey knew, without possibility of doubt, that the figures had been carven from life. He saw a large flat table, half sunken beneath a sea of tiny gold beads, that depicted the flat, circular earth...and the lands beyond. At the center was the north pole, with an utterly impossible but completely accurate mapping of Greenland and each of the thousand Canadian islands of the Northwest Territories. South America and Africa were distorted, and Antarctica was a circular ring around the world's periphery. And the world did not end there, but went on, and on, with new mountain ranges and new seas, and new continents of incredible size. Several locations upon the map were marked with tiny inset sapphires, and Corey ached to be able to stop and examine them more carefully. Schliemann's Troy would be the merest shadow of glory when compared with the sites Corey glimpsed: sunken Atlantis; drowned Lemuria; and a particularly ominous sunken island in the South Central Pacific...

He saw orreries and astrolabes, and a huge armillary sphere with a shocking profusion of more and more eccentric hoops, nineteen in all. He saw calculating machines, and tide-boxes; folding cut-away scale models of undiscovered pyramids; a stack of papyrus and vellum scrolls, thrown together all helter-skelter and reaching high into the air.

Had he not already cottoned to the threat posed by this city and its catacombs of dire temptation, he would have been lost. There was a lifetime's work — no, ten lifetimes, or a hundred — in merely examining the archaeological and scientific wealth here, without even giving a moment to serious investigation or cataloguing. The thought of leaving without ever delving into the mysteries here tore at Corey's heartstrings, and he slowed his footsteps involuntarily, part of him begging himself to stay and immerse himself in the infinite volumes of lost lore.

A shot echoed from somewhere ahead of him; he threw himself down, off the trail, into the high-piled gold and gems. Chanda and the guardsman, close behind him, continued their charge. The guardsman rushed past where Corey huddled, his scimitar loose in his massive fist. Chanda also ran past, but Corey, acting instantly, reached up and caught her by the elbow. She fell awkwardly into his lap.

“You! Stop and let me go at once!”

“Don't just rush in to him,” Corey snapped. “We have to come at him from an angle where he can't see us approach.”

Chanda quieted. Corey extinguished the torch by thrusting it forcibly deep into a pile of silver coins. He held onto it, however, and with his other hand loosened the heavy machete that was strapped to the outside of the calf of his left leg.

Then he set off in the darkness, negotiating his way by touch, heading cross-country through a great glittering sea of incalculable wealth. He heard Chanda near him, trying to be silent as she moved. They trod the sovereign treasure of the world beneath their feet, navigating by feel and by instinct. Soon, climbing up from behind a small mountain of stacked gold bars, they saw the tableau of conflict: Ambrose stood facing the guardsman at a distance of approximately twenty feet. Ambrose held his pistol in his fist, and his torch upraised in his other. His knapsack was tied to his belt, and from the way it hung, it was clear that it was heavily weighted down with valuables.

“Don't force me to shoot you,” Ambrose muttered. The guardsman said nothing, but stepped solemnly forward, holding his scimitar before him in a low guard position.

“Damn it, I warned you!” Ambrose shouted, and drew back on the trigger. The explosion of sound echoed thunderously in the cavern, and the darkness threw back the report in a shower of fragmentary soundclaps. The giant guardsman staggered, and an ugly wound appeared beneath his breast. Dark blood began to drip down his ribs, but still he advanced.

Ambrose blanched, and began to back up. Corey shifted, trying to gain a position where he could come at Ambrose all unawares. Somewhere in the darkness, Chanda also maneuvered, but for the moment Corey had lost track of her position. Only Ambrose's torch served to illuminate the scene.

Now or never at all, Corey muttered, and advanced as silently as he could toward Ambrose. Ambrose, not seeing him, fired again at the bulking guardsman, striking him again in the chest. Again the guardsman was jolted, but did not sway or fall.

Corey prepared for a rush at his once-friend, when, out of the darkness, Chanda appeared, beyond Corey and behind Ambrose. She advanced with deadly stealth, a polished silver dagger upraised in her hand. Corey gritted his teeth and kept silent, although his instincts urged him to cry out to Ambrose in warning.

What sound Ambrose heard was never clear: certainly Corey didn't make it, frozen in utter stillness as he was. Equally clearly, the twice-wounded guardsman gave no sign that he saw his Queen advancing upon his foeman's rear. Perhaps Chanda kicked a trinket with her foot, or her gown may have rustled. With lightning speed, Ambrose whirled, saw her, and saw his opportunity at the same time. He dropped his torch, which, flickered but was not extinguished. With his freed hand, he grabbed the Queen's upraised dagger-hand in a ruthless grip and pulled her to him. She struggled, to no avail; in only an instant he had captured her, and held his pistol clapped brutally to her temple.

“Now, big fellow, you are letting me go?”

The guardsman lowered his scimitar, his face as neutral of expression as it had ever been. It seemed then more than ever that the man was a mere automaton, a man truly formed of the stone of the tunnels.

“Ambrose, stop it!” Corey shouted.

“Reveal yourself, Corey!” Ambrose answered, darting his eyes about and holding the Queen in his crushing grasp.

“All right.” Corey fished a pair of matches from his pocket and rekindled his torch. Ambrose met his gaze.

“Well, Corey. I thought you were dead.”

“You hit me enough times. Perhaps I ought to be.”

Ambrose frowned. “I don't know why I did that. I wasn't right in my own head just then. The heat...”

“And your treason, and your anxiety about the way the Italians are so badly losing this phase of the war.”

“What are you talking about? What treason?”

“Treason against Great Britain, Marco Ambrose.” This time, he pronounced it 'Am-broze-ay.'

“I didn't think you knew,” Ambrose lamely muttered. The guardsman, sensing a momentary lapse of his foe's concentration, started to leap forward, but Ambrose stiffened and ground the muzzle of the gun mercilessly against Chanda's head.

“Help me, Quentin Corey,” she pleaded piteously. “Help me, and I will give you all of the gold you can carry.”

“Hell,” Ambrose laughed, “if it's gold you're after, take all you want. There's enough here for both of us.”

“Ambrose,” Corey said, his voice tight but under his control. “Let her go. She's no part of this. Neither is the guardsman. It's a test...and you're failing it.”

“What are you talking about, old man?” Ambrose tried to watch the guardsman and the scientist at the same time. The guardsman, patient as a dog at bay, held his position and waited to leap.

“This place. This whole city, with its caverns, is impossible. The city had no farmland beyond it, no cattle, no sheep. A city cannot exist without support.”

“You're the anthropologist,” Ambrose said, his voice impatient. “You explain it. They trade with their neighbors. I don't care. If you want to help me, then scoop up a bagful of gold. Otherwise, get away from me, and let me get the hell out of here. I don't like this place. I don't like this place at all.”

“Nor does it like you. Ambrose, you're being tested. This place — “ Corey waved his hands in frustration at his inability to explain exactly what he meant.

“Look,” he tried again, “I don't know if I can convince you of this, but please, please, please believe me. You're in the worst danger you've ever been in, anytime during your life.”

Ambrose frowned. Corey was obviously sincere, yet what he said made no sense.

“What are you trying to say?”

“This gold: where can it have come from? All the mines of Africa — ancient and modern — Egypt, Kush, Ethiopia, Johannesburg and Pretoria — being worked continually for five thousand years... Could they have filled this cavern?”

“I don't know the answer to that!” Ambrose snapped. “Tell me what you are getting at.”

Corey sighed. “This city is a test, a trap. It is a manifestation of the collective unconscious of the human race. We — you and I both — are being tested against the substrate of myth. We are being weighed against standards as much older than the Golden Rule as the Pyramid of Khufu is older than New Brunswick. This city is not real; not the way we understand the term.”

“What are you saying, Corey? That I'm dreaming? Like Alice's Adventures Underground? This is all a hallucination?”

“Do you feel like you're dreaming? Do you feel as if you're asleep?” Corey's sarcastic tone took Ambrose by surprise.

“Of course not. But...”

“Fairy tales. The Brothers Grimm. In French, or English, or Italian, they're all the same: the tales that old Grandmothers tell to wide-eyed children on cold nights in the Autumn. What's the moral of every story?”

“I don't know. I don't care. Corey, look — “

“No. You look. Don't steal the fairies' gold. Don't be greedy. Don't fight the terrible troll head-on.”

Ambrose looked suddenly at the guardsman, who had been making use of Corey's distraction to edge closer, slowly closer to the Italian. Ambrose jerked the gun against the Queen's hair, just behind her ear. The guardsman halted, but did not retreat.

“Damn it, Ambrose! I'm trying to save you!”

Ambrose was stunned by Corey's unaccustomed use of profanity. Keeping his eyes upon the guardsman, he nodded. "Okay, Corey. I believe that you don't want me dead. What do I do?"

Corey addressed the Queen, who had been silent in her pain and fear since Ambrose had captured her. "Chanda. He is evil...but he's my friend. Can you let us go?"

Chanda stamped her foot against the floor of gold, and threw herself from side to side in an attempt to pry herself free from Ambrose. "Never! Are you evil also? Have you forsaken all that you ever believed in? What has this man made of you?"

"He deserves his chance to pass the test," Corey said simply.

"No!" Chanda threw her arms wide, knocking Ambrose back and away. Instantly, the guardsman leaped to the attack. But Corey was equally swift. The two arrived before Ambrose at the same moment. Ambrose's gun exploded virtually in the guardsman's face, and yet the entry wound seemed small and insignificant upon that massive, flat visage. Corey's machete leaped upward, in time to parry the great downward swing by the guardsman.

"Run!" he bellowed; Ambrose needed no second urging; he fled away toward the path up and out.

The fight that followed took all of Corey's concentration and skill, and he was hard-pressed merely to keep the guardsman's scimitar away from his face or limbs. The giant was a demon or troll indeed; he fought with utter fury and abandon, yet all the while his face was immobile and expressionless. Corey parried, parried, and parried again. Sweat soaked him, and he was backed up step after relentless step. After a time, he found himself parrying with both machete and torch, and in danger of being stranded in the darkness.

Sometime during the hammerblows of the combat, he heard a rumbling and clattering of falling stone, and fear clutched at his heart. Was the cavern collapsing? Then he was too busy to think or to worry, and his parries grew more and more desperate. The guardsman was inhumanly good, and would probably defeat him within only five or six more swings.

Corey suddenly shifted tactics, abandoning the purely defensive posture he had restricted himself to, and took a backhanded swing in at the giant's ribs. The jolt he felt through his machete was blunt and brutal; he felt as if he had just hacked at the bole of a white oak. His time was running out...

With his blank expression unchanged, the huge guardsman stopped suddenly, and lowered his sword-arm. Corey stepped back and sobbed for breath. The guardsman crumpled, dropping to his knees, then toppling forward onto his face.

Ambrose stood behind him, a large golden anvil gripped in both hands.

"The Queen caused the ledge to collapse," he muttered. "No way out."

Corey gasped, the exertion of the fight having nearly destroyed him. "Ambrose. Thank heaven. You don't know what this means."

"We're going to die?"

"You passed the test."

"You were serious about all that?"

"Yes. This place is a collection of archetypes, images that the human species holds in universal regard." He found it difficult to speak, so thirsty was he for air. Ambrose seemed content to wait.

"Everything here...all of it...serves only one purpose. It is to measure us against a common standard of behavior. And by common, I mean universally common. The guardsman there" — Corey indicated the fallen giant — "is a representation of the troll, the guardian of the treasure."

“And I? I was the villain?”

“Yes. But no longer. You heard me, and came around.”

“What part, then, am I playing now?”

“The villain redeemed.” Corey sighed. “We are individuals, not archetypes. Being an archetype is too large a task for any mortal, and as the days go by, we represent differing ones.”

“Just as a man in his time plays many parts?”

Corey smiled. “For an Italian spy, you have studied English literature very well indeed.”

Ambrose's face tightened. “Be careful. As a villain, I can still be un-redeemed.” But then he smiled. “And if you are right, then this place of testing would punish me for it.”

“Yes.”

They sat in the circle of torchlight and waited. After a time, the voice that Corey was waiting for sounded from far above. It was Chanda's voice, but cold, so cold and unlovely.

“You have seen fit, O Quentin Corey, to aid your friend in his rapacity. For that, you will both die together. You will starve to death in this cavern, in the darkness, once your torch falters.” Her voice turned hideously cruel. “Or, if you wish, you may eat gold and drink jewels.”

Corey closed his eyes in anguish.

“What's wrong?”

“She, too, plays more parts than one,” Corey said sadly. “She was the Maiden of myth, the young innocent over whom the hero and the villain are set to fight. But when our roles changed, hers did also. She is now the witch, and she has imprisoned us.”

“What shall we do?” Ambrose's voice was tight, but still comfortably far from panic.

“We escape.”

“What if there is no way out?”

“This is myth,” Corey stated positively. “There is always a way out.”

“I have a suspicion,” Ambrose muttered. “We are both lying in the sand by our broken-down car, and this is a delirium.”

Corey smiled. “That isn't the case. But some of the same rules apply.”

“And how will you find your way out?”

For an answer, Corey stood, and walked slowly across the heaps and mounds of treasure to the high, blank stone wall of the chamber. Carefully, moving very slowly, he began to circumnavigate the cavern, his torch held high before him. Ambrose followed, uncomprehending.

Suddenly, Corey halted. Ambrose looked at him quizzically. Corey pointed with his free hand, indicating the slight trembling and wavering of the torch's flame.

“A draft...” Ambrose whispered. Corey nodded.

Moving with caution and deliberation, they followed the stream of moving air across the cavern. Halfway across, the faint motion of the air ceased, and the torch burned with a smooth, vertical flame.

“Aren't you awfully loaded down?” Corey asked pointedly.

“What..? My knapsack?”

“Yes.”

“You want me to get rid of it? This sack is crammed to the top with gold and gems!”

Corey faced him squarely. “This is myth. This is faery. This is unconscious. This is dreamwork.” He paused. “But before long, we'll be hungry and thirsty, and unless that gold and those jewels mean more to you than life...”

“I confess it before myth and God,” Ambrose grumbled. “I am greedy.” After a moment, he shrugged. “But I would prefer to live.” He untied the bag from his belt and threw it away into the darkness.

Corey walked slowly forward, and after a short time the torch flame began again to flicker.

“Who are you?” Ambrose asked suddenly. “Are you the hero?”

“No,” Corey answered shortly.

“Are you the youngest of the seven brothers, who in all of the stories is the only one with any luck?”

“Maybe.”

“Or are you my guardian angel?”

“I never intended to be.”

“And where did this whole test come from? Why us?”

“Why did you strike me with the wrench, out on the desert?”

“I...I don't know. I went suddenly mad. I was as if possessed. I can't explain it...”

“I can.” Corey smiled. “I think.” He remained silent for a time, following the bending of the flame.

“You were the one to be tested. Your guilt and sense of urgency about the battles between your countrymen and the British led you into a state of emotional distress that left you vulnerable to this mythological trap. I followed you because I didn't know why you'd left.”

“When did you learn that I was really Italian?”

“Only when Chanda gave you your true name — Marco Ambrose. She also knew my name, although I never gave it to her.”

“So you followed me out into the desert because you thought I was your friend?”

“Yes.”

“Then you must truly have been playing the part of hero.”

“Then, yes.”

“Now?”

“I'd rather not say.”

Ambrose let it pass.

#

Their escape was inelegant and painful. The slowly moving breeze in the cavern led them to a fissure in the stone, through which they wriggled. The fit was tight, and only their cooperation allowed them to survive. At points, they traversed tunnels so tight that they had to exhale fully in order to narrow their bodies enough to squeeze through. Ambrose had less trouble, but Corey was a larger man, and he scraped away a good deal of skin before he finally popped out of that tightest passage. It was obvious that Ambrose's bag of gold could never have accompanied them in their long uphill swim through the seemingly solid rock. At other times, the fissure opened up into vast galleries up which they painstakingly climbed. Crevices yawned beneath their feet, and crumbling slides of rotten stone cascaded down upon them. If their escape was due to the workings of myth, it was also a matter of hard labor and desperate effort on their part. They rappelled across one gap by tying their belts together to form a short rope; they leaped across another chasm, and only Corey's strength and speed prevented Ambrose from toppling back into the unplumbed depths.

At last they arose from the sifting sands of the desert, and were stunned into momentary blindness by the harsh winter sun. The long trek back to the car was a trial to them both, but they

made it at last, arriving at the car only to collapse into it for its shade and drop into deep, dreamless slumber.

#

They spent the next day scratching markings into the desert sand, which would, they hoped, be seen by General O'Connor's air reconnaissance forces. By that evening, thirst had driven them to contemplate the cross-country walk to Msus, impossible though such a trek might be. The rattle of a distant engine interrupted their discussion.

They raced up the nearest rise, and waved frantically to the approaching car. It was a scout car like theirs, originally a civilian model hastily painted in camouflage and assigned to a survey/recon team.

“You won't turn me in as a spy, will you?” Ambrose asked plaintively.

“Sorry, my friend, but you know I have to. Your battles are over, and your tests are done. Wait out the war in comfort.”

“Eh? I'm a spy! They'll have me shot!”

“They will not. My word on it.”

“I respect your word, Mr. Corey.” Ambrose embraced him. “You saved my life. Now twice.”

“Yes.”

“What part, though, tell me: what part were you playing in the test? You said that you started out as the hero, but didn't end up that way.”

“That's right.” Corey grinned, and reached into his pocket.

From it he drew a long, finely formed gold chain, made of links so small as to be nearly indistinguishable. “I never intended it, but I ended up as the trickster.”

Ambrose goggled, then laughed. “The seventh son!”

“Jack, who stole the giant's treasure.”

“Prometheus.”

“Loki.”

“Quentin Corey, I admire you so very greatly. It is no shame to have been caught by you.”

“You caught yourself. Just as you redeemed yourself. And I guess I ought to thank you for leading me into that place.” Corey grinned. From another pocket, he pulled another fine gold chain. And a handful of tiny coins. And several small diamonds. And...

He had, of course, hidden it all away before the scout car pulled up beside them, and before the enthusiastic British officers tumbled out with much-welcome waterbags in hand.

## Howard's Dilemma

**Kent McDaniel**

Around four-thirty Howard Vancil's phone rang, and it was Mrs. Jennings from around the corner. "Howard, did Sean come home?"

A prickling ran along his spine. "I thought he was with Bob and Gary."

"They came home without him. They couldn't find him."

Howard's son Sean had come to Oakdale two weeks ago for the summer, and he played a lot with the Jennings brothers. Bob was ten, and Gary was eight, like Sean. It was Saturday, and a couple hours earlier the three had walked over to Blake School's playground, two blocks away.

Howard made himself speak calmly. "He's got his cell phone. I'll call."

After three rings, Sean picked up. "Hi, Dad."

"Where are you?"

"Walking back from the Dairy Queen." His son's voice was cheerful.

"The *Dairy Queen*?" Ten blocks away. "You went to the Dairy Queen?"

"Yeah," Sean chirped, "with Phillip. My new friend."

"Where are you? How far from home?"

"How far are we from my house?" Sean sounded as if he'd turned away from the phone, then spoke into it again. "Like three blocks."

"Well, hurry it up, OK?" Howard marched out of the small house he rented. In a minute, sure enough, here came tow-headed Sean, slender like his father, strolling down the block, but alone.

Howard met him at the yard, the hot air damp. "Where's Phillip?"

"Right here, Dad." Sean glanced right and looked back at Howard, frowning.

"Sean--nobody's there."

Sean gazed right again and drew back. "I didn't know." He looked at Howard. "I'm the only one who can see him."

If Sean had to have an imaginary friend, did his name have to be Phillip?

Inside, on the couch, Sean said he'd run into Phillip by the fountain. "I said 'Do want to be my friend?' He said, 'Sure.'"

When Sean met new kids, he always said: "Do you want to be my friend?" It sounded so vulnerable.

"And you just went off and left your friends?"

"Phillip wanted to go to the Dairy Queen." Sean's look was part grin, part grimace. "I forgot about Bob and Gary."

Howard took a breath. "Sean, call before you go out of the neighborhood. And don't go alone."

"How 'bout with Phillip?"

Howard closed his eyes. "It has to be someone real."

"Phillip says he *is* real." Sean glanced sideways, blinked. "He says, did you call always your parents before you went anywhere?"

Howard pushed his shoulders against the couch. No, but he wanted Sean to do better than he had. And he wanted to be a better father than his was. Chuck, his Dad, had worked ten-hour days and spent evenings and weekends at The Moose Club.

On the other hand, Chuck hadn't split up with his wife and moved two hundred miles away. When Howard and Juliana divorced--eighteen months ago--they shared custody. Then when Howard moved back to Kentucky, they renegotiated. Sean would remain with her in St. Louis but spend vacations with Howard. He felt like he was deserting Sean, but what could he do? His father's heart was bad, and now his mother had Alzheimer's. That Howard found he preferred life back in Oakdale just made him feel more guilty.

He looked out the window, where sunlight beat down, and back at Sean. "My folks didn't have me call before I went. I didn't have a cell-phone either." When Howard moved, he'd bought Sean one. "Before you leave the neighborhood check with me, OK? Or Aunt Sheila."

Next morning, they went to the First Methodist Church, which Howard's parents attended. Howard was unreligious, but Juliana believed in Mahayana Buddhism and many magical beings whose existence he doubted: Gods, Goddesses, nature spirits, bodhisattvas, and more. Still, to please her, he'd attended the temple and found the services refreshed him. Going to Church seemed to also.

As light through stained glass bathed him, his mind kept drifting back to what he read last night on Wikipedia: An imaginary friend after early childhood might indicate mental problems.

Riding home from church in Howard's van, Sean asked, "Did you play little league baseball, Dad?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Phillip said you played centerfield." Sean shrugged. "He said you didn't hit that good."

"How do you know all that?"

"I *told* you. Phillip."

Howard's face felt like he'd been slapped. "Thing is," he said, calmly, he hoped, "Phillip isn't really real, is he?" He stared at Sean. "Well, he's not, is he?"

"He's real to me." Sean slid lower in the seat. "And it *was* him who told me. He knew you."

They were home.

After supper that evening, Sean went out, and the sound of kids playing floated into Howard's living room. At dark he strolled outside, where wan streetlights glowed and fireflies darted. Seven or eight kids milled around in front of the house three yards down. Howard peered, unable to make anyone out, and his heart fluttered. He called Sean's name.

A small figure darted out of the group and ran toward Howard, and when it reached the streetlight, Howard could see Sean grinning. He jumped into Howard's arms, and Howard extended them high and whirled Sean around in circles till he made himself dizzy. He set Sean on his feet, both of them laughing.

"We were playing hide and seek," Sean said and gave Howard a sheepish grin. "When I was it, Phillip told me where everyone was. He followed them when they hid."

Howard ground his teeth.

Later, at bedtime, Howard said Sean's prayer, and afterward, Sean asked, "Dad, were you in Boy Scouts? Troop 118?"

Howard's throat constricted. "Yes, I was."

"With Ronnie and Sam and Terry and Lawson?"

Howard swallowed. "Are you going to tell me Phillip told you all that?"

"Phillip was in your troop, too, Dad. Remember?"

Everything was silent. "There was a boy named Phillip in our troop. What about him?"

Sean shrugged under his Justice League bedspread. “He was just in your troop. But he’s still a kid, like me.”

Howard made himself breathe, the room, Sean, everything garish, almost pulsating. “Ok, Sean, pleasant dreams.”

He stalked to the musty basement, and under a bare hanging light bulb, rummaged through a pile of cardboard boxes, until he found a battered scrapbook with a hand-lettered sign glued on the front: SCOUTS. He sat on the concrete floor, leafed through it, and stopped near the end. On the bottom of the page there was a picture of Troop 118, twenty-three scouts in three rows. Howard ran his finger along the middle one, passing over his sullen eleven-year-old self, and stopped at the second boy from the end, a jar-headed freckle-face with cross-eyes and a lop-sided grin.

Phillip had lived three blocks from Howard, and they were friends sometimes. Howard liked Phillip’s parents: his mom chain-smoked Pall Malls and cussed like a roughneck, but talked with kids in a natural way almost no adults could manage. His dad read science fiction, listened to Cardinals games on the radio, and watched the stars through a telescope on summer nights. But the real thing was, that they got along. An unspoken tension polluted his own home.

Phillip himself could be OK when it was just him and Howard. When more kids were around, Phillip was always trying to play one against the other. Even when it was just him and Howard, sometimes he’d say things like, “Why isn’t your dad ever home?” Or, “Is your mother drinking or something?”

Howard stuffed the scrapbook back in the box and plodded upstairs. For a long, long time, he’d never thought about Phillip.

Next morning, he got ready to take Sean to Aunt Sheila’s. Howard was redoing Mrs. Tate’s kitchen and bathroom out in Baker Addition. He’d told her beforehand that he’d only be able to work four days a week because Sean was in town, but all day, she’d be asking how much longer everything would take.

Walking out their front door, Sean said, “Dad? Phillip asked why I don’t just stay home. When you’re at work. I’m almost *nine*.”

“Phillip--” Howard heard himself speaking through gritted teeth. “Phillip isn’t real, Sean.” He took a breath. “I thought you liked Aunt Sheila.”

Sean nodded. “But she doesn’t have an Xbox. Or cable.”

“You’re too young to be home alone. You and the Jennings boys play together, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but Phillip--”

Howard shoved out his palm. “I don’t want to hear about Phillip, OK?”

Sean pouted as they walked to Aunt Sheila’s.

After work, Howard drove back to his aunt’s, where she answered the door without her usual smile. He went in, tension creeping into his shoulders. On the couch Sean looked up from a *Justice League* comic, his face as grim as hers.

“Sean told me he was going to play with the Jennings boys,” Aunt Sheila said. “But he went to Hucks instead.” A convenience store/filling station two blocks away.

Howard stared at Sean, whose blonde hair fell across his forehead.

“The clerk caught him trying to leave with two candy bars he hadn’t paid for. I had to come pick him up.”

“Sean! *Lying? Stealing?*” Howard jabbed his finger. “And you don’t cross that intersection alone!”

Sean stared.

Howard lowered his voice. "You can't lie to Aunt Sheila. She won't be able to let you go out and play."

He turned to her. "I'm really sorry." He shook his head.

She gave him a half-smile. "I'm sorry, too. He's a good boy."

As they walked home through sweltering heat, Sean asked, "You never lied to your parents? Or stole?"

Howard felt like screaming. Yes, he'd lied to his parents and shoplifted, shoplifted a lot, for a long time. His freshman year at the university, he started seeing Dr. Schlosser; after that, bit by bit Howard grew less tense and angry, and perhaps kinder and happier.

Sean was gazing at him. "Phillip said you weren't nice--when you were a boy."

*Phillip.* "That might be true." Howard looked down at the sidewalk, where scraggly grass had struggled up between sections.

Sean stared straight ahead. "Phillip asked if you love me." He glanced up. "He said, why did you leave me and Mom? If you do."

Howard stopped. He squatted down and stared in Sean's blue eyes. "Your mom and I couldn't stay together. And I had to come down here, for Grandma and Grandpa. But I love you, buddy boy. I'll always be there for you, best I can." He held Sean's shoulders.

"I'm just telling you what Phillip said."

That night after Sean went to bed, Howard thought about Juliana. He'd told her things about his childhood he'd never told anyone; could that be where Sean got his information? That'd be hard to believe: he and Juliana had managed to stay friends. But where else was Sean getting all this?

He opened his cell phone, hoping she was still up. She was working long hours for Monsanto.

She picked up, sounding tired. "Howard, what's up?"

He told her everything.

"I hope you don't think I told Sean all that stuff."

"I know." Howard felt rueful. "But where's he getting it?"

Neither of them spoke for a long moment; Juliana broke the silence. "This is the first I've heard of any imaginary friend." Her voice took on an edge. "You think Sean should come back here?"

*No...* Summers were all he and Sean had; Howard couldn't lose them, couldn't let Sean lose them. "It's probably better if he stays here," he said. "And we work things out."

"OK then." The slightest reluctance showed in her tone. "Keep me posted, all right?"

After they hung up, Howard stared at the phone. He and Juliana met at Washington U., aspiring journalists, and became lovers. They graduated, and Juliana landed a job with a small local paper, while Howard free-lanced and did remodeling. A year later they got married, and a few years after that, had Sean. With that Howard started worrying about life insurance and Sean's college. He began doing more remodeling and eventually quit freelancing. Which disappointed Juliana. Then she surprised him by entering law school. One small step after another, they drifted apart.

Tired, he tiptoed up to Sean's room and in the moonlight watched him sleep. Kids do look angelic asleep, he thought. Tears in his eyes, he went down to the living room and sat wishing Dr. Schlosser were there. Around midnight he fell into bed, where he drifted in and out of sleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

Then: Boy Scout camp, and a group he leads is tormenting Phillip for days, tripping him, pushing him down, filling his sleeping bag with dirt and ants, putting salt in his milk, Purex in his canteen, calling him “cockeye.” They circle him, dancing, singing, “I’m Cockeye the sailor man. I live in a garbage can. I like to go swimming with syphilitic women, I’m Cockeye the sailor man.” Abruptly, Howard and the others are hiding behind trees along a path through twilit woods, down which creeps Phillip. They step from behind the trees, and he freezes, misaligned eyes staring. They pull knives and hurl them. Phillip runs off through the woods. They chase him, throwing knives. One glances off Phillip’s head, and blood streams down his neck. From the woods he scurries onto a dirt road. A meteor screams down from the sky, crushes Phillip. Blood flows from under it, making a crimson pool. Which spreads and spreads until it’s a lake, warm and viscous, and Howard flounders and thrashes in it, unable to touch bottom.

\*\*\*\*\*

He woke sweat-soaked a little after four in the morning, got up, and drank cup after cup of coffee in the kitchen, waiting for the sun.

Howard was taking his father, who was having heart palpitations, to Dr. Patel that morning. Around eight-thirty, he walked Sean to Aunt Sheila’s under a sky with large white clouds, grey at the edges.

Dr. Patel said that his father’s heart sounded okay, and by ten-thirty Howard was out at Mrs. Tate’s, where she reminded him that in ten days her daughter’s family was coming. Just after two his cell phone rang, and Sean’s number showed. When Howard answered, a voice demanded, “This Mr. Vancil?”

“Yes?”

“This is Wayne Phelps. Your boy was involved in a accident.”

The kitchen seemed to spin. “Is he OK?” His hand gripped the cell like a tourniquet.

“He’s OK,” Phelps drawled. “He caused a wreck, though.”

“Oh?”

“I was ‘cross the street from Blake,” Phelps said. “My buddy was behind me. I went across the intersection. And your boy ran smack dab in front of me.”

“I’ll come over,” Howard said.

He told Mrs. Tate what had happened. “I’m sorry, but I have to go see about it.”

Lips folded in, she nodded.

At Blake School Sean stood by the curb with two guys in their thirties, a rusted-out pickup and late model Focus across the street. The air sweltering, sky more gray than blue, Howard strode over. The taller of the two men, maybe six-three, jerked his thumb at Sean. “You his dad?”

“Yes.” Howard knelt and stared into Sean’s eyes. “You all right?”

Sean nodded.

Howard stood. “Thank God you didn’t hit him.”

“I’m Wayne Phelps.” The guy turned to a smaller man in jeans and a t-shirt. “Ralph back-ended me when I stomped my brakes.”

They walked over to the Focus, leaving Sean on the school ground. Technically, Howard probably owed Ralph nothing: You rear-end someone, that’s generally on you, legally. Still, Sean had caused the whole thing, and if Phelps hadn’t braked--

Howard yelled at Sean, “You ran right in front of him?”

Sean nodded. “Me and Phillip--”

“You ran right in front of this guy,” Howard yelled, “is that right?”

Sean nodded.

Howard and the men talked it over. Phelps wouldn't worry about his pickup. Ralph would take his car to Fritz's Body Shop, and he and Howard would split the charges. Fritz worked cheap, but this was going to cost plenty.

He and Sean rode back to Aunt Sheila's, a little after three. He glared at Sean.

“What the hell were you thinking?”

“Me and Phillip were playing tag! I was chasing him.”

Howard found himself quivering. “I don't want to hear about Phillip, god damn it! Phillip isn't real.”

“He is real!” Sean yelled. “Just cause you can't see him! I don't *care*.”

“SHUT UP ABOUT PHILLIP!” He shook the steering wheel.

“I hate you!” Sean screamed. “You suck!”

Howard drove home and sent Sean to his room. He let Aunt Sheila and Mrs. Tate know he wouldn't be back today and sat looking at the empty street. Last night's nightmare came back to him; he'd had it in one form or another a hundred times. Parts of it had actually happened: the pushing, the ants and dirt, the Purex and the salt, the “Cockeye The Sailorman” song. The ambush in the woods, too, but their weapons had been dirt clods, and more than one hit Phillip. He had run onto the road also, as in the dream, only a speeding jeep hit him, not a meteor from the sky. But it killed Phillip just as dead.

That afternoon, they'd run to the road and gaped at Phillip's crumpled form. Howard told the others. “We were just playing tag, right?” He stared into everyone's faces until they nodded.

Before last night, he hadn't had the dream in years; he'd give anything to never have it again, if it had all never happened. If he'd never been a bitter, mean-spirited boy. If Phillip had never made him mad at the start of camp, telling the others “Good, I hope he doesn't come” when Howard was late arriving.

He made himself stop thinking about it.

Around five-thirty he went to ask Sean if he wanted to go to Dairy Queen. His room was empty, the window open.

Howard slammed his palm against the doorway. He called Sean's phone. No answer. He called Mrs. Jennings; Bob and Gary were home, and Sean wasn't there. He called Aunt Sheila, who'd seen nothing of Sean. He called his son again: “Sean you better pick up this phone. Where are you!”

He ran out to his van and drove all over town under overcast skies. *Where the hell was Sean?*

A little before seven his cell phone rang. Sean.

“Where are you?” Howard cried.

Sean's voice was quiet. “At the cemetery.”

Howard stopped in the middle of the street. “What cemetery?”

“I don't know...” Sean moaned. “It's got one great big tombstone with a big grey ball sitting on this thing. And it's right by this little cement house. I think there's dead people inside.” He paused, then said, “It's the one out North Avenue.”

Howard's stomach clenched. “I'll be right there. Just stay put.”

He stomped the accelerator and raced down the street, heat lightning flashing in the leaden sky. He ran a stop sign, leaving town now, flying along an asphalt road. A few miles

down, he turned and raced down North Avenue, seconds later swerved into a gravel drive. Tombstones stretched on both sides. He stopped, sprang out crying, "Sean?"

"Dad!" Sean yelled, off to his left.

He came upon Sean where he expected: at Phillip's grave, Sean's bike in front of Phillip's tombstone. Howard fell to his knees. Tear tracks showed on Sean's face, his slender frame trembling. Howard put his arms around him and leaned back with his hands on Sean's shoulders.

"He showed up in my room." Sean's voice was choked. "He said, 'I told you your dad was no good. Come on, I'll prove it.' He rode on my handlebars."

Howard peered around. "Is Phillip here now?"

"I dunno." Sean gave a small shudder. "I asked how he died. And he said, 'Ask your dad.' And then he wasn't here."

Suffocating, Howard gazed around. "Phillip?"

He looked at Sean, who met his gaze, eyes feverish, and then looked down. Faint thunder rumbled, and the sky was charcoal. Howard knelt there, watching Sean and the tombstones, listening.

Slowly Sean raised his head. A lopsided grin spread across his face. And then one eye shifted.

Howard stared into the cross eyes.

Sean spoke, voice more of a drawl with a hint of insinuation. "Bet you never thought you'd see me again, didja *Howie*?"

Howard took a breath. "Just in nightmares."

Phillip's left eye bored into his gaze. "Payback, Howie."

"Sean never hurt you. It was me."

"Killed, don't you mean?"

"Nobody meant to kill you," Howard cried. "I'd--"

"I guess not," the voice was snide, the voice Howard remembered. "Just make me feel bad. Have a little fun." Phillip grinned at him from Sean's face, the set of the facial muscles altered.

"Please," Howard said. "It made me sick for years. I never--"

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Phillip crooned. "You lived though, didn't you? Got married. Had a son. And all those years and years and years I was stuck. Here. And the world was gray. Far away, sort of."

Howard stared at his son's face, twisted and venomous, and tears spilled from Howard's eyes.

"Years and years and years..." The lop-sided grin came back. "Alone...invisible. And who finally sees me? Howie's son. How bout that?" He nodded. "First time anyone ever did. It made me stronger, too." He cocked his head. "The longer I was around your little son."

"Phillip, you--"

"Wouldn't this be fair? Me living out his life?"

"I'd get Sean back," Howard said. "Somehow."

"Then how about I jump in front of a car?"

Howard felt like a boy trading challenges. "Phillip." He shook his head. "Sooner or later, you'd be invisible again, wouldn't you? And everything'd be grey. Again."

"Like you care." His face scrunched up.

"Why're you still here anyway?"

Phillip glared. "I don't know. *OK?*"

"Because you can't forgive us? Especially me?"

"Why should I?" Phillip shrieked. "You don't *deserve* it."

Howard gazed down. "I regretted what happened--what we did--all my life. The guy who--"

Phillip spun around, clutched a tombstone and started slamming his head—Sean's head--into it. Howard dragged him away. Phillip kicked and scratched, stronger than Howard would've believed. He managed to pin Phillip's arms and kneeled. Sean's forehead was scraped and scratched, and blood trickled from a cut above his eye. Howard glared at it, breath hissing over his teeth.

The boy raised his chin. "See? I can hurt your little son."

Howard nodded. "But what does it change?" He turned Phillip loose.

Heat lighting pulsed across the dark sky, the still air hot. Howard was wet with perspiration. Tires hissed by out on the road. Phillip took a breath. "So everybody calls you Howard now." He rolled his cross eyes. "A dork name." A grin spread across his face. "So...*Howard*...want me to forgive you? Tell Sean what you did to me."

What would that do to Sean? And even if Sean could handle it, could Howard bear telling? All these years, he'd never told anyone all of it, not even Juliana. Sharp as ever, shame struck him.

"Tell your parents," Phillip sneered, daring him. "Tell *my* parents."

Howard's mother's grip on reality was tenuous enough, and his father's heart... The idea of telling Phillip's parents was worse: "Hi. Remember me? Guess what?" He couldn't face it.

Phillip gazed down at his extended finger, Sean's finger. Head still bending downward, he looked up at Howard. "Wonder if I could bite the tip off. What do you think?"

"I can't do it." Howard hung his head. "Why do you even want your parents to know?"

The face before him became a snarling mask, its forehead scratched and raw. "I want them to know the truth. About my friends. I want you to have to tell them."

"But why? What good would it do?"

A drop of rain might've hit Howard's hair.

"Oh, yeah," Phillip jeered, "that's right, you're all good now. Taking care of your mom and dad and your little son. But that's not really you. *Is it?*"

"It is me," Howard cried. "I'm not—"

Phillip opened Sean's mouth wide and began to edge his finger toward it.

"OK," Howard barked. "OK, I'll do it. But how do I know you'll leave Sean alone?"

Phillip smirked. "You don't."

Again, perhaps a drop of rain.

Phillip's face turned deadpan. "I'll turn him loose. But I'll be there when you talk to him. And the others..."

"Sean didn't hurt you. Leave him alone."

Phillip gave a fake yawn. "Yeah, yeah. You already said. Just tell 'em what you did."

His face went blank several seconds. Then his eyebrows pressed down. "What'd he mean by that, Dad?"

"Sean?" Howard stared at him, wanting to believe.

Sean looked at him like, *Duh. Yeah, Sean*. He cocked his head. "What'd he mean? 'Ask your Dad?'"

ill. Relief washed over Howard. But then the prospect of what he'd agreed to made him feel  
He took Sean's hand, rain beginning to fall. "Let's go home."

## Inconceivable

### **George Phillis**

Pamela Morgan drifted unwillingly back to awareness. It was the still of the night. Light from Kronos's largest moon streamed through her bedroom windows.

She had worked far too late into the evening. Now something had awakened her.

What? She heard only the remote sigh of broken waves. No, before that, there had been a strangled gasp. A burglar? Hardly likely, not with University Security.

She hated to spy on housemates. They didn't know she was a telepath---they didn't believe in telepathy---her scruples still protected them. The sound repeated. What if someone were choking to death? Now fully awake, Pam sent out a mind probe, searching only for physical sensations: pain, asphyxiation, terror. She pulled back as quickly as she could. Miralie's bedroom held two minds, one clearly male. Both were asleep, separated by a distance which suggested that an intrusion would definitely not be welcome. Pam giggled.

Sometimes she missed the obvious. At least Miralie's previous boyfriends hadn't snored obtrusively.

Pam looked back at her desk, peering vaguely at a computer screen and notes for her current term paper. The evolution of the senses, she thought, lulling herself back toward her dreams. Senses: sight, telepathy, hearing...; organs, evolutionary prototypes: eyespot to lens to color vision, all locked in the rigid grid of an outline. She came awake again. There was an obvious gap in her neat table of references. The entries for one sense, which one she couldn't quite see, were completely missing. Darn! she groaned to herself. She had stayed up half the night to finish her notes. She told herself this was the penalty for cheating on sleep. The list of senses had been sitting there for days while she searched the libraries. All she had had to do was to fill in the blanks. Now she had missed something. Fuming, she tiptoed to her desk. Which sense had she forgotten?

Her eyes were too blurred with sleep to focus on individual words. Still, every entry in the table was filled. The gap had been some trick of the light. It was very late. She just wasn't thinking clearly.

As she slipped back under her quilt, she glanced at the desk again. Tomorrow, a first draft had to be written on how field senses evolved. Her outline gleamed in the moonlight. In its center, clearly visible, was empty space. Pam stared. The writing above and below the gap was prominent. One set of reference links was totally blank.

She snapped on the room lights, and sprang from bed, her tall, athletic frame landing panther-light on the wooden floor. Steel-blue eyes flickered with suppressed anger. She couldn't be dreaming. She was worrying about nothing, when she should be asleep. Tediously, she counted down each column of entries.

Four senses: sight, hearing, chemoreception, magnetic field detection. Evolutionary examples from half-a-dozen worlds spanning the width of the Confederation. Reference lists. Figures. It was all there! Everything. She staggered back to bed and put out the lights.

The original plan for her paper echoed dreamily through her mind. She would say something about senses which detected external fields: light, sound, chemical potential, telepathy, vector potential. Perhaps she would change her mind again, and skip telepathy. It was not a socially acceptable ability. It would be hard to explain her insights without revealing that she was a telepath herself. Besides, it wasn't clear that telepathy corresponded to a field.

Vision responded to the vector potential, but to what fields were telepaths sensitive? Content that all was well, she yawned deeply and looked at her notes on how the senses had evolved, now only vaguely legible in the moonlight. The gap leered back at her.

It didn't make sense. The first column of the table listed the five senses she would study. She counted them off against the fingers of her right hand. Five senses meant five sets of lines, exactly as she had counted them a few moments ago.

Pam had a near-photographic memory. With a little effort, she could see the whole table in front of her, every entry, as sharp as it had appeared when she stood by the desk. In her mind's eye, she counted off entries against her fingers: left index finger, middle finger, left ring finger, little finger. The table had four sets of lines, matched against four fingers. Everything was finished!

Triumphantly, she held her hands up before her and, drunk with fatigue, matched left and right hands. Then she wriggled deeper under the quilt, her nightgown raising little sparks against the sheets. She tried to forget all about the paper, bemusedly wondering what had confused her. A final stretch silhouetted long fingers against the far wall.

Four fingers and outstretched thumb clashed against four equally long fingers and clenched thumb. She blinked, hard. Her hands whispered insults at her.

Here she was, a first-rate student at one of the Confederation's leading Universities, unable even to count on her fingers. Another cycle of turning on the lights and staggering over to the bed left her as confused as ever.

Perhaps, she thought, perhaps this was all an elaborate nightmare. She was dreaming that there was a terrible gap in the outline of her paper, a gap that disappeared whenever she tried to see what it was, but that would not disappear under the keen gaze of the Faculty.

Suddenly, she recognized the pattern. A grim suspicion, one neither of her housemates could have conceived, formed in her thoughts. Leaning to one edge of her bed, she spoke instructions to her datapad. Robotically following its replay of her instructions, she counted senses, walked to the desk, counted again, and returned to bed. Finally she pressed her palms against her eyes, shutting all thoughts of her term paper out of her mind. Methods of mental discipline, learned from mind-to-mind contact with a half-a-dozen alien species, came into play. An elbow restarted the computer-recorder. She listened to her own voice. Obedient to her prior instructions, the computer juxtaposed her words, carefully omitting the subject of her work.

"Put everything out of your mind. How many topics are in your term paper?" she had asked herself ... "Five," she had answered ... "Now go to the desk. Count! How many topics are in the term paper?" ... "Four. One. Two. Three. Four," she had counted.

The computer hesitated slightly. "When you sat in bed, your answer was---'Five'---Is that the number of topics that you see?" ... "Yes, of course," she had answered, "I still see four entries."

The computer paused again. "In bed, you said there are---`five'---topics. By the desk, you said there are---`four'---topics. Is `five' equal to `four'?"

... "Yes!" she had snapped back. "The four topics are as many as the four topics!" ... Patiently, the machine asked again "Is `five' equal to `four'?" "Any child knows that!" she had snarled.

"Very good. Very good indeed." The computer's version of her voice was as saccharine as her own. "Now go back to bed, put everything out of your mind, and replay this sequence."

Recognition was immediate. She recognized that confusion, that ability to believe true and false at the same time. Someone had set a compulsion mesh---a mind-binding---on her. Someone did not want her to think something. What?

She couldn't tell. A scan of her mind showed nothing unfamiliar, but all except the most amateurish of geases were invisible. There was a general way to purge mind-bindings, though. Compulsion meshes usually collapsed once one learned what one was being compelled to do.

Now, what was it she couldn't do? A compulsion mesh good enough to hold her was no small matter to create. It was hard to believe anyone cared about a term paper on evolution. She gave more orders to her computer-recorder. She would speak names while lying in bed. She would speak other names at the desk. The machine would compare the two lists and verbalize the difference.

She marched through her plan. Back in bed, she found herself trembling with nervous anticipation. Or was she afraid? A compulsion mesh was too complex to be a practical joke---very few of her friends were close enough for the friendship to survive this sort of stunt. Besides, which of her friends could even set a mesh? Any? Somebody had set a geas on her, without her knowing. It was hardly believable she'd done this to herself, though she probably knew how to do it. There weren't a lot of telepaths who were good enough to do it, not to her, not without her having noticed. In a little while, one of them was either going to give a very good explanation, or get very thoroughly pounded on. She leaned over and restarted the recorder.

"Clear your mind..." came the computer. She did. "Line four, columns two through four, are blank. Line four: telepathy. Columns two through four: evolutionary antecedents. What are the `evolutionary antecedents' of `telepathy'?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Dawn peaked through Pam's curtains. She was sprawled on the carpet by her bed, tangled in her sheets. Her head throbbed. Her skin was covered with cold sweat. Her nightgown clung to her skin like a running suit after a ten mile race.

What had she done to herself? At first she was too dazed to remember. She had listened to a sentence. Then there had been fireworks. In a sense, it had been a highly educational experience. She hadn't suspected she could put so much power into a single levin-bolt without killing herself. She remembered from where she had drawn that much energy. She could do it again, if need be. Her mind-screens had taken a real beating. But she hadn't been attacked, or tried to defend herself. She had tried, with vigor and determination, to commit suicide.

A shower and walk on the beach left her a spectral shadow of her usual self. Fortunately, regular classes had ended for the term. The thought of facing an interactive lecture left her sick to her stomach. Breakfast improved things a little, though she stayed with fruit and tea rather than her customary heartier fare. Miralie's latest boyfriend turned out to be a graduate student in naval architecture, a buoyant red-haired man who couldn't imagine that anyone in the galaxy wasn't interested in the finer points of starship design.

Pam watched his mind as he talked. Miralie's friends often had straying eyes. Pam made sure they didn't stray in her direction. With telepathy, you couldn't help but know how others saw you. Pam liked domestic tranquility, meaning that her bungalow-mates never lost their boyfriends in her direction. Not that she was interested in that sort of thing. Mind-to-mind contact had given her a different perspective on the important things of life, a list of which did not include an urgent need for male companionship of a physical nature. After all, Pam told herself, it wasn't that she wasn't as pretty as Miralie or Jessamine, or as personable, or as bright. She'd had to fend off enough of their boyfriends to be sure of the first, and knew she could think rings

around most of her fellow students. Most people even underestimated her weight, which lurked as coiled-steel muscles rather than eye-catching curves.

She listened politely while Miralie's latest paramour discussed faster-than-light drives and the curious fact---Zinor's Law---that all faster-than-light drives had virtually the same limiting speed, even if they were based on completely different physical principles, except for a few much slower faster-than-light drives. Pam had heard of Zinor; his Law sounded far-fetched, though no more so than the equally empirical Second Law of Thermodynamics.

Pam spent the rest of the morning on her bedroom's private balcony, nearly out-of-sight of the world, sorting through the shards of her mind. Once she isolated the geas, it stopped affecting her. The immediate binding had kept her from conceiving that telepathy must somehow have evolved. She had been able to think about evolution, and had no problems thinking about telepathy, but the two topics were rigidly compartmentalized. Until she shattered the binding, the concept of telepathy's evolution had been strictly---inconceivable. Only an accident in the way she'd chosen her term paper's topic---plus perhaps her internal psi-shields---let her juxtapose the two ideas.

Rooting the geas from her subconscious, and deducing the precise limits of its compulsions, was time-consuming. The binding was like an ancient bed of climbing ivy which had been allowed to overgrow a great mansion. Here it wrapped around lists of starship speeds; there it stood poised around ideas on magnets. Its complexity was surreal, its camouflage exquisite. She had never met a telepath who could have installed such a binding, even with the active cooperation of the recipient. It was as though the binding had grown up with her since she had been an infant, putting out new extensions in response to forbidden patterns of stimuli.

For a mind-binding to be so complex was entirely novel. What sort of a structure would be required? It would need to be almost sentient. The talent which let her read another's mind, as quickly and accurately as she could read a book, now came to the fore. The psi structure could be scanned as easily as any mind, letting her isolate and destroy its last shreds. There were a long list of forbidden topics, not just one or two: ties between evolution and psi, starship designs, a half-dozen seemingly unrelated questions in history, chemistry, law,... More ominously, she located what appeared to be external sensors, built into the binding, placed so an outsider could determine whether or not the binding was intact.

Her bungalow-mates, she recognized, would never believe what she had just found. Why had someone---some group---done this to her? She had spent much of the last decade striving to be inconspicuous, remaining largely invisible even to the small but active community of psis on Kronos. It defied reason. A parallel nagged at her memory. The binding on starship speeds looked remarkably like Zinor's law. She reached out mentally for Miralie and boyfriend. Finding people out of line-of-sight was often tricky, though she knew just where they would likely be by now. She probed them very gently until she found what she wanted. They were both mind-bound, exactly as she had been. Pam put her probes farther out into the bungalow complex. Some people she skipped. A fair part of the population was nearly psi-immune; some wore good mechanical psi-shields. A few were fellow telepaths. Everyone she could scan had the same blocks in place.

Suddenly she felt very conspicuous. Her shields snapped tight. Probes went out in a delicate lacework, hunting for anyone who might have noticed her reconnaissance. Whoever had put the blocks in place might be very---no, lethally---irritated to learn they had been caught. But who could it be? And why? Only the Temporal Physics Center, the Confederation's covert psi-

police, had anything like the needed resources. They were never terribly subtle; these geases were not their style.

Two faces came to mind. One was nearby, and always good for a conversation---or lunch, as that hour was approaching. The other was half the Confederation away, and probably very busy with her own affairs. Still, the other shared Pam's knack for blundering into dangerous circumstances, and might appreciate a piece of map labelled "Here Be Hungry Dragons". She was a lot better with mentalics than Pam. Besides, Pam had trusted her enough to link mind-to-mind, using absolutely no screens. Pam had never done that before, nor since. She prepared a long letter detailing her findings, added a cover letter explaining why and how it would be dangerous to read her main letter, and encrypted both documents. The other would know the code-key at once. The usual estimate for decoding a document, without the key, involved Hubble-Segal times. The letter went into the DataNet, to be transmitted cross-cluster anonymously at high priority. Pam winced at the credit charges. She had needed to stay on-campus over break to write her paper; now she didn't have a choice. The other could spend money like water---though she never seemed to---but Pam's budget was rigidly limited. Finally she made a videophone call.

\* \* \* \* \*

Percival Summers was not so much a boyfriend as a good companion; someone she could talk to, or take to a concert, without feeling forced to create a deeper relationship. They were definitely not just casual acquaintances. Pam trusted Percy enough to reveal that she had psi talents. They enjoyed each other's company, at least on a platonic basis, and had been seeing each other regularly for several years. Pam ignored her bungalow-mates' questions as to when Percy would be seen at breakfast as well as in the early evening. When she phoned, promising him an interesting puzzle which she couldn't solve, he was delighted to pay her a visit. He listened avidly while she described what she had found.

"Let me restate this," he finally intruded. "You say that everyone you checked has identical mind-blocks and can't think about certain topics. That's unreasonable. Why would anyone do it? Besides, Pam, when you finally convinced me that you, that you really could pull those psi tricks, you put a block on me, so that I couldn't find the doors until I closed my eyes and found one by touch. But you had to work hard to do it to me. And, you've said, you're about as good at telehypnosis as anyone you've ever met. To put something that complicated on everyone---you'd need more telepaths than there are people. You couldn't possibly hide something like that." His tone softened. His fingers stole across her shoulder. "I don't want to say I don't believe you, but it's awfully hard to accept."

"I know." Her head sank. "And I don't know who did it, or why, or how to prove it."

Percy looked up, eyes bright. "There's an obvious way. I know you don't like prying about in my mind, but you can. And you checked I had the blocks. You named a forbidden idea, and I didn't hear you say anything. If you could break my mind-binding, I might be able to help."

Pam stared at him, tight-lipped. She liked him too much to risk hurting him. On the other hand, she had already asked for his advice; it was too late to complain about what he said. "All right, I'll try. You're sure now?" she asked, hoping beyond hope that he'd reconsider. He only nodded.

They were of a height. She looked him square in the face, steel-blue eyes peering into deep brown. There was only one sound way to remove a block, the one she had used on herself. "Percy?" she asked, meanwhile blocking his binding, forcing him to hear her words. "You know what my current term paper is about. What are the evolutionary antecedents of---`telepathy'?"

“Why, there aren't...” His face paled. His jaw slackened. He fell ahead lifelessly, taking her so by surprise that their faces brushed before she could catch him.

Her mind-probes revealed the damage. He was in shock. His heart had stopped beating. It was too late to call for medical help. He was, at least technically, dead.

His psyche began to fade. She reached in, lending him her strength. Through telehypnosis, she could force another's limbs to move. Now she used her talent to link their bodies, so that her nervous system drove two hearts, two pairs of lungs, two sets of blood vessels. She swept through his mind, using miniature levin-bolts to disrupt the structures that were rapidly killing him.

Her arms shook. Taking over another's body had never come very easily to her. Now she needed very fine physiological control over an unfamiliar, decidedly male, body. At the same time, she had to perform intensive psionic surgery. It wasn't reasonable. She had found her own barriers, and hadn't needed outside help to survive their efforts to kill her. For some reason, Percy was much more fragile.

It took an hour to repair the damage. For most of that time Percy's own nervous system did rather little toward keeping him alive. She could feel the demand on her own strength. It was possible, she realized, that instead of saving his life, she would be dragged under with him. Finally all was done. He peered vaguely up at her, confusion fading rapidly from his mind. She lay back on the sofa, exhausted, her hand resting softly on his.

He finally broke the silence. “I remember what you asked, and what happened afterwards, as though I saw it all through your eyes. You spoke. Everything became very still. That must have been my heart stopping. I fell forwards, we knocked heads, and I passed out.” He paused for a few moments. “Now I see the blocks; rather, I see their absence. All those coincidences aren't coincidences, not at all.”

“I wish I'd kept quiet. I could have killed you. In fact, I did kill you. Almost. I had to take over---but you could feel that, couldn't you?” she asked.

“Wasn't that dangerous for you?” he countered. “To take over my body for that long? You'd said that controlling someone else is very demanding.”

“It wasn't that hard,” she answered wanly, shaking from the strain. She hoped he didn't notice. “Besides, darn it!--there's such a thing as responsibility. I couldn't leave you like that. It was my fault, so I had to bring you back. Even if you were awful stubborn about wanting to stay dead.”

“I didn't have to be curious,” he volunteered lamely.

“You?” she asked in gleeful surprise. “Not be curious? For your sort, being curious is as natural as breathing.”

“By experiment, for me being curious is in fact considerably more natural than breathing.” He smiled at his joke. “We're rather alike in that respect.”

“Among others. Ummh, some things are better said sooner,” she said apologetically. “I'm afraid I couldn't very well do---what I did---and leave your mental secrets as private from me as you might like... ummh, it's not what I want to do to a friend, but I'm not good enough to do it another way.”

He sat up. Their faces were a few inches apart. “You know,” he said, “About bumping heads. I always thought you'd have a real knockout of a kiss---but I hadn't meant it so literally.” Pam began a laugh.

Percy leaned forward. For a time the room was very still.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pam and Percy sat on her balcony, leaning back into carefully separated deck chairs. They were lost in thought, oblivious to the rumble of the surf as they tried to unravel the riddle Pam had uncovered.

“Suppose the TPC applied the blocks at birth, so they matured with you?” asked Percy. “No, Zinor's Law is universal. I don't see why the Confederation would geas its whole population. The Senate Ethics Committee wouldn't let them. Or maybe I'm judging from the one committee member I've heard--the mother of that friend of yours, the brunette who kept pretending she wasn't stunningly pretty, almost as pretty as you. But how could we persuade the other sentient species to copy us and mind-bind their own people? Someone would cheat. The Lords of the Ether, for one. Besides, we can hardly communicate with some--the Barlennoi, the elder races---let alone cooperate.” He paused in his argument. At least, I think we can't communicate with them. Or can you?”

A modest blush tinged her cheeks. “I've never tried. Barlennoi don't wander around on planets with oxygen atmospheres. I did link with a Timeless One, once.” Percy's eyebrows raised. The Timeless Ones were so alien as to verge on the mythical. “I don't know for how long--we were inside its mindspace, and they really do exist outside time. But I can't imagine persuading Fogfall Silvermist to do anything---they really don't make conscious decisions, so far as I could tell.”

“Perhaps the blocks are a natural-law requirement on the evolution of intelligence?” he asked.

“If pigs had wings, could they tow the Star Fleet's dirigibles into battle? I suppose it's possible, but I can't see how,” she answered.

“Perhaps something from outside did it. We don't have the power, but someone else might. Why? If you could do that, conquest would be no problem,” he said.

“If you were enormously powerful, you might not want competition,” answered Pam. “Or perhaps it's an experiment, to see what happens when a lot of intelligent species compete, without one dominating the rest. You'd need to keep all species technically and intellectually equal. That explains some of the limits.”

“But why psi and evolution? Oh, of course. There are no evolutionary antecedents for psi, anywhere in Terran-stock animals. Psi couldn't have evolved in people---there's no starting point. Color vision was a replication mutation, but psi must have been introduced. Perhaps they thought man needed natural telepaths to compete with other species. But if I were making telepaths, I'd make very sure they weren't as strong as me, or that their screens had holes only I could use, or something. That would make them---whoever made the blocks---very dangerous. Even for you, Pam.”

“I know, I know. Especially for me. You're right. Most mentalists ignore---or can't see--some bands. Bands that go right through commercial screens. But I can throw a pretty decent shield on any band. At least, any band I know about.” With each word she sounded less sure of herself.

“There might be a more obvious explanation, once we've thought about everything the blocks do,” said Percy. “I have to run, though---I have two months off-planet, starting tomorrow morning. Pam, do be careful. I'd miss not seeing you again.” He stood, hugged her firmly for a long moment, and left.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day found Pam at the University Zoological Gardens. The facilities were closed to the public during holidays, but scientists could be found laboring there around the clock. A

month back, she had scheduled an appointment with an expert on sensing. However much she was interested in her new discovery, not to mention finishing the first draft, her term paper was due soon.

Professor McMaster and his assistant, Dr. Crenshaw, were acknowledged experts on the evolution of magnetic field detection. McMaster, a gruff white-haired man, had apparently concluded from her letter that Pam might possibly be capable of learning something, an ability he clearly did not attribute to most of his colleagues. He talked, occasionally leaving a gap in which a bright student might make a comment and a very bright student might ask a marginally intelligent question. Crenshaw stood at Pam's shoulder, noting illustrative examples and clarifying abstruse parallels.

The important part of their conversation over, Pam sketched the rest of her term paper, noting her approach and choice of comparisons. On an impulse, she mentioned telepathy as a field sense which might be studied. As she expected, McMaster listened carefully to her list of five field senses, nodded sagely, and remarked that comparing four senses would be a lot of work---a good indication that she was a promising student.

Dr. Crenshaw, still at her shoulder, peered at her intently. "Miss Morgan, did I hear you mention the evolution of psi? That is really clever. Wherever did you hear the idea?"

"Hear of psi evolution? No place, really. It's the same question I've asked before, applied to one more sense." Pam leaned away from him. Wasn't the block universal? If Crenshaw had heard what she said, she might have put him in danger.

"Where did you hear of the evolution of psi?" Crenshaw repeated. In one corner of her eyes, McMaster sat stock-still, as if unaware of their conversation. Pam suddenly realized that Crenshaw was no longer radiating stray wisps of thought, the way normal people always did. Startled, her mind-shields snapped towards maximum density, to be struck by a crushing hammer of psionic force. Her shields shuddered and warped, then reformed as she set the force of her will behind them. The attack had had lethal power.

Crenshaw wasn't using psi, in the usual sense, at all. It was something not-quite-visible to her senses, before which her shields were crumbling like a sand castle in high waves. Who was Crenshaw? A conspirator? She reinforced her defenses, then countered with a stiff levin-blast. Crenshaw, she thought, couldn't be shielding himself, not and hold that level of attack. Her blast bounced off a gossamer-thin barrier, something that looked too fragile to stop a puff of breeze, something she had scarcely sensed until her own attack set it ringing.

Crenshaw was using bands she had never faced before. Despite her best efforts, her shields were rapidly fraying. She needed time to reorganize her protections. She whirled and planted her elbow, hard, just below his ribs.

One of Miralie's former boy-friends, who had had three inches and eighty pounds on her, once complained that Pam confused basketball with full-contact karate. The speed and strength which made her a terror on the boards now came to her rescue. Crenshaw sagged backwards, gasping for breath, his mental barrage momentarily interrupted. Pam dodged out the door. She didn't have a real plan; she just wanted to open the range. She was neither weak nor slow, but Kronos was a civilized planet where few people studied hand-to-hand combat. She didn't want to learn if Crenshaw was an exception. Besides, most exotic psi forces travelled poorly. While they stood shoulder to shoulder, Crenshaw had mauled her screens. At twenty or thirty feet, he might be less successful.

Crenshaw followed, carefully keeping a good distance between them. At a distance her shields could stand up to his attacks. His shields, however, were impervious to everything she

could muster. She fled before him, noting that he had control over most of the air locks and fire doors. Her Graduate Student ID would open some of them, but he gradually herded her into a particular quadrant of the zoo. She was prepared to accept his plans, at least so long as they moved closer to an outer wall. Once outside, Crenshaw would find her much more difficult to corner. In the long run, being hunted by the secret overlords of civilization---or whatever they were---sounded unfortunate. In the short term, her subconscious needed time to identify the flaws in Crenshaw's protections.

How had she found a conspirator so quickly? Were they that common? In retrospect, the answer was obvious. The mind-bindings were not completely infallible. Whoever did the binding needed agents to spot the unbound. They could make random searches, but there was a simpler way. Anyone who realized that telepathy had evolved, Zinor was wrong, or whatever, would soon show up at a good research facility with his discovery. There, waiting in editorial offices and scientific laboratories, would be Crenshaw's friends, lurking like spiders until an innocent blundered into their outflung web. Indeed, her near-photographic memory reminded her, perhaps once a year there came an announcement of a new super-fast star drive. Equally regularly, the discoverer proved to be a crackpot who faded so completely from sight that he could not later be found.

She was puzzled by Crenshaw's limited range of methods. He remained fifty paces behind her, too far away for his attacks to disrupt her screens. They ran by busy laboratories, whose workers stood in paralyzed silence while they passed. If she had been in Crenshaw's position, she could have used mind control methods to turn the workers into a mob of pursuers. Crenshaw simply froze their minds for a few instants, so that none were aware of her flight. Perhaps Crenshaw was not such a fool, she reflected; a lynching might be somewhat challenging to explain to Campus Security.

A particularly long straight corridor brought her to a stairway leading up. The markings indicated a ground exit. Pam dashed up and outside, to be greeted by rolling parkland planted with unfamiliar bushes and shrubs. Where was she? Her probes reached out, finding mechanical psi-screens in the distance. Was this really a park? Crenshaw had closed a barrier across the stairs behind her. An interrogatory shove suggested a blast wall, not something she could break. She shifted to one of the more exotic psi bands, an effort that left her sweating, and slipped through the screens around the park. There was no one that she could reach. Crenshaw had put everyone in the complex---perhaps a hundred people---to sleep. The zoo's external screens were too good for her to penetrate quickly. Of course, she reflected, she had slipped a few ideas on their weaknesses into the zoo director's subconscious. The zoo might not worry about creatures which lured their prey by psi methods, but she did, so she had ensured that the zoo's psi-screens were rock-solid. At last she found someone whose memories identified her whereabouts. Her heart sank. Crenshaw had lured her into the pen of a cthulwaul, one of the nastier predators known to the Confederation.

She wasted a few moments cursing her lack of good sense. The warning holograms had been turned off, so nothing had appeared on the stairway. In a hero tale, she would have read the necessary minds while she ran, using local knowledge to pick her route rather than walking into Crenshaw's trap. She had instead spent her time trying to break his screens. In a hero tale, though, her elbow to the ribs would have killed him instantly, sparing her the chase scene. She wasn't a fabulous heroine, she reminded herself, she was just a physically fit graduate student who happened to read minds. At the moment, none of those attributes seemed likely to help her.

Pam shrugged and searched out those who knew the beast's habits. She found many facts, most discouraging. The cthulwaul was a massive ball of red fur, looking much like a small child's toy except for its rows of fangs, claws, and voracious appetite. The beast was a tracking hunter, carefully penned behind thornbushes and reinforced concrete walls. The thornbushes were impassable to humans without powered ceramic body armor---which was the only safe form of clothing inside the pen. The real cage was based on perfume, though, not steel. Cthulwauls were rigidly territorial, sharing neutral land only during adolescence. An adult female cthulwaul never entered another's territory, and similarly for males. Appropriate scents, sprayed around the enclosure's perimeter, left the beast unable to conceive of passing beyond the thornbushes.

She peered through a guard's unseeing eye. Crenshaw had neutralized the enclosure's security system. The beast would hunt her, but even when it ate, the computer banks would note nothing unusual. Pam started for one edge of the enclosure. With time, 'impassable' plant barriers might be passed.

Pam's psi attacks had cascaded intermittently off Crenshaw's shields. The most she could do was to cloud his second sight, creating a thin haze like streamers of fog rising off a pond on an autumn evening.

The cthulwaul sniffed the air. It smelled a new type of food. The novelty aroused first interest, then hunger. The cthulwaul began its hunt. Its loping canter had a pace many human runners would have envied. Pam marked its speed, then scrambled away. She could keep ahead of its for a couple of hours, at least if she stayed on flat open ground. The fear of ultimate loneliness nibbled at the edges of Pam's thoughts, not quite distracting her from the crisis at hand.

A gossamer curtain of Crenshaw's not-psi force now swathed both the beast and its pen, keeping her from controlling the beast or reaching the outside world. Reaching the outside was pointless. If she couldn't fight Crenshaw, any psi she summoned would share her fate.

What could she do? Her mindscreens blocked Crenshaw's own psi attacks. As a zoo-keeper, Crenshaw might have access to firearms. No, the zoo, like the local police, relied on StarFleet Marines for weapons support. That left her facing a cthulwaul, and Crenshaw afterwards. Pam concluded that Crenshaw had supreme confidence in his abilities. He wanted her to die without creating questions; the cthulwaul was a convenient tool. What, she asked herself, could be less suspicious than an overzealous grad student who broke a few safety rules to pursue her research project? It would be a shame that the Security system had failed, but it would have been unethical to design a system to cope with people who deliberately overrode its operation. Even Pam, who had learned the mind-sets of a dozen alien species, shared the Confederation prejudice against obstructing evolution. Inquirers who knew Pam had psi talents could be told that a hunting cthulwaul was sometimes immune to levin bolts.

As she ran, she made a long series of psi experiments, carefully masked from Crenshaw's eye, on the predator. Crenshaw was not terribly observant, but his interference was terribly strong. Pam could find the beast's memories of other hunts, the sun's warming glow, the solitary adolescent trying to steal territory. She could create momentary illusions within the cthulwaul's mind.

It might briefly be convinced that it faced a wall, a grove of trees, or another prey animal. She tried to use the beast as a living battering ram against the thornbushes. She couldn't do it. She could lure the beast toward the bushes, but they were protected by the odor of other adult cthulwauls, marking them as part of other cthulwauls' territories. Adult cthulwauls respected

each other's boundaries. She couldn't, she found, keep the cthulwaul from smelling something which was really there, such as herself, not while Crenshaw shielded the beast.

She continued to run, her predator a moderate distance behind her. She dared not lead the beast by too much, lest it cut towards the center of the cage, where it could keep pace with her while forcing her to run faster than it did. Crenshaw used the transport tubes to keep even with her, always staying a safe ten or fifteen yards on the other side of the thornbushes. She could sense his probes around her, but he never attacked. Either he wanted nature to take its course, or the effective range of his powers was very small. She had the range to hit him, not that it did any good. Her heaviest levin-bolts, the summoning of which brought fine lines of fire under her skin, didn't even dent his shields.

Pam was tiring. Her ribs hurt; her breath came in gasps. Her jacket, now sodden with sweat, was tied around her waist. The perimeter of the compound was eight or more miles long; she had completed its circuit and then some. Her watch said that less than an hour had passed since Crenshaw had lured her into the pen.

Crenshaw, she noticed, was very predictable. He always stood exactly in front of a transport tube, ready to follow after she passed. When she reached the next tube, she slowed and hung her jacket over a thornbush. She pretended to cry, as though she had abandoned hope and preferred to wait for her death.

Crenshaw's not-psi mindprobes flickered against her hair, drinking in the emotions she supplied. Why? Was he some sort of vampire, who sipped on terror rather than blood? Or did he hope her screens would collapse as she died, so that he could learn who else knew her secrets? She had prepared herself for that grim contingency, readying herself to move out-of-body and destroy her memories. Even without Crenshaw's interference, she could survive disincorporation only for a few seconds, but she could and would ensure that when her shields followed her psyche into nothingness, no damaging references to Percival Summers would remain behind.

The cthulwaul loped into view, stopped, and began a deliberate stalk, one foot moving noiselessly after the next. Its tail whipped back and forth. Her resting place put the breeze on her back; to a cthulwaul nose, her woolen jacket---and perhaps the rest of her, she thought---gave the place an acrid stench.

She lashed out at Crenshaw, hitting him with the hardest psi-blasts she could muster, then shifted away from normal human psi bands. Crenshaw's screens seemed to be softer there. Crenshaw recoiled in startlement. As he did, she tickled one of the Cthulwaul's memories. The cthulwaul glared. There, beyond the interesting food, just beyond the bushes, was another cthulwaul. An adolescent. She created an illusory scent in the cthulwaul's mind. The scent announced that the adolescent was challenging for territory.

The cthulwaul screamed in blinding-white rage. It could smell the adolescent's challenge. The fragrance was the one the real cthulwaul had used, many years ago, when it first took territory. The cthulwaul heard the adolescent roar a response. The cthulwaul attacked.

Pam threw herself to the side. The creature's delicate nose registered a slight scent of other adult cthulwaul, almost masked by the hideous reek of a human, and the undeniable odor of a challenger. The challenge could not be tolerated. The stripling had to be destroyed, annihilated, obliterated!--even if it meant a brief trespass on the grounds of another adult. No other choice could be imagined. Bellowing with hatred, the cthulwaul crashed into the brush.

Pam held her attacks focussed against Crenshaw. She couldn't break his mind-screens, but she had to blind him until it was too late for him to run. When the cthulwaul charged, she

swaddled the creature in her own mind-screens. Crenshaw had kept her from controlling the cthulwaul. For a few moments, she would try to return the favor.

Crenshaw saw the beast trample down the shrubbery. He felt an instant of terror. "Die!" he commanded. He lashed out against the creature with a vitriolic stream of not-levin energy. Unprotected, the beast would have fallen in its tracks. Most human psis, Pam reflected, would have been little better off. Crenshaw's command crashed into Pam's shields, lovingly wrapped around the predator. She shuddered at the impact. Layer after layer of screen vanished, burned away like tissue paper before a torrent of ravening flame. Her vision faded into a red haze. She had a fair notion of her endurance, of how hard she could drive her powers before she risked killing herself. She was well beyond that limit. Crenshaw's barrage vanished in a crunch of fang and bone. Pam tried to scan Crenshaw's vanishing memories, then bound the beast to ignore the food that lay on the ground behind it. Having reached the limit of her strength, she sank limply into the grass.

Monitors dutifully noted the presence of an escaped animal, and summoned Security. By the time the robots arrived, only a detailed biochemical analysis of the cthulwaul's stomach would have revealed whether or not Crenshaw had been human. Pam knew better. The form might have been human, with a camouflage of social graces, but the basement mindset was that of a shark in feeding frenzy.

She had found a few of his memories. Lurking behind the thornbushes, he had watched her with elation. It had been a long time since he had hunted. Too long! After he had disposed of the prey, he would have to check her acquaintances, though it was nearly mathematically certain that none of them would be aware of her discovery. In many ways she was a splendid specimen, as defined by the Great Plan, but there was no alternative to deleting psi talents whose geases became defective. Fortunately, as Forseen by The Planner, psi could be relied upon to strengthen the bindings, so psi talents almost never became unbound. In any event, the cthulwaul's blood lust and her terror would be heady wines, upon which he would soon feast. Of Crenshaw's superiors, Pam had glimpsed only reverential invocations of The Great Plan.

It appeared that Crenshaw had not yet informed his superiors of her existence. Sitting still and keeping quiet was the best way to ensure that they did not suspect that his death was other than an accident. Her term paper, however, had just gotten shorter. Four field senses, after all, were more than enough.

University Security was entirely willing to accept Pam's confused explanation of the afternoon's events. It was hard for them to believe that Crenshaw had told her the pen was safe, but no other explanation made sense. If Crenshaw's people made their own investigation, Pam missed the traces.

The next weekend, the semester completed, Pam, house-mates, and friends sat on the bungalow's patio, watching the moons sink into the ocean. Pam was content to let the others talk. The crash of breaking waves came faintly to her ears. She peered up into the starstream, her thoughts leaving her companions far behind. To her housemates and their boy-friends, the stars were open, infinite, promising an unlimited future for mankind. She alone had glimpsed the invisible bars across the constellations. Something had to be done to remove them, but with some cleverness, and help from a few friends, she would figure out how.

## **About the National Fantasy Fan Federation**

The National Fantasy Fan Federation (N3F) founded 1941, is the oldest international SF/F fan club in the whole world. No matter whether you love supernatural, horror, scientific extrapolation, other worlds, films, television, games, or the printed word, you are welcome in the N3F. for more on the N3f: <http://N3F.org>

Our name? Back in 1941, science fiction, swords and sorcery, horror, and supernatural tales were all ‘fantasy’ — speculative fiction. It’s the 21st century...Please visit N3F.ORG. No matter your tastes in speculative fiction, you’re welcome in the N3F.

National? We represent a figurative nation: the nation of fans of speculative fiction. No matter where you live, you’re welcome to join us.

### **What We Do**

Why a club? We’re a club, because many fan activities are a lot more fun when done with a group of with other fans. We unite fantasy fans, so we can all enjoy more our interests.

We offer participation in bureaus that publish fanzines, create round robin correspondence rings, critique our fellows’ writings, and talk about games and game design.

No matter where you are, we offer you a chance to meet and interact with other fans. Yes, you could wait for the next convention. But why wait? We offer you a chance to meet and interact with other fans right now.

### **For New Fans**

Did you just discover the speculative fiction hobby? For almost two-thirds of a century, we’ve served as the Hobby’s welcome wagon.

We’re here to help you discover new events and activities: Authors and movies and television shows and comic books you might have missed. Fannish activities you would love to try, if only you’d known that they existed. Events you would have loved to attend, if you had only heard in time.

### **For Veteran Fen**

Yes, “fen”, the plural of “fan”.

We are one of the few remaining SF/F clubs that still run traditional fannish activities via the U.S. Postal Service. You don’t have to be tied to the internet to join our activities. We still honor the word, printed on paper and delivered to your door. (If you prefer electronic links, we do indeed have internet activities. See our web pages at N3F.ORG)

### **For Creative Types**

Our members include writers, artists, and game and video designers. Some members have published; others aspire to publish or love to dabble in prose.

Artists who take their craft seriously are welcome; so are fellow doodlers of fan art.

The N3F has nurtured new authors for decades.

Our annual fiction contest is open to hopeful author-members.

The N3F Writer’s Exchange lets you circulate your unpublished work to volunteers who promise critiques.

Some members write fan guides. Others create games and game systems.

If you want to publish your own fiction, or to learn how to publish, we have multiple outlets to support your efforts.

## **Publications**

Our monthly newsletter *The National Fantasy Fan* has been published under various titles for three-quarters of a century. Our review and letter zine *Tightbeam*, now published mostly electronically, features art, letters of comment, and reviews of all sorts. Since 1959 we have operated an Amateur Press Association, *N'APA*. *N'APA* is a collation of short zines written by individual N3F members, including whatever people choose to write, with comments on each other's works a traditionally important section. *Ionisphere* is the publication of the Fan-Pro Coordinating Activity Bureau; it features interviews with authors, famous fen, and news of events. The anticipated new zine is *Eldritch Science*; it will feature longer works of fiction, poetry, and artwork.

## **Some of Our More Popular Activities**

**Artists' Bureau:** Our website N3F.org shows a sampling of art by member-artists. Artists from this bureau supply much of the artwork for club magazines *Tightbeam* and *The National Fantasy Fan*.

**Birthday Cards:** This is a fun bureau started many years ago by a fan who wanted to be active in the N3F. Volunteers choose a month to send birthday cards to fellow members.

**Convention Coordinator:** This bureau generates convention reports, dates, and activities.

**Games:** The Games Bureau supports N3F game players.

**N3F Bookworms:** Bookworms is our online reading group.

**Naffer Amateur Press Alliance:** (N'APA): Involved fans publish their own zines; the Bureau Head assembles zines into a single issue of N'APA, and mails N'APA issues back to participants. Amateurs and professionals are all welcome.

**Short Story Contest:** We have a yearly short story contest open to amateur writers.

**Welcommittee:** The Welcommittee is here to welcome new people into the N3F.

**Writer's Exchange:** Members of the Writer's Exchange read and critique each other's manuscripts. We often have a surplus of readers over writers, so feel free to accept criticism from your fellow fen without feeling obliged to offer any criticism in return.

Since 1941, the National Fantasy Fan Federation (N3F) has supported fannish activities across America and around the world. One of those activities is our annual short story contest. In honor of this, our 75th anniversary, we present the winning stories from our 2015 contest

First Place

Sean Gillhoolley – The Bazaar of Forbidden Dreams

Second Place

Jeff Spitzer – The Last Ordeal of James Willoughby

Third Place

Kristin Janz – Fabiana's Fairy Grandmother

Honorable Mention

Deborah Rocheleau – Track Invasion

plus fiction from other Neffers, including Angela Parson Myers, Kent McDaniel, Jefferson Swycaffer, and George Phillis.

Our stories include classic hard science fiction and tales of magic, mystery, horror, and the supernatural, all branches of fantasy as envisioned by the N3F's founders.

Jon Swartz gives us a special non-fiction supplement, a history of N3F publications.

Visit our website  
for more stories, fan  
history, and awards.

