

# CIRSOVA<sup>TM</sup>



Magazine of Thrilling Adventure and Daring Suspense  
Summer Special #2 2020

**The Last Day  
in Iram**  
by  
**James Hutchings**

**Paul Lucas  
Mark Pellegrini  
Schuyler Hernstrom  
J. Manfred Weichsel  
Vonnie Winslow Crist**

**Jill Hand  
Tony Beaulieu  
David Skinner  
Lauren E Reynolds  
Donald Jacob Uitvlugt**

# **Cirsova**

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**The Last Day in Iram, by James Hutchings**

**Summer**

**Special  
No 2**

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by Schuyler  
Hernstrom



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# Just Don't Open the Door

By MARK PELLEGRINI

***Sean lives next to a weird house with bricked-up windows and an overgrown yard... One day, he sees the strange man living next door leaving in a panicked hurry, offering one brusque warning!***

**G**rumbling, Sean plucked another dandelion from a crack in the greying driveway asphalt. It promptly snapped at the base of the stem, which meant he'd have to use the trowel to dig out the roots, which meant he'd have to spend minutes instead of seconds on yet another weed, which meant more precious minutes of his Saturday morning were going to be spent on chores instead of fun. He could be watching baseball or playing video games or riding his bike or eating chips or, really, doing *anything* else, but instead his parents had condemned him to a morning of manual labor. "The sooner you finish, the sooner you can play," his dad had told him—a line he repeated so frequently, it was practically a catchphrase.

His dad was right, of course, and if he'd just focused on the task at hand, he'd have been free and clear in under an hour. Instead, Sean let his attention span become tempted by the scenery surrounding him, and he wasted clusters of minutes staring longingly at the places he'd rather be and imagining the things he'd rather be doing there. A chorus of sighs was the soundtrack to his Saturday morning.

"*It's not fair,*" he groaned as his trowel scraped blindly against the asphalt, nowhere near the dandelion roots. Sean's eyes were jealously locked on the moving target of Rebecca *Something-Or-Other* (she was two grades below him, so they weren't friends). She was riding her bike in casual zigzags down the street, not paying him any particular mind. Rebecca never seemed to have to do chores on Saturday mornings. She was always out riding her bike or skipping rope or running around in circles while he was stuck mowing the

lawn or raking leaves or pulling weeds. “*It’s not fair,*” he gloomily repeated.

Sean looked away in resentment, but the scenery only got worse. His eyes landed on the neighbor’s house. Not the *normal* neighbor’s house, but the *weird* neighbor’s house. The place looked exactly like his own, and every other house in their suburb, except for the fact that the lawn was never mowed, the leaves were never raked, and the weeds were never pulled. Also, all the windows were bricked up, which was why Sean regarded it as “the *weird* neighbor’s house” and not “the *lazy* neighbor’s house.”

Despite appearances, Sean knew that the house wasn’t abandoned. His bedroom window faced the ugly thing, and at night, in bed, he could hear the clatter of various goings-on and whatnot from behind the bricks. Then there was the car, a blue four-door sedan, that was infrequently parked in the cracked and grassy driveway. He’d never caught sight of the man (he assumed it was a man) who lived there, but the evidence was enough to convince him that the place was at least *sometimes* occupied. He’d asked his parents about the weird neighbor a couple of times (a dozen times) and they only ever replied that they’d also never met him, but that how he took care of his home was none of their business. Then they’d remind Sean that if he didn’t mow the lawn and rake the leaves and pull the weeds, *their* home would become as ugly as the *weird neighbor’s* home. The fact that the house had become an ever-present monument condemning him to waste his Saturday mornings on yardwork only served to make Sean hate it even more.

“*Whatever,*” he moaned in dismissal and at last put his eyes back down on his work. His father’s catchphrase had rung in his ear when he’d looked at the weird neighbor’s house, and for a moment it was beginning to make sense. Maybe the reason Rebecca was always out riding her bike while he was stuck toiling away was that she got her chores done faster than he did?

No, no, never mind. It was because she was a spoiled little kid, he was an overburdened pre-teen, and life just wasn’t fai—

**CRASH!**

The abrupt noise rattled Sean’s unguarded nerves and sent the trowel plummeting from his jittering hand like an arrowhead toward



the asphalt crack. It landed flush and stood perfectly on its tip in a miracle of aim he would never notice. That was because Sean was staring eyes wide and mouth agape at the source of the startling crash: the weird neighbor's front door. And stumbling across the threshold in a waddling rush was the weird neighbor himself.

To Sean's satisfaction, the weird neighbor looked *exactly* as he'd imagined him: rotund, balding, poorly shaven, and with pants hiked halfway up his gut. He was sweating profusely as he hurried in wide steps across the overgrown stone path in his lawn and toward his nearly-as-overgrown driveway. The nearer he got, the more Sean realized that the weird neighbor wasn't sweating so much from overexertion (though it was clear that he'd never moved this fast in his life), but more like someone with a fever. He looked sick: pallid complexion, sunken eyes, greyish tongue, and arms that were pockmarked with gooseflesh. Maybe he was on his way to the doctor? The only way to find out, Sean figured, was to keep on staring.

The weird neighbor careened down his driveway and slammed into the rear bumper of his car like a pinball. Clutching the surface of the vehicle for support, he sidled his way around it toward the driver's side door, his sweaty palms making a sticky sound as they peeled off the slick metal. He fumbled around in his pockets, trying the left, then the right, then the left again until he finally found his keys. He opened the door and was about to slosh into the driver's seat when he noticed the bewildered neighbor kid watching him.

Sean wasn't scared of the man, not even when he made eye contact with him and held his gaze for much too long. After all, he was confident he could outrun the wheezing old weirdo. From what Sean could tell, though, the weird neighbor wasn't angry at him for rudely staring. If anything, the man seemed to be frantically searching in his mind, like he felt the sudden need to explain himself to a 12-year-old boy he'd never met before. His huffing and puffing gave him plenty of time to think up a story, and Sean wasn't going to look away anytime soon, either. Eventually, when his breath had gotten longer and his cholesterol-choked heart had found a reasonable rhythm, the weird neighbor said something. He didn't

speak loudly, but there was no fence or hedge between him and Sean, so his voice carried with unmistakable clarity.

“Everything will be fine,” the weird neighbor exhaled. “Just don’t open the door.”

With that, he broke his eye contact with Sean, rolled into his car, slammed the door, started the pattering engine, turned onto the street without first checking for little girls on bicycles, and then disappeared in a cloud of grey fumes that took ten minutes to clear up and twice as long to stop stinking. Sean would never see him again, but that was okay. Once was enough.

Before the exhaust smoke had even begun to dissipate, Sean had already gotten to his feet and left his trowel forgotten on the driveway. He wasn’t looking at the weird neighbor’s car, but the weird neighbor’s house. In the creep’s haste to flee, he had left his front door hanging wide open; the heavy oak slab was still rocking slightly on its hinges as it spent the remaining momentum imparted upon it. Sean could potentially see into the house from the invisible property line that divided their yards, but his attention was focused on the gaping front door. If the weird neighbor’s parting message was “just don’t open the door,” then *why* did he leave the door unlocked and wide open?

The question haunted Sean through the remainder of his weekend, sapping the fun away from the leisure activities he’d so looked forward to. By the following Monday, as he left for school in the morning, he saw that the door was *still* hanging wide open. When he came back from school that afternoon, the door was *still* in the same position, though now debris had gusted over the threshold and inside the house, certainly making a mess of the living room. That night, as he lay in bed, he could hear the hinges creaking in the night air followed by the sounds of nocturnal critters skittering through the unbarred entrance and then having a run of the whole place. Sleep did not come easy, as he still couldn’t shake the question: what did he mean by “don’t open the door?”

“There were animals in there, last night,” Sean said to his parents while choking down a Pop-Tart and zipping up his backpack. “Can’t I just go over and shut the door?”



“It’s not our property. That would be trespassing,” his mother impatiently reminded him. The coffee hadn’t brewed yet, and she’d been telling him the same thing since Saturday evening.

“Besides that,” his father, who was also eagerly awaiting the coffee pot, added, “what if the animals are still in there? You shut the door and trap them inside, they’ll starve to death. Is *that* what you want?”

“No,” Sean sighed in defeat, yet still continued, “But—”

“*It’s none of our business,*” his mother cut him off, knowing full well he had nothing else to say. “If he wants to leave his door open all week, that’s not our concern.”

“But—” Sean had an epiphany, though it was anticipated by the opposition.

“*And even if* he’s abandoned the place,” his father said, running interference, “the city will come by eventually, clear the wild animals out, board up the door and label it condemned. All it takes is one missed mortgage payment. We have to do the paperwork for that stuff every month at the office. It’s procedure.”

“Occupied or condemned, it’s not like anyone can tell the difference with that ugly dump,” his mother said with the sort of cattiness that preceded her morning coffee. “So, just forget about it and don’t miss your bus.”

Sean made it to his bus on time, but he *didn’t* forget about the door. By Wednesday, he had stopped bringing the topic up among his parents. By Friday, his friends at school had told him he was being annoying and needed to drop it. By the rise and shine of Saturday morning, he had decided he was going to stop minding his own business and do some trespassing before the city came by and boarded the place up. Besides, he didn’t have anything better to do. His parents and his friends needed a break from him, and that meant his entire day (post-chores) was free.

He had already devised his strategy midway through the week: he’d burn through his morning chores, tell his parents he was riding to the park for a while, stash his bike in a bush, sneak over to the weird neighbor’s house, and then see what was inside. It was an easy scheme, and luckily for Sean, the stars aligned to make it even easier. His chores that morning were light as a feather (bathroom

duty: gross, but quick work), and his parents were going shopping at the health food place across town, which meant they'd be gone for hours. He didn't have to struggle through a laundry list of chores and he didn't have to make any flimsy excuses to hide his true intentions. Completely free and unsupervised, he could just waltz right over to the weird neighbor's house.

So Sean waltzed right over to the weird neighbor's house. Unlike the raccoons and possums that had come and gone without a moment's consideration (their muddy paw-prints littered the doormat before the threshold and dotted the floorboards beyond it), he hesitated on the porch. He had come prepared for the windowless darkness within, squeezing his flashlight with pinkie knuckles in his left hand, but that wasn't what caused him to pause. Nor was it any fear of authoritarian consequences for trespassing, be it a grounding from his parents or a handcuffing from the police. It was *something else*.

That "something else" wasn't *too* foreboding, though, as Sean shrugged the intuition off and stepped inside after only a second's reluctance. The question that had plagued him for a whole week hadn't been satisfied, and that was all that mattered to him in the moment. Obviously, the door the weird neighbor had referred to hadn't been the *front* door. That meant there was a door *somewhere* in the house that he wanted kept closed. *Why* did he want it kept closed? The only way to find out was to open it. And the only way to figure out *which* door he was referring to was to open *every* door. No matter how long it took.

He messed with the panel of switches by the coatrack, and none of them did anything. If the city had already shut off the power, then they'd be boarding the place up soon. Today was likely his last chance to get answers. Sean grew even more anxious.

The light from outside didn't make it very far into the house, but he clicked on his flashlight and dismissed that obstacle with ease. He was too old to be afraid of ghosts or the dark and hadn't much been intimidated by such things even when he was little. He was more practical in his frights and avoided exploring abandoned buildings not because of boogeymen or evil spirits, but because drug addicts and homeless people shacked up in those places. They were far

more dangerous than any imaginary creature, and he was old enough to know better than to put himself in such perilous predicaments. The weird neighbor's house was a different story. Word hadn't gotten out that it was abandoned, at least beyond the people he had told, like his parents and his friends (none of whom cared at all). And any crackhead or hobo who wandered in would have surely closed the front door behind them. He was confident that the house was unoccupied and he could explore its recesses in peace. And anyway, if worse came to worst, his flashlight was one of those heavy rods made from aircraft aluminum, and he could swing it pretty hard.

Exploring the house would be an easy-enough job, too. It was identical in layout to his own home, just like all the other houses on his street (the handiwork of 1950s cookie-cutter suburban planning). Though it was a little strange, walking into a home that had the familiarity of his own but with different furniture and decorations—sort of like stepping into an alternate dimension. Maybe that was the “something else” that had nagged at Sean for a second as he stood on the front porch? He didn't really care and was more pleased that he could jump right into his task without wasting time getting his bearings.

The place was cleaner than he'd anticipated; he'd been sure that the weird neighbor was a slob like most stereotypical recluses. The living room, he could tell, had been vacuumed and kept organized prior to the front door being left hanging open for a week. The couch had been clawed up along the sides and across the cushions by tiny paws, and dirt and leaves had been tracked along the carpet and over the hearth of the fireplace. But all things considered, he kept a tidy house (tidier than his lawn, anyway). The décor was sparse but tasteful, though Sean noticed that there were no family photos framed and displayed anywhere. He wasn't surprised, given what he knew about the weird neighbor's shut-in lifestyle.

The living room would be investigated later. Sean had decided that the most methodical way of finding the right door was to start from the top and work his way down, one room at a time. It wasn't that different from how he would begin pulling weeds at the front

porch and not quit until he reached the curb. But hopefully, this would be less tedious and more rewarding.

Sean mounted the staircase, which faced the front door and bisected the house. His first stop would be the attic, and if the layouts were truly identical, he would have to access it through a ceiling panel in the hallway. In his house, the panel pulled downward on a string, and a ladder unfolded out from on top of it. To his relief, upon yanking on the plastic ball dangling from the ceiling, he found that the collapsible ladder came standard with the homes on his street. It was a *relief* because if he had to go back home and carry a ladder over to the weird neighbor's house, he was liable to lose interest in the whole expedition. He wanted to know about the door, but he didn't want to work *that* hard for it.

Precisely as with his own house, the idea of air conditioning ventilation in the attic had never occurred to anyone in the planning process. As the ladder unfolded, a sauna's worth of steamy air that smelled like sawdust came dumping over him, and he immediately felt like he needed a shower.

Climbing most of the way up, he poked his head and shoulders through the portal and then brought his lit flashlight up with him. He suspected that there weren't any doors inside an attic, but he had to be sure. The sterile, white light revealed a whole lot of pink cotton candy insulation, diagonal wooden beams, and some loosely scattered debris from a bygone decade (plastic dishes, neon-colored casual wear, magazines with hairy men wearing large golden necklaces on the covers, etc.), but no doors. Sean descended the ladder and resealed the trap door, grateful that he didn't have to spend more than a few seconds in that musty, sweaty loft.

The upstairs hallway was shaped like a horseshoe that curved around the bisecting staircase with the doors for each room (all closed) lining it along the way. Three bedrooms, one bathroom, and one linen closet; Sean figured he'd make short work of them all. Starting with the bathroom on the east end of the hallway, he soon learned that this was a bigger job than he'd anticipated. Beyond the bathroom door, there were shower doors and cabinet doors, and did the lid to the toilet count as a *door*? He would have to check it anyway, just to be thorough.

There was nothing in the bathroom, not that Sean knew exactly *what* he was looking for, so he moved on to the first bedroom door. Inside, there was the closet door, and inside the closet door, there was the door to a crawlspace, and inside the crawlspace, there were large, plump bugs with too many legs. He exited the closet quickly. There were also several dressers, and though they didn't have *doors*, they had *drawers*. *Drawers* weren't the same thing as *doors*, but he had to open each of them anyway. What if he'd misheard the weird neighbor? What if he'd actually said, "just don't open the *drawer*," not "just don't open the *door*?"

By the second bedroom, this was becoming an ordeal as laborious and tedious as anything his parents had assigned him to do. And *why* did the weird neighbor have so many fully furnished bedrooms, anyway? He lived alone, so far as Sean knew. Yet the closets and dressers were all stocked with clean clothes that he had to rifle through in search of whatever it was he was after. Tearing through a bottom drawer full of balled-up socks (*who puts socks in the bottom drawer?* Sean pondered), it occurred to him that if the weird neighbor were to come home right now and find him, it would look like he was robbing the place. It *occurred* to Sean, but it didn't *bother* him. Shoving the drawer closed, he moved on to the linen closet.

*Towels.* The linen closet was full of towels.

The master bedroom was next, and just like his parents' bedroom, it came with its own bathroom and a walk-in closet loaded with small cabinets. Sean surveyed the many doors and drawers he was going to have to inspect, realized he still had the first floor and basement to deal with, and wondered if he even cared anymore.

*Everything will be fine... Just don't open the door.*

Sean started with the bathroom. The medicine cabinet was stocked with ointments and colognes that had never been opened, and the shower was likewise supplied with shampoos and conditioners that were still sealed. He hit the walk-in closet next and noticed that none of the clothes were correctly sized to fit someone as corpulent as the weird neighbor. It was like everything in the house was just for show. Did anyone even actually *live* in the place...?

This was getting frustrating. When he had begun, Sean had given some thought to discretion and made sure to put the clothes back in their drawers and cabinets, as neatly folded as when he'd removed them. *Now*, though? Now, he was chucking the clothes onto the floor and leaving them in wrinkled heaps. It didn't matter. If the weirdo ever came home, he'd probably assume it was a wild animal who had made the mess, anyway.

Nothing. Sean shuffled his way out into the hall and down the stairs, making a mental list of all the rooms he still had left to check: living room, rumpus room, another bathroom, the kitchen, and the basement. And all the doors therein. A sigh accompanied the creak of the bottom step as he realized he wasn't even halfway done.

Sean persevered and attacked each room in the order he had mentally listed them. The work was quicker now that he didn't care about cleaning up after himself, but it was still a whole lot of drudgery. Fruitless drudgery, at that, as nothing of interest had turned up, and he'd already reached the kitchen on his list. There was nothing in this house but clothes that had never been worn and bottles that had never been opened. He was beginning to suspect that his apathetic friends had been onto something.

His despondency increased as he strobed his flashlight's beam across the kitchen, revealing the dozen or more cabinet doors. Although he had not intended to steal anything from the weird neighbor, after all this work, Sean felt he was entitled to help himself to any chips or Oreos he might find in the cabinets. An appetite was beginning to creep up on him, and so he began searching the cupboards with a renewed enthusiasm.

Three cabinets later and all he'd found were stacks of dishes and glasses, all with their barcode stickers still adhered. Was there no end to this house's marathon of disappointments?

The cabinets overhanging the sink, above a bricked-up window, were too high for him to reach. The layout was the same back home (albeit, *his* window wasn't sealed with bricks), and Sean still had to use a stepping stool to get the drink mixes and pitcher down. It was embarrassing, and he yearned for his teenage growth spurt to kick in, but there wasn't anything to be done about it. Even on his tiptoes, he just couldn't reach.

Sean ran the beam of his flashlight along the kitchen floor, revealing the linoleum details one square-foot at a time. He'd need to scoot a chair over to the sink, and he swore he saw a pair by the breakfast table near the backdo—

*Scraaaaaatch!*

The sound, though not deafeningly loud, caught Sean off-guard with enough of a sneak-attack to get him to drop his flashlight. The metal shaft struck the linoleum tiles with a greater noise than the scratching had produced, but even that was a mild *THUD!* He scrambled to collect his flashlight as it rolled in a circle, animating strobing shadows from the furniture and appliances. Rapidly bringing his flashlight back to chest-level, he cast its ray in the direction he had heard the noise. In the direction he was *still* hearing the noise. Something was *still* scratching.

The spotlight landed on one of the cabinets overhanging the counter nearest the basement door. The scratching was becoming frenzied, furious with the unmistakable sound of particleboard being scraped with thin, deep lines. The cabinet door was vibrating and popping inside its frame. Sean felt his mouth run dry, as if all the saliva had slithered down his throat without replenishing itself. Was *this* the door that the weird neighbor had mentioned? Was there something in there he didn't want let out? There was only one way to know for sure. Sean advanced very slowly toward the rioting cabinet.

He only made it halfway, which was fine, because he didn't need to open the cabinet door. The cabinet door opened itself.

"*What—!?*" Sean screamed, his heartbeat pulsing painfully in the big vein where his neck met his jaw. A large grey shape launched itself from out of the cabinet, following a trajectory that only narrowly missed his face. It came close enough for Sean to stumble to one side, ricochet off the sink and fall backward onto his rear. He reoriented his flashlight with just enough time to catch sight of a black-ringed tail as it slipped out of the kitchen. He put his breath on hold for a few seconds so that his own gasping couldn't interfere with the sound of tiny paws and tiny claws scurrying through the living room and out the front door.

"Stupid!" Sean yelled, hoping the raccoon could still hear him and emotionally internalize his insult. He slammed the butt of his



flashlight down onto the tiled floor in impotent frustration, his search momentarily delayed until his heartbeat got under control.

The encounter left Sean more furious than frightened, and he grumbled his way through the rest of the kitchen cabinets, reserving choice words for the ones above the sink. His flipping stomach had eliminated his appetite, and the treats he noticed behind the walk-in pantry door did not entice him in the slightest.

All that remained now was the basement and Sean suspected that if he hadn't found anything *yet*, he wasn't going to find anything at *all*. And the basement didn't look very promising. A windowless hole in the ground, it was difficult to navigate even with a flashlight. Cardboard boxes, all of uniform dimensions, were stacked in pillars upon the concrete foundation. The boxes were not labeled or water-damaged or even dusty. And when he bumped into them, he could tell that despite having been sealed at both ends with packing tape, they were all empty. Everything about the house's furnishings seemed oddly fake. Fraudulent.

*Fraud*, was the operating word that popped into Sean's head, though he was attaching it less to the house and more to the weird neighbor, whose enticing lie had duped him out of a whole Saturday. There was only one door in the basement, a root cellar door underneath the steps, and he'd found nothing beyond it.

A moment before quitting, his flashlight caught a baseball-sized hole in some drywall near the hot water tank. Sean felt his hopes escalate for a moment (even though it was definitely not a *door*), but when he stuck his flashlight into the hole, he found only a wide nook of empty space and wall slats. And that was it. There were no more doors in the whole house. He'd checked them all. What a rip-off.

Sean shoved over one of the pillars of empty boxes and then moodily stomped his way up the stairs, pouting into the darkness. He hadn't considered what he was going to find in the house. He had no expectations of discovering treasure or heroically freeing a kidnapped victim and making the news. His solitary expectation was that he'd find something, *anything*. All he wanted was a story he could tell his friends, but now he was going to have to keep this whole waste of time to himself. They'd just laugh at him.

Entering the kitchen, he remembered the raccoon, and it occurred to him that he almost got rabies in the pursuit of nothing. *Nothing at all*. The revelation just made him angrier, and he swatted over the chair he'd stationed by the sink, letting nothing come between him and the backdoor. Perhaps he could still salvage what was left of his Saturday? Cranking free the deadbolt, he calculated that if he hopped on his bike and left *now*, he could make it to the *7-Eleven* and back before his parents got home (they'd permit him to bike to the park, but the convenience store was "too far" for their peace of mind). It'd be a close one, but he could make it if he hurried. With his disappointments behind him and a new goal in mind, Sean yanked open the backdoor.

He had prepared his eyes for the tidal wave of sunlight, but it never came. Beyond the backdoor was not the weird neighbor's backyard with its knee-deep grass and kudzu-choked bushes. Sean wasn't entirely sure *what* he was looking at, and the confusion stunned him further. He could not tell the ground from the sky and felt that anxious tingling rise from his toes to the base of his skull, a sensation he always felt when he so much as imagined standing at the precipice of a great height. He timidly shuffled a step backward, but still could not take his eyes off the dark expanse that shouldn't have, *couldn't have* been there. The only thing of substance that seemed to be out there was a thick, fibrous mass that rolled like fog but did not share the same intangibility. It looked like something had taken a humongous black cotton ball and was slowly pulling it at both ends, tearing it apart one thread at a time. The sight summoned a taste in Sean's mouth that he recognized as unpleasant but couldn't quite identify. Suspended in the ebony threads as they massed and thinned and tumbled were large grey lumps he at first thought were just wads of cottony fog. They were something *else*, he could tell, and they rolled among the fibers above, below and straight ahead, following trajectories that propelled them languidly in random directions.

***SLAM!!!***

The earsplitting, quaking din shocked Sean from his slack-jawed paralysis, rattling the nerves in his bladder to near-disaster. At first, he thought the noise, so thunderous it trembled the floor, walls, and

ceiling, was the prelude to the entire house falling apart. But the roof did not collapse on top of him, and looking around the dark kitchen with his trembling flashlight, he realized quickly what had caused the ruckus. The basement door was closed. The pantry door was closed. The cabinet doors were closed. Every door he'd opened in the kitchen, every door he'd opened in the *entire house*, had just slammed shut at the same time. Every door but the *back door*, that is, and he could hear something beginning to stir from that direction.

His heart ringing like a fire alarm in his ribcage, Sean whirled around to again face the bizarre expanse, bringing his flashlight's beams with him. The bright rays did not sweep clear the darkness and make the frightful things go away. All the light did was make things *worse*. The explosion of slamming doors had merely awakened the greyish things that tumbled and scurried beyond the door, but it was his *flashlight* that seized their attention. The light caught their glassy lenses as their eyelids peeled horizontally aside, revealing clusters of triangular organs that decorated otherwise featureless, spade-shaped heads.

Their bodies were no longer moving in random directions among the black fibers but were now migrating with intent toward the door. The grey lumps were unfolding like armadillos or pill bugs, and tangles of arms with bulbous joints came spilling out from their underbellies. They gripped the dark threads with sharp, clutching instruments that didn't so much *extend* from hands as *exploded* from them. Their ungainly bulk never caused the drifting webs to buckle, nor did their dozens of fingering knives sever the delicate strands. And as they arched up, Sean saw their mouths. They had as many of those as they did arms, as the puckering orifices were located in the pits where their limbs socketed into their bellies. The moist circles opened wide and from them erupted a chorus of very angry roars that had the timbre of a wet cough.

Sean slammed the backdoor shut. Though the details of the awful place and its angry things had needed only a second to burn themselves into memory, he still wasn't entirely sure what he'd just seen. He *was* sure, however, that he'd just found the door he was looking for. Regret began to duel with terror in the emotional core of

his brain, each sensation vying to make him feel worse. It occurred to Sean that he should have listened to the weird neighbor.

There was a *creak!* Followed by a *crack!* Followed by a *THUD!* And then the backdoor began to bend outward toward him as a furious weight pressed upon it from the other side. The gurgling howls of the angry things began to seep through the gaps in the frame, and their thin, serrated fingers followed quickly after.

That was enough. It was time to leave. Sean whirled around and began a half-blind sprint across the kitchen. He made it two steps when something caught his legs, entangling his ankles with unyielding right angles that bruised his flesh as he pitched forward toward the floor. In the dark, he couldn't see where his hands were going, not in time, and he did a poor job of bracing the impact. Smacking the tile chin-first, he felt something loose and sharp pass across the tip of his tongue. Then one of his newly chipped incisors began to throb mercilessly, and his chin felt hot and wet. Sean started to kick and crawl, soon untangling his ankle from the legs of the chair he'd swatted over into the middle of the kitchen just a minute ago. His bruised ankle hurt, but not enough to keep him from getting back on his feet and taking off for the front door.

The flashlight, now in use, guided him through the living room; there'd be no more chairs to trip him up. Though his conscious thoughts were occupied with a dedicated yearning for escape, in the back of his mind, he was envying the raccoon from the kitchen. It had gotten clean away before things went south. He should've followed its example.

Sean did not slow down but let the door bring him to a stop as he crashed into it with his chest. Clutching the flashlight with one hand, he worked the doorknob without fumbling, wasting no time in turning and pulling. The door was swinging open before he'd even peeled his whole torso from it.

Daylight did not wash over Sean's face, and that was the only thing that saved him. The lack of sunlight gave him the fraction of a second he needed to realize that something wasn't right, stopping himself just in time. His left foot was hovering over a bottomless depth of the black cottony fog that put a gross taste in his mouth, and had he followed through on his step, he'd be tasting it for real.

Sean withdrew his foot, aimed his flashlight forward and saw the shiny, wet carapaces of the angry things barreling toward him from all directions. They were less than a half a breath away.

Sean needed less than a *quarter* of a breath to slam the front door and start a mad scramble up the staircase. By the time he cleared the top step, he could hear the heavy oak of the front door splintering. Ideas and theories surfed his brainwaves, though in his panic, they didn't correlate into any sort of internal monologue. He suspected, however, that the outside of the house was kept ugly to keep people away. And the inside of the house had been furnished to *look* like someone lived there in case anyone was nosy or stupid enough to break in and dig around (someone like *him*). But it wasn't *really* a house at all. It was some kind of barrier or maze that kept the angry things on their side of *wherever-it-was*. And now he was stuck inside of it with them.

*All because I opened that stupid door!* Sean thought. It was the only coherent sentence that had congealed in his head. The rest was a smoldering sensation of rage toward the weird neighbor, who had done a poor job of keeping the angry things on their side, a poor job of warning others what not to mess with, and had then run away after he screwed it all up. If this was his job, Sean hoped he got fired.

With the front and back doors out of the question, it dawned on him that there was nowhere left to flee. The windows were bricked up, and he knew of no other exit. All he could do was hide and pray that eventually someone would come looking for him, open the door on their side, and he'd be able to get out. Sean reached for the nearest door, remembering it was the master bedroom. If he could barricade himself in there and then further barricade himself inside the bathroom or walk-in closet, he might be able to keep himself safe long enough for help to arrive.

The bedroom door bent and heaved toward him, creaking in agony under the stress. He could hear the soaked, furious howls slip through the cracks in the frame. The angry things were already in there. They were in *all* the rooms. The other doors on the second-floor hallway were bending outward, and a melody of terrible noises, rising and dropping in volume with each push of the barriers, were calling for him. The only door that wasn't moving was the linen

closet, but Sean couldn't take refuge in there. It would be like trying to hide in a coffin.

**CRASH!**

The sound came roaring up the stairs, and he felt a powerful gust shove him in the back. The angry things had just gotten through the front door, and he could already hear the clambering of their abundant arms making rapid progress up the staircase. The linen closet may have been a terrible hiding place, but it was all he had left. Sean sprinted down the hall and felt splinters pelt him in the cheek as he passed each failing door. Snatching the knob of the closet and yanking it open, he prayed that there'd be enough clearance between the frame and the shelves for him to wedge inside and shut the door behind him.

The closet door did manage to shut behind him, which was the only good thing to happen in that moment. Sean's unimpeded momentum sent him tripping and then rolling sideways like a log down the basement stairs.

He was fortunate to have taken the fall sideways; had he somersaulted his way down the steps, he would surely have broken his neck. Still, he didn't *feel* very fortunate when he came to a stop on the concrete floor, bruised all over, and it took several confused seconds of searching with his flashlight to realize where he even *was*. The doors weren't working right, anymore. They were all leading to the wrong places.

**CRREEEAAAK!**

The angry things weren't wasting any time. The timber of the basement door was already straining from their raging assault, and a downward tilt of the flashlight revealed that the cellar door beneath the staircase was doing the same. Sean wondered how the creatures could have so many arms with so many hands and so many fingers, yet they couldn't work a doorknob. Then he wondered how he was going to get out of the basement before they got in.

*The hole in the wall*, he remembered. There was a hole in the wall behind the hot water tank. A hole wasn't a door; it wouldn't send him anywhere it wasn't supposed to. He could hide in the wall.

Sean made a beeline for the water tank, his flashlight at his side and unneeded; he strategized that he could plow his way through the

stacks of empty boxes without much effort. And that strategy lasted as long as the first pillar of boxes that got in his way. He put all his weight and momentum into the shove, but the boxes didn't budge. They *weren't empty* anymore. As the sealed cardboard lids began to bulge and burst, it dawned on Sean that if drawers and cabinets counted as "doors" then so did the lids of boxes.

The beams of his flailing flashlight glinted off the bunches of veiny straight-razors that groped blindly in the dark, searching for a handful. The arms stretched, reaching in all directions, and their sharp fingers swiped frantically like swinging guillotines. Sean ducked and dodged in a futile endeavor to cross the obstacle course unscathed, but he soon felt hot moisture along his arms and legs and knew that overwhelming pain was soon to follow. The screams from the boxes grew louder, as though the angry things used their fingers to smell. And they very much liked the smell of blood.

Sean reached the hole in the wall exhausted, but it wasn't time for a nap. With the butt of his flashlight, he bashed away at the drywall, widening the hole until it was large enough for him to crawl through. Using the wall slats for purchase, a purchase that cost him the tips of his fingernails, he pulled himself in and then up. His sneakers passed through just as he heard the familiar sound of doors snapping to pieces behind him.

He shimmied his way up until he found a horizontal beam wide enough to rest his toes on. He knew he was somewhere on the first floor, though his sense of direction was so out of joint, he couldn't be sure where. All he could do for the moment was hold his breath and listen to the noises on the other side of the fragile drywall: sticky lengths of shell scraping against the paint, a marching line of pointy fingers clattering across the floorboards, and a harmony of drowning moans.

His flashlight spotted something in the drywall: another hole, much smaller than the one he came through. He clicked the light off so it couldn't give him away, then began to slowly, quietly, *carefully* inch his way along the beam toward the circle.

It was a delicately drilled and discretely placed peephole, though the weird neighbor would have been far too rotund to have ever used it. But maybe a previous owner/guardian of the house had? Sean



gave it a peep, and though it took some time for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, he could make out the living room. And at the far end, he could see the fireplace.

### *The fireplace.*

Sean figured that if holes weren't doors, they weren't subject to the same spatial contortions. And what was a chimney but a big hole in the roof? If he got through the fireplace, he could escape through the chimney. It was a dangerous strategy, but he could feel his head getting woozy. The wetness on his arms and legs wasn't getting any dryer, either. He couldn't wait for help to find him.

He wasn't able to see if the coast was truly clear or not, but the prowling sounds along the walls had drifted away and around corners. He was anxious and losing steam and needed to go. Bracing his back against a support beam, Sean lifted his knees, flattened his feet against the drywall, and pushed. A crack ran up to the peephole, and it widened as he pressed harder. The wall began to split open and so he started to kick. He could hear the angry things responding to his disturbance, so he kicked faster and harder.

The drywall crumbled into a hole large enough for him to slip through, and Sean found his way through it without a moment's hesitation. His flashlight was left dark and abandoned somewhere in the walls, and he rushed through blackness to where he knew the fireplace would be. He could hear the angry things to his left and his right, and a smell like an open dumpster on a dog day afternoon swooped in on him from those same directions. Sean's fingers found bricks, he ducked his head, felt old logs and an iron rack scatter under his shoes, and then he put his shimmying experience into practice, propelling himself up the chimney. For a second, what sounded like throbbing knives scraped against the treads of his sneakers.

His progress up the chimney was swift. It had to be. He could hear those same knives and dozens more scraping against the bricks, and they were getting closer by the second. Sean kept moving upward in that dark, tight shaft until the top of his head smacked against something made of thin metal.

"*What!?*" he shouted, digging his feet and back into the bricks to keep from plummeting. The chimney flue damper was closed. "No!

Nononono! NO!" he screamed, tasting the salt of his tears as they dribbled into the corners of his mouth.

Sean could hear the angry things closing in, and their garbage smell was collecting and thickening around him. Bracing himself tighter with his back and feet, he reached up and crammed his fingertips into the thin seam between the edge of the damper and the side of the chimney. He imagined it would have been much easier if he still had fingernails, but scraping the skin off his knuckles as he forced his fingers in, he found enough leverage to pry. The metal lid came down, bringing a cloud of dry leaves with it, and he restarted his upward momentum. He heard the sound of sharp fingers tapping on the metal lid below him, but he could also see the opening of the chimney above him. Sean shimmied faster.

There was light outside, though not much, but he didn't care. It was enough to see the shingles of the roof and the gutters at the edge. He climbed gracelessly out from the mouth of the chimney, his hands clutching at anything they could wrap their raw, stinging fingers around. Sean tumbled headfirst over the side and rolled halfway down the ramp of the roof, sliding the rest of the way until his heels caught the rim of the gutter and saved him from a nasty fall.

He wasn't relieved. Looking down, he did not see the grass or the driveway. He saw nothing but the dark fabric of mist that went on forever into otherwise empty space. The chimney flue damper, it seemed, had counted as a door.

*It's not fair,* Sean thought with a weakening, fading consciousness. He'd worked so hard, *so hard,* yet he didn't get anything. He didn't even get out. He could hear the chimney bricks crumbling behind him and the wet howls of the angry things growing louder. He didn't want to look, so he continued staring over the edge of the roof at the rolling ebony clouds.

That awful taste surged back into his mouth, and he finally remembered what it was and why he kept recalling the flavor. *Black licorice cotton candy.* Those dark, fibrous mists made him think of black licorice cotton candy.

It was a stupid thing to think about, but it was his last thought. He'd wasted it.

“I’m gonna ride my bike!” Rebecca called out as she tightened the laces on her shoes. Her mother paused from her coffee and conversation with Mrs. Calaman long enough to give her an acknowledging hand-wave. Rebecca accepted the consenting gesture before any second thoughts could be considered. Ever since the neighbor boy had gone missing, her mother had kept her locked up like a princess in a Nintendo game. No bike riding, no tag with friends, no sunshine: nothing but TV, homework, and Saturday morning chores. Using a distraction like Mrs. Calaman to slip past her mom’s defenses was underhanded, but it had been a month and she was going stir-crazy. Besides, Rebecca wanted to do more than ride her bike. She wanted to see *the place*.

Rebecca felt sorry for the neighbor boy (whose name she didn’t know and face she barely remembered), not so much because he went missing, but because his newsworthy disappearance had been completely overshadowed by a much more exciting and mysterious happening that had occurred on that same day. As she shut the front door behind her, she could already hear that the conversation between her mom and Mrs. Calaman was going to go the exact same way *every* conversation about the boy’s vanishing went.

“Terrible thing about what happened to *What’s-His-Name*,” her mother would say, albeit using the boy’s name that Rebecca couldn’t remember.

“Oh, yes,” Mrs. Calaman would reply. “I *hate* to keep my boy cooped up indoors, but I couldn’t stand the thought of him disappearing like *What’s-His-Name*.”

“And speaking of disappearing,” her mother would perk up. “*That house!*”

“Oh, *I know! A whole house! Gone!*” Mrs. Calaman would set her coffee cup down noisily in its saucer so she could gesture grandly with both hands. The conversation about the missing house would continue, but any thoughts of the missing boy would be long forgotten by then.

Rebecca dug her bike out of the shed, hopped on, and sped off before anyone could tell her to get back inside. It had been very strange that a whole house had up and vanished when no one was

looking, and she had to see *the place* for herself. The place where the house had been.

No one seemed to know what had happened to it. She had passed it, ugly as ever, on the morning of that infamous Saturday while bike-riding. And it was still there when she came back in the early afternoon. She hadn't seen it disappear, but then again, no one had. Mr. Johansen was even out watering his lawn two doors down and told everyone that it had been there when he started hooking up the sprinkler but was gone by the time he cranked on the spigot. No one had seen a truck with a platform trailer drive in to carry it away, and no one had heard a demolition crew tear it down. The ugly house had simply vanished in the blink of an eye, leaving behind nothing but a rusted mailbox, a weedy driveway, and a square hole in the ground where the basement used to be.

Everyone at school was still talking about it, even the big kids, and naturally they'd already tied the missing neighbor boy into the rumors. Some older kids who said they were his friends were positive that the boy had been inside the house when it vanished, "because he wouldn't *shut up* about the place for a whole week." Rebecca didn't care so much about any of that, just that the empty lot had become a haunted landmark: their town's own personal Stonehenge. Every kid in school had made a pilgrimage there, even the tykes in the grades below her. *Every kid but her*, because her mom wouldn't let her leave the house alone all month.

But she was there, now. Skidding her bike to a stop, she felt a chill tremble her flesh and make it prickly. She'd driven past the empty lot twice a day on school commutes with her mom, but seeing it in person, alone, was very different from seeing it through the backseat window of their car. That big hole in the ground looked quite a bit deeper.

Rebecca dropped her bike on the cricket-infested lawn, crept past the mailbox, and made her way nervously up the shaggy driveway. Peering over the pit's edge, she saw nothing but an earthen floor and four walls of red clay with a few broken pipes embedded flush in the sides (looking like they'd been cleanly sliced when the house had run away from home). It really wasn't *that* deep, she judged, realizing

it was just a one-story drop, and noticed that ladders had been placed below so that anyone who fell in could climb back out.

She also saw what all the kids had been telling her about. A very long beam of wood, purloined from a construction site by some teenagers, had been placed over the hole to span it lengthwise. Everyone who visited the empty lot was challenged to walk the narrow beam from one end to the other. Supposedly, if you fell in, you would not hit the soft clay below, but would instead go tumbling forever into the place where the house had gone (“That’s what happened to *What’s-His-Name!*” one of the older kids had said). The escape ladders hinted the consequences were bunk, but this was what Rebecca had come to do, and she hoped it would be as thrilling as advertised.

Stretching both arms out in a T-pose for balance, she began across the beam. It was as exhilarating as the kids had promised, and for a moment, in the center of the pit, she froze and felt her knees begin to wobble. She recovered, pressed on and made it to the other side with bragging rights acquired. In fact, it was so much fun, she did it again. And again. *And again.*

By the sixth trip, she was getting bored. The place wasn’t feeling so spooky anymore, and the hole in the ground seemed to shrink in perilous depth every time she crossed it. It was clear why no other kids were at the empty lot that morning; it didn’t take long to get tired of the place, and everyone but her had already had their fill. At least now she could say she’d done it and not feel left out during lunch break and recess conversations.

Rebecca marched back down the driveway less nervously than before, suddenly content with spending the rest of her Saturday watching TV inside. It had been fun, sort of, but it wasn’t *Universal Studios* or anything. The mystery spot hadn’t even occupied an hour of her day. Brushing the bouncing crickets from the handlebars as she lifted her bike up, she wondered if maybe the pit-crossing would be more fun if she brought her friends along? After all, if anyone was going to believe she’d done it, she’d need witne—

*Scraaatttccchhh!*

Rebecca looked around in a circle, more curious than startled. The scratching sound had been so close, it tickled her ear.

*Scraaatttccchhh!*

She heard it again, but this time she was able to trail its source. It was coming from the rusty mailbox at the edge of the driveway. Setting her bike back down among the crickets, she headed over to investigate.

The nearer she got, the faster and more numerous the scratches inside the mailbox became. It sounded like dozens of little claws were in there, clicking and scraping about. The mailbox door was closed, held fast by a tiny latch, and it dawned on her that whatever animal was in there (a bird or a squirrel or something) had to have been trapped. Maybe one of the teenagers stuffed a kitten inside so it could starve or suffocate. Teenagers were always doing cruel things like that.

*Scratch! Scratch! Scratch! Scratch!*

Rebecca couldn't stand the thought of the poor animal stuck in the dark, cramped place and hurried over to the mailbox to let it out. There was an odd smell, like the bottom of their kitchen trashcan, but she ignored it. The scratching intensified into a frenzy, and the mailbox began to vibrate and rumble. The animal inside must be getting anxious; she had to let it out quick!

Unfastening the latch, Rebecca opened the door...

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# The Greenery Has Come Again

By PAUL LUCAS

*James's childhood home is no longer his own, and returning proves an uncanny experience as the mystery surrounding the giant tree his mother named Yggdrasil blooms like the greenwood itself!*

It is with some trepidation that I set down on paper the events that took place on my twenty-fifth birthday, so many years ago. Although I am an old man now, the memory of those events is as fresh in my mind as those other memories of my youth: the fields of our estate where I lived as a child in Northumberland, the meadows filled with poppies and Soldiers' Buttons, both of them bright and scarlet. I still remember those beautiful flowers and the dark woods brooding beyond this display of vibrant colour. Those times are more vivid to me than the present day, where I have difficulty remembering what the nurse brought to me at breakfast time: whether porridge or toast done only on one side, I cannot recall. I do, though, admire the marigolds she has placed by the side of my bed. At least, I believe it was she who placed them there while I slept. It may have been one of my granddaughters, they love horticulture so much.

My family's estate had been sold to the Brunel family after the war, Father having fallen in battle and Mother not being able to deal with the loss. The death duties and upkeep after Father's passing had left her a broken woman, and she passed away only two years after him, pale and emaciated and beautiful. Roger Brunel had been an old friend of Mother, and he had bought the estate, mostly out of affection for her. After the various debts and death duties, the purchase left me a small independent income that I eked out with a position as a tutor at a small public school, St. Sebastian's in Oxfordshire. It was a rather threadbare institution, but adequate.

I had driven up to the estate at Roger's invitation. He was always solicitous of my wellbeing and often invited me to stay on public holidays and other celebratory occasions, most notably the



coronation of Her Majesty the previous year. The event in question, though, was my twenty-fifth birthday—the tenth since Father had fallen on the beaches of Normandy, but only the second time that I had had the wherewithal to celebrate since that terrible day.

It was the height of summer, the fields were ablaze with nature's beauty, and the air was warm, though there was some Aeolian relief coming in from the southwest. As I drove up the long winding driveway, the house bulked large ahead. I say house, but it was more of a manor, dating back several centuries. Fake crenellations topped the two wings and tall, broad windows filled each wall.

I could see Roger standing on the steps, and he beckoned to someone in the doorway, a 'someone' who came swiftly down the steps to join him: his daughter Beatrice. He was taller than she, even though she was tall and willowy herself. I hooted the horn, and they both waved in a jolly fashion, Beatrice with a broad-brimmed hat in her hand. She looked very pretty, as she always did, her long brown hair loose and floating about her head.

As the car closed on them, a creature dropped from the trees that lined either side of the driveway and landed on the bonnet of the car. I slammed my foot on the brake pedal, sending up stones from under the tyres, only to see the creature was a red squirrel, now gripping the windscreen wipers with its little hands. It chattered at me, scolding me over some imagined slight, its big bushy tail waving in the way that squirrels do when they are irate; message delivered, it bounded off the car and scampered across the grass to the safety of the woods some distance away. Gone to take refuge in Yggdrasil, no doubt.

Roger welcomed me out of the car with a firm handshake, and Beatrice hugged me and gave me a kiss on the cheek. She smelled of roses.

"Well, what a welcome from the local wildlife, eh?" said Roger.

"It's amazing it didn't slip under the wheels," I replied.

"Ah well, there are plenty more tree rats where that came from, eh," he said. Roger never had been a big fan of nature, having made his money in some manufacturing enterprise on the other side of the pond long before I was born—California, I vaguely remembered.

“Ignore Daddy,” said Beatrice, putting her hand on my arm. “We’re just glad you didn’t crash your car. I wouldn’t like to see you laid out on a mortician’s table somewhere.”

“I’ll get your bags, James,” Roger said, reaching into the back seat. “Let’s get you settled into your old room.”

We went up the steps leading into the house and through the main hallway. Roger had replaced the Horton family portraits with newer works of art, all angular and abstract; he had stored the bulk of my ancestors in an out-of-the-way attic room: “for when you have your own place,” he had said when he bought the place. Beyond the hallway was the staircase, which, being made of dark polished wood, gave a sense of solidity to the house and not the gloom you might have thought from its heaviness. The stairs creaked as the three of us strode up them and along the first floor to my old room. I turned to Roger.

“The staircase never used to do that,” I said, to which he replied, “Sorry, old boy. Some of the woodwork has been playing up lately. I’ll have someone look into it, eh?”

Other than the unexpectedly squeaking floorboards, he had maintained the house far better than Mother and Father had ever done, I will give him that. The armoured figures along the hallways were polished, and the windows sparkled in a way they never had when I was a boy, and no spider webs festooned the top corners of the passageways. Physically, it was all the same, but there was also something about the place most unlike what I had known. Something other than the spider webs was missing, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on it.

Beatrice chattered away by my side, one topic succeeding another. At that moment, the topic was her medical studies at St. Maud’s College.

“...and when you prise open the braincase and get inside, it’s all grey and squishy,” she said, imitating lifting out a brain and squeezing it between her fingers. “You’d never think it held the entirety of the human mind. All engineering, science, philosophy and the arts, all in such a little thing.”

“Any sign of a soul in there?” I asked, to which she laughingly replied, “Only if it was *your* brain I was examining,” and moved on to

the next topic that sprang to her own mind.

“I’m the only girl in my class, you know, James,” she said, “but the boys are all incredibly kind to me.”

I grunted a non-committal reply.

“Probably because she’s so beautiful, eh, James?” said Roger, giving me a nudge. Before I could reply, we were at my room.

He put my bags down and said, “I’ll leave you two to catch up.” He nodded towards Beatrice, who had rushed across the room to look out of the windows at the grand view of the woods beyond. Before he could go, I put my hand on his arm.

“What is it, James?”

I tried to answer but was suddenly tongue-tied. I felt my cheeks burning.

“Out with it, young man. You know you can tell me anything. Or ask me anything.”

“Well, those old family records I once asked you about,” I finally said. “Have you found anything? Maybe when you were clearing out the bookcases. It’s where Mother used to hide all her scribblings.”

Roger shook his head. “I’m sorry, James. If she ever wrote anything down, I’m afraid she must have destroyed it all before she...you know.”

“Nothing of Father’s? No letters, diaries...anything?”

“I really am terribly sorry, James.” He shook his head once again and then turned to go. He stopped in the doorway and looked back, opening and closing his mouth a few times before finally saying, “There’s something else I want to talk to you about, James, but it can wait till another time,” and then he was gone.

“Whatever was that last bit about?” I asked Beatrice, who had come back to join me.

But she only smiled enigmatically, like the Mona Lisa, and taking me by the elbow to draw me across the room, answered, “Why, I don’t know for sure! But I hope it’s what I suspect.” She blushed very prettily.

I disentangled myself from her clasp and looked out of the window across the grounds to the north. The lawn was well tended and the flowers bloomed everywhere I looked, and the giant ash tree I called Yggdrasil was still there at the edge of the cultivated area: old,

gnarled and huge, it towered over everything. I had spent many happy hours underneath its limbs. Its highest branches were easily taller than the house and cast a great shadow over the woodlands beyond it. Now, four creatures grazed in the shade of its leaves, and I pointed them out.

“Look, the stags are back,” I said to Beatrice, and beckoned her across.

“They're beautiful,” she said. “But I've never seen them here before.”

We watched as the stags lifted their heads and sniffed the air, as if they could scent our interest. Four majestic sets of antlers turned this way and that, and then, as if not liking to be watched by the common herd, they stepped gracefully into the dark of the woodland beyond Yggdrasil.

“Who was that woman with them?” I said.

Beatrice shook her head. “What woman?”

“The one who was standing just under the trees, where the stags went into the wood.”

“Really, James, you're just imagining things! Are you teasing me?”

“She was really there. Dressed in rather a rustic outfit.” And there had been a woman, half-hidden by the trees. I had only noticed her as she stepped aside to let the stags go past her.

“Oh well, if she was in camouflage, how do you expect me to see her? Perhaps she was from one of the neighbouring estates,” Beatrice laughed and then changed the subject yet again. “I hope you like the room,” she said, “We haven't changed anything too much since the last time you were here.” She prattled on as I looked out at my old kingdom. I, though, was still perplexed about the strange woman. I didn't like the thought of an outsider standing on land that was once my family's. An outsider who didn't spook the stags was even stranger. But perhaps, as Beatrice suggested, she was just one of the workers from a neighbouring estate. Perhaps I could see where she had gone.

I moved to the window in the other wall and looked out on the estate from a different angle. Beside and beyond the greenery and Yggdrasil stretched Tyburn Forest, which had once provided us with building materials and firewood, but which had also provided timber

for less life-affirming purposes down South, in London. Many a criminal had swung from beneath the limbs of those grim trees built from our wood.

Usually, the forest stretched as far as the eye could see to the north, great swathes of dark green dominating that landscape, but today it was changed. There were holes in the canopy, and I could see great masses of trees, branches sawed from them and discarded, the trunks piled on the ground, one on top of the other; it was like the dreadful photographs I had seen after the war, of corpses tumbled together in makeshift tumuli, everywhere the Nazis had conducted their human sacrifices. Above the corpses of the trees loomed a mechanical contrivance, all shining metal struts. I turned to Beatrice quizzically.

“Daddy is harvesting the trees for commercial use,” she said. “There’s a lot of building work around the county, and this is one way to keep the estate running. He hopes it will turn a profit, eventually.”

“And the machine?” I asked.

“A new forestry device for harvesting the trees efficiently,” she said. “One of his own inventions. Engineering runs in our blood, after all.”

“Like molten metal rushing through a furnace,” I replied, pointing at the towering machinery.

“Of course,” she said, flushing. “Now let’s go down and have some tea.” She put her hand on my arm and led me out of the room. Her hand felt quite hot to the touch.

Later that afternoon, after a cold lunch of sliced beef covered with good English mustard thrust between hearty chunks of freshly baked bread, and with Beatrice off somewhere—doing something feminine, I’m sure—Roger and I were sitting in the drawing room reading the newspapers. The sun was slanting in the windows, and I was drowsing, the sheets of paper slowly sliding off my lap onto the floor, when Roger disturbed my repose.

“Wake up, James, old boy!” He gripped my leg and gave it a shake. I blinked bleary eyes and apologised for my slothfulness. “Never mind, that,” said he. “There’s something I want to show you, now that we’re alone.” He beckoned me to the bookcase that filled

the whole of the back wall of the room. The bookcase had been there my entire life, but Roger had filled it with new books: all engineering and modern art. Of all the things about Roger, his taste in art was the only thing I didn't like, but I didn't say so, as he had been so generous to me.

He pointed at the wainscot that ran all around the room, from the floor to a height of about three feet. It was dark panel, like most of the wood in the house, how old I could not guess, but certainly stretching back to the days of the English Civil War, I was sure; it stored a history of battles and purges, no doubt. I had heard Mother say that the panelling in this room was even older, taken from the wood of the original castle on which the house rested, repurposed for more civilised uses; I had always taken that to be one of her fanciful imaginings.

I looked closely at the wood. It should have been dark brown all the way around, but I could see green mottling in large areas, especially around the bookcase, where nearly all of it had gone dark green. I bent closer. It wasn't a mottling, but was, in fact, living greenery! The panel was sprouting small leaves, tiny leaves, like those on a Japanese bonsai tree, but leaves nevertheless! I turned back to Roger.

"It's been happening this last month," he said. "It started as a few discolourations, then small nodules broke through, tiny branches, and within the last few days...this! Most perplexing, I'm sure you'll agree, eh?"

"Have you had anyone in to look at it?" I asked, to which he replied, "Too busy with the forestry work, I'm afraid."

I nodded, but then my attention was distracted by a noise. Something was scratching and rustling and moving about behind the wall! The wainscot closest to the bookcase was showing signs of age, with cracks running up and down its height; the rustling was loudest there. And it wasn't just a rustling, either. Another noise whispered in and out, like the voice of something animate filtering through the leaves and branches of a dense woodland.

"Can you hear that?" I said. Roger shook his head. "I swear, Roger, it almost sounds like a soft voice. A child, or a woman. It's coming from down here, where the damage is." I pointed, all the

while the susurrations continuing from somewhere in the wall. Roger came to stand next to me, bending over to get his head closer to the wooden panelling. "Put your ear up against it," I said, which he did.

"My Lord!" he spluttered, "There's something behind there. What do you think it is, more greenery? It would explain the leaves, eh. My word, maybe there's something growing under the whole house, undermining the foundations! There's this weed from Japan which I hear is damned difficult to get rid of. Kudzu they call it in America. I'd best get that panel off and..."

But before he could say any more, a great length of the panel burst forward and landed at his feet. A fetid odour rolled outwards from the space behind it, causing us both to gag. Roger stumbled backwards and went down on his rump as a thousand tiny creatures burst forward, tiny grey creatures with tiny feet and beady black eyes, and tiny quivering whiskers. Mice and more mice came pouring through the gap and ran over Roger's body, thousands of little feet scampering about the room before heading for the open window, climbing up and over the furniture in a furry grey tide, and thence out into the countryside. There was nothing behind the panel, no foreign weed or any kind of growth, nothing other than a hundred holes where the mice had burrowed their way through, and a pile of dirt and murine waste matter on the carpet.

"Well, I never!" Roger stood up and dusted himself down.

"I suppose I'd best get someone to come and clean up the mess," he said, ringing the bell for the servants.

That night, I was sitting up late in the games room, the drawing room now being in no fit state to occupy, reading the rest of the newspaper I had laid down earlier that day. I wasn't feeling sleepy, though the night was dark, it being nearly midnight. Beatrice and Roger had retired sometime earlier, and the servants were off to their quarters. As I turned the pages of the paper, they were ruffled by a warm breeze that was blowing through the open window.

I was distracted by a noise from outside, which sounded like someone laughing way off in the distance. I looked out of the window, but the light from the games room was too bright, so I opened the French doors and stepped out. I let my eyes adjust for a

few moments, but I couldn't make out anyone or anything, just the lawn running away from the building, bisected by the driveway. Then the laughing came again, from round the side of the building off to my right, so I went that way, the gravel of the path crunching underfoot. Above me, the moon was mostly hidden by clouds, leaving everything in partial darkness. Turning the corner, I saw more lawn running towards Yggdrasil. Even in the dark, its bulk was obvious: a greater darkness silhouetted against the black sky.

On the lawn in front of Yggdrasil, there was a magnificent sight: the four stags were here again. They were majestic creatures, their antlers towering well over my head. The two furthest away dropped their heads to crop at the grass, while the two nearest, the largest, just looked at me. Their brown eyes were large and inscrutable, but not threatening. Strangest of all was a glow coming from their antlers. No, not from their antlers, from above them. Above each tine, floating an inch or two in the air, glowed a round and soft point of light that cast a silvery glow over the stags.

I stared at them for a few moments, and then felt compelled to step forward, onto the sward, and rest my hand on the flank of the nearest beast. It snorted and twitched its ears, but let my hand rest there. I stroked it gently. I had never had the privilege of being so close to these creatures before, and I felt tears form in the corners of my eyes.

The laughing came again, and in the gloom, I saw a faint light from somewhere in the woods, moving towards Yggdrasil. It bobbed and weaved, sometimes rising high, sometimes falling low, disappearing momentarily as it was obscured by some branch or trunk, all the while accompanied by a feminine voice singing a strange song in a tongue I didn't recognise. The woman of the forest! It had to be her, come back to visit.

I stepped forward another pace and went to walk past the right side of the stag, but it just moved to stay in front of me. I increased my pace, wanting to find out who this mysterious singing stranger was, but the stag just kept moving ahead of me, the glowing lights staying in place above its antlers, illuminating them with a soft silvery glow. The other stags came towards me until they were all blocking my path. No matter which way I moved, they were in front of me,



escorting me slowly away from Yggdrasil and the mysterious woman. Beyond them, the bobbing light finally reached the mighty tree and went out. The voice died off, and there was only the sound of the rustling of the leaves and the huffing of the stags' breath in their nostrils. I made one last push to get through them, trying to step carefully between them, but the biggest just dropped his head and pushed at me with his antlers. I stepped backwards, and he raised his head, looking me in the eyes. I looked back into his eyes, amazed at the inhuman intelligence I saw within.

There was a bang from behind me, and the stag's left eye exploded with blood, splattering on my shirt, arms and face. His head fell to one side and his legs buckled. He wobbled, then sank to his knees and toppled onto his right side, blood pouring from the hole in his head and spreading out at my feet. His fellows ran from me across the lawn, disappearing into the woodland somewhere off there in the dark.

I was standing there in shock when Roger came upon me from behind, rifle in his hands.

"I've been after one of those blighters for a damned long time," he said, stopping beside me. He was in his dressing gown, slippers on his feet. "Thanks for distracting them while I got the shot in. He'll look great over the fireplace." He prodded the stag's torso with his foot, and then bent down to get a good look at it.

"What the hell!" I shouted, then grabbed Roger by the back of his dressing gown and pulled him back to his feet. He staggered as he rose.

"That creature has more right to be here than you!" I shouted in his face, "He's got more right to be here than me!"

"Steady on, James," he responded, "It's just an animal."

"What do you think you're doing, shooting him like that? He was beautiful, in his prime, and you've cut him down...and with a firearm at that. He was a creature of the forest, not a...I don't know...some sort of combatant! This isn't a battlefield!"

"Well, I'm sorry about that, old boy," he replied, "If I'd known you felt that strongly, I'd never have taken a shot at him. Tell you what, you can have first dibs on the carcass. Maybe we can send it to the

butcher in the village as a goodwill gift to the villagers. Free venison for everyone. What do you say, eh?"

I stared at him for a few seconds, at his face with its pathetic half-grin, half-grimace on it. I shook my head, turned from him, and headed back into the house and the game room. I would normally never drink that late, but I found the whiskey and a soda bottle and made myself a large one. As I was knocking it back, Roger came into the room through the French windows, muttering about the stag, but I waved him away.

"I don't want to talk about it just now, thank you, Roger!"

"Don't want to talk about what?" said a feminine voice from the internal doorway. I turned to see Beatrice standing there, also in her dressing gown, holding a large book in her hands. Her long brown hair was flowing over her shoulders, and her eyes were sparkling with life and laughter.

"Oh nothing," said Roger. "Just a difference of opinion about pest control."

She nodded and shrugged her shoulders. "Look here, James, I've found something." She put the huge tome down onto the billiard table, being careful to move the balls and cues out of the way first. She was always very methodical and careful, my Beatrice.

I looked over her shoulder to see that the tome was massive, with a dark leather cover. It was closed with a wooden clasp, and on the cover, inscribed in an ornate copperplate script, was the title, "Being a Detailed History of Tyburn Woods, the Horton Estate, Ogbury Barrows and Sundry Other Locations of Interest to the Amateur Folklorist, Geologist and Naturalist."

"I overheard you talking with Daddy before," Beatrice said, "and remembered seeing something interesting in one of the attics when we were children. I couldn't sleep, and so I went exploring. I found this. Look."

She flipped the clasp and opened the book. Just inside the front cover was an envelope made of crisp white paper—modern paper. It had 'James' written on it, in a feminine hand I recognised. I reached for it, but then something made me draw back. Was it addressed to me, or to my father? Would I be broaching marital trust if I read it?

"What's this, then, eh?"

Roger's hand reached from behind me towards the envelope, but Beatrice slapped it out of the way.

"I'm sorry, Daddy, but I don't think this is your business."

He grumbled something in reply. I turned to look at him. My visage must have been quite grim because he didn't say anything else, just took himself through the doorway and stalked off down the corridor with his rifle hanging loose from his hand.

I turned back to the book and reached for the envelope myself, but I couldn't bring myself to take it out, or even touch it. My hand hovered over it, fingers mere inches from it, but I couldn't compel myself any further. I looked up mutely at Beatrice.

"Would you like me to...?" she asked. I nodded. She took the envelope and opening the flap, which was not gummed down, extracted several sheets of paper covered with a beautiful script. Mother's writing. I gulped down some more of the whiskey and nodded at Beatrice. She had the first sheet in her right hand, and the rest of the sheets in her left.

"My dearest James," she read, "before I head out for my evening walk, I wanted to explain to you so much. Not just about what I am doing, but about what happened in ages long gone. It's important that you understand the truth about the estate and everything within it, and why the family has been haunted for so long by the ghosts of the past."

Beatrice looked up at me. I nodded again. She dropped her eyes and continued reading.

"It all goes back generations, to the earliest days of the Horton family, and the landscape. You are bound to it in ways you don't understand. I've spoken with someone who has seen it all, the one being who knows everything, the one person with a breadth of knowledge, gathered over the years, that you and I could never appreciate, and the truth is that..."

As Beatrice read those words from the first page, a flame burst from the sheet of paper, catching her fingers. She waved it about, making little cries of shock as she did so. The paper just burnt more fiercely, until Beatrice was compelled to drop it to the floor. She stamped on it, still holding the other sheets in her left hand, but it kept burning. And then the sheets in her left hand likewise

combusted in an incomprehensible manner, flames running up the sleeve of her dressing gown.

I knocked the remaining sheets out of Beatrice's hand to the floor, and took up the soda siphon and sprayed its contents all over her blazing garment. When I'd made certain that there was no danger of any more conflagration, we both looked to the sheets on the floor. They were only ash. Beatrice dropped quickly to her knees and tried to pick up the pieces, but there was nothing to pick up but grey dirt.

"Oh, James! I'm so sorry. I don't know what happened. Did I have some combustible liquid on my hands? Something I trailed back from college? Oh, I'm ever so sorry! If this is my fault, I'll never forgive myself."

She stood up and put her hands to her face in shame, leaving smudge marks on her cheeks. I took her in my arms and said, "Of course it's not your fault. As long as you're safe, that's all that matters."

After a few moments, she pulled herself together, and I let her go. She sniffled into a tissue that she had retrieved in that invisibly female way from her other sleeve.

"Oh James, this could have been the answer to all your questions, and look at it! It's all gone. Lost forever. Oh, I must tidy it away."

She looked about as if for cleaning equipment, but I put my hand on her arm.

"I'll take care of it. And please don't apologise anymore," I said, "This has afforded me a great opportunity to think. I'll see you in the morning."

"Are you sure..." she started to say, but I said "Bed!" and gently pushed her away. She nodded and left the room, looking back at me once before continuing into the darkness beyond. When I heard her footsteps on the creaking stairs, I lifted the book that had caused all this trouble from the billiard table and sat down to read it. Outside the window, I thought I could see soft lights in the woods, and hear mocking laughter in the distance.

I spent the next several days with Roger and Beatrice, enjoying the summer sunshine and the lovely surroundings. Roger often went to tinker with his engineering devices, leaving Beatrice and me to make

our own amusement. He was trying to avoid me, too, truth be told. I could see it in his sheepish glances at me, and the absence of venison from the menu.

Beatrice and I often took walks around the grounds, but never into the woods. “Too many forest operations going on,” was always her excuse, but I didn't see any signs of active machinery anywhere. Occasionally I heard a rumble as Roger moved the great tree harvesting machine, but never any noise of timber felling. When I saw the great machine swaying in the distance, I felt a chill go down my spine. There was something soulless about it. Not just mechanical, but malevolent.

Beatrice wanted to talk about the events of that evening, but I put her off. “There's nothing more to talk about,” I would say, “what's done is done.” Still, she pestered me about what I thought the letter meant and the significance of the history book, but I put her off. The letter was gone, and the book was just a history of the surrounding area with nothing to say specifically about my family, much as I would have liked it otherwise.

On these walks, I followed Beatrice's lead, letting her take charge and feel valuable after her failure—in her eyes, not mine—over Mother's letter. We would stroll around the lawns, vegetable gardens and orchards, wherever the fancy took her, occasionally splashing through the stream at the far end of the estate. It reminded me of the times when I first met her and Roger, when we were very young, and her father had returned from America with this pretty young thing. Father and Mother had gushed over her before Roger had whisked her away to somewhere in the Pacific for another extended absence.

Everything today was growing lustily, but, much as I enjoyed Beatrice's company, there was always a pain at the back of my mind seeing everything from the eye of an outsider, a stranger—a foreigner. This had all once been mine, but now it belonged to someone else. Still, I appreciated the kindness Beatrice and Roger displayed towards me. They weren't to know how much it sometimes pained me to see the changes: the herb garden moved from where Mother had planted it against that sheltered wall, or the old apple trees, venerable enough to be retired, instead chopped down to

make way for cherry saplings that were too young to put forth a full head of blossom.

It was the middle of the day with no shadows around us, and we were strolling back from the orchards towards the house, the last walk we would ever have at the estate. I noticed the harvesting machine looming near us, above and beyond the nearest trees. Beatrice noticed—she was always attentive to my emotional state, lovely girl—and nodded towards it.

“You don’t like it, do you?”

I shrugged. “I’ve always preferred natural forestry. When I was a child, Father would take out half a dozen of his men and ponies, each with a harness attached to it. Hours later, they’d come back with the ponies dragging tree trunks behind them, shorn of their branches. It was a sight to see, Father and his men leading the beasts back, steam rising from their shaggy coats.”

“That sounds very romantic,” said Beatrice. “But there’s something to be said for the machinery. I think there’s something quite majestic about it,” and she waved at the massive machine, “It’s the future.”

She took my arm in hers and, changing the subject suddenly, asked me the queerest question.

“Tell me, James, did you ever see strange things when you were a boy? When you lived here, before your parents...you know.”

I was nonplussed. “What sort of strange things?” I replied. “Stranger than letters spontaneously combusting?”

Beatrice’s cheeks reddened, making me feel bad for even mentioning it, and she shook her head. “I don’t know. Just...strange things. I saw the growth on the wainscot, and Daddy told me about the mice.”

“There are always animals coming and going in a place like this,” I said, “and shadows in the trees. The forest can make some awfully strange noises at night, too. It can be eerie if you’re not used to it.”

“But nothing stranger than that? Anything, well, unnatural?”

I thought back. I wanted to talk to her about the strange woman in the woods and the lights shining above the antlers of the stags, and what I thought about them, but something held me back. This house, this estate, had once belonged to my family, and these little mysteries felt like they were my last little bits of that life. But I

couldn't keep everything from Beatrice, she was so honest and earnest, and such a good friend, so I compromised. "Well, Mother used to tell rather fanciful stories about the place. It was she who named the ash tree Yggdrasil, and she always had a story about the woods and the creatures that lived there. But I've forgotten most of them. When I was a child..."

We continued walking. Around us, the birds were suddenly active, especially the crows, which had started cawing and wheeling about in the sky above the woods, as if getting ready to settle for the night, although it was the middle of the day. I pondered this strange behaviour, but then Beatrice interrupted my thoughts.

"Does it make you sad thinking about those stories she told you?" she asked. "Not remembering that part of your legacy?"

I forgot about the birds and nodded. "Sometimes."

"She loved the forest," said Beatrice. "I remember that much of her." She paused for a moment, then blurted out, "I've seen their initials, you know James, carved into the tree."

"What?" I said, "Whose?"

"Your parents' initials. MB and JTH. I saw them."

I was shocked and couldn't reply. This was a story I had never heard, a story about an artifact I had never seen in all the years I had lived on or visited the estate. Beatrice continued.

"I saw the initials recently, in a love heart, while we were setting up the forest machinery. They were carved high up in Yggdrasil, where one of the branches joins the trunk. Impossible to see from the ground. I meant to tell you the other day, but well, there was that strange affair with the letter from your mother..."

"I'll have to look at these initials," I said, but then reconsidered. "But maybe not, I don't know. Do I need to know? Should I intrude? What goes on between husband and wife is a private thing." I could barely move. Beatrice laid a hand on my arm.

"I think the initials were where...you know...where they found your mother. It may even have been the same branch." She left it a few moments, and then asked, "Do you want me to show you?"

I shook my head. "Not now. But thank you for telling me this, Beatrice," I said. "You don't know what this means to me. You're the best friend I ever had." She took my hand in hers.

And suddenly we were startled by a cold air blowing across us, and the sky turning dark. The birds had all disappeared from the sky and the landscape was silent around us. I looked up and squinted. The sun was but a partial disk in the sky as the moon glided across in front of it. Beatrice held onto me tight; I could feel her shivering in her light dress. I put my arms around her as the moon ate some more of the sun.

We walked back to the house in silence.

**T**hat night, as I lay in the bed that had once been mine, and which was mine again for a few nights only, I was woken by a creaking from somewhere in my room. The curtains were blowing in a gentle breeze and some moonlight was leaking in, so I could see a little, but to my sleep-befuddled eyes, nobody was there. I turned to the switch that controlled the electric light, but as I flicked it there was a sudden pop as the bulb burnt out, followed by a smell of burning.

I jumped out of bed and saw that the power lead was smouldering. I pulled it from the wall socket, being careful not to shock myself. It was a damnable nuisance, but I'd experienced worse. I knew that there would be candles somewhere left over from the war, but where they would be, I couldn't quite remember. I groped my way to the window as best I could and pulled open the curtains. The room was lit up, I presumed by the rays of the full moon coming in through the window, creating a mix of shadows and light. But a thought was tickling at the back of my head about the moon and the eclipse, a thought I was too befuddled to follow to its conclusion.

Something rustled behind me. Turning, I saw her standing between me and the door.

"Beatrice?"

Her long brown hair was tied up and crowned with leaves that were twined together. She was wearing a green skirt, made of a rough homespun material tied at the waist that stopped just above her knees. Her bare legs tapered to slim bare feet. Her skin was not the white that it should have been in the light of a full moon, but was the green of a lawn in the morning after rain. Her skirt was the dark green of the leaves deep in the forest where there was no light and



where they had to fight for nourishment. This was most unlike the Beatrice I knew. I approached her.

“What are you doing here? What would your father think!”

She didn't reply or even smile. Her face, normally so animated, was placid. And when she opened her mouth, I realised that this wasn't my Beatrice, the Beatrice I'd known for so long, but was some sort of sending from elsewhere.

“Look to the tree,” she said, pointing out of the window. “Look to Yggdrasil, to your fate.”

I glanced outside but saw nothing other than the darkness of night stretching across the forest, and the faint gleam of reflected light from the harvesting tower. The fake Beatrice rustled as she moved towards me, and I turned back to her. She put her arms on my shoulders and reached up to kiss me, but I turned my face away. I put my hands on her arms, and felt nothing of any substance beneath, as if she was a summer breeze given human form. I grasped her to hold her in place, but she just turned her face to me again, imperturbable; under my hands her skin sagged, and then turned into hundreds of leaves which dropped and drifted to the floor, browning as they went, as the leaves do in autumn, the disintegration swiftly spreading to the rest of her. The leaves made a soft whispering as they collapsed, and then she was gone. I fell to my knees and felt amongst the leaves which covered the whole floor to my room, sweeping both arms left and right, groping amongst the leaf litter, but there was nothing else there. There had never been anything there. She was gone.

I turned once more to the window and looked out, towards Yggdrasil, which was now fully visible to me—yet not from the moon coming out from behind the clouds, for there was none, but from its own phosphorescence. Every branch and leaf was limned a pale white against the darkness. It was soft and beautiful. A different, green, phosphorescent glow shone more brightly beneath the tree. I stepped up to the window and, pressing my face to the glass, looked more closely; it was Beatrice, or rather her duplicate, standing under the spreading branches. She lifted one arm and beckoned me, and I knew I had to go.

Five minutes later, having brushed the leaves from my clothing and dressed in a rush, I was on the lawn, striding out towards the tree. My mind was awlirl, and I confess I was not thinking straight; I don't think I was thinking at all, just perceiving, like an animal.

She was standing there beneath the tree, waiting for me. Although it was the middle of the night, Yggdrasil itself was now limned in a faint glow of its own, a light coming from inside its branches and being part of its branches. I could hear the chittering of a squirrel coming from high in the tree, and the cawing of crows somewhere in the distance.

I only had one thing to ask her.

"Who are you?"

"I am the greenery, the verdant countryside, that which you once loved but now spurn. I am your fate."

"But what is your name?"

"You know my name. It is the whispering of the wind through the leaves, and the rustle of the creatures in the undergrowth."

She was speaking in riddles, but I pressed on. "Why have you taken Beatrice's form?" I asked.

"Your love for her is a poor, pitiful, smouldering spark, too dull to be extinguished, too feeble to burn. But that is the sort of love humans have for each other—in the end, all consuming."

My head could not understand her evasive and enigmatic statements, but something else deep inside me did. I felt my chest tighten, and my breath shortened. My heart was pounding fast.

"Beauty is like the North Star," she said. "You will never touch it with your hands, but you can use it as your guide, and following it, reach your destiny. The forest is your destiny."

"Remember this, though, the beauty which you see with your eyes is only skin deep, but the beauty which you see with your heart is the beauty of the soul. Such beauty suffuses her whom you love, from her heart outwards. Come to me, James, and feel my heart beat for you." She held her hands out to me.

I confess, I felt some attraction. There was something about her that I found alluring, so like Beatrice, but also unlike. Her skin was the colour of new spring growth, and her bosom as ripe as the fruit

on the trees in the autumn. Most compelling of all, her eyes were as green pools in the depths of the forest, filled with ancient wisdom. How could I resist? Why should I resist? But something inside me gave me pause, and I shook my head and took a half-step back.

She pointed at the machinery towering above us.

“Is that what you want, James? A soulless tool? A tool that has one purpose only: to destroy the greenwood for which your heart yearns?”

I didn't respond.

“Well, have her if you must, your soulless creature of metal that only loves to cut and extract, but know that you are tearing up the roots of happiness eternal, here in the greenery, and casting them into the fire. And you shall never know what I have seen, you shall never hear the last words of she who loved you the most, she who loved you the first.”

She pointed to the branch immediately above her, which lit up with a blinding white phosphorescence; bright shone the letters where the branch joined the tree. ‘MB + JTH’, inside a love heart. It was just as Beatrice had said!

“Did you...did you really see her? Did you really...hear her last words?” I managed to stutter.

She just smiled and held out her hands to me again. I walked in a daze towards her. I could not resist. I lifted my own hands to take hers and learn the truth of everything that had ever riddled me.

“James!”

I turned around. Beatrice, wrapped in a dressing gown, was rushing towards us across the lawn. She stopped with hands on hips in front of her doppelgänger.

“I know you,” said Beatrice. “The tree-maiden, I've always called you. You've been haunting this place for years! Plaguing anyone who tries to change anything. Destroying them. And now you're after James, too. Bitch!”

Beatrice slapped her hard across the face. The tree-maiden, for the first time that I saw, expressed shock, her eyes wide and her mouth falling open. It was the most human I had seen her, and it didn't suit her. Her face was suddenly lined with the sort of wrinkles that run up and down the trunk of an ancient tree. Then, her face

contorting with rage, she grasped hold of Beatrice's long hair and pulled her closer. Beatrice struggled, but the tree-maiden had the strength of an entire forest in her, or what remained of the forest, which was still mighty, and dragged Beatrice closer and closer to Yggdrasil. I rushed towards them both and tried to push the tree-maiden off, tried to rip her arms from around Beatrice, but she was as immovable as Yggdrasil itself. With each second she was pulling Beatrice closer to the trunk of the tree, where I knew I would stand no chance of freeing her.

"James!" cried Beatrice. "Help!"

I pulled harder, but the tree-maiden just let go of one hand from Beatrice and punched me in the chest. I flew far across the lawn and landed on my back, winded and helpless. But looking up, with the vantage of the angle I lay at, I realised that I wasn't helpless. There, beyond Yggdrasil, in the forest, towered Beatrice's saviour: the huge forestry machine, shining in the light of the phosphorescence of the mighty tree itself. The soulless machine would save her, the only soul in all the world, I now realised, who mattered to me!

I dashed across the lawn, skirting the tree that housed my adversary, stumbling over tree roots and through the undergrowth, till I reached the metal tower and climbed up into the control cabin. I looked down at the switches and levers around me. They seemed quite simple. That was clearly the ON/OFF switch, and those levers over there controlled the blades. The tower even had caterpillar tracks to move, which Roger had told me about over lunch one day. I switched the machine on, to a mighty roar and a flash of lights as its headlights blazed on, and I pushed every lever I could find fully forward. Smoke belched out from behind me as the tower went into motion, lurching and juddering forward, headlights penetrating the gloom of the forest, blades whirling all around me from every direction. I didn't care if the blades broke through the cabin and eviscerated me, as long as they helped me rescue Beatrice first.

The mighty oak trees between me and Yggdrasil, each of them twenty, thirty, fifty feet tall, were mere twigs to the machine as it tore through them; branches and trunks were snapped and brushed casually aside. At last, we reached the gigantic ash tree, and battle commenced.

The first set of the machine's blades reached out, as if of their own volition, for I had touched no controls for some seconds, and the shears ripped into the topmost layer of branches on Yggdrasil and flung them aside. These branches thudded down onto the lawn, such that even I could feel the vibration up in the cabin of the juddering machine. The blades continued moving without me touching the controls, the levers moving themselves on automatic, forwards and back, up and down, stripping the mighty tree of its limbs. My job here was finished, it was clear; I could no longer help Beatrice from inside the machine, so I jumped down from the cabin, and landed near the roots.

The tree-maiden, that duplicate Beatrice, was standing stock still, looking up at the machine above her, screaming, but she still held Beatrice in a firm grasp.

"Let her go," I shouted above the roaring.

She turned to me. Tears ran down her face.

"You will never know," screamed the tree-maiden, "you will never know the words she cried at the end!"

"I don't care," I shouted back. "I only care for Beatrice!"

Stepping closer, I grabbed Beatrice. The tree-maiden's grasp was weaker now, that of a normal woman, as the source of her own strength met its nemesis in the form of a soulless machine. But was the machine really soulless? The forestry machine was built of iron, mined from ore, from the very Earth itself; as the trees held ancient spirits, did the rocks and soil of the planet hold spirits that were older still, spirits that the ingenuity of man were now unleashing?

The tree-maiden ran around, trying to pick up branches, which she obviously found difficult, and dragged them back towards the trunk. She laboured to lift them up and thrust them back up to the tree as if to re-attach them, but she did not have the strength. At last, she ran back empty handed to Yggdrasil, threw herself to the ground and reached her arms as far as she could around the base of its trunk. She turned back to us, and her face was filled with pain.

"She's no threat to you now, Beatrice," I said, drawing her further away from the carnage taking place above us.

"But look at her, James. She's so helpless."

Beatrice was right. The tree-maiden cut a wretched figure as she slumped against the tree, surrounded and showered by fallen leaves—each leaf surely a soul to her.

“James, we’ve not just destroyed a tree, but taken her whole world away from her.”

And then Beatrice demonstrated that fickleness of spirit and kindness of heart that I had always admired, but which were very inconvenient for her to display just at that moment.

“We can’t leave her to die!” cried Beatrice and, breaking free of my arms, she rushed towards the base of the tree. I chased after her, but a limb of the tree caught in one of the blades of the tower, and it dislodged a great metal beam at me. I swear it came at me as a javelin thrower hurls his weapon. I was knocked down and left pinned to the ground by a semi-circle of metal around my ankle. Above me, the harvesting machine lurched forwards and backwards as its cutters spun and flailed in and out of Yggdrasil’s branches. I looked again for Beatrice, but could barely see her amongst the detritus that showered down around me, and the beams and blades that whirled above me.

“Beatrice!” I cried, over and over again, to no avail. She had disappeared somewhere in amongst the massive roots, roots which were being pulled out of the ground and thrown around under the exertions of the machine. Clods of earth and turf popped out and showered me with dirt.

By now, the harvesting machine was fully locked in an embrace with Yggdrasil, its metal spars and cutters fully jabbing into the tree in ways that I knew were impossible to its construction, many of the blades getting stuck; the tree’s branches were twisted round by the machine’s action and wrapped around the upright tower, as if fighting off a predator. For a moment, the pair remained this way, locked together, and then suddenly the branches of Yggdrasil moved of their own accord, I swear it; the ends of the branches extended and the twigs flexed like fingers, they grasped the tower and thrust it over, and then everything came down with a massive crack and creak, both tree and tower collapsing away from the forest and onto the house, onto my childhood home.

The massive tree's canopy landed on the roof directly above the front entranceway, scattering the slates; the upper blades of the machine whirred through the centuries-old roof beams, and both tree and tower continued their fall, tearing through windows and floors and walls until they came to a rest on the ground. Dust and brick shards and leaves blew from the scene of the devastation.

"Beatrice!" I cried, and, finally extricating myself from the beam, I ran towards the torn and broken roots of the tree and the caterpillar tracks and cutting blades of the machine. I heard a coughing, and heedless of the blades whirring about me, I dove in and felt for Beatrice. My hand touched an arm, and praying it was her, I grabbed it and pulled until eventually I could get both of my hands under her arms and tug her out. But who was it? Who had I saved? I looked down. Long brown hair spilled over a beautiful face and onto arms that were pale and bare. But the arms were only bare because her dressing gown was so torn and ruined, and the skin underneath was pale white, not tinged with green. Beatrice! My Beatrice! I clasped her in my own arms and held her close.

As I stroked her hair, I looked over her head and into the ruins of the tree but could see no sign of the tree-maiden. I never did.

Roger came running from the direction of the ruined house and, climbing up sideways into the ruined cabin, turned the machine off.

"Good God, what in hell is going on here!" he shouted above the roar of the blades as they came slowly to a stop.

Beatrice stepped out of my arms, brushed some leaves from her hair and ran her fingers through it to straighten her tresses. She turned to Roger.

"Don't worry, Daddy," she said, "I'll explain everything in a minute." Then she turned to me and stood up on tiptoes. "It's gone midnight. Happy birthday, James," she said and kissed me on the lips.

I can still feel Beatrice's kiss on my cracked lips as I lie here in my bed in this nursing home. My old body is broken beyond economical repair, and so was my childhood home after that cataclysmic battle so many years ago. Yggdrasil had ensured that machinery would not triumph, even if the tree itself would not survive. Ever the businessman, Roger eventually donated the

building to the National Trust as a tax write-off. After many years, it was renewed and refurbished, but never to the full extent it was originally. Now tourists walk up its stairs and along its hallways, looking into the gaping hole at the heart of the building. They hear the guides tell of the strange events that occurred here —but only a bowdlerised version, of course. “An unexpected storm combined with subsidence brought on by poorly managed forestry operations,” is what they say.

But though I never had the house again, at least I had Beatrice. If the life she carried me off to after that dreadful night isn't quite the eternity of quaffing mead and carousing with fallen companions befitting one who went through battle, well, it's the closest you might want as a civilised man: single malts around the hearth with she whom I loved, and long walks on the moors with the children. The seasons have moved on, from that high summer through to the autumn of my life with Beatrice and the youngest, to these chilly days where the sun gets ever lower with the approaching solstice, and my shadow lengthens ahead of me every day.

And if the staff here in this home knew of what I write, they would only think it the ramblings of a demented old man and would drug me into insensibility, hence my trepidation setting this story down; but set it down I must, so that my grandchildren, at least, can understand what they are and where they came from, if my suspicions are ever proven true about Beatrice and the tree-maiden.

I have had many years now thinking about what happened, and plenty of time to consider the changes that slowly came over Beatrice: a sense of contentment and considerably less flightiness, which I had always put down to the joys of marriage and motherhood, but which may have had another source.

I can never be sure which of them came out of the machine alive.

The woman that Beatrice became, the poise and elegance, now that I look back, remind me of her who stood under the branches and called to me that night, her with the verdant skin and allure of the forest. Or was the tree-maiden merely a template into which Beatrice molded herself as she became older and wiser, pouring her soul into the form that she needed to become?



Whatever, I still miss my Beatrice, the Beatrice she became over the years with me, as Mother Nature transformed her, as she no doubt transformed me, too.

But marvel of marvels! Look at this in front of me! As my words scratch across this sheaf of paper, I am cast back through those years, and to the miracle I once saw when dead wood burst with life on that wainscot, for the pencil I have been using to scribe my words, that poor benighted once-living greenwood, machined and transformed into a tool of the civilised man, is changing. It is growing new wood, I can see it with my own eyes! This pencil has burst into flower, yellow and red blossoms twining up and about my fingers, and within my own hand I hold new life.

She has come back to me.

The greenery has come again!

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*Paul is far too mundane to have anything exciting to put in a bio. This is his second story to be published in Cirsova, but please don't ask him to explain it. You already understand it as much as he does.*

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# Mission 21

By SCHUYLER HERNSTROM

***Codename Joker: he's the best at what he does—wet works ops against the reptilian aliens that eat human flesh! Can he keep his perfect record when a bystander gets caught in the crossfire?!***

**T**he woman completed her transaction, an exchange of money for goods enacted without pleasantries. Her two children tore into their oversized bags of off-brand Cheetos.

Every city has a different kind.

The brilliant red dust of the snacks began coating the girls' fingers before they had even reached the door, beaded braids clacking as they walked with a light step.

Only one customer remained, a man in blue coveralls with a bag of paper plates and one of plastic flatware. The old man behind the counter sized him up with a quick glance from under his bushy eyebrows, their bright white striking against his brown skin.

The customer was tall and broad-shouldered. He carried himself like a soldier, a posture slightly out of odds with the shabby coveralls he wore.

The man in coveralls handed over a crisp five-dollar bill. The doorbell sounded.

The swarthy old man behind the counter pushed the change into the man's palm, but the tall fellow was distracted. His steel-blue eyes viewed the new customer in the rounded mirror tucked where wall and ceiling met.

There was a nearly imperceptible change in his posture. His feet were a little wider apart, shoulders tense. He took two steps backwards, making room for the new customer but not turning to leave.

The new arrival got right to business. From the voluminous pockets of his filthy jacket, he produced a cheap pistol. The piece shook in his hand as he began screaming, a string of obscenities

with mention of the cash register sprinkled in. Red eyes above sunken cheeks darted here and there, wild with feral hunger.

The old man's eyes narrowed. Where he had come from, men waving guns in an attempt to impose their will were a dime a dozen. One hand stroked his long beard as his other dipped underneath the counter.

The junkie's bloodshot eyes tracked the movement. "Don't you dare! Don't!"

The old man raised his hands.

The junkie waved the pistol towards the man in coveralls.

"And your wallet! Now!"

The man's voice was calm as he replied, the tone of someone about to tell a joke.

"I left it at my place. Sorry, bro."

More obscenities poured from the thief.

"Easy, man. Take it easy. I got some cash." The man in coveralls rifled through his pockets. He produced a handful of twenties and then searched his back pockets. "I think I got some more. I lose stuff in these coveralls."

"Hand it over!"

"Oh, here's a couple hundred! You want this wad for sure. Is it crack or meth you're needing? Either way that will buy a lot right there, right?" The man laughed into the shaking barrel as he held up the money. "It's my boss's money."

A filthy hand snatched the money away.

"Got any more?"

"Hey, man, you saw me go through my pockets. Don't get greedy, now."

The man in coveralls watched from the corner of his eye as the old man made another play for under the counter.

Time slowed.

The thief swung the pistol to point at the old man with a jerking motion, fast like a rat. The crack reverberated within the narrow walls, and the round smashed into a box of cheap cigars, sending bits of tobacco into the dank air.

In one swift motion, the man in coveralls knocked the weapon aside and slipped behind the thief.

His heavy arm swung around the neck like a viper. The fist came underneath the chin, then a step backwards.

Next came the sound of cartilage separating, a soft crunching noise, like celery breaking.

A twist, then the thief slipped to the ground. He twitched once and was still.

The man in coveralls shook his head. He gave the old man a look, raising his hands slightly in a universal gesture meaning whatever had been happening was over, calm down.

He bent and retrieved his bills from the jacket, picking gingerly through the pockets, nose wrinkled at the smell of stale tobacco and the effluvia of one whom drugs had robbed of the impetus to bathe.

The man stood and leaned close to the old man. His pleasant baritone betrayed not a hint of distress as he spoke.

“Brother, God willing, you have to do me a favor. When the police come, tell them you didn’t get a good look at me.”

He reached over the narrow counter and ejected the security tape from the VCR, nearly toppling the unit from where it lay covered in dust in a nest of cables. The old man made no gesture to stop him, eyes fixed on the body on the floor.

“I have to take this.” The man in coveralls pocketed the tape and placed the roll of hundreds on the counter. “Here is a gift for you and your family.”

The bell on the door announced his departure, a high pitched sound at odds with the grim tableau he left behind.

The owner stood dumb for a moment.

The man had been speaking to him in Pashto. Had he? No, it wasn’t possible. He pocketed the cash and dialed 911. As it rang, he looked at the body again. There had been some fight while he hid behind the counter. That was going to be his story. He had forgotten to put a tape in the machine. He hadn’t seen anything. Just some white man. If the news people came, he wouldn’t talk to them. An abiding scorn for artificial authority had been hard-wired into the men of his tribe for longer than his new home had even existed. Not a bit of that was going to melt in this pot.

he man in coveralls walked with shoulders slightly hunched, eyes  
T down but not too far down. It was the walk of someone tired, a  
working man no one would give a second look. The hiss of  
hydraulic brakes sounded at the curb, and he abruptly turned to  
get on the bus. Ten minutes later, he was in the thick of downtown.

At the entrance to the underground he found a rare payphone.  
The change gave him a moment's trouble from his work gloves.

"Oliverio's Pizza."

"Oh, sorry. Wrong number."

It would be about twenty minutes' wait, now. The man kept  
moving. He covered the same couple of blocks but in a pattern  
designed so no one would see him twice. He studied the people  
around him, the buildings, anything to keep his mind off the killing.  
He could take it; he had many times before. But when the memory  
was fresh, especially then, it hung around his consciousness like  
alligator eyes peeking up from the swamp.

At the mouth of an alley, the Mercedes appeared.

A man waited in the back seat. He was of compact build, swarthy  
skin pulled tight over a wiry frame. His dark brown suit was cut  
roomier than the current fashion stateside but would not look amiss  
strolling a palm-shaded avenue in Beirut or Haifa. His arms were  
crossed as he watched the man in coveralls, fingers drumming  
slowly in the crook of his elbows.

The man in coveralls smiled, a crooked grin. "Avi, I jump through  
all these opsec hoops while you ride around in this. Is your suit  
getting creased? That would be a shame."

The driver looked back a moment, a small head pivoting on a  
thick neck. His chuckle died in his throat after a look from the one  
called Avi.

Avi spoke with authority, perfect English that only contained a hint  
of Sabra.

"Mr. Joker, scanners are lit up with a mess a block from where you  
are staying. Tell me this isn't why you called before a big op."

"Why are the Jews here funny, but the ones in Israel such a  
downer like you?"

"Was that your mess?"

“Well, yes. But it wasn’t my fault.” He handed over the VHS. Avi took it in his hands like it was a piece of bloodied evidence. He placed the tape in an envelope and wagged his finger at the man.

“You are lucky. Anything but a bodega would be streaming that somewhere off-site. Maybe it would go viral. You killing a man with your bare hands. Your face everywhere.”

“The old man went for a weapon, and the guy fired. I had to make a move.”

“A mess, a big mess right before an op.”

Avi leaned forward. His narrow face wore a cop’s expression, disbelief and cold anger. “The owner saw you, saw what you did.”

The man sank into his seat. “He won’t talk. Where he’s from the only difference between government and bandit is an embroidered patch. I left him some sugar to make extra sure. You know, Avi, this wouldn’t happen if you put me up in a better part of town.”

Avi spoke through clenched teeth. “We might have to come back here someday. And you need to be in a part of town where people don’t talk to police. people move around. You know that.”

“If we have to go back, you can use somebody else. Don’t touch the old man.”

Avi shook his head. “I have to consider security. While you do push-ups and watch Young and the Restless, I have to consider these things and set up these ops.”

Rain drummed the roof. Oncoming headlights lit up the streaking droplets on the passenger windows.

“Avi, don’t touch the old man.”

Avi’s voice dropped an octave.

“That is my call.”

The man called Joker narrowed his eyes. His voice had lost its mirth. His tone now seemed to cool the interior of the car as he spoke, “Don’t.”

The two men stared at each other.

Avi looked away. He straightened his suit, speaking in a soft voice.

“You know what happens in this business when people like me feel like they have lost control of people like you.”

“Come on, Avi, it’s me! Code name Joker! The best the Consortium ever fielded. One hundred percent success with zero collateral. When have my instincts ever been wrong? And what good is all our work if innocent people get killed?”

“You just broke your streak with that junkie.”

Joker shook his head, “Oh no. That wasn’t on an op. Doesn’t count.”

Avi shook his head while he continued.

“Trust me, Avi. Anyway, I’m Wienbaum’s favorite. Back in the day, the old man himself would have come to chew my ass. How is your grandfather, by the way?”

Avi shook his head, defeated and rueful. He smiled despite himself.

“He’s goddamn near a hundred but still sharp. He sits in that study and has a hand in everything. Me and Ben run around all day.” Avi stared out at the rain for a moment. “He seems to think something big is coming.”

“Like what?”

“He won’t say. I think he is worried we will think he is losing it. He doesn’t want to retire yet, something is holding him back.”

The man shook his head. “Poor old coot. I would have liked to see him enjoying his golden years, playing chess, watching old movies, whatever.”

“That would kill him faster than anything.”

Joker shrugged. “I suppose you’re right.”

The city’s buildings gave way to open sky as the car accelerated onto one of the many arteries that pumped white-collar workers away from its nocturnal dangers.

Avi barked at the driver. “Get off next at the exit and get behind University Park. And call Peter with the van to come pick Joker up.” He turned back to Joker. “Peter will take you to the safe house and get you set up. Zev headed up the recon, and he is running your support. He’s scrubbing your place now.”

“Ha! I bet he’s pissed. Today wasn’t a total wash, then.”

“The op is tomorrow night. Be glad your indiscretion happened now. It is too late for me to get another operative in place. I’ll be in command of this one personally.”

Joker smiled again. "Ooh, late night for Avi. How mad is Nita?"

Avi's voice went high, buoyed by the force of sudden memory. "I almost forgot. Are you on for Vienna? You never RSVP'ed."

The car slowed as it made its way around the treelined road.

"Yeah, I'll be there. Gale set it up. I'll be traveling as 'Dax O'Donnell.' I think she gets those names from her romance novels. But what the hell am I supposed to bring? What does a sixteen-year-old girl want for her birthday?"

"Hell if I know," replied Avi.

He laid a hand on Joker's shoulder. "Jon."

The switch from code name to Christian name was accompanied by a rare surfacing of warmth shared between two men who lived in shadow. The Consortium was a family they shared, one by birth, the other by employment. Code names were for the vast files the Consortium kept, unnecessary in the field with such an intimate organization. Yet, for some reason, people preferred to use "Joker" when addressing the man presently riding in Avi's Mercedes and playing with the seat controls as his handler, and friend, addressed him.

Avi continued, "This is going to be a tough one. Three alphas, one beta, and one warrior. A lot of dark spots in the recon. Maybe extensive construction underground. If we didn't have so much going on, I might have put more operatives on it."

"You know I like to work alone."

"Be careful. Just. Be careful."

Joker smiled. "I'll be fine."

He left the car at a bend with no one in sight, took a couple of big steps and then, hands thrust in his pockets, he shuffled along, a man out for a stroll ruined by an autumn rain. The van waited in a lot by an empty swimming pool. Peter waited in the driver seat, thick fingers tapping the wheel.

Joker's pace slowed the closer he got to the vehicle.

The horn sounded. Peter's cursing reverberated in the van's interior, spilling into the lot when Joker finally opened the door and hopped into the passenger seat.

"We got shit to do. Quit screwing around!"



“Peter, I worry about you. All that extra weight and you got that bad temper. You should take better care of yourself, Peter. And these cigarettes, honestly. Who smokes anymore?”

Peter pondered his own girth for a moment and then slammed the van into reverse and peeled out of the lot.

“Be serious, Joker. This op is not a laughing matter.”

“I am serious. We could get you on a program. Nothing extreme. Some walking, cut out the junk. You’ll feel so much better. Won’t be so mean.”

“You serious?”

“Yeah.” Joker leaned over and drew a cigarette from the pack resting on the dash. Peter handed him a lighter, eyes not leaving the road. Joker cracked the window and leaned back, watching the smoke from his long drag slipping out into the chill air. Gray clouds above obscured all but the occasional glimpse of sunset.

Peter shook his head, an unkempt mass of red locks kept in check by a tattered ball cap.

“I never know whether you are bullshitting or not.”

Joker shrugged. “I suppose that is my fault.”

His eyes tracked a group of cyclists in the road, and he spoke again.

“Avi sure was spooked.”

“Wait until you see the file.”

The safe house was a sprawling mansion along Owner’s Row, a line of luxury houses built around the turn of the century. Each tried to outdo the next with fanciful Victorian ornament, odd windows, and narrow spires. Twenty years ago they were in ruin, but the winners in the new economy had decided to return to the city. Contractors prescient enough to become sudden experts in the rehabilitation of the houses had reaped the rewards. The safe house was undergoing extensive construction but water, gas, and power were on. Men in vans coming and going would not merit the slightest notice.

Joker found a duffel waiting for him in a bedroom on the third floor. Inside was clothing, things he was known to like and find

comfortable, new but freshly laundered. At the foot of the bed was a sleeping bag, tags still attached.

After a quick shower in the adjoining bathroom, he unfolded a new set of coveralls emblazoned with a different logo, Montleforte's Contracting. Joker knew if he called the number on the back, he would speak to a real person that could provide any detail anyone wished to know about the firm. There would be a website and incorporation paperwork filed somewhere.

For the op, he would be wearing body armor under the coveralls, but for now he slipped them on over his boxer briefs. As he did so, he inspected himself in a standing mirror, a long oval perched on claw feet. When not on an op, Joker trained constantly. His tall frame was packed with wiry muscle. His blue eyes lingered on the deep scars on his left shoulder, four lines slicing down past his rib cage, flesh white against his tan.

Joker zipped up the coveralls and shouted to no one in particular.

"Hey, how come James Bond gets a tux, and I wear Carhartt all the time?"

Diane shouted from the next room, her high voice echoing in the labyrinthine halls of the mansion.

"Because he fights Russian spies and you hunt infiltrators."

"That answer is thoroughly unsatisfying."

Hands in pockets, he strolled to the next room. Atop a folding table was a mess of radios, cryptographic equipment, monitors, and two laptops. Diane sat in the screens' glow. Her big eyes peered at Joker from behind bigger glasses.

Joker smiled. "How are you doing, Diane? You look great."

A tiny bit of color blossomed on plump cheeks unused to much sunlight. She smiled, then mimed a shiver.

"Doing fine. A little chilly, though. Coms are up. You'll have your usual rig, earbud and emergency phone."

She tossed him what looked like a cheap burner. "It works like normal, but dial 656 and you have me secure. 767 and you get Avi if the house is compromised."

"Roger that."

Diane glanced over at the monitors. Reflected on her glasses was the image of another van pulling into a driveway behind the property

alongside a converted coach house.

She smiled at Joker. "There's Zev with your toys."

"I'll go give sourpuss a hand."

Joker nearly got lost making his way to the backdoor. Towering sycamores lined the flagstone lot. A gentle breeze coaxed dead leaves from branches to float down periodically. Joker slipped from the servants' entrance to stand behind Zev, where he stood at the van's open back doors.

"Hey, Zev."

The man spun around, hand dropping to his trim waist where a fanny pack rested.

"Dammit, Joker."

"You're all keyed up, aren't you?"

The two men stood facing each other. They were much the same, tall and athletic, though Joker's sandy blonde hair and high features seemed at home on a beach, and Zev's dark hair and bent nose gave him the menacing aura of a man that collected debts.

"Give me a hand."

They took the heavy duffel bags to Joker's room, where he laid everything out on the bare mattress.

Weapons and the means to carry them. Every strap, every pouch, holster or sheath, was all to Joker's specifications. It was all gear he had used and trained with, nothing at all left to chance. Each operative had a different kit, hand-picked. Joker's face was without humor as he sorted the articles. He tried on and adjusted each bit of webbing before placing it back on the mattress. He unfolded his bodysuit, a custom garment of tightly woven Kevlar. Two rectangles of ceramic protected his chest and back. A cup sat in a pouch over the groin and two long greaves protected the outside of his forearms. A turtleneck collar concealed a fine mesh of steel chain. Form-fitting lycra woven with a moisture-wicking mesh held it all together. Underneath the coveralls it would be undetectable. Three tubes of what appeared to be shower caulking were worn in a loose bag that clipped to his rigger belt.

He and Zev unfolded chairs to sit while they loaded two magazines apiece for the .40 compact pistol on the mattress. Joker held up each round to the light for inspection, turning it in his hand

and searching for imperfection. Zev did the same. The magazines were stuffed into a rig that would fit snug around his lower right leg, pistol low, near the ankle where it would be easily accessible by Velcro vents in the legs of his coveralls. Joker checked the edge on a new Gerber MK II and slipped it into an underarm rig.

Joker produced a black case from the depths of the duffel. Zev proffered a key, and the lid flew open. Nestled in foam within was a pistol unlike any available at a gun store or convention.

The metal was black and gave off an oily sheen. The handle was reminiscent of a 1911, but the upper receiver was odd, nearly organic in appearance and long, about the length of Joker's forearm. There were four vents on either side and no sights to speak of. Joker toggled a switch near the handle, and a strange, quiet hum sounded as the vents glowed with a dim green.

He and Zev traded looks, each smiling with a boyish appreciation of the weapon. Joker toggled the switch back and waited a moment for the vents to dim. He pushed the weapon back into the foam cutout and closed the lid. The sound of a door opening came from below, then heavy footsteps across creaking floorboards.

Zev spoke, "There's Peter with chow."

A piece of painter's canvas served as tablecloth. Joker's eyes lingered on the dining room's impressive appointments, dark oak paneling worked with arches suggesting a gothic cathedral. The ceiling was cast plaster, hexagons containing sprigs of laurel, shrinking in size as they ringed the half-dome from which a chandelier hung. Its crystal droplets were stained and dull, green-tinted from the corroding copper fixtures. The party ate underneath the glare of work lights sitting atop tall stands.

Joker let out a whistle. "These people must have been loaded."

Peter spoke through a mouthful of noodles. "Duh. This is where all the mill owners lived. This whole street."

The party spoke little at first. They had all been on ops together and in different groups. Reminiscing brought the risk of a mistake, compromising an op to people that had not participated. Subjects inevitably turned to things that were held safe, common to all. A favorite topic was the old man and legends about his early life, before the Consortium had been formally established. Avi's

peculiarities were mocked, including his taste in suits. Joker maintained his tailor was none other than Cesur himself, clothier of Saddam Hussein. Zev called his bluff, which spiraled into a discussion about the Joker's trustworthiness, an item of furious debate.

Empty containers were gathered into a trash bag, and the table cleared. Zev disappeared to return with the file, a simple manila envelope.

He smiled at Joker. "Time for work. You'll be glad you ate first."

Joker smirked and opened the file. His eyes scanned the first page, the op order as they called it, a paragraph summary of the target.

"Oh, no. Not one of these."

Zev smiled. "Told you."

Peter and Diane nodded, by happenstance in time with each other. It was an absurd sight, a giant Dane next to a petite woman from some hard bit town in the Idaho panhandle, nodding together with the same look of concern on their faces.

Joker flipped the page to see a photograph of his target, or more properly, where his targets were hiding.

The sterile storefront with its wide windows and innocuous sign immediately suggested a medical facility.

The sign read, "Women's Reproductive Health Center."

For the next two hours, he went over the file. His teammates stayed at the table to answer the occasional question and give advice if asked. First, Joker read it straight through, then made some notes on a legal pad. He went through the entire file again, then opened just to pages he could not recall with sufficient clarity. Troubling was the lack of details about the building itself. The blueprints on file might have represented the building when new. But the owners had made significant changes. Windows had been removed from the southern-facing portion of the structure, and those on the northern side were now two paned, likely bulletproof, as Peter pointed out. Two-paned windows also complicated surveillance efforts. Lasers that could be pointed toward a window and reconstruct sound from within by measuring vibration were useless. Anywhere near a window or door sat a rectangular bulge.

Peter's tone became pedantic as his engineering experience went on display. "These probably house shutters. Fire exits also seem to have a little extra going on. If needed, I think they can zip the whole place up. The alarm system is a custom. No link to first responders, self-contained."

Joker scratched his chin as he spoke, staring down at the floor plan before him. "Nobody in, nobody out."

"That's right."

Diane spoke next. "Power consumption is higher than what you would expect from a facility this size, and the ventilation system is overkill. Everything points to subfloors. Zev checked out the nearby sewers. It isn't a simple bolt hole."

Joker leaned back, looking to each of his teammates. "I've never seen something like this. It is usually all outs with these guys. Once they know they are made, they bug out. Cornering them is what gets hairy. What is special here?"

Diane shook her head. "We don't know."

Joker turned to the part of the file regarding the humans who unwittingly worked for his targets, the "unawares." A scheduler and a receptionist. The scheduler was an elderly woman whose file photo displayed a heavy-set woman with short, gray hair. The pic was a selfie, taken at a protest of some sort. The woman's denim vest was a canvas for a dozen buttons and badges featuring catchy slogans covering a range of issues. The receptionist was a woman in her mid-twenties.

Joker studied the image. "Not bad. Pretty, actually, if she loses that stupid nose ring." He looked up. "Did you trawl their socials?"

Diane spoke, "Only a little. Nothing remarkable whatsoever. Both have a good trail that goes back as far as you would want. Total unawares. Avi's second-story men got into their respective apartments to borrow their keycards, and I made copies."

"But we couldn't get anyone inside the facility?"

Zev answered, "No. Two years ago, they were both out sick for an extended period, and they didn't even bring in a temp. The female Alpha answered phones. They aren't hiring."

"Janitors? Security?"

“No. You know ninety-nine times out of a hundred firms use contractors for that stuff. Not here. One security guard and one janitor on the actual staff. They rarely leave the facility.”

Joker laid out the photos of his principal targets. Two men and one woman stared at him with the benign expressions expected in official photographs. Collectively their features were completely unremarkable. Middle-aged Caucasians, neither fat nor particularly fit, not short or tall. The older two, a male and female, were listed as doctors. The other male was a nurse. A surveillance photograph of the security guard painted a similarly innocuous picture. Joker’s eyebrows went up with a look at the janitor. He was at least 6’6”, with large limbs and a thick neck. Underneath a smooth, bald pate, two small eyes looked out at the world without emotion.

“Well, here’s the warrior.”

Zev nodded. “Most likely.”

Joker shook his head. “Ok. Understaffed for something like this. Janitor and security rarely leaving the facility. Only two unawares to make things look normal. They are getting sloppy. Taking chances. Why? And why are we moving now?”

Zev spoke, “Every third Thursday, the senior staff has a meeting and stays late. Really late. The UAs leave at five. You will catch them all together with no UAs present.”

Zev stood and tossed a local newspaper to the center of the table. “And this.”

The headline proclaimed boldly, “PRESIDENT STARTS RE-ELECTION CAMPAIGN WITH GALA THIS WEEKEND.”

Joker spoke without conviction, “Could be coincidence.”

Diane answered, “Avi doesn’t want to take the chance. It must be coming right from the old man.”

“A nightmare facility, five targets, and crap intel. I guess that is why they called in the Joker!”

The table laughed, tension in the face of death dissipating. Joker laughed too, though his eyes were drawn back to the file and the photo of the facility where he would hunt tomorrow.

**T**he sun was out, though the air was still crisp as the afternoon wore on. All over the city, people watched the last minutes of

their workday wind down. Hunched inside the van, Joker waited for his to begin, blue eyes fixed on his blocky wristwatch.

Peter's voice sounded odd, live in one ear, and through the bud in the other.

"UAs are both gone. The older bugged out a couple minutes early. Younger one just left. I think she was crying a little."

Joker looked up from his seat on the van's floor.

"What?"

Peter toggled off his coms and turned in his seat. "Yeah. Looked really bummed out."

"What does that mean?"

Zev shrugged and adjusted the passenger seat. "Probably nothing. We'll give them ten more minutes, and then it's on."

Joker lifted himself to a bench mounted to the side of the van. Underneath was all the gear an EMT might use to revive someone who had suffered major trauma. From out the tinted window he watched people going about their business, completely oblivious to the drama that would soon play out underneath their noses.

"What do you think it is like, being a civilian, I mean?"

Peter spoke through a mouthful of peanut M&Ms. "Really lame."

Zev looked back. "How about you keep your head on the mission?"

Joker smiled, "Hey, it's me you are talking to."

Peter looked up and down the street. "Good gap in the foot traffic."

Zev switched on his coms. "Avi, Support is good to go. Street is clear."

Diane's voice came on the line. "Coms green. Scanners online."

Avi's crisp voice came next, "Joker, on you."

"Joker is go."

He opened the side door and stepped from the van. Every muscle in his body pleaded for dramatic action. Sprint, punch, kick, something to dispel the sense of coming danger. To anyone watching he was just another man, shuffling along, work belt hung with the bits and bobs of his trade, tool bag hanging from a long shoulder strap. He made for the lane that led to the back lot. A glance over his shoulder and then he ducked into the side entrance. He took a deep breath and slid a keycard through the electronic lock.



The interior was warmer than he expected.

He whispered, "Thanks for the key, Diane."

"Anything for you, stud."

Avi's voice came on the line, "No chatter."

The room was an employee lounge that doubled as storage for office supplies. There was an air of disuse. No photographs decorated the refrigerator. A corkboard hung above the far wall, stuck only with a work schedule and the OSHA material required by law. Ahead was a doorway that led to the main hallway. Reception and waiting rooms south, operating and examination rooms to the north.

Peter leaned back in the bucket seat with a smartphone resting on his belly. A camera hidden atop the van sent a feed to the safe house and back to his phone. The view was a sweep of the glass front of the facility, the main entrance and security desk. Peter cursed and bent forward, scattering candy to the floor of the van.

"Joker, guard on the move, copy?"

Joker tapped the mic hugging his neck twice. He went to one knee and took the black pistol from the tool bag. He leaned against the wall. The guard's heavy footsteps were audible now, having passed from the carpeted reception area to the sterile tiles of the hallway.

The doorway was flush with the northern wall. Joker waited, bracing his arm against its beige-colored expanse. The guard came into view, silhouetted in perfect profile for a moment. He appeared to be a middle-aged white man, paunchy, with small, beady eyes.

Joker squeezed the trigger. There was a stomach-churning sense of great sound and force, but at a frequency inaudible to human ears. The recoil sent him back a step, but he kept his eyes fixed on the target. The smell of ozone tickled his nose as he looked down.

The guard lay headless on the floor. Dark green blood pumped once, twice, from the neck stump, then ceased. A circle of drywall on the opposite wall had been pushed in by the force.

"The beta is down."

"Look alive. That is a small facility. If you weren't made before, you are now. You got a warrior and the three alphas before we call it a day."

“Roger that, Avi.”

It was indeed small, and Joker’s apprehension grew as he came out of the doorway and into the main hall. Thirty meters until the end of the hall and the main operating room. On either side were the examination rooms, and before them, a door leading to a suite of offices for the doctor and nurse.

Joker moved now with a careful fluidity, speed with perfect control. Years of training were required to imprint the skill onto an organism born for either mad fight or madder flight.

He leaned against the wall next to the doors to the office suite. He pressed his ear against the cool drywall. Nothing at first.

He heard two heavy steps.

The drywall exploded in a cloud of dust and debris. Joker threw himself across the hall, slamming into the opposite wall. Through the swirling mass of dust an arm like a bridge cable flailed, catching Joker on the shoulder. The heavy pistol slipped from his grasp. He sank to the ground and scrambled to his hands and knees, scuttling a few feet down the hall. He whipped the knife from its sheath and rolled to his back to see his attacker. The hulking mass stood in a cloud of dust. He spoke as he stepped forward.

“Sneaky, little man.”

The voice sent shivers up Joker’s spine. With all pretense gone, the janitor had felt no need to mask his voice. The sound that came from the warrior was odd, hissing and metallic, like the noise of a knife drawn across a steel cable. The janitor reached into his mouth and yanked. He threw the false teeth to the ground and drew his tongue across a row of razor-sharp fangs, delighting in their feel.

Then he leapt with a grace born from great strength. The warrior’s soaring bulk landed atop the Joker, but the Gerber was out and ready, meeting the great mass of the janitor as he thundered down. The warrior gasped and reared back. Joker came up with him as he continued to hold the knife stuck fast in the janitor’s forehead. The beast shook his head and Joker lost his grip. He scrambled underneath the warrior and dived back toward the broken wall, hands reaching to his ankle.

The janitor stood and pulled at the knife. His groan became a growling wail and finally the knife was free. It clattered to the floor,

and he stepped forward.

“That really hurt. Now, I will eat you while you still live.”

Joker let loose with the holdout piece. With its long silencer, the sound was odd, the action of the weapon and a muffled pop. Each shot took another chunk from the warrior’s head as he advanced. By the time the magazine was empty the head was a dark green ruin.

The janitor stopped and went to his knees then fell forward with a heavy thump.

Joker changed magazines, replaced the knife in its sheath, and began a frantic search for the special pistol, lost somewhere amidst the rubble in the wall. He noticed his earbud dangling from its wire before him and pushed it back into his ear.

“—oker do you copy? UA inbound, UA inbound!”

“Peter! What is going on?”

His view to the outside was blocked by a shoulder-high partition separating the front and back of the facility. He stood and peered, seeing only the darkening street.

“The receptionist came back, parked, and is now headed into the facility. Zev just left the van to intercept.”

Zev had left his coms on. Joker listened as the tragicomedy outside the facility unfolded.

“Excuse me, miss?” The reply was inaudible. “Hey, just a second, don’t rush, hold on,” The reply was still inaudible but more forceful in tone. “Just a moment, please, miss, gas leak, wait, please...”

The line suddenly crackled with a stream of obscenities.

Joker whispered desperately, “Peter, what the hell is going on?”

Peter’s deep voice answered. “Oh, my God. Zev overplayed it a bit and she maced him. He’s stumbling back to the van.”

“You got to be kidding me.”

“She’s running to the side door, Joker!”

He heard the door mechanism snap open and the hinges creak. A moment later she burst into the hallway. She stood above the dead guard, but her attention was fixed on the glowing phone she held close. Fingers worked the screen.

Diane’s voice filled the bud, “She is dialing 911.”

Joker stood and yelled, “Lady, no!”

She dropped the phone and screamed. She looked down, realizing she stood in a puddle of dark green ichor next to a headless corpse. She screamed again.

Zev's voice came on, "Son of a bitch, it burns."

Avi spoke next, voice icy, "Joker, you know what you have to do. Peter, get Zev in the van. You are heading support until he is better."

"Roger that."

The cold voice continued. "Diane, make sure her phone didn't pop up with the dispatchers."

The woman in the hallway began hyperventilating. She noticed the janitor's corpse further down the hall, then finally, Joker. He stood dumb, pistol still in hand.

"Lady, I know how this looks, but I am one of the good guys."

She lost consciousness.

Avi yelled, "Joker! You are stalling. Do what is necessary and continue your mission."

Joker sighed. The young woman was pitiable laying there, pale with shock, breathing shallow. She was indeed beautiful, round face and full lips under a nose with the slightest upturn. Her eyes and indeed her whole face had an impish quality Joker generally found irresistible. Her dark hair was cut shoulder length with long bangs. She wore a simple dress of earthy brown cinched at the waist with a macramé belt. Against the chill she had a wool-lined denim jacket, a kind of garment fashionable when worn for any occasion except for that for which it was designed.

Joker raised the pistol and fired.

"Done, Avi. Continuing in the facility. Warrior is down. No additional contacts. Are you sure they are here?"

"They are there. Either hiding or in sub-floors we don't know about."

There was a sudden electric whine, and the sound of motors filled the facility.

Joker looked left and right. He darted forward.

Steel shutters were descending over the windows.

"Avi, are you seeing this?"

"Joker, you are getting zipped up. Peter, prep charges in case he needs to get out the way he came."

Peter acknowledged the order.

A soft groan came from the girl at his feet.

Avi barked, "Joker, what was that?"

"Don't know, Avi, I think the shutters are messing with the coms. Do you copy?"

With that, Joker reached for unit clipped to his belt and switched it off.

"Oh, my God." She sobbed and shook as Joker dragged then carried her from the bloody mess of the hallway and back to the employees' area. He retrieved her phone and turned it off while with wide eyes, she regarded the shutters preventing exit.

"Oh my God, what is happening? Are you a cop? What is happening?"

Joker began the complicated multitask of comforting her and keeping his senses alert for any sign of his remaining targets. He felt naked as a babe kneeling there beside her.

"Sweetie, you have to be quiet. It is extremely dangerous here. This place is filled with people that want to kill us."

She pushed herself into a sitting position and regarded Joker warily. "What the hell is going on?"

"You have to keep your voice down. Like I said, this place is full of people trying to kill us. Me, really, but now you will be a target."

"Why, what is happening?"

She looked again to the hall where lay the guard. "Oh my God, did you kill him? Oh my God, what is happening?"

Joker considered, for the briefest of moments, whether or not Avi might have been right. He pointed to the slick of dark green.

"I did kill him."

She recoiled from his comforting hand on her shoulder.

"But look, look at that. Does that look like human blood?"

Her eyes stared at the mess. She swallowed and looked to Joker then back at the mess.

Her voice came softly. "No."

"Sweetheart, he wasn't human. I am here to kill him and his friends. It's my job."

She had ceased listening. Carefully she crawled on her hands and knees. Joker let her go, creeping beside her but giving her

distance.

She inspected the body from the doorway, only a few feet separating them. She turned to regard the janitor's corpse.

"Green blood. Oh, my God."

Joker laid a hand on her shoulder. She studied his face a moment. Joker watched her expression shift as her mind attempted to process the last few minutes. She took his hand, and he helped her to her feet.

She shook her head. "I just came back for my phone charger. What the hell is going on?"

Joker spoke to her as he stepped to the ruin of the wall, kicking over the larger pieces, eyes scanning for his weapon.

"Aha!" He bent to retrieve it, blowing off the plaster dust as he stood. The vents no longer gave off their eerie glow. He toggled the switch on and off. Nothing. A normal pistol could be cleared, stripped if necessary. But the heavy piece in his hand was a concoction assembled by PhD's in some dark corner of the old man's personal network. He flipped it on and off again to no effect and then resignedly replaced it in the tool bag and slung it over his back.

"Green blood...What the hell is going on?"

Joker sighed. Avi had already ordered him to kill her, and he had disobeyed. He was locked in a facility where three alphas still lurked, and he was without his primary weapon. After fifteen years in a strange and dangerous business his luck had likely run out. A different man might have given himself to despair.

Joker smiled and checked the pouch at his side where the tubes labeled shower caulk and the fuses were held. He drew his holdout piece and the Gerber and faced the young woman.

"Okay, what you are about to hear is known only to a few people in the entire world. I work for an organization that hunts and kills reptilian aliens who masquerade as humans, kill and eat people, and generally cause mischief. Your bosses and some of your coworkers are aliens, and I am here to kill them. They should have been all over me by now, which leads me to believe that they are beneath us somewhere, either fleeing or doing God knows what else."

Her hands rested on her hips as she replied, "I don't believe a word of that bullshit."

He smiled. "I wouldn't either. But it is the truth. Did you ever see anyone bleed green?"

"No. But it could be special effects or something."

"Sure. This is all an elaborate scheme to get you on hidden camera freaking out. I killed two men and spread green goo everywhere. At this point it doesn't matter. I am stuck, here and you are stuck here. But I have a job to do. I recommend you stuff yourself in one of those cabinets under the sink while I go work. I'll see if I can get the shutters up, and then you can run away. Just do me a favor and lay low for a week or two, and don't talk to the cops about me. My boss told me to waste you and I didn't. If you make noise, he'll figure that out and send someone to take care of you. You just lay low for a while and never talk about this, and it will go away. They won't know to look for you unless you make noise. We aren't government. We can't waste resources. Now, go."

"This is insane."

Joker shrugged. "It is what it is."

She looked to the corpses again. "I heard a guy on TV talk about lizard aliens on Earth."

"And what did you think?"

Her voice was soft. "He was nuts."

Joker nodded. "Yeah. Exactly what you were meant to think. Dudes like that are plants making wild claims to distract you from the reality." He gestured to the break room. "Go ahead. Just lay low, remember. For your own sake. I have to go back to work."

Joker took a breath, his mind slipping back into a combat posture after such a distraction. She stood in the hallway.

He raised the pistol and took a step toward the suite of offices. Three sudden strides brought her to his back. She gripped his arm.

"I'm coming with you."

He sighed again. "Don't."

"Hiding is worse than coming with you."

"You say that now..."

"You can't stop me. You already refused to kill me."

"I might change my mind."

They stared at each other. After a moment, she began shaking her head.

“You wouldn’t.”

Joker smiled ruefully. “Man, it sucks being a good guy. People call me Joker, by the way.”

“Rebecca.”

“Nice meeting you. Stay close.”

He stepped down the hall with her in tow.

“What do they want here, anyway? Why here?”

Joker’s voice lowered. “They like human flesh. This facility is what we call a ‘veal ranch’.”

She was still a moment, and silent. Then she retched.

Joker laughed. “Pretty gnarly when it sinks in, right? These jobs are the worst.”

**S**he stuck close to him as he swept the offices. Computers were on, and emails were open on the screens.

“They must have gone under right after I popped the janitor.”

Joker smiled and spoke again, “Well, look at this, the spoils of war.”

In the largest office, a small safe stood open in the corner.

He stuffed his baggy pockets with thick stacks of hundred dollar bills. He tossed one to Rebecca.

“If we get out of here, you can use this to move.” He tossed her another one, and she stuffed the pair into her jacket.

Examination rooms and the operating room were clear. Presently the pair stood in the hall. Joker’s brow furrowed in frustration.

“I don’t get it. I didn’t see any path down.”

Rebecca spoke, “There is a storage closet.”

Joker shook his head. “I checked the one in the examination room and even looked in the cabinets in the operating room. I swept this whole place.”

“It was in Dr. Geffman’s office, the first one you checked. You were just worried about the safe.”

Joker wore a sheepish expression as the pair made their way back. He held his pistol ready and pulled the closet door open. On one side metal shelves held boxes of copy paper. The other side held various supplies. On the floor was a thick rubber mat. He bent and peeled it back, revealing a metal door.



He looked at Rebecca. "Keep real quiet."

She nodded.

Joker switched his coms back on.

"Avi, you copy? I found the entrance to possible sub levels. No additional contacts. Three targets still unaccounted for. If this is just a regular bolt hole, then they are long gone."

"Oh, thank God, Joker. We feared the worst. What is going on with coms?"

Diane spoke, voice tinny and distant. "Everything checks out. No interference. I don't know why we lost Joker. Nothing on scanners either."

Joker spoke, "Must be environmental. Proceeding down."

"Roger that, stay alert. If it was a standard bolt hole, we likely would have found the exits. Zev checked out the sewers and there was nothing."

He switched them off again and looked at Rebecca.

"I have to go down here. You don't."

She nodded. "I have to see."

"Really?"

She nodded again.

Joker smiled, "You're something else. A lot of people would be a mass of quivering jelly at this point, and I can't say I would blame them. But you are pretty with it."

Rebecca nearly smiled and shrugged before a look of new worry darkened her delicate brow.

"You sure you aren't going to change your mind and kill me?"

He shook his head. "Nah. I'm starting to like you a little. Pretty and tough. If it wasn't for that nose ring, I think we'd be getting a bite to eat together after this was all done, assuming we lived."

She smiled and then frowned, shaking her head in annoyance.

"They said you were crying a little."

Her head cocked. "What?"

"One of the team said you were crying a little when you left."

"I broke off a relationship yesterday. It was going nowhere. I am going nowhere. I don't know. I don't know why I am telling you this."

Joker grinned. "Well, I spilled the beans about alien lizards walking the earth in human form. So we are already hip-deep in

secrets, right?”

She laughed quietly despite herself; despite the presence of death, the immense shock of the night's events, she laughed.

Joker looked back to the floor of the closet and its door. “My team seems to think there is something going on down there, but I think they just bolted. They have an exit, and we missed it. Just you watch.”

With a grunt, he lifted the door. The swaying bare bulb above illuminated a steep metal staircase that rested on a metal floor.

There was a blur, a figure on the stairs. One, two steps, and the figure shot from the opening, bowling Joker over. Rebecca dived behind her former employer's desk as Joker and the alpha rolled on the carpet, each fighting for mount. The male alpha masquerading as the doctor rolled on top then reared up, hissing through his fang-filled mouth. Joker twisted at the last second, and the razor teeth clamped onto his armored shoulder instead of his face. He shoved the pistol's long silencer into folds of the scrub tunic the thing wore and emptied the magazine. After a last hiss, the alpha collapsed on top of him.

The thing's contacts had slipped out. Joker stared into vertically slit eyes, inches from his. He pushed the creature off and rolled to his knee, reloading as he did. He pointed the pistol down the stairway.

“You okay?”

Rebecca nodded. “This is real, isn't it? That was the doctor I worked for. He had fangs and bit you.”

“Yep.” Joker switched on his radio. “One alpha down.”

“Roger that. Joker, are you switching off your coms?”

Joker switched off his coms. With Rebecca hovering over him, he carefully made his way down the stairs. The room below was formed with concrete slabs. Cables and vents were clipped to the low ceiling. One door led out.

Joker slowly opened the door. He felt Rebecca close behind, her breath on the back of his neck.

Within was a sort of kitchen. Two metal doors led out, one facing north, one east. The east door sported a thick coat of black paint. A large refrigerator stood between two long tables of stainless steel.

Away from the prying eyes of their prey, the Reptilians were not fastidious. The preparation of past feasts was in evidence. Blood and bits of gore lingered on near every flat surface. The smell of rot wrinkled Joker's nose.

Rebecca whispered, "Oh my God. I'm going to be sick again."

Joker pushed the door open, revealing a longer room with crudely painted black walls. A makeshift chandelier of light bulbs of purple and red glass hung from the high ceiling. High backed chairs of wrought iron ringed a bloodstained table.

Joker whispered next, "My God. Look at this stuff. This must be how their home looks."

His pistol moved, sweeping the room. On the far wall was something that could only be described as a piece of art. Vicious arcs had been roughly cut from hammered bronze and arranged in a star-like pattern. It was asymmetrical, sweeping left. In the center was a dot of blue.

Rebecca gripped his arms as she stared.

"What does it mean?"

"I don't know. I've never seen this. They work really hard to never leave any kind of trace. This is different." He reached to a belt pouch and retrieved a small camera. Still holding the pistol, he snapped a half-dozen pictures.

"The old man is going to flip."

They crossed back into the kitchen, and Joker pushed open the other door.

It was larger than the other rooms, stuffed with computers, monitors, devices of unknown purpose. On a pedestal in the open center was a large, glowing cylinder, ends capped with devices bulging with pipes and cables. Inside swirled a green thick fluid. The silhouette of a person could be seen floating inside.

Joker stepped inside, Rebecca close behind.

"What, in God's name, is this?"

Rebecca shouted one word, voice desperate: "Up!"

He pushed her back and dove to the floor, spinning around in time to see the fanged mouth snap shut an inch from his face. He and the alpha tumbled to the floor. A desperate swipe sent Joker's pistol flying. The other arm swung down, catching Joker on the jaw. Joker

thrust his hips up and threw his weight right, sending the alpha over. The thing was strong. Before he could get into a position of advantage, it pushed him off balance and scrambled up, now standing with back to the tube. The alpha grinned as he stripped the false flesh from each hand in turn, revealing sharp claws.

Joker smiled and pulled the Gerber from its sheath as the two slowly circled each other.

The rush of adrenalin brought a smile to Joker's lips. He stared deep into the eyes of the alien infiltrator across from him and spoke, "Let's go."

The alien hissed and lunged forward. Joker parried the mad attack, stepping forward to deflect, a half spin and a stab with the knife. The blade bit into the alpha's side. The thing howled in its metallic voice, and Joker ducked a wild hook, stabbing up this time, burying the blade under the rib cage.

Rebecca watched with wide eyes.

A voice sounded to her side. It was a familiar voice, but tinted with an eerie, hissing quality.

"Miss Rebecca. You were late to work today."

She screamed and ducked. The female alpha lashed out with a blow that shredded the side of Rebecca's jacket. Bits of wool floated down as she fled to the other side of the room. There was a sense of nearby motion, a rush of air, and the female alpha landed directly in front of her.

"Just stay still, and I will make it quick. We'll call it 'professional courtesy'."

Rebecca kicked out and threw herself backwards. On hands and knees she scrambled across the floor covered in snaking cables, seeking shelter underneath one of the tables. An iron grip found her ankle and pulled. She screamed and turned, grabbing onto a table leg. From her vantage point she saw Joker atop the other alpha. He held his knife, pushing down with all his might as the alpha held him at bay with both arms, the duel devolved to a test of primal strength. Veins stood out at Joker's temples as he bore down, teeth bared. The alpha snapped his jaws, hissing. Joker had the advantage, but the thing's immense strength pushed back as the two strained, close as lovers.

A yank drew Rebecca a little further from under the table, and she lost sight of the duel. She gripped the table leg as hard as she could and it was dragged along with her as her former employer pulled, eyes bright with inhuman hunger.

Her eyes fell on Joker's pistol, sitting idle in the coil of a heavy extension cord. She let go with one hand, and took up its unfamiliar weight.

Another pull broke the grip of her remaining hand and she was dragged out onto the floor.

The female alpha looked down. Saliva came in ropey strings from her mouth as she descended to bite.

Rebecca brought the pistol up.

"I quit."

She pulled the trigger again and again. The rounds went wild as she fired, but at that range enough found their mark. The female alpha collapsed moaning.

Rebecca ran to Joker's side. The knife was a trembling inch from the alpha's sternum. Sweat poured from Joker's face, immense strain written in deep lines in his face as he grimaced.

Rebecca spoke, "I found your gun!"

Joker spoke through clenched teeth. "Shoot him."

She held the weapon with both hands and fired, nearly able to keep her eyes open this time.

The round struck a pipe near the alpha's head, unleashing a jet of green liquid that splashed Joker's face. The alpha made use of the distraction, turning the blade aside with a final lurch. Joker rolled to one side and the alpha to the other. The pair sprang to their feet. The thing screamed in triumph and came forward, swinging with his claws. Joker took a blow to his shoulder and stepped inside. He lashed out with his elbow and threw the infiltrator over his hip. The alpha's legs flew up, his whole body suspended in midair for a second. Joker threw his own weight down with the falling alpha. They went down hard, the momentum from the throw added to gravity. The knife buried itself deep, through the alpha's neck and into the floor. The alpha exhaled, green blood frothing at his lips, and was still.

Joker stood and whispered to himself in between great gulps of air.

“Good kill.”

Rebecca went to his side and held his arm. She looked up. “Sorry about the shooting—missing, I mean.”

Joker shook his head. “Forget about it. You did good.”

She tugged at his sleeve.

“What?”

He looked up. The green liquid that had filled the tube was now pooling on the floor. Inside the cylinder, the person was revealed. It was a man somewhere between middle and old age, pale and soft. No sign of life was apparent as he slipped limp to the bottom of the cylinder as the liquid emptied.

Rebecca gasped. “Oh, my God.”

“What the hell is that about?”

“Don’t you recognize him?”

Joker shrugged. “No.”

Rebecca looked at him. “That is the President. Don’t you watch the news?”

“Well, yeah, sure. I just didn’t recognize him like that.” He looked to Rebecca. “My boss was worried about something like this.”

He snapped a few pictures with the small camera and holstered his pistol. Then he reached into the side pouch and drew the tubes of caulking. He took duct tape from his tool bag and walked the perimeter of the room. He placed the charges where he thought they would do the most good, working quickly.

In a corner, he paused and grinned.

“Here’s the bolt hole. I can’t wait to rub it in Zev’s face.”

He opened the hatch in the floor and peered down. A ladder led to a long, narrow hallway that went farther than his small flashlight could illuminate. He ran back to the charges and clicked the switch that brought the detonator to life, awaiting a signal by radio.

He clicked on his radio.

“Targets liquidated. Charges set. I found a bolt hole, leaving now. Give me about five.”

Avi’s voice answered instantly.

“Joker, we thought you were gone. Roger that. Area clear, charges are go. We’ll watch the street and detonate when clear. Go to ground. Check your drops in 48 hours.”

“Affirmative. Joker out.”

He turned the radio off.

“Time to go!”

The pair ran down the tunnel, Joker holding Rebecca’s hand. Joker grabbed her under the arm and they ran together.

His flashlight revealed the end of the tunnel. Ahead was a smooth concrete face with no sign of any door or hatch.

Rebecca spoke through gasps of air.

“What do we do?”

Joker answered. “Don’t worry. This is an old trick.”

He walked forward and kicked. The concrete gave way, barely an inch troweled over a plastic mesh. Beyond was a gap, then old bricks. He kicked again, and the bricks tumbled down. He peeked through the hole into a welcome sight, a low, long tunnel half full of dark water, part of the city’s old sewer network.

He guided Rebecca out of the hole and hopped into the sewage beside her.

A low crump and a whoosh of air announced the completion of his mission.

Joker turned to Rebecca and smiled. “We’re alive.”

He stood a moment, looking up and down the tunnel, and continued, “If my bearings are correct, we should be near 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, right near the Continental.”

Relief and new anxiety competed in her voice. “What do we do now?”

Joker exhaled as he ran a hand through his sweat-soaked hair. “I don’t know about you, but I feel like a hot bath in a big tub. Maybe some room service. Ever stay at the Continental?”

She shook her head no.

They left the sewer from a manhole in an alley beside the hotel. Joker paused a moment to watch cars drive by the wide avenue at the end. A couple walked with a stroller, father weighed down with more accouterment than the Joker carried. A few teenagers ran past

the young family. The normalcy was jarring so fresh from the mission.

At a utility entrance, he approached a bellhop leaning against the door frame, smoking a cigarette.

The young man looked up from his phone at the couple, two people in torn clothes, reeking of sewage. The man spoke.

“Hey, hoss, me and my new bride were on our way to Atlantic City for our honeymoon and wouldn’t you know it? I drove the car into a ditch. Our luggage is sunk in the mud somewhere and we are in quite a state. My new bride is furious. Beauty queen from Lithuania, used to red carpet treatment, you know what I mean? Doesn’t speak a lick of English, but you sure know when she is mad.”

Joker winced as Rebecca pinched his arm. He took a stack of cash from his pocket and tore off a couple hundred-dollar bills.

“Those are for you, sport. Now go grab the concierge and tell him he’s got a couple of guests that need a little help and know how to pay for it.” He wrapped his arm around Rebecca and continued, “Chop chop, the little lady hates waiting. Bridal suite, the works, and change of clothes.”

Grinning, the bellhop stepped lively through the doorway, holding the bills like they were a bouquet of flowers.

The Joker looked at Rebecca. Despite their ordeal, she wore a wide smile as she slipped her arms around his waist. Joker noticed her nose ring was gone, whether by accident or design, he didn’t know or bother to ask.

They kissed under the alley’s yellow light as they waited for the concierge.

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*Schuyler Hernstrom’s work has appeared in LORE magazine, Heroic Fantasy Quarterly, and here in Cirsova. His new anthology, The Eye of Sounnu is out now from D.M.R Books. Named for P. Schuyler Miller, a friend of his father’s, he grew up in a house full of paperbacks with Frazetta and Jones covers. He can be reached at [hernstroms@gmail.com](mailto:hernstroms@gmail.com).*



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# Sail Safe

By VONNIE WINSLOW CRIST

***At Port Crystal, the facility director's daughter is...not her daughter! Can Radko Urban get Sally Brogan, who was kidnapped as an embryo, off the station before they're both made?!***

**A**s Radko walked to the back row of the general passenger section of *The Eudisia*, he scanned the faces of the other travelers searching for his Second. At first glance, no one looked the part of a Retriever, but the best Seconds blended in.

"Young man, you need to sit. We will be landing on Terra Luna soon."

Radko glanced at the speaker—an older woman with short, white hair.

"Sitting, now," he said and lowered his six-foot frame into the seat to the left of her.

"Esther," said the woman.

"Pardon me?"

"My name is Esther Bickel." She offered her heavily-veined hand to him.

"Radko Urban." He clasped, then shook her hand. *No sense in drawing attention to myself by being rude*, he thought.

"I'm going to live with my son and his wife, and watch my grandbabies while Grady and Charlotte are working in the crystal factories." Esther searched through her flowered travel bag. "Here's a picture of them." She handed a personal image viewer to Radko.

"Nice-looking family," he said as he gave the viewer back to Esther. "Where are their quarters?"

"Section Seventy-Eight, not far from the recreation complex," the grandmother responded as she tucked the device back into her bag.

"What about you?"

"Here for work." *Keep it simple. Keep it truthful—if you can*, he reminded himself.

"I'm sure you will do well." She patted his arm.

Relieved the conversation was over, Radko turned to face the huge windows which spanned the entire left side of the transport ship's passenger compartment. As he watched, Terra Luna expanded from a pockmarked disc to a human-inhabited world of craters, ridges, landing fields, greenhouses, and vegetation tubes. He knew it was the greenhouses, glowing like luminous Edens, which made life on the moon agreeable.

"Pretty, isn't it?"

"Yeah." *Didn't Esther Bickel ever give up?* he wondered.

Hoping the biddy would take a hint, Radko leaned toward the window. Hundreds of laborers had worked round-the-clock to frame-up those greenhouses and grow tubes from nickel-iron steel and other metals mined in the asteroid belt. Then, the framework had been covered with impact-proof plastiglass and sealed with high strength epoxies. When complete, the greenhouses' self-sustaining watering system worked perfectly. Even he had to acknowledge, the under-plastiglass ecosystem heated by solar and steam power was almost a miracle—a miracle that had taken his father's life.

"All passengers and non-essential personnel secure take-off/landing restraints," ordered the ship's computer.

Radko locked his seat belt, Velcroed his shoulder straps, and snapped his head cushion in place.

"I can't seem to get my belt latched," said Esther Bickel as she tugged on her lap-strap.

"Wait a second." Radko unsnapped, un-Velcroed, and unbuckled. He helped the grandmother belt herself in place, then redid his own restraints.

"Thank you. You're such a dear..." began the woman.

Whatever she meant to say next was drowned out by the ship's computer announcing, "This is the final warning to secure seat restraints or risk serious injury."

After a few clicks as passenger restraints were secured at the last minute, the cabin's illumination panels dimmed, and blue lights lining the ship's outer skin flashed the designated sequence. Others might believe the lights flickered randomly—not Radko. He knew ships and stations used them to communicate and acknowledge the docking sequence.

"Commencing landing procedures," said the computer.

Radko pressed his lips together—he hated the tinny sound of a mechanical voice. He wished InterWorld Communication & Transportation used human voice messages. There was something less sinister about a person giving orders.

“This is exciting!” exclaimed Esther.

Radko chose not to respond. Instead, he gazed out the window at Terra Luna’s loading placentas rising from her access tunnels like deep-sea tubeworms. Next, as *The Eudisia* hovered above Port Crystal Field, the placentas attached their couplings to the ship’s navels. *The Eudisia* shuddered, then the distinct scrape-clang sounds of cogs catching, magnets securing themselves to the outer hull, and safety sheaths sealing the junctions echoed throughout the compartment as the tethering apparatuses locked themselves into place.

The seat restraints released automatically, and passengers gathered their belongings while the tinny voice said, “We hope your trip with InterWorld Communication & Transportation was a pleasant one, and you will consider sailing with us in the future.” A crescendo of upbeat music blared out of *The Eudisia*’s audio system, followed by the theme music of InterWorld.

As the whoosh of Port Crystal’s atmosphere rushed through the airlocks signaling the safe connection of ship to moon city, Radko stood, then grabbed his briefcase.

“Goodbye,” said Esther Bickel.

He gave her a halfhearted wave. Even though he resisted the urge to mouth the catchy jingle which often accompanied the InterWorld theme music, Radko couldn’t stop himself from thinking, *Sail safe, sail happy, sail InterWorld*, as he strolled down the sloping floor of the closest placenta.

Around Radko, the arriving passengers chattered and laughed. Oblivious to their surroundings, they approached the check-in counters like well-trained sheep. In contrast, while he waited for his ID check, Radko studied the relaxed disembarking procedures and general lack of security at Port Crystal. The few guards present appeared distracted or bored. If the departure procedures were as lax, he reasoned it would be easy to smuggle something, or someone, onto or off of Terra Luna.

“Passport, sir,” said a cheerful woman in a gray uniform as Radko stepped up to the counter. She gave the document a cursory glance. “Scan.” He stuck his right hand out. The check-in woman ran a chip-reader across his forearm. On the computer screen beside her, Radko’s image and name, sans any security flags, appeared.

“Welcome to Port Crystal. I hope you’ll enjoy your stay with us.”

“Thanks,” Radko answered. Politeness, he’d discovered years earlier, served him well on his less-than-legal ventures. Politeness made people like you, and caused them to let their guard down.

Though he had never been to Port Crystal before, the subsurface complex was similar to other moon and asteroid facilities he’d visited in the past. As he walked toward the Central Bazaar, Radko noted the pedestrian corridors were illuminated by recessed lighting and the occasional sun-hole—reinforced shafts that shot to Terra Luna’s surface, and with the aid of countless mirrors, allowed a bit of natural light to shine upon the Lunans.

Every so often, there was a refreshment nook, restroom, or conversation alcove jutting out from the passageway. As he continued his descent, perpendicular thoroughfares intersected the main corridor with increased regularity. Even though he couldn't hear them, Radko was aware machines zipped cargo and personnel from location to location in tubes running parallel to the pedestrian passageways. If one was able to see a cross section of the complex, he knew the general impression would be that of an ants’ nest swarming with task-focused laborers, rushing through a maze of tunnels to complete their assigned jobs.

Radko frowned at the docile faces and uniformed dress of the colonists. “I hope *she* thinks for herself,” he muttered as he neared the Port Crystal Auditorium.

The corridor suddenly opened up onto a five-level auditorium where hundreds of new arrivals from *The Eudosia*, still carrying their luggage, flowed into a stream of passengers from other recently docked ships. The flood of immigrants poured into the room, eager to listen to welcome speeches from the various Terra Luna officials and to receive their job assignments. It was obvious from the size of the throng that the call for recruits to assist in the expansion of the city’s crystal farming operations had been answered by Earthers and Martians alike.

Radko moved to a conversation alcove, pulled up a Velcro flap on his jacket sleeve. Staring back at him was an ID photo that had been secreted in the garment's lining. Confident he could locate the young woman pictured, Radko lowered the fabric flap, strolled back into the auditorium, and wandered through the throng. Eyes flitting from one woman to another, he searched for Valentina.

"Will new arrivals please find a seat," announced a human voice. "Current Galaxy Leaper, Inc. family members, are also asked to be seated."

Radko smirked. Family members? He shook his head—Galaxy Leaper *employees*, was more like it. The emotionally comforting moniker irritated him. Radko climbed the stairs to the top level of the room and sat in a nosebleed seat. From this location, he could observe most of the people in the cavernous gathering place.

After a series of brief warm-up speeches, Dr. Margaret McCann, Facilities Director of Port Crystal, was introduced. Radko focused on the speech and the woman wearing a stunning necklace and pair of earrings featuring both emeralds and topaz—no doubt grown on Terra Luna—who was giving it. From a distance, she was a small figure swathed in a flowing caftan in the middle of the stage—but the fifty-meter projection screen behind her, alternately showed a full-body view then a headshot of Dr. McCann as she spoke.

"We like to think of our work-staff at Port Crystal, Terra Luna's premier crystal production facility, as a part of the Galaxy Leaper, Inc. family, and encourage each of you to bring to our attention any problems you encounter. I ask you to call me Dr. Maggie, rather than the more formal Dr. McCann. I pledge to always address your concerns, while maintaining the excellence of this colony. First founded in..."

Radko yawned, adjusted his collar as the Director continued, "So it stands to reason that at Port Crystal, we pride ourselves on the ability to create not only high-purity germanium, cadmium telluride, gallium arsenide, mercury iodide, and silicon crystals, but also, to manufacture various protein crystals invaluable to the medical community. Where I ask you," Dr. Maggie McCann spread her arms for emphasis, "would humankind be without Human Gamma Interferon crystals and their ilk?"

A gust of air from a ventilation fan made Dr. Maggie's abundant hair and diaphanous clothing flutter. For a few seconds, the Facilities Director appeared almost angelic. He noticed the Lunans around him seemed transfixed by her animated speaking technique, flamboyant appearance, and apparent endless wealth of knowledge. Radko grunted at this effective and well-orchestrated display—Maggie McCann knew how to put on a show.

The Director resumed talking. "As the long-ago crystal experiments on the Earther space shuttles demonstrated, crystals grown in microgravity are larger and contain fewer defects than those grown in gravity. Unfortunately, the cost of producing a small quantity of microgravity crystals in space shuttles or on orbiting space stations made the practice impractical. Not long after..."

Someone sitting three seats to the left of Radko coughed. He glanced in that direction. As Radko looked beyond the coughing woman, he spied a man with a distinct tattoo on his neck and the lower portion of his face staring at him. Radko nodded at the tattooed man. Mr. Tattoo narrowed his eyes, scrutinized Radko, then nodded in return.

*He's watching me,* thought Radko—and I don't think he's my Second. Mentally retracing the path he'd taken since his hurried departure from Mars, he was certain he hadn't seen the man before.

*Hmm,* he mused, *he is either a curious colonist, an undercover security guard, or... every or* Radko could think of involved treachery which could doom his retrieval.

Shaking off the doomed vibe, Radko re-focused on Dr. Maggie's voice. "Terra Luna's reduced gravity proved a far more practical and profitable aid in the growth of crystals not only from aqueous solution but also from vapors..."

Radko tilted his head back. The enormous size of the Port Crystal Auditorium hinted at the vast underground city which had been designed and developed by Galaxy Leaper, Inc. The greenhouses on the surface were the tip of the iceberg. For every cubic meter of greenhouse or vegetation tube above ground, there were thousands of cubic meters of crystal-growing vats, storage vaults, housing units, recreational complexes, and shopping bazaars carved out of the moon's interior. In addition, Port Crystal had five landing fields not only large enough to accommodate the freighters and passenger ships that



transported goods and colonists from Earth to Terra Luna to Mars and back again, but to serve the long-distance vessels which brought metals and other elements to the near-Earth settlements from the Asteroid Belt or from one of the far planets or moons.

When the space program had been privatized in the twenty-second century, Radko doubted the Earth governments had dreamt that corporations, business coalitions, and multi-billionaires would end up running the off-Earth settlements. Each moon, asteroid, and Mars colony had been established initially as a business venture, with the parent companies paying a usage fee to the United Earth Governing Organization. Once a settlement was operating in the black, a tax was paid to UEGO, and the parent company hoarded their profits with an eye to acquiring more territory for more settlements to earn more profits.

Of course, doctored books, bribes, tax fraud, questionable ethics, and illegal deals were common business practices the farther you traveled from UEGO's headquarters. Not to mention, Port Crystal produced tens of thousands of jewelry-grade gemstones which were imported to Earth and Mars, then sold as naturally occurring gems. A fraudulent practice—but a very lucrative one.

Thunderous clapping drew Radko's attention back to the smiling, waving Dr. Maggie McCann. As the Facilities Director triumphantly returned to her seat, the Chief of Personnel walked to the podium.

"After that inspiring welcome, I'm sure all of you are impatient to learn about your work assignments and housing arrangements—but before we get to those details, I'd like to introduce you to some of your Galaxy Leaper, Inc. family. Would all those currently participating in facility maintenance, please stand."

There was a cacophony of folding seats refolding, uniform fabric rubbing against uniform fabric, and shoes striking the floor. Hundreds of people stood. Enthusiastic applause followed. The maintenance squad departed.

"All those currently participating in agriculture and food preparation, please stand," said the Chief of Personnel. The noise, applause, and departure of workers was repeated.

Radko missed the rest of the introductions as he jumped up, hurried out of the upper balcony, and rushed down three flights of auditorium stairs. When he reached the second-floor walkway, Radko surveyed

the crowd on the ground floor, spotted the flaming hair of Valentina—greenhouse employee, botanist, terraforming enthusiast, planetary life hobbyist, daughter of Facilities Director Maggie McCann, and his assignment.

Radko jogged down the stairway to the first level, wove through the Lunans and new arrivals on an intercept course, then stood still and waited until Valentina was almost beside him. The redhead was looking behind her towards the auditorium stage where her mother was talking with assorted Galaxy Leaper, Inc. executives, when Radko stepped into her path. Valentina slammed into him, nearly knocking them both over.

“I’m so sorry. I wasn’t paying attention. I hope...”

Radko grabbed her elbow, leaned close to her face. “Come with me, Valentina. I need to talk to you in private.”

The woman hesitated, glanced at the abundant security officers, then shrugged her shoulders. She allowed Radko to steer her into the corridor that led to the Central Bazaar. After about fifty meters, they ducked into a conversation alcove.

“I’m sorry, but I didn’t catch *your* name.” Valentina held her chin up and gazed unblinking into Radko’s eyes.

“Radko, but that’s not important. What *is* important is *your* name.”

“Valentina Sally McCann—my mother is quite the fan of twentieth-century spaceflight,” she said as she took a step away from Radko.

“Wrong! It’s Valentina Sally Brogan, and your father’s brother sent me to get you. He insists that you visit him at the Windgate Colony on Mars.”

“You’re mistaken. I have no uncle. I suggest you leave me alone and return to whatever ship you sailed in on before I call security.”

As the woman turned to leave, Radko slipped his left arm around her waist and pressed the side of his briefcase against her. “Don’t suppose you’d like to take a chance that I won’t inject you with the needle hidden in the side of this case.”

Valentina looked up at him—eyes wide and mouth slightly open.

“I understand this particular drug is quite potent and,” he squeezed her waist, “very fast-acting.”

“What do you want?”

“Told you,” Radko answered with a lopsided smile. “To take you to Mars to visit your uncle. But before we do that, we need to go

somewhere less public and I'll tell you how you came to be raised by an impostor on Terra Luna."

Brows furrowed, Valentina nodded her assent.

"I think calling you Val will sound friendlier," said Radko as he continued to guide the woman toward the Central Bazaar.

Radko noticed her gray eyes narrowed as she replied, "Fine."

"Let's not have an unpleasant scene. Seems to me I'm the answer to your prayers."

Val shook her head. "I don't know what you are talking about."

For a second, Radko thought of a wild horse shaking its mane. *Keep it impersonal*, he reminded himself. "When we get to your living quarters, I'll remind you."

There was no more conversation as the couple traveled the busy corridors around the Central Bazaar, cafeteria and restaurant zone, and educational section. Then, they rode an elevator up four levels until they were in a hallway adjacent to the main agricultural labs.

"I believe your housing unit is down this way," Radko said. He knew there was a mocking tone to his voice, but he wanted to make the woman aware of how severely her privacy had already been violated by spies sent earlier to gather intel from the cleaning staff, repair persons, maintenance team, and other necessary workers who did their jobs unnoticed as the wealthy went about their day-to-day lives.

"Do you know the entry code, too?"

"Do you *really* want an answer to that?"

Val frowned, punched in her entry code. The couple stepped inside her apartment. The steel door slid shut behind them.

"Where's your view-screen?" Radko unlocked his briefcase and pulled an info-stick and plastic gun from a hidden compartment built into the molded side of the luggage.

Val pointed at a screen and computer unit above a small desk.

"Sit." Radko gestured to a pale green couch.

Glancing at the gun, Valentina sat down on the edge of the sofa with her back straight.

"Now, let's see who's lying."

A video that featured Valentina and her mother appeared on the screen.

"Where did you..."

“Doesn’t matter how I got it.” Radko studied the young woman’s face as she saw herself arguing with her mother:

“You’re never going to let me leave Port Crystal, are you?” an obviously irate Val complained as she stood in front of her mother’s desk, suitcase at her feet.

Dr. Maggie raised her eyebrows. “I don’t think you really want to go, dear. You registered legitimately on an Earth-bound freighter, knowing I’d check the manifest and see your name. You *had* to know I’d delay its launch and have you escorted off the ship.”

“What would be the point of giving a false name? I assume you monitor my location using my ID chip, so I can’t leave anyway.”

Dr. Maggie checked her makeup in a compact, snapped it shut. “Don’t be a child. We both know you’re the best person to replace me as Facilities Director when I retire.” The older woman picked up a report from her desk. “Not that I intend to retire for years.”

“That’s the point, Mother. You want to keep working for decades, and I’m interested in planetary life, terraforming, and botany—not crystals. Can’t you...”

“But you know more about crystal farming than anyone—except for me, of course. I’ve seen to that. You’ve been educated in both the appropriate scientific and people skills needed to continue, and even exceed the success of the first twenty-five years of Terra Luna’s crystal production.” The Director closed her eyes. “Dr. Margaret McCann and her daughter, Valentina—we’ll go down in the history files as the most savvy mother-daughter team of early off-Earth manufacturing.”

Val shook her head at her mother’s dream. “It’s true that you’ve groomed me to replace you as Facilities Director at this crystal farming colony, but not for my happiness or for the benefit of Galaxy Leaper, Inc. You’ve done it to secure a power-behind-the-scenes position for yourself.”

“Nonsense.”

“Not nonsense,” argued Valentina as she stepped forward, placed her hands, palms down, on her mother’s desk. “You want me to be a part of *your* legacy. You’ve managed my life with the same efficiency and iron-handed discipline which you’ve used to shape Port Crystal into a successful moon city. But a daughter isn’t a corporation. I want to go to Earth, or even Mars. I want to leave this...”

“Don’t be foolish,” Dr. Maggie said with a dismissive wave of her well-manicured fingers, “you’ve never even been to Earth.”

“That,” Valentina said as she picked up her suitcase and retreated out the door, “is my point.” The camera continued to show Dr. Maggie as she skimmed the monthly report and called for her secretary to send in the newest profit statistics.

The video screen went blank. Radko saw Val was near crying. “You’ve put up with an awful lot, considering she isn’t even your real mother.”

“What is it with you and this real mother thing?” She wiped her eyes.

“Dr. Maggie stole you from the cryo-embryo tanks back on Earth. Stole you from her cousin.”

“You’re daft! But for argument’s sake, let’s say you’re telling the truth. Prove it.” Val leaned back in the couch and crossed her arms over her chest.

Radko slipped the gun into his belt, then flipped open his briefcase. “Thought you’d never ask.” He withdrew a hard copy file and handed it to Val. “Take a look for yourself.”

She opened the folder and began to leaf through the paperwork. There was a receipt for the deposit of ten embryos from a Finn and Abigail Brogan, withdrawal slips for eight embryos, death certificates for Finn, Abigail, and Arthur Brogan, a police report filed by Seamus Brogan reporting the theft of two embryos, and DNA reports to be used in the event that a child raised to term using the missing embryos was discovered. “So?”

“This,” said Radko as he handed Val a genetic report, “is the science that connects you to the Brogans.”

Valentina knew enough about DNA from her work with plants in the greenhouses and botany labs to understand the series of marks that mapped out the genetic similarities between her blood and the blood of Finn and Abigail. They *appeared* to be her parents—if the data report was genuine.

“This could be a manipulation or forgery.”

“How about we visit your old nanny? She’s alive, though ill, and currently is being monitored in the nursing area of Port Crystal. I’ve got a feeling she’d like to clear up this mess before she dies. Know why?”

Val didn’t answer.

“Because *she* is the one who contacted Seamus on Mars. *She* is the one who wanted you to know the truth.”

“Then, why didn’t *she* tell me herself?”

“Maybe she was afraid she’d suffer an ‘accident’ if she tried to make contact with you, much less tell you the truth about your parents.” Radko saw creases form between Val’s eyebrows. “When was the last time you visited her?”

“It’s been a while. Every time I set up a meeting, something...”

“Needs your attention, and the visit to your nanny is postponed? Sounds a little suspicious to me.”

Val lifted her gaze from the DNA reports, looked Radko in the eye. “Can you get me in to see Nanny Bett?”

“Of course.” Radko withdrew several small containers from his briefcase, then slipped the folder with the DNA papers back in its place. “We’ll visit her today, but we need to take care of a problem or two before we go.” He tossed Val a package wrapped in brown paper. She opened it, saw it was hair dye.

“I don’t understand.”

“Redheaded Valentina McCann won’t get access to Nanny Bett—I guarantee it. But Sally Brogan, brunette friend of a retired nursemaid stopping by to cheer an old woman up, *will* get in to see Nanny Bett.”

“A little hair coloring isn’t going to change who I am.”

“Nope, but removing your ID chip and replacing it with another that says you are Sally Brogan will,” Radko said as he put together the components of a scan-chip insertion and removal device. The normally metal and plastic piece of medical equipment had been constructed entirely of plastics. Radko clicked the last part into place. “Doesn’t set off the metal detectors. Only way to smuggle weapons and illegal machinery on and off ships.”

“Have you done this before?”

Realizing that Val was about to back out of their visit to her nanny, he pulled up his sleeve. “According to Terra Luna records, Radko Urban, businessman and supplier of entertainment software, is visiting the bazaars for the next two days to take orders from store managers.” Radko tilted his head toward his arm as he withdrew his ID chip, then quicker than an eye blink, inserted a new chip. “Now, according to Mars’ records, Radko Truslow, Cosmos Enterprises Ltd. employee, is

visiting Terra Luna to acquire an expert in adapting plants to the constantly changing Martian ecosystem.”

After wiping the incision with an alcohol-based antiseptic, he swabbed it with arti-skin, then dropped the old ID chip into his pocket for disposal. “And, if circumstances require it,” he continued, “Radko another-last-name, will be an Earth-sick crystal farmer heading back to his homeworld. Or Radko whomever, a carefree crewman looking to work on the asteroid runs.” He tapped a plastic panel inside the briefcase where multiple ID chips were snapped in place.

“I know what I’m doing,” he assured her as he reached for her hand.

Before she could question him further, Radko grabbed her wrist and turned her arm over, exposing the flesh of her forearm. He pressed the scan-chip device against her skin. Quick as a viper, it removed Valentina’s ID chip and replaced it with a chip identifying her as Sally Brogan.

Val, now Sally, gasped. “Ouch!”

Radko tore open an antiseptic-analgesic pad packet. “Press this on the wound, and it will feel better in a few seconds. You can’t remain Valentina and see your former nursemaid.”

“I didn’t agree to change IDs,” Val protested as she held the pad against the small wound. “Don’t I need stitches after something like this?”

Radko grabbed her wrist again. “Nope. Just a swab or two of liquid bandage, and you’re as good as new.” He brushed a stroke of clear arti-skin over the incision. “Okay, Sally, go dye your hair and I’ll whip up lunch. As soon as you’re a brunette and I’ve eaten, we’ll visit that nanny of yours.”

When Val, now Sally, started to speak, Radko put his fingers against her lips. “Don’t argue. Just do it. Time is running out for Nanny Bett, and for our escape. Besides, worst case scenario—you’ll have a fabulous adventure you can brag about for years.”

The idea of an adventure seemed to appeal to the woman. She nodded, then walked toward the bathroom carrying the hair dye.

After Valentina left the room, Radko disassembled the scan-chip insertion-removal device and stowed the components in his briefcase. Next, he hid Sally’s old Valentina ID chip in the sofa cushions. Unless someone physically checked on the whereabouts of Dr. Maggie’s daughter, security would assume she was in her room based on the

location of her ID chip. Then, he went to her kitchenette and gathered the ingredients for a quick omelet from the refrigeration unit. As he mixed the filtered water with powdered egg substitute, he thought about the tattooed man again.

Radko didn't recall anything he'd done in the last few years that would merit a shadow or a hit, but he couldn't be certain that some customer, creditor, or mark wasn't holding a grudge against him. That was the problem with being a jack-of-all-trades, too many folks blamed you for their woes—even if *they* were the ones doing the illegal stuff and *you* were subcontracted by law-enforcers.

"The dye has to stay on for another fifteen minutes before I can wash it out," said Val, now Sally, as she padded barefoot into the kitchenette.

Radko splashed a little vegetable oil into a frying pan. "Like omelets, Sally?" He dumped the pseudo-egg mixture into the hot oil.

"Yes." The woman sat at a bistro table near the stove. "I suppose I'll have to answer to Sally until we get this parent thing sorted out."

Radko glanced over at her. In a robe with her hair hidden underneath a towel, she looked younger, more vulnerable. He pressed his lips together, then spoke. "I'd say you're going to have to go by that name for quite some time—maybe for years after we leave Port Crystal."

He saw her rub her eyes.

"Hey, it's not so bad. In fact, it's fun to be different people. Plus, you've got an uncle who is dying to see you."

"Tell me about this supposed uncle," Sally said as she set forks, dishes, and glasses on the table. "What does he do on Mars?"

"Runs the Windgate Colony located in the southern hemisphere. He's interested in setting up a human-friendly environment which is self-sustaining." Radko folded the omelet in half, brought the steaming pan over to the table. Using a spatula, he cut a chunk of the pseudo-egg concoction off, slid it onto Sally's plate. "I think you'll like him. He's blunt but generally honest." As an afterthought, he added, "I trust him as much as I trust anyone."

Radko flopped the rest of the omelet onto his plate, sat down, then pointed at her eggs. "Eat," he said as he shoveled a forkful of omelet into his mouth.



Sally tasted the eggs. “Not bad, for a jack-of-all-trades.” She almost smiled at Radko.

*Keep it business*, he reminded himself.

“If Nanny Bett confirms your story, if I decide to go with you to Mars, when do we leave?”

“Our passage is already booked on *The Ranielle*—she’s a freighter departing tonight at nineteen hundred hours.”

“I can’t be ready to leave by then,” Sally said as she frowned at her omelet.

“You’d better find a way. When we leave your apartment this afternoon, there’s no coming back. Anything you want to take with you goes with us when we visit your nursemaid.” Radko took a swallow of water, set the glass back down. “Then, we’ll visit the Central Bazaar until check-in time—make ourselves as invisible as possible until we get off Terra Luna.”

“But I need to say good-bye to...”

“No one. Because no one can have an inkling you’re leaving.”

Sally started to speak; Radko slammed his palm against the table. The clanging of silverware and the sight of water sloshing on the tabletop silenced her. “I mean it, Sally, *no one*, or you will get us both in trouble. Maybe dead.”

“My mother wouldn’t...”

“Dr. Maggie isn’t your mother, and you’ll know the truth once we visit with your nursemaid. I can guarantee Maggie McCann will protect her self-interests and place in the history files, even if it means sacrificing you.” Radko stood. “Now, go wash that stuff out of your hair and pack whatever you’re going to take with you in one piece of luggage. I’ll clean up.”

“Okay.” Sally sighed, then headed to the bathroom.

Radko heard water slamming against the shower stall. He thought he also heard crying. About twenty minutes later, after the whine of the hairdryer had ceased, Sally came into the living room dragging an overstuffed suitcase.

“Ready,” she said.

Her now brown hair was tied back with an aqua scarf, and she wore a white jumpsuit with a matching aqua belt. Radko knew she’d have to change before they left, but he didn’t want to upset her again before they saw the nanny. Plus, the suitcase would have to be smaller, less

bulky, to get off Terra Luna unnoticed. Radko decided to deal with that later, too.

“Say good-bye to your digs,” Radko said as he opened the apartment door and they strolled into the bustling public hallway.

Sally pulled her suitcase behind her as they navigated the labyrinth of corridors on their way to Nanny Bett’s apartment. It became evident when they neared her rooms, that this section of housing was reserved for the elderly and ill. Not only were medical staff with stethoscopes and testing paraphernalia striding by them, punching in responses to pages, and mumbling into phones—but unusually somber Lunans, quietly talking to each other, filled the halls.

Radko paused by a bank of lockers. He ran a credit card through a scanner, opened a large locker door. “We need to stow your suitcase here. We’ll pick it up on our way back to the Central Bazaar.”

Radko slid the luggage into the locker, closed the door, then slipped his arm around Sally’s shoulder. When she stiffened and started to pull away, he whispered in her ear, “They won’t be watching for a couple stopping by to see an old woman. They’ll be looking for a red-headed Valentina visiting her Nanny Bett.”

Radko felt Sally’s posture relax.

*This charade just might work*, he mused. The thought had no sooner crossed his mind than he saw Esther Bickel carrying a bunch of artificial flowers. Luckily, the woman stopped by a nurses’ station before she spotted him. *Probably asking what room a friend is in.*

Radko and Sally finally reached Nanny Bett’s assisted living apartment, knocked, and then slipped in when they heard the woman call, “Who’s there?”

Sally gasped, ran to the bed, and hugged Nanny Bett when she saw her former nursemaid’s physical condition. While the women reminisced, Radko studied the nanny. She was skeletal, her hair was thinning, and her skin had a grayish cast to it. Radko went to her bedside table and checked the various pharmaceuticals—nothing there should cause the poisoning symptoms he saw.

While he watched, the nursemaid took a sip out of a glass of water. *Arsenic*, he thought. It was tasteless, colorless, had no odor, and available in a crystal-growing colony. A drop or two was probably in the water pitcher by her bed. Arsenic was the poison of kings. Easy to use and tough to detect. A no-worries way to eliminate the enemy if you

had the time and means to feed it to your victim over a period of months, or even years. It was lucky Bett had sent a message to Brogan when she did; otherwise, she'd be too far gone to hold a logical conversation.

"Nanny Bett, this is Radko. He tells me you contacted a Seamus Brogan about me," said Sally as she motioned Radko closer.

The nursemaid grabbed his hand. "Thank you," she managed to say before a bout of coughing stole her breath.

He handed her a glass of water. He knew, as she knew, it was too late to worry about the source of the poison.

"Promise me you'll get her to Seamus. Once Maggie realizes she knows the truth, there will be hell to pay."

Radko patted Nanny Bett's bony arm. "Done," he said.

"Valentina," the former nursemaid began.

"I'm going by Sally now."

Nanny Bett smiled. Radko noticed her gums had receded and were bleeding. "I've always liked the name Sally," she said, then continued, "I never meant for you to get hurt. When Maggie came to me begging for a child, I agreed to take the last two embryos belonging to Finn and Abigail from cryo storage and have them implanted in me. I was working in a home-world cryo lab then. It was the only way Maggie could have a child. You see, she's transgender. Margaret McCann was born Marcus, and went through gender reassignment in her late teens."

"Mother is a man?"

Nanny Bett rubbed her cheek with a scrawny hand, scratched at a scab under her right eye. "No, she's a woman who was born with the wrong chromosomes. The surgeons and endocrinologists helped her body match her soul. She's been my best friend for all of my life, and I felt honored to bear the children who would be hers."

"Children? Do I have a brother or sister?"

"No, dear. Only one embryo matured, and when you were born, I couldn't have been happier. Maggie got her wish, and I got to be nursemaid to the most beautiful little girl." The woman sighed, looked at the blood under her fingernails, then wiped the open sore on her face with a tissue.

"Tell her the rest," urged Radko. This was taking too long. Someone probably noticed them coming into the room. Even with the brown hair,

Sally was recognizable if you looked closely.

“Radko, give her a minute to...”

“No, he’s right. I need to make this quick.” Nanny Bett reached up and caressed Sally’s face. Radko was glad the nursemaid used her left hand—it didn’t appear to have blood under its fingernails.

“When we knew I was pregnant, Maggie took the assignment on Terra Luna with Galaxy Leaper, Inc., and I came, too. Shortly after you were born, I was contacted by a friend of mine who still worked at the Earth cryo lab. The Brogans had scheduled a meeting with the cryo doctor to arrange for implantation of the remaining two embryos. Finn and Abigail had a seven-year-old son, Arthur, but they’d decided they wanted to try one last time for a little girl. I told Maggie about the situation. I knew it was only a matter of time before the Brogans realized who had taken the embryos.”

“Hurry.” Radko began to pace beside the bed.

Sally glared at Radko, then, asked, “Why would they suspect you two?”

“Because several years earlier, Maggie had asked Finn and Abigail if she could have the two embryos. Abigail was Maggie’s first cousin, so genetically, they were similar. Finn refused. He’d never liked Maggie. Abigail went along with her husband, so theft was our only option.”

“Tell her.”

Nanny Bett smoothed some wrinkles in her bed’s coverlet, raised her eyes, and looked at Sally. “Less than forty-eight hours after I told Maggie about the Brogans’ pending meeting with the cryo doctor, they were killed in an explosion. The local law enforcers blamed the bombing on a terrorist organization run by a group of radicals, but I suspect it was Maggie making sure her involvement in embryo theft was hidden.”

“Then, she lied about my parentage,” Sally added. “So she was willing to murder my parents and brother to keep her secrets.”

Radko saw her bottom lip was trembling and her hands were shaking.

“A lot of things make sense now: Mother’s personality, her forbidding me to visit Earth or Mars, her refusal to discuss my father, her....”

Radko couldn't allow Sally to breakdown. He needed her focused. "Time's up, ladies—say your goodbyes, because we're leaving."

As Sally and Nanny Bett hugged one last time, Radko evaluated the nursemaid's condition. He figured Maggie McCann would end her suffering within hours of discovering her daughter had paid the nanny a visit. He opened the door a few inches, peered into the hallway at the steady flow of visitors and medical personnel. As he watched, three nurses hurried by—one stared at Nanny Bett's door and bit her lip.

"Dammit." Radko grabbed Sally's arm, pulled the woman to him. "Someone knows we're here."

"Oh, no!" Nanny Bett wailed.

"Geezus, hush her up."

"Nanny Bett, please quiet down," Sally begged, but the nursemaid seemed not to hear her. "What should we do?"

"You're going to walk beside me down the hall, and when I say, *hurry*, you're going to head for the Central Bazaar. As soon as I can, I'll meet you beside the Goddess Fountain." Radko pulled a new passport out of his pants pocket and handed it to Sally. "At seventeen hundred hours, if I haven't shown up at the fountain, go to the Port Crystal boarding area and get on *The Ranielle*. She's headed to Mars. Once you're on the planet, find your way to the Windgate Colony and ask for Seamus Brogan."

"I don't think I can do this alone."

"I'm hoping you won't have to." Radko winked, pushed open the door, and together they hurried down the hallway towards the storage lockers. Radko heard footsteps behind them. Only one set, but whoever was running after them was getting closer.

When they reached the lockers, Radko stopped. "Hurry," he ordered.

"But I..."

"Go. I'll see you at the fountain." As soon as Sally rushed out of the locker alcove, Radko looked for the cameras. He knew there would be video surveillance in all public corridors, and wanted to position himself so that whatever happened next would be recorded in the way that was most advantageous to him. He held the plastic gun in his hand, leaned against the locker containing Sally's suitcase, crossed his arms, and waited. The tattooed man stepped into the alcove.

“Good afternoon. Nice day for a walk,” said Radko as he watched Mr. Tattoo’s eyes and monitored his body movements. Experience had taught him that most opponents tightened a muscle, flinched, glanced away, or indicated with some other physical twitch their intent to strike. He was betting his life that the tattooed man was no different.

“I know you. Saw you at the welcoming ceremony.” Mr. Tattoo grinned. He seemed to show every one of his shiny white teeth as he added a booming laugh to the friendly facade. “You look worried. I think you worry over nothing. Leave the girl alone, and I leave you alone.” The man took a step closer.

“Can’t do that.”

“Whatchu mean you can’t? Turn around. Get on the next ship off this moon. That girl’s mama ain’t letting her go nowhere.” Mr. Tattoo took another two steps forward. “You and me, we’re alike—just trying to make a living. No need for us to fight.”

The man moved closer.

“How about we shake on no fighting?” The man extended his right hand, then lunged at Radko. He was quick, but Radko spotted the tip of the knife hidden in Mr. Tattoo’s sleeve and blocked the first thrust of the blade. The assassin pressed against Radko as he raised the knife’s edge toward Radko’s throat. “I think you gonna be sorry you mess with Qadir.”

“I think you’re going to be sorrier,” said Radko as he slid the muzzle of his gun under the chin of his opponent and pulled the trigger. “Because you brought a stiletto to a gunfight.”

When the plastic bullet drilled through his brain, Qadir raised his eyebrows, but had no other response as he released his blade and fell against Radko.

Radko lowered Qadir’s body to the floor, scanned his credit card, opened the locker door, yanked Sally’s suitcase out, and stuffed the tattooed man’s body in the locker. He unzipped the suitcase, grabbed a beige sweater, and wiped the blood off of his face, jacket, hands, and the floor, before tossing the soiled garment into the locker with Qadir’s corpse. Radko closed the locker door, grabbed the suitcase, and headed for the Central Bazaar.

**A**fter leaving a dead Qadir crammed in a locker, Radko decided a casual stroll through a series of public corridors was ill-advised, so

he bribed his way into a service tube. Once there, he traded his clothes for a nondescript outfit worn by one of the workers he encountered, then entered the Central Bazaar through its dingiest, most illicit access tunnel. It wasn't legal to slip in that way, but *legal* was a gray word in Radko's book. Over the years, he had found that people making a living on the fringes were more resourceful, more interesting, and more willing to negotiate than those more gainfully employed.

Radko spent the next twenty minutes dickering with Central Bazaar second-hand dealers. He managed to get rid of the suitcase, which was easily identifiable and likely bugged, and Sally's fancy moon colony clothes. In their place, he acquired practical clothing and a forgettable carry-on. Even though he'd done it for her own good, he knew Sally was going to be miffed when he met her at the Goddess Fountain and she realized most of her belongings were gone. Radko *had* taken the time to transfer her personal items from one piece of luggage to the other, but he was pretty sure this wouldn't mollify Sally's ire.

He hoped the gold bracelet, earring, and necklace set he'd traded for a comfortable traveling outfit, a pair of women's syntho-leather boots with thick soles, and a generous supply of loose credits hadn't held too much sentimental value. The credits would give them some untraceable buying power, and gold jewelry attracted too much attention.

Lastly, he had dropped his old ID chip in the bag of a Lunan shopper. When Valentina McCann's absence was noticed, or the video of the tattooed man's death was discovered—Port Crystal's security would be pursuing one Radko Urban via his chip. A chip which would be far from the departure terminal.

Radko stood behind a rack of book sticks and observed Sally waiting on a bench beside the fountain. No one seemed to be paying her any mind. He scrutinized the vendors hovering about their kiosks—they all appeared to be busy waiting on customers or re-stocking their merchandise. There were certainly spies here, and undercover security, but Radko felt sure that they could lose them in the crowds of shoppers if Sally was recognized.

Suddenly, he froze. He thought he saw the Bickel woman by a jewelry kiosk. Heart pounding, he studied the shoppers more closely,

and he realized he must have been mistaken.

“Been waiting long?” Radko said from behind Sally.

“Oh, my gosh, I thought you were...” Sally paused, unwilling to finish the sentence.

“Dead?” Radko grinned. “Take more than a tattooed man to put an end to me. Come on, we’ve got some talking to do, and the Bazaar is a little too out-in-the-open for my taste.” He picked up their luggage and walked in the direction of the cheaper, less desirable wares.

Sally looked down, saw Radko’s briefcase and a shopping bag in one hand and a tan carry-on in the other. “My suitcase?”

Radko decided a small lie was necessary. “Sorry, I got blood on it. I had to trade the suitcase and a few things in it for this carry-on and some practical clothes for you.”

Sally was scowling.

“But I did buy you some nice boots.” Radko lifted the shopping bag slightly.

“How much blood?”

“Let it go. You really don’t want to know the details.” Radko handed Sally the shopping bag. “We need to be moving.”

Sally’s curiosity overcame her anger as they walked. She turned her head from side to side, looking at table displays, storefronts, and merchandise kiosks. “I’ve never been in this part of the Bazaar before. It’s so...” she wrinkled her nose. “Pungent, colorful, noisy—but still beautiful. I didn’t even know all these people lived here.”

“Funny how we miss the things that are right in front of us,” Radko said as he stepped into a tea house. “Let’s grab something to drink. I’ll explain what we’re going to do next.”

A waiter shuffled over to the couple. “What you want?”

“Something citrus with a bit of spice to it. Got a tea like that?” Radko placed a credit on the table. “And a private place to talk?”

“Ah,” said the waiter. “Privacy for you and the lady, and a pot of tea to stir the senses.” He plucked the credit from the tabletop. “Follow me.”

He led them to a room in the back of the tea house. It was furnished with a chaise, several ottomans, and a long, low table. Its walls were covered in a vermilion fabric, the furniture was constructed of black lacquered wood, and the rug and upholstery featured golden dragons sparring on deep red backgrounds.



“Where’s that door go?” Radko indicated a locked exit in the back of the private room.

“To the maintenance tunnels—for deliveries. No worries about that door.”

“It’s perfect.” Radko tossed another loose credit into the waiter’s outstretched hand. “After we get the tea, we’ll need to be alone for a while, then maybe some dumpling soup.”

“No problem,” said the man as he rubbed the two credits together and went to get their tea.

“Finish your supper,” said Radko as he glanced at his watch. “You need to change. Then, we need to make our way to the departure terminal.”

Sally dipped a deep-fried noodle in the tangy sauce provided by their waiter and popped it in her mouth. “Today has already been an adventure. Mother never allowed me into this section of the Bazaar—and I can’t say I’ve ever tasted anything quite like this meal.”

“This is only the beginning,” Radko assured her.

He turned his back toward the Facilities Director’s daughter. Giving her a small bit of privacy for changing her attire, he slid to the open position four bolts which secured the door at the back of the room. Next, not possessing the key to unlock the large metal lock, he managed to pick it with the aid of a plastic screwdriver he kept in his briefcase.

“What do you think?”

Radko turned, glanced at Sally. Dressed in a dark blue pair of pants, shirt, and jacket, and wearing practical boots—she could pass for a typical working-class woman.

“You’ll blend in—which is perfect.”

“You look ordinary as well,” she responded as she tied her brown hair back in a braid, then tied the end with a piece of fabric she’d torn from her scarf. “So, what do we do with my clothes?”

“We’ll take them. Trade or give them to someone down in the transport tubes.”

“Sounds like a plan,” she said as they furtively exited the tea house and began hiking an upward sloping tube which Radko hoped led to the departure terminal.

About five minutes after they'd begun walking, a tram, loaded with opaque containers kept in place by metal railings, zipped by them before squealing to a stop. A tinny voice said, "This is not a human tunnel. You must board the tram. It will take you to an exit where you can access the pedestrian passageways.

"Thanks," answered Radko as he placed their luggage on the tram, then climbed aboard and helped Sally get up on top of one of the containers, too.

The tram rapidly ascended the tube, then halted before a door marked *Exit*.

"You may now access the pedestrian passageway." Without waiting for them to actually leave the tube, the tram sped away as soon as they'd disembarked.

"Let's see where we're at." As Radko held open the door for Sally, he dropped her lovely white jumpsuit and turquoise belt in the tube. *No sense in carrying what we can't take with us*, he thought.

"We're about a five or ten-minute walk from the Port Crystal departure terminals," she said. "We should be able to make it from here."

"Maybe," replied Radko. Things had gone too well. Like all Retrievers, he knew the hardest part of the job was actually getting off-world with the contracted item—in this case, Maggie McCann's daughter—still in your possession.

Sally and he didn't talk as they did their best to blend in with the other passengers making their way to the terminals for departing on one ship or the other for Mars, Earth, the Asteroid Belt, or one of the outer planets or moons. As they entered the departure ID check area, Radko studied the ship boarding information on the view-screens above the check-in counters. It appeared four ships were scheduled to depart within an hour of each other. *The Ranielle* was scheduled to leave first.

"Our check-in counter is the one all the way to the right," said Sally. He could hear the excitement in her voice.

Relieved she hadn't decided to bail on her Mars adventure, he surveyed the line of passengers ahead of them—saw no one he recognized. *Maybe we will get off Terra Luna without incident*, he mused.

Determined to appear as ordinary as possible, Radko took Sally's hand, winked, then said, "Boyfriend and girlfriend traveling together. Seems a good reason to stick close to one another throughout our check-in, journey, and arrival on Mars."

"Right."

As the check-in attendant motioned them forward, he felt Sally's pulse racing. "Passport," she said. Sally handed the woman the new passport Radko had provided. Barely looking at the document, the attendant handed it back. "Scan," she said. Again, Valentina, now Sally, passed the security check without any issues. Sally moved forward a few steps, then paused, waiting for Radko.

As the check-in attendant glanced at his passport, then scanned his ID chip, she looked up, squinted her eyes, and asked, "Didn't I just check you in? I seem to recall the name *Radko* from earlier today."

"What a great memory you have." Radko gave her his most charming smile. "I came to Terra Luna to pick up my girlfriend, Sally. We're heading to Mars to visit my family."

The woman relaxed. "Well, you two have a great time."

And with that, it appeared Radko and Sally were free to enter the placenta which led to *The Ranielle*. That is, until more than a dozen security guards arrived and began to move people away from the departure ID check-in counters. With no place to run, they stood still as stone, waiting to see what would happen next.

Then, something made Radko glance at the check-in counter next to the one they had just passed through. There was Esther Bickel. She mouthed, "I am your Second," as she stuck her wrist out to be scanned.

As soon as the scanner got near her forearm, warning buzzers and lights went off. The security personnel pulled out their weapons and rushed toward the grandmotherly woman.

"Bomb," gasped the man who had scanned Esther Bickel.

The word *bomb* flew through the crowd. Most of the people screamed and shouted for loved ones to flee, as hundreds of people stampeded away from Esther Bickel. Meanwhile, the security guards raised their weapons, the check-in employee ducked down, and the grandmother looked Radko in the eye and shouted, "Sail safe!"

In the confusion and commotion, no one noticed Radko and Sally hurry up the loading placenta, find seats beside the window so they

could observe Terra Luna diminish, then fade below them when *The Ranielle* launched.

In the terminal below, Radko imagined Esther Bickel was being led away for questioning. He suspected she excelled at her job, and would eventually be determined to be a harmless, slightly confused septuagenarian who had been electronically misidentified as carrying a bomb. Odds were, the Port Crystal officials would send her back to her port of origin within a few months.

*Ranielle* passengers who'd remained near the check-in counter during the commotion were quickly ID-ed, scanned, and sent up the placenta to the freighter. Those passengers who had run from the perceived bomb threat missed their flight. Galaxy Leaper, Inc. ran an efficient, effective, and timely facility—so despite a potential terrorist incident, the transport ship and Port Crystal Field's loading placentas uncoupled on schedule.

When *The Ranielle* pushed away from Terra Luna, a tinny voice announced, "We hope your trip with InterWorld Communication & Transportation will be a pleasant one. Please watch this brief informational video designed to familiarize you with our ship and its amenities."

Prior to the video beginning, a crescendo of upbeat music blared out of *The Ranielle's* audio system, followed by the theme music of InterWorld which ended with the corporation's motto: *Sail safe, sail happy, sail InterWorld.*

"I can't believe I'm going to Mars to meet my father's brother," whispered Sally.

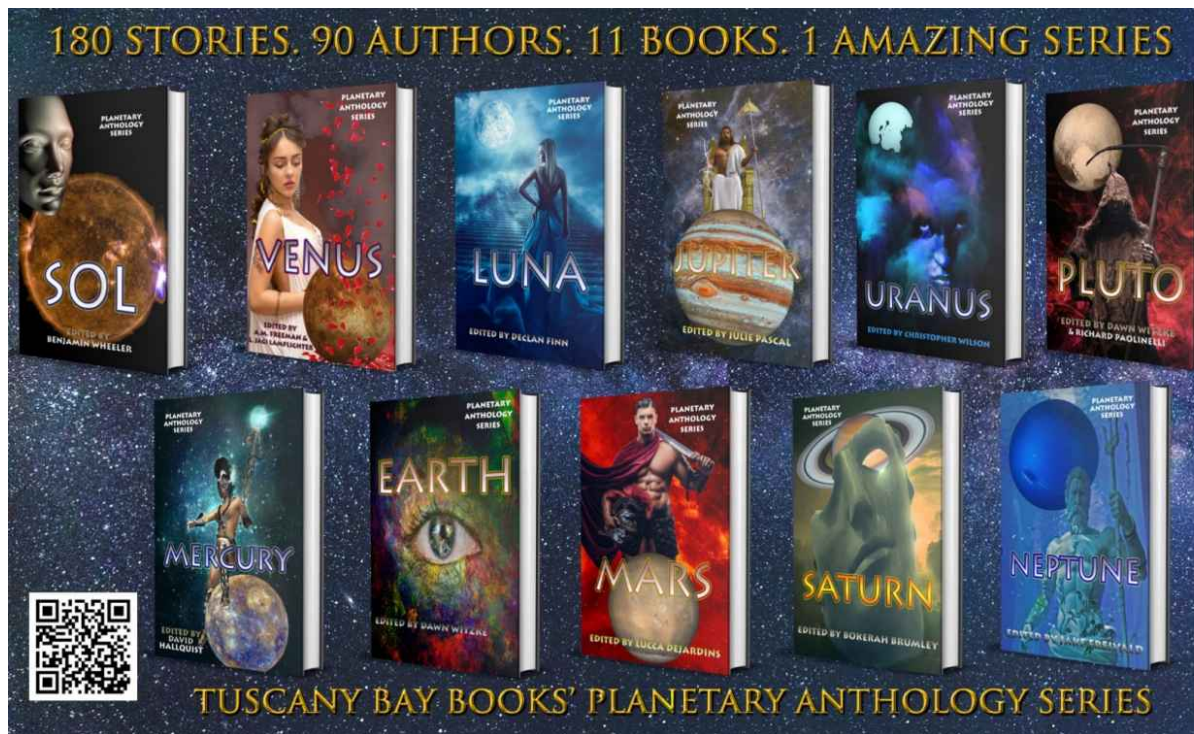
"Believe it," said Radko.

Pleased that he'd not only managed to complete the hardest part of his assignment, but had also gotten a bit of revenge on the woman whose cutthroat business practices resulted in his father being one of the hundreds of workers killed in the construction of Terra Luna's crystal-growing facilities, Radko relaxed. To Dr. Maggie, *Deceased male, age 27, Gustav Urban*, was a statistic—but to Radko, he was family.

Nevertheless, as Sally laid her head against his shoulder and watched the InterWorld video, niggling in the back of Radko's brain was the certainty that Dr. Margaret McCann wasn't going to give up on her daughter so easily. It wouldn't take the Facilities Director long to

figure out where she was. Then, Radko and Sally had better watch their backs.

*Vonnie Winslow Crist, SFWA, HWA, has stories in Black Infinity, Lost Signals of the Terran Republic, Amazing Stories, Deep Space, Dogs of War, Worlds, and elsewhere. Her books include **Murder on Marawa Prime, Owl Light, and The Enchanted Dagger.***



# Shakespeare Among the Stars

By JILL HAND

*Lured onto a space cruise by romantic letters from a handsome holo actor that turned out to be part of a marketing campaign, Kivrin has run out of money and is stuck working the waste tanks!*

**A** klaxon blared from the speaker in the bulkhead, jolting Kivrin out of a pleasant dream in which her old life had miraculously been returned to her. The bunk tilted sideways, dumping her onto the floor, where she landed with a thud.

“Get up! Time to work!” a harsh, robotic voice snarled.

Anticipating what was about to happen next, Kivrin pulled her bare knees to her chest and shielded her head with her arms.

“Wash!” the voice commanded.

A jet of icy water spurted from a nozzle overhead, soaking Kivrin and the cramped room’s furnishings of bunk, locker, and chair, all made of cheap Ly-Rex. The icy water was followed by a dribbling of antibacterial soap, followed by more blasts of icy water. Just as Kivrin thought she couldn’t stand it another moment, the water shut off. Vents slid open in the bulkhead next to where she cowered, shivering and dripping, and gusts of hot air blew out.

“Get ready for work,” the voice said, threateningly. The speaker shut off with a pop. Kivrin made a rude gesture at it.

Opening the locker, she took out a black knitted watch cap. She wrung out her long brown hair and plaited it into a braid, stuffing it under the cap. Then she climbed into a disposable coverall made from the fibers of the Yunglu tree, harvested on one of the planets in the Sevnos galaxy. The dull green material crackled as she sealed the stick-tite closure in front. She was buckling the straps on a pair of waders when the door leading to the companionway opened, and Chivix entered.

Seven feet tall, her ruby-red skin covered from her collarbones to her toes in scaly, textured body paint which shimmered gold and

peacock blue in the harsh overhead lighting, Chivix was an arresting sight. With her corona of blue hair, four eyes, and an equal number of breasts, she resembled some kind of mythological beast. In reality, her DNA was more or less human, or at least the kind of human that came from one of the exoplanets in the constellation Cygnus.

Chivix yawned and stretched, the scarlet-lacquered nails on her eight-fingered hands barely avoiding grazing the overhead. “What a night! I’m exhausted. They kept the retzu tables open late because a group of Lithurian royals wanted to keep playing. They must have lost sixty million credits, but they wouldn’t quit. You know how Lithurians love to gamble.”

Chivix worked as a dancer in Proton, one of three casinos aboard the *Fantasy Adventure*, a luxury space cruiser that provided its passengers with pampering, fine dining, and a variety of entertainment options as it meandered among the stars before depositing them back in port, fatter and poorer, if not dead. The death rate was high among passengers on the *Fantasy Adventure*, and its sister ships, *Quantum Frolic*, and *Radiant Ovation*. That was due to overindulgence in eating, drinking, and the other activities passengers got up to, once they were safely out in international space, beyond the reach of law enforcement.

The same thing used to occur onboard the cruise ships that once plied Earth’s oceans. People would throng aboard and try to forget their troubles by reverting to a state resembling toddlerhood, one without adult supervision. They ate like pigs and partied wildly. The ships’ designers had to keep adding more refrigeration compartments in the morgues because the passengers, many of them old and out of shape, kept dropping dead as the result of all that carrying-on. It was even worse now, aboard the space cruisers, which might take off with 3,000 passengers and return with only 2,700.

“Look at what one of the Lithurians gave me as a tip,” Chivix said. She pried a gold-colored disc from her navel and handed it to Kivrin. Stamped on the obverse was the profile of a sneering froglike creature. It was a flattering image of Her Splendidness, Nilmeth II,

queen of Lithuria and its dependent colonies. On the reverse side were five wavy lines, surrounded by a sunburst.

“A five-thousand-durna piece! The intergalactic exchange rate’s good right now. You can use it to pay your passage home,” Kivrin said, passing it back to her.

Chivix regarded her in astonishment, her four silvery eyes blinking. “Are you kidding? And give up show business? Besides, there’s nothing for me back home. My clan are bog-grass weavers. Do you know what that’s like? Bending over a loom all day, weaving strands of bog grass into feed bags for the bog buffaloes? No, thanks.”

Chivix went to the locker and took out a folded blanket and a thin pillow. Like Kivrin’s coveralls, they were made from Yunglu fibers. They crackled as she placed them on the bunk from which Kivrin had been ejected. In terms of bedding it was the absolute rock bottom, thin and scratchy, vastly inferior to what could be found in the luxurious staterooms on the decks above. Kivrin had occupied one of those staterooms before disaster struck and she was forced to join the crew.

Now she toiled fourteen hours a day, sharing a cramped cabin next to the engine room with Chivix and a spa attendant called Wub-Wub. The three of them took turns in the narrow bunk, sleeping in eight-hour shifts.

The worst part was that Kivrin knew she had brought it all on herself.

With another yawn, exposing both rows of her pointed teeth, Chivix climbed in the bunk and pulled the blanket over her shoulders. “Have a good day,” she told Kivrin sleepily. “Don’t forget your ID badge.”

Ly-Rex ID badges were worn by all members of the crew, identifying them by name, planet of origin, and the service they performed. The officers wore similar badges made from a silvery metal from one of the habitable moons of Neptune.

**K**ivrin was aware that her day would be unlikely to resemble anything even remotely considered nice. She pinned on her



badge on which was printed in black intergalactic pictograms: I'm Kivrin from Earth. How can I make your day sparkle?

At first, when her credit disc had been declined three days into the voyage, Kivrin feared they'd make her work the debt off by becoming a deckhand. The purser, Luminard Purvish, laughed when she told him she didn't think she'd be any good at keeping a lookout for space debris, or polishing the brass railings around the bridge and the promenade deck which served a purely ornamental function.

"A deckhand? Good gracious, no! You don't have to worry about that," Purvish said, patting her arm reassuringly.

Kivrin relaxed a little. "I won't?"

"Certainly not! The idea! A deckhand!" Wiping away tears of merriment, he said, "Deckhand! Oh, that's good! Deckhand's a plum position, my girl. You work your way up to deckhand if you're lucky. You'll be cleaning the waste tanks."

Kivrin wasn't sure what that meant. Perhaps it involved something in the kitchen or the engine room? The ship was powered by thermoelectric generators. Maybe those had waste tanks that needed cleaning?

She'd prefer not to work in the kitchen or the engine room, both of which were hot, noisy places presided over by bad-tempered individuals who barked out orders at their underlings, and threw things when they were angry. But she needn't have feared Purvish would assign her to either of those places. Instead, he told her to follow him to a hatch in one of the aft bulkheads. Opening it, he revealed a supply room filled with a variety of items, including rakes, coveralls, and, oddly, Kivrin thought, wader boots.

"Here's your gear," he said. "The rakes and waders get disinfected and reused. Mister Budleigh, the waste crew chief, will show you how that works. The coveralls go in the incinerator after each shift."

Kivrin was beginning to get a bad feeling about this.

"Why? Do they get dirty?"

That produced more laughter. "Do they get dirty? Follow me and see for yourself."

Down a ladder they went, Purvish first, the gold braid on his epaulettes sparkling in the dim lighting, followed by Kivrin. As they descended, she began to detect a horrible odor. It got worse the

farther down they went. When they reached the bottom, Kivrin was confronted with a scene that made her mouth fall open in shock.

Four massive tanks stood on the deck in front of her. The tanks contained a foul-smelling brown substance the consistency of oatmeal. The stench made Kivrin gag. There were people in the tanks, immersed up to their waists, poking at the muck with rakes. They looked utterly miserable. As she watched, a pipe in the side of one of the tanks spat out a thin stream of liquid.

“Ugh! What’s this?” she said.

“The waste tanks, obviously. You know the toilet in your former stateroom? Where did you think it went when you flushed? It goes down here.” Purvish was holding his nose and his voice came out as a muffled squawk.

An enormously fat man heaved himself up from where he was seated in a folding chair, watching something on a hand-held vidder. Turning it off, he asked, “Who’s this, Mister Purvish? You giving passengers tours of the waste tanks now?”

“She’s a former passenger, Mister Budleigh,” the purser replied. “She blew up her credit disc by spending like a sailor on shore leave. Bought fancy clothes in the shops in the Midway Plaisance arcade. Got all sorts of beauty treatments in the Escape Hatch spa. She was living it up like a Lithurian royal, without the means to pay for it.”

The two men shook their heads mournfully at the thought of such folly.

“Now she has to work in order to pay back the shipping line what she owes. I heard you have a vacancy down here,” Purvish said.

Budleigh surveyed Kivrin doubtfully, his plump lips pursed. “I suppose she’ll do. We can’t be too choosy. It’s not like people are beating on the door, begging to be taken on as waste tank cleaners. As long as she keeps her footing and doesn’t go under and drown like the last one did she’ll probably be all right.”

“Somebody drowned, in... in there?” Kivrin looked at the tanks in horror.

“It happens sometimes,” Budleigh said calmly. “Once they go under it’s not likely they’ll come back up again. Once they go under, they *stay* under. That is, until the end of each shift when we seal the

tanks, compact the contents into little cubes, incinerate them, and eject the ashes out into space. It's very tidy."

It was indeed tidy, so much so that the system was fully automated. Kivrin didn't learn why they were given rakes and sent into the tanks until she started work. Then she was enlightened by another cleaner. His ID badge said: I'm Ivo from Mars. How can I make your day sparkle?

"Put on these gloves and grab a rake," Ivo told her, indicating a box of dark green water-proof gloves in the supply room. "Gloves get incinerated after each shift, along with coveralls. Waders and rakes get disinfected and reused. Give 'em to Budleigh; he'll take care of it."

Kivrin pulled on a pair of gloves and took a rake from the rack. Her expression must have revealed how much she dreaded climbing into one of the tanks because Ivo smiled reassuringly.

"It's not so bad. You'll get used to the smell, although it'll cling to your hair. I don't have to worry about that." He ran a hand over his bald scalp. "Just a minute!" He dug into one of the boxes on the shelves and produced a knitted cap. "Tuck your hair under this."

She did as he suggested.

"Good. Now, there's an old proverb, said to have been coined by the poet John Milton. It goes: 'Every cloud has a silver lining.' Are you familiar with it?"

Kivrin nodded, although she couldn't imagine how it applied to working in a tank full of sewage.

"This job, disgusting as it is, has a silver lining. Sometimes things end up in the tanks that don't belong there. Valuable things. That's what the rakes are for. We poke around with them, and when we discover something valuable, we turn it over to Budleigh, and he gives us a cut."

"He cuts us?" Kivrin, asked, alarmed. Budleigh hadn't seemed violent, but perhaps he had a nasty streak.

"No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you. That's just an old-time way of saying he shares part of the reward he gets when something valuable turns up. I'm a student of history, in an informal sort of way. I like collecting old-time sayings and reading about how things used to be in the olden days. Let me give you an example that fits our

present situation. I see you're from Earth. Have you ever been to London?"

"I was there last year," Kivrin told him. "I went to the Globe Theater and took a tour of the restored Gherkin. It's said to be the most beautiful piece of twenty-first-century architecture still in existence."

"I envy you. I've never been to Earth. My great-grandparents came from there, and I've always wanted to go. My point is there's a river that runs through London, the Thames. A long time ago, people called mudlarks used to scavenge in the mud along the banks at low tide, looking for things they could sell. It was a nasty job, like what we're doing, but at least we're not going to come across any dead horses, and we're not going to get sick and die, like the mudlarks sometimes did, because we have enhanced immune systems, thanks to modern medicine."

"Is that the silver lining, that there are no dead horses, and we're not going to die unless we drown?" Kivrin asked. "No, wait! You said sometimes there're valuable things in the tanks. How do they get there?"

"How do you think? Passengers eat too much. They drink too much. They get swizzled on euphoria gas and happy tabs. Then they toss their cookies. That's an old-time expression meaning they..."

"I know what it means," Kivrin said.

"Then you know that sometimes things get tossed by accident, along with their cookies. Just the other day, the Girvan of Rostiza lost a priceless necklace of red Mars diamonds down the toilet after she ate an entire chimera goose. She was leaning over the toilet when the catch on the necklace broke. Before the Girvan realized what happened, the necklace was gone, along with her dinner. She notified the purser and offered a reward to get it back. The purser told Budleigh, who told us to be on the lookout for it."

Ivo smiled modestly. "I was the one who found it. After Purvish and Budleigh took their share of the reward I got mine. Feast your eyes on *this!*"

He produced a flat Ly-Rex disc from the pocket of his coverall. On it was stamped, in gold intergalactic pictograms: Proton! Where Every Day is Your Lucky Day! Good for One Complimentary Appetizer or Dessert.

Kivrin didn't think it was much of a reward. "That's all? An appetizer or a dessert? For finding a priceless diamond necklace?"

"Not just any appetizer or dessert, an appetizer or dessert in Proton, where a beautiful dancer from the constellation Cygnus works. I plan to go there, linger over my appetizer or dessert, and get to know her." He placed his hand on his heart and struck a dramatic pose. "You'd be surprised. I can be quite charming when I make an effort."

The dancer, of course, was Chivix, Kivrin's roommate. Kivrin doubted the stunning Chivix would be won over by a short, bald, waste tank cleaner, but she didn't want to hurt his feelings.

"Good luck," she said.

Kivrin had plenty of time to brood about her situation. She'd told Ivo about her trip to London, where she'd seen a show simply called *Shakespeare!* but she hadn't mentioned the subsequent details that landed her in this mess. The show was a mash-up of William Shakespeare's plays, staged at the newest version of the Globe Theater. It was located on the south bank of the Thames, the same river where the mudlarks used to ply their trade.

*Shakespeare!* was an interactive production in which the audience got to vote on what would happen next by pressing buttons on the armrests of their seats. While everyone else cheered and clapped, enthusiastically pressing buttons marked 'Sword fight' and 'More jokes' Kivrin kept pressing one marked 'Monologue.'

That was because, with the exception of a woman who complained about not being able to get her hands clean, and another woman who went crazy and drowned herself, all the monologues were delivered by a male actor whom the program which popped up on her vidder identified as Ric Salvo.

Kivrin thought Ric Salvo was splendid. Muscular yet graceful, commanding of visage, with dark, brilliant eyes and a deep, thrilling voice, the sight of his legs in tights had her mesmerized. She pressed 'Monologue' at least twenty times, watching entranced as he

did things like talk to a skull, and reveal a plot to kidnap someone's daughter.

After the show, when the audience was filing out, an usher came up to Kivrin and handed her a note written on a sheet of cellulose. Unfolding it, she read the following, written in purple ink in bold, flowing script: *I can't begin to tell you how pleased I am that you enjoyed today's performance. It means a lot to me when someone appreciates my work. If you'd be so kind, I'd love to hear your thoughts about the show. Here's my personal contact information. Hoping to hear from you soon! Ric Salvo.*

As she dragged a rake through the revolting contents of the waste tanks, Kivrin thought bitterly about what a fool she'd been. She replied to the note, and to her delight, Ric responded. A correspondence ensued. He wrote frequently, telling her about the events of his day. Eventually, he confessed that she meant a great deal to him, so much so that he could think of nothing besides getting to know her better. He'd soon be appearing in a new production aboard the space liner *Fantasy Adventure* and wondered if she'd care to join him?

Thrilled, Kivrin sent off her reply. Of course she'd be there! Many times in her daydreams she pictured ways in which she might run into Ric, all of them wildly improbable, but she never dared to imagine that he'd invite her to go away with him. She quit her job, bought a ticket, and prepared to sail off into space with Ric at her side.

There was only one problem: Ric Salvo didn't exist.

Shortly after they left port, Kivrin asked the cruise director where she could find him.

"Who?" the cruise director asked. Passengers eddied around them, admiring the ship's décor, which hearkened back to the era of early space cruising, with real wood paneling, wall-to-wall carpeting, and crystal chandeliers. The trip had just begun and already the cruise director looked frazzled.

"Ric Salvo. He's doing a show on board."

"We've got a lot of shows. Hold on, let me find out which one he's in." She consulted her vidder. "I don't see anyone by that name... Oh! Here it is! Stellar Extravaganza Productions presents *The*

*Second-Best Diner on Titan*, a hilarious farce starring popular hologram Ric Salvo.”

“Hologram?” The word came out as a croak.

“That’s what it says. Would you like me to make a reservation for you? The first showing is tomorrow at 7 p.m. Central Earth Time, in the Adelphi ballroom.”

Kivrin was speechless. She knew the show she’d seen in London was a holo performance and not a play with live actors, but she’d assumed the performers actually existed, somewhere, and that Ric was a real person. Now she realized he was nothing more than a series of computer-generated 3-D images, displayed through a light field, as insubstantial as moonbeams.

Stunned, she turned to walk away. “Wait,” the cruise director said. “These gentlemen are from Stellar Extravaganza Productions, the ones putting on the holo show you were asking about.” She indicated two men standing among a heap of gear. One was middle-aged and wore a flashy-looking suit. His face bore a smirking, wise guy expression. His companion was a gawky young man whose bony wrists stuck out several inches from the cuffs of his jacket. His mouth hung open as he gazed around him.

The older man nudged him. “Already the fans are asking for Ric, and we ain’t even put on the show yet! How d’you like that, Howie?”

The young man blushed. “I guess it’s all right,” he muttered. His curly brown hair was clamped down with gel. A tuft on top suddenly freed itself from its imprisonment and sprang up. His blush deepened as he stuck it back down.

“Ha! He guesses it’s all right! You’re a limp noodle, Howie, you know that? You’re about as lively as a stale trilobite sandwich.” Howie wilted under his companion’s scornful gaze. The older man sighed disgustedly. “Make yourself useful. Go find somebody to put this stuff in our room. Then you better start getting things ready for the show tomorrow.”

Howie tripped over his own feet in his haste to do as he was told. The older man turned his attention to Kivrin. “So you’re a fan of Ric Salvo? Well, guess what! You’re looking at his creator! Artholomeo Ferbler’s the name.”

“Ric Salvo is a hologram?” she said, hardly able to take it in.

“What’s the matter? Don’t tell me you thought he was real!”  
Kivrin turned and fled, his mocking laughter following her.

The note the usher in London gave her, purporting to be from Ric, the romantic messages, the invitation to join him on the cruise, all were part of a carefully constructed publicity campaign.

No doubt hundreds, maybe even thousands of people got similar correspondence. Oh, why had she been so stupid? More to the point, why had she spent money she didn’t have, buying all those clothes and spa treatments? She’d been trying to make herself feel better, but it only made things worse. Now here she was, not only deep in debt but waist-deep in sewage.

At least Kivrin’s cabin-mates were content. Chivix had become practically giddy, humming to herself and talking happily about costume changes and new dance routines. Wub-Wub, the third occupant of the cramped cabin, worked in the Escape Hatch spa. She was the strangest creature Kivrin had ever met: five feet high, barrel-shaped and silvery-brown in color. Wub-Wub was covered with knobby bumps like a starfish. Bizarrely, she had no eyes or mouth or any other external organs, as far as Kivrin could tell.

Chivix had prepared her for meeting Wub-Wub, telling her that nobody was sure of where she came from (“far from here” was all she said when asked), but Kivrin could do worse when it came to bunk mates.

“Those Trugulons who work in the kitchen? They’re horrible. Mean and gossipy and stuck-up. You wouldn’t want to room with any of them. Wub-Wub looks kind of unusual, but she’s really sweet once you get to know her,” Chivix said.

Upon introducing herself, Kivrin discovered that Wub-Wub communicated telepathically, in a pleasant, contralto voice which rang softly in Kivrin’s head, reminding her of the gentle tolling of a bell.

“Greetings, Kivrin! It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Wub-Wub, a licensed massage therapist. Would you like a massage? You seem...” There was a pause, as Kivrin felt her thoughts being delicately but intently examined. Questions flickered



through her mind: *Is this human angry? Dangerous? A threat to Wub-Wub? No, only tired and unhappy. Ah, she is sad, poor thing!*

"That's all right, thanks," Kivrin told her.

Wub-Wub glided toward her, her multitude of knobby feet working in concert, allowing her to pick her way across the deck as daintily as a cat. "It is no trouble. I would be happy to extrude my appendages in order to give you a relaxing shoulder massage."

"Maybe later," Kivrin told her.

"As you wish," Wub-Wub said, gliding away.

While picking up trash in the empty Adelphi ballroom one day, Kivrin was startled to hear a voice come from behind her. "Testing, testing, one, two. Ahem! But soft, what light through yonder window breaks? It is the East, and Juliet is the sun! Arise fair sun, and kill the envious moon who is already sick and pale with grief that thou her maid art far more fair than she."

**K**ivrin knew that deep, smooth voice. It belonged to Ric Salvo. He was the one responsible for her being here, picking up candy wrappers and lipstick-stained cellu-cups in a cavernous, over-heated room with murals on the walls of what the artist imagined Venice looked like before it sank. The voice came from a speaker high up in the rear wall disguised as a palazzo window. Beneath it, painted gondoliers in striped shirts and straw hats poled their elongated boats through a canal.

But it couldn't be Ric. He didn't exist. It must be a recording.

As Kivrin fumbled with the controls of her anti-grav cart, it lurched forward and bumped against one of the Corinthian columns. Cleaning supplies tumbled out and clattered onto the polished floor, causing the voice to stop comparing Juliet to various celestial objects and ask, "Who's there?"

Kivrin frantically gathered up the spilled items and flung them into the cart. She was bending down to pick up a bottle of all-purpose cleaner when a door opened in the rear wall and someone stepped out. It was Howie, the awkward young man from Stellar Extravaganza Productions.

"I, um, didn't know anybody was out here," he stammered.

“I’m sorry to disturb you. I hope you’re having a fantastic time aboard the *Fantasy Adventure*,” Kivrin said, repeating the words she’d been taught to say upon encountering a passenger.

“**A**ctually, I’m not.” The errant tuft of hair sprang up and he smoothed it back in place. “The show we’re doing is stupid, full of worn-out jokes about how crowded and smelly it is on Titan. They used to make the same kind of jokes about New Jersey.” The bottle of all-purpose cleaner had rolled to his feet. He picked it up and handed it to her. As he did, he noticed her ID badge.

“You’re Kivrin? That’s a name you don’t hear much anymore.” A thoughtful expression crossed his homely face. “Kivrin from Earth. You wouldn’t happen to be the same Kivrin from Earth who writes to Ric Salvo, would you?”

“How do you know about that?” Kivrin asked. Then it dawned on her. Of course! He wasn’t only the voice of Ric Salvo, he’d been writing to her as Ric, leading her on and toying with her. He’d encouraged her to come on this cruise, pretending he wanted to get to know her better when in fact all he cared about was selling tickets to a play about a diner on the largest of Saturn’s moons.

She flung the bottle of cleaner into the cart. Powering up the anti-grav mechanism, she directed it to rise and move toward the exit. She followed it, her back ramrod-straight inside her baggy Yunglu-fiber coverall.

“Wait! Where are you going?” Howie called.

She kept walking, her face set in an expression of cold fury.

While Kivrin was disappointed in love, her fellow waste tank cleaner Ivo was fairly bubbling over with bliss. He told Kivrin he met Chivix while lingering over a complimentary Olympus Mons hot fudge sundae at Proton and they’d hit it off. Kivrin couldn’t believe the gorgeous Chivix would fall for dumpy little Ivo, but apparently she had.

“We’ve come to an understanding. After considerable reflection on her part, and considerable nervousness on mine, she agreed to make my dreams come true. I couldn’t be happier,” Ivo told Kivrin, as they dragged their rakes through one of the waste tanks in search of

a platinum brooch set with sapphires belonging to a woman who was fifth in line to inherit the throne of New England.

“Congratulations. I’m happy for you,” Kivrin replied. Her rake struck something solid. She thought it might be the missing brooch, but it turned out to be an oyster shell. She tossed it into a bucket and kept on raking.

“I feel like I’m walking on a cloud,” Ivo said happily as he sloshed through the reeking contents of the tank.

Chivix wouldn’t disclose anything about this new development. Kivrin asked her if she’d met anyone interesting but she changed the subject and started talking about a new routine the Proton dancers were practicing, one in which they were costumed as what she called “fish-women from Earth.”

“You mean mermaids?” Kivrin asked.

“I don’t know what they’re called. They’re half-woman and half-fish. They live in your planet’s oceans,” Chivix said. Her normally blue hair was dyed green, with bits of artificial seaweed woven through it. Her body paint was applied in overlapping green and goldfish scales. As usual, she looked stunning.

“Mermaids aren’t real,” Kivrin told her.

“Really? Are you sure? You have such unusual creatures on your planet. I was certain there must be fish-women,” Chivix said.

Kivrin decided not to press her about Ivo, thinking Chivix might find her inquisitiveness impolite. She came from a different culture, after all. Perhaps they considered it rude to discuss romantic relationships.

Meanwhile, she tried not to think about Howie and how he’d fooled her into coming on this cruise. She was dragging her rake through a waste tank one day, mentally rehearsing what she’d like to say to him for at least the one-hundredth time, when an announcement came over the public address system.

“Attention! All ship’s personnel! Report to the fo’c’sle immediately.”

Budleigh laboriously rose from his chair. “Everybody out,” he said. “Drop your rakes and take off your waders. Let’s go see what’s going on.”

Kivrin and Ivo and the rest of the waste tank crew joined the crowd assembling on the upper deck. They stood in clusters,

excitedly speculating on what could be happening. The buzz of conversation ceased as Purvish stepped out and addressed them.

“I have some good news and some bad news,” he said.

“Let’s hear the good news first,” shouted a Trungulon in kitchen whites, his eyestalks bobbing.

“Actually, it’s less good news and bad news than bad news and horrible news,” Purvish said.

The Trungulon clacked his mandibles. “All right then, what’s the bad news?”

Purvish hesitated. “Maybe it’s not exactly bad news. In a way, it’s sort of good news, for me, anyway, although if you look at it objectively you might say it’s...”

A deckhand cut him off. “Just tell us, Mister Purvish.”

“Very well. The sort-of-good-but-probably-just-neutral news is that I’m now captain of this vessel. The former captain has locked himself in his cabin and is screaming hysterically. The first mate has wedged herself under her bunk and refuses to come out. The second and third mates aren’t anywhere to be found. Also missing are the bosun and the chief engineer. They’re probably hiding somewhere. That makes me in charge.”

There was a babble of excited questions. What was going on? Had they hit space debris? Was it a meteor shower? Was something wrong with the ship?

“Nothing’s wrong with the ship,” Purvish said. He looked uncomfortable. “We’re perfectly safe. Well, no, on second thought, I wouldn’t say we’re safe. See, the thing is, we’re about to be attacked by pirates.”

**T**here were shouts and gasps and cries of alarm. Chivix pushed through the crowd to where Kivrin and Ivo stood. “What’s going on?”

“We’re about to be attacked by pirates,” Ivo told her.

Purvish raised his hands. “Quiet down, everyone. The good news is we’re armed, and there’s a gunship from the Intergalactic Treaty Organization speeding to our rescue at this very moment.”

The crowd regarded him warily, suspecting there was more to it than that. They were correct, because Purvish continued, “The bad

news is it will be at least six Earth hours before help arrives. The other bad news is we have only four laser pistols and twenty rounds of ammunition, which, as I'm sure you can guess, would be next to worthless against bloodthirsty pirates armed with laser cannons and pulse-disputers and liquid fire launchers and maybe more. I'm not really up on what kind of weapons pirates have, but I'm sure they won't hesitate to use whatever they have to kill every last one of us."

There was a thunderous rumbling above them, followed by a loud *clank*. Everyone looked up. "That would be the pirate ship docking on the bridge," Purvish said. He'd gone pale. "They sent a transmission that said 'Avast! We be pirates! Prepare to be boarded.' It had a skull and crossbones on it." He seemed on the verge of tears at the recollection of that sinister ancient symbol. Pulling himself together, he said, "It seems there's nothing we can do. Let's try not to annoy them."

**T**he sound of stamping footsteps could be heard coming from the bridge, followed by hoots and troll-like laughter.

"Here come the pirates now," Purvish said. He gave a weak smile. "At least the passengers are safe. They were told to lock themselves in their staterooms. The doors are solid borgontine. That's almost impossible to cut through unless the pirates have meklun-welding torches, which they probably do if they're used to robbing cruise ships." He sighed and looked toward the ladder leading from the bridge, where the pirates were making a racket, gloating and cheering. "I guess the passengers are in trouble too."

Howie shoved his way through the crowd to Kivrin's side. As usual, a tuft of his hair was sticking up. "Kivrin, thank goodness. I've been looking all over for you."

Kivrin couldn't believe it. First pirates and now Howie. "Go away," she hissed.

The first group of pirates had reached the bottom of the ladder. They were a mixed lot, made up of an assortment of races and genders, as pirates have been ever since piracy was invented. But no matter their race or gender or planet of origin, their faces all wore identical anticipatory grins. They respectfully stepped aside to make way for the head pirate, a tall, alligator-skinned creature from one of

the exoplanets in the Kepler-35 system. As was customary with pirates, he wore a black tricorne hat, and the collar and cuffs of his shirt were lavishly trimmed with lace. His gleaming eyes were like an alligator's, greenish-gold with vertical pupils. Overall, it would be difficult to imagine a more fearsome pirate.

“Hello!” he piped in a shrill, bat-like voice. “How’re you all doing? I’m Roflar, the terror of seven galaxies, and this is my crew.” He waved a web-fingered hand tipped with black claws at the smirking cutthroats gathered behind him, as more poured down the ladder.

“We are heavily armed, with pulse-disrupters and liquid fire launchers, as well as laser cannons. Hold up your weapons, everyone,” he squeaked. The pirates chortled and displayed their weapons.

“See, what did I tell you?” Purvish said. “Didn’t I tell you they’d have all kinds of weapons?”

“Who are you?” Roflar asked.

“Captain Luminard T. Purvish,” he replied, his voice shaking.

“We won’t stay long,” Roflar said. “We’ll just rob everybody and be on our way. Topsail Tommy and Binnacle Bill and Long Alice and Mubungo will move among you with sacks in which you will place your valuables. Cooperate, and all will be well. Resist, and we’ll kill you. Any questions?”

There were no questions.

“Is that all?” Roflar asked a few minutes later, peering into the sacks. The contents were disappointing, barely worth the trouble of stealing. His minions muttered unhappily. There was a sound of weapons being cocked.

Purvish cleared his throat. “Excuse me, Mr. Roflar, Your Honor, sir. We’re just the crew, and assorted service personnel, and entertainers. We don’t have anything of value. The passengers are the ones with money and jewelry and negotiable bonds and so forth.”

Roflar looked thunderstruck. He twittered, “Of course! A ship this size would have many passengers. Where are they?”

“They locked themselves in their staterooms. The doors are solid borgontine. I assume you came equipped with meklun-welding torches capable of cutting through borgontine?”

“Naturally,” Roflar said. He turned to one of his crew, a dissipated-looking individual who wore a brain-booster headset. “Flummery Bob, get the torches.”

Purvish held up his hands. “Stop! That won’t be necessary. The safe in the purser’s office contains the money from the casinos, as well as most of the passengers’ valuables. You can take that and be on your way. It’s all insured. That way you won’t have to cut through doors and damage ship property and frighten the passengers.”

Roflar’s reptilian eyes narrowed as he thought it over. “All right,” he said. “Where’s the purser?”

Purvish timidly raised his hand.

“What?” the pirate captain barked.

“I’m also the purser, or I was, until I became captain. I didn’t have time to make anybody else the purser and show them the combination to the safe, so if it’s all right with you, I’ll open it.”

“This is the most poorly organized ship we’ve ever robbed,” Roflar said disgustedly. He cast his eyes over the assembled group, his gaze coming to rest on Chivix. “You, the one with the scales and the green hair. What do you do?”

“I’m a dancer.”

“Great! You can come and dance for us. Long Alice, take her to our ship and tie her up.”

A tall female pirate with a pulse-disrupter slung over her shoulder stepped forward, grinning. She had a gold front tooth and wore a red kerchief on her head. She’d been among the pirates who’d gone around with sacks, collecting everyone’s valuables.

“Get the one next to her, too, the little one in the dirty coverall. She’ll be attractive once she’s cleaned up. I’m sure we can think of something for her to do,” Roflar piped. There were whoops of laughter from his crew at this. Several of them shouted out suggestions of things that Kivrin might do.

“You’re not taking her,” said Howie. He stepped in front of Kivrin and glared at the pirates. Kivrin stood frozen in terror, hardly daring

to breathe.

Long Alice swung her pulse-disrupter from the strap over her shoulder and leveled it at Howie. There was a hum as she pressed the power button.

“Step aside, Sonny Jim,” she said.

“No,” said Howie, crossing his arms.

“Look,” said Long Alice. “If you don’t step aside, at the count of three, I’m going to pull the trigger and blow you into little bitty pieces. Then we’ll take your girlfriend. Either way, she’s coming with us. Now stir your skinny shanks and get out of the way. One...Two...”

Kivrin felt Chivix’s eight-fingered hand squeeze hers. She closed her eyes. *Oh no*, she thought. She braced herself for the sound of Howie being blown to bits.

That’s when Wub-Wub glided up on her knobby feet and planted herself in front of Roflar. He stared at her in astonishment; then he snorted with laughter.

“What’s this thing?” he said. “Is it their pet? Space monkeys on a trampoline! I’ve seen a lot of weird critters, but this beats them all. Let’s take it, too. When we get bored with poking it with sticks, we can feed it to the thylacine.”

Slowly Wub-Wub began to swell. She grew larger and larger until she resembled a huge, knobby balloon. The pirates backed up nervously. Roflar raised his webbed hands to his head. He screamed, “Owww! Stop!”

His head exploded. Several more pirates’ heads exploded, one after another, bone fragments rattling against the desk, blood and brains splattering against the overhead. Long Alice yelped and ran to the ladder, the hobnailed soles of her boots clanking on the iron rungs. The rest of the pirates followed, jostling each other in their haste to get away. There was a roar as the pirate ship’s engines engaged, followed by silence.

Wub-Wub subsided to her normal size. Kivrin could hear her crisp, polite voice ringing inside her head. “I apologize for the mess. It seemed expedient to rout them by directing an inaudible sonic wave through the skulls of the ringleader and some of the others, blowing them up, and discouraging the rest from lingering.”



So ended the pirate raid. Wub-Wub was given a reward from the shipping line for saving the *Fantasy Adventure*. Ivo went to Chivix's home planet, where he started a company that manufactured decorative items made out of bog grass. He and Chivix, it turned out, weren't romantic partners, but business partners.

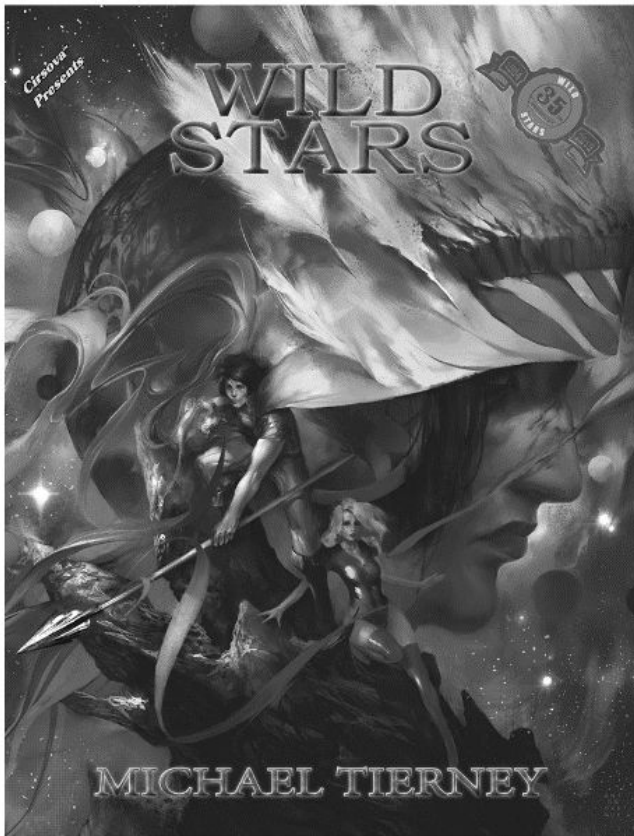
Howie apologized to Kivrin for misleading her. He really had wanted to get to know her better, but he was afraid she'd find him disappointing, compared to the suave Ric Salvo. He quoted monologues from Shakespeare's plays to her until she decided the gawky young man who was willing to give his life for her was worthy of her love.

"All's well that ends well," he told her.

Laughing, she kissed him. His unruly lock of hair sprang up, but neither one cared.

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*Jill Hand is the author of the award-winning thriller, **White Oaks**, from Black Rose Writing. Her work has appeared in many anthologies, including *The Pulp Fiction Book of Phobias*, *The Shadow Booth*, and *The Corona Book of Ghost Stories*.*



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# How I Spent My Summer Vacation

By TONY BEAULIEU

***A young girl's parents die mysteriously while investigating a strange book: The All Story! When Paige Hamil finds her parents' notes and The All Story, Valvidian Corp agents aren't far behind!***

***I, Rhoderick Benson, do swear to the accuracy of the following report to the best of my present knowledge, as an official witness to the events currently under investigation. Let this report serve as the official record of said events, which transpired on August 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020, in Murphy Glen Elementary School classroom 204 between 0800 and 1400 hours.***

***Early that morning, after the first bell, I took roll call, introduced myself to my new class, and assigned seating order based alphabetically by last name. I then asked each student to stand, introduce themselves to myself and their new classmates, and tell us one interesting thing about themselves.***

***During this time, one of my students stood and introduced herself as Paige Hamil. She stated in her introduction that she had recently moved to Murphy Glen under an assumed name and that she could not reveal her "real name" as she was on the run from the law. This was met with snickers from the rest of the class, which I quickly shushed. Undeterred by the laughter of her peers, Paige continued to say that one interesting thing about herself was that her parents had been international adventurers who had been assassinated for the secrets they knew and that the assassination had been covered up as an accident. She turned to the rest of the class at this time and apologized that she could not go into more detail lest she reveal her secret identity and put them all in danger.***

*This was also met with a round of laughter, one boy in the front row tried to start clapping. I felt very bad for Paige. It was obvious that her parents had passed away and that she had constructed a backstory to explain it and give their passing meaning. I quieted the class down again and thanked Paige for sharing such intimate personal details.*

*After the rest of the students had stood and given their introductions, I presented the class with their first assignment of the semester, the annual How I Spent My Summer Vacation essays. I read my own Summer vacation essay aloud to the children as an example. In the essay I described my summer job as the night manager of the Valvidian Corporate distribution center here in Murphy Glen. During this time, Ms. Hamil raised her hand to ask me how long I had worked at Valvidian, and if I was still employed there. I informed her that it was simply a summer job, to help supplement my teaching salary, and that I no longer worked there. This seemed to satisfy her.*

*After I finished my essay, I set the deadline for the rest of the essays after lunch period and moved on to the next subject.*

*During recess later that afternoon, I observed Ms. Hamil not playing with the other children, but instead sitting cross-legged under a tree and writing intently in her composition notebook. I gave my whistle to another teacher on duty and returned to my classroom to double-check my attendance sheet. Paige Hamil's name appeared there next to the other children's. I felt somewhat foolish at the time, but I was very interested to hear Paige's How I Spent My Summer Vacation essay.*

*The following is a direct transcription of Paige Hamil's Summer essay, as she read it before my classroom following recess. For the record, the original copy will be attached to this report:*

**"How I Spent My Summer Vacation"**

**by Paige Hamil (alias)**

My name is Paige Hamil, but not really, and this is how I spent my summer vacation.

My summer vacation was spent in a small town where my Aunt Deirdre lives, which for reasons that will become apparent later in

this essay, will have to remain a secret. For now, I will call the town Smalltown.

I moved to Smalltown this previous Winter after my parents died in a car accident that wasn't an accident (more on that later). My Aunt Deirdre was actually not my aunt but my great aunt. She is a very nice lady who uses a walker to get around. She is also really funny.

I was allowed to take as many of my parents' things as I could fit into a box when I moved. My mom and dad were teachers at a big college in the city where we lived, which I will call Bigcity College. My parents' work was their life, so I tried to take as much of my mom's chemistry research as I could, in the hopes of one day continuing her work.

My first days in Smalltown were very lonely. My Aunt Deirdre let me do whatever I wanted outside, but inside she just sat down on her couch and watched cheesy tv shows in the living room. Sometimes I would make lunch for both of us. She introduced me to fried bologna sandwiches, which are now my favorite food to make for myself.

There weren't many kids who lived on my road, and it got very hot during the summer in Smalltown, so instead of playing outside, I usually sat in my new bedroom and read. I read a couple of romance novels from Aunt Deirdre's bookshelf until one day she saw me reading one at the dinner table and took it out of my hands and said it wasn't appropriate for someone my age. I was disappointed, but Aunt Deirdre was definitely right.

After that I started reading some of my mom's old papers I had saved. But it was really hard for me to understand them. My mom was a scientist, and my dad was a history professor at Bigcity College. They were complete opposites, but my dad always said that's what made them love each other. My mom said they were attracted to each other like covalent bonds; she was always saying stuff like that. She really loved science.

My dad also loved history, and he would say my mom was prettier than Cleopatra, and then he'd lean across the breakfast table and kiss her like the people in Aunt Deirdre's romance novels and cheesy tv shows.

Pretty soon I found some of my dad's papers in the box I'd brought along. In his papers I read that before he died, my dad had found a really old book. I don't know where he found it, but I have to guess it was when we went on our vacation in the Czech Republic the summer before (which was really crazy and could make its own Summer essay, but that will have to wait for another day).

According to what I read in my dad's papers, the book he found was so old it was hardly in English. The book was called All Story, roughly translated, and was so old in fact that my dad didn't even believe it existed until he found it and began translating it. The All Story was supposed to be this ancient book of secrets, according to rumor, but as my dad began translating it, all he found was old recipes! Among my dad's things I found some letters to Bigcity College asking for more money to translate and study The All Story, and I could tell from his final letters he was very frustrated by their answers.

This made me remember the last month my parents were alive. They said they were on vacation from work, but all they did was stay in the basement of our old house, night and day. When they came out, they had dark spots under their eyes and were really grumpy, I was afraid to ask them what they were doing, so I never did. This was also when I started making my own food. That was before Aunt Deirdre told me about fried bologna, so I was making myself peanut butter and jelly, *with* the crust.

One night as I was eating my sandwich, from the kitchen I could see red and purple lights flashing under the basement door and could hear loud noises coming from inside. I got really distracted wondering what it could be, and a loud bang on the front door almost made me fall out of my seat!

I answered the door. My parents told me if anyone came to tell them that they were busy and ask if I could take a message. The man at the door was really tall and he was wearing sunglasses even though it was night. He was also wearing a dark blue collared shirt with short sleeves and I could see his muscles were very big.

He asked if my parents were home. I wanted to say no, because I couldn't see his eyes and he just stared forward, I don't know if he even saw me and it creeped me out. Instead I did what my parents

said and told him they were busy and could I take a message. He slowly turned his head towards me and he said yes and to tell them that Valvidian came and to tell them they have a very precocious daughter. I'm not sure what he meant by that last part, but I was amazed when he said he was from Valvidian. My parents always used to order my school supplies from valvidian.com, and I always see the dark blue Valvidian vans driving around delivering things to people.

When I told my parents about the Sunglasses Man from Valvidian and his message, they looked at each other and got really quiet. Later that night, my mom came out of the basement and told me I don't have to answer the door anymore.

The next night as I was lying in bed, I overheard my dad arguing with someone on the phone. Whoever he was talking to wanted something from him, and my dad was cursing and saying he'd never sell whatever it was to them for all the money in the world. And he also said to "never send one of your thugs to my home again." I thought he must be talking to someone from Valvidian about the Sunglasses Man, but I didn't know what it was they wanted so bad from my dad that would make him so upset.

That was the week before the accident, and after reading all the things my dad wrote about The All Story it was obvious to me that that was what they were arguing about, and what was keeping my parents up all night in the basement. And the thing that really startled me was that I remembered the accident that had killed my parents was a crash with a Valvidian van!

*(WITNESS NOTE: The class erupted in laughter at this point, and I again hushed them before urging Ms. Hamil to continue with her essay.)*

I stayed up all night thinking about it, wondering where The All Story could be. I knew my parents would never have given it to Valvidian. My first thought was maybe the book would be at my old house, in the basement where my parents left it. But that was impossible because the whole house was cleaned out and sold except for the stuff in my box.

I decided to look for any clues I could find. I jumped out of bed and dumped the box on my bedroom floor, which I knew Aunt

Deirdre wouldn't like but I told myself I'd clean it all up by morning.

I looked back over my mom's notes. All that was there was a bunch of formulas and symbols I didn't know. I re-read every scrap of what my dad had written about The All Story; all it was was translations of old recipes that also didn't make sense to me.

I kept reading and I even read all the stuff not related to The All Story, like my parents' diplomas. I looked at the clock and saw it was four in the morning, and I got really frustrated because I'd been looking all night and hadn't found any clues. At first, I felt like I was going to cry, then I just got really mad and I kicked the empty box across the floor, and I ran over and started punching it and ripping it into pieces. I thought maybe Valvidian had gotten the book after all, and that made me really mad because my parents didn't want them to have it, and the man they sent to our house looked really mean and whatever they wanted with the book couldn't be good.

I picked the box up over my head to throw it across the room, something fell out from beneath one of the bottom flaps and hit my head and landed on the floor. I picked it up, it was a library card to the Smalltown Public Library. I turned the card over and on the back of it was my mom's signature. I thought this was weird because my mom hadn't lived in Smalltown for a really long time, since before I was born, since before she met my dad even! But my mom had lived in Smalltown with my Aunt Deirdre when she was my age.

This made me feel a little better because I remembered my mom had been a kid like me once, in the same bedroom I was in then, and probably in the same old bed, but she'd still grown up to do awesome things. That thought helped me finally get to sleep that night, even though I was still frustrated I hadn't found any clues to where The All Story was.

The next day I rode my bike to the library with my mom's old card. I thought maybe I could look in the history section to see if there were any books that mention The All Story. My dad's notes said the book contained powerful secrets, but I was really curious why Valvidian had wanted it so bad.

The Smalltown Public Library was really small, especially compared to the library I was used to in Bigcity, and even the library at Bigcity College. When I walked in it was empty, too, except for a



man talking with the librarian at the front desk. He was arguing with her about something and he didn't seem nice. When he finally turned to leave, he walked away really fast. The librarian smiled down at me and I put my mom's card on the counter and asked her if it was still good.

She said she'd check. After a minute of her clicking on her computer she told me yes, my card was still good, and I could check out whatever I'd like. She called me by my mom's name, which made me feel weird and kind of sad again, then she asked me if I'd like to check out the book I have on hold.

That really threw me for a loop! How could my mom's card have a book on hold if she hadn't used it in so many years or even been in Smalltown since she was a kid? I told the librarian that yes, I would very much like to check it out. She smiled and said hold on a minute, I'll go get it. She came back from the back of the library and laid a really huge old book on the counter in front of me.

I picked it up and felt that it was really heavy. The cover was grey, but it looked like it used to be green, with a border that was brown with scratches that revealed gold underneath. I could only recognize some letters in the title, and when I opened the book, I saw the whole book was written in the same weird language. I was amazed, and my hands started shaking so bad I had to put the book back down because I was afraid of dropping something so old. It was the book from my dad's notes!

At first, I was really excited that I'd found it, because that meant I could continue my parents' work, and find out what The All Story was about. But then I remembered the man from Valvidian and that my parents died hiding this book from them and I got really nervous. I asked the librarian if she knew what the book was. She said it was a cookbook written in Old English called Every Recipe.

She said, "That nasty man also wanted it, but I told him it was on hold." She was talking about the man that had been in front of me, and that made me really scared because that man was probably from Valvidian and that meant they knew the book was in Smalltown, and I think the librarian could see the worry on my face because she said "Don't worry, I didn't tell him who had the book on hold, I'm not

allowed to. And besides you've been calling every week renew your hold, so I thought it must be pretty important to you."

This really made my head spin. I hadn't been putting the book on hold, and my mom definitely hadn't, so who had? I wondered if it could have been Aunt Deirdre, but she didn't know anything about this, she can't keep any secrets. I kept my mouth shut and just nodded, then I said one more question to the librarian and I asked how they had gotten this book. She said it was just donated a few months ago. I asked who donated it, and she apologized but said they don't keep records of that.

Luckily, I had brought a backpack, so I put *The All Story* in there with my notebook and zipped it up quickly. I thought it would be smart not to carry around *The All Story* in public since Valvidian were snooping around. I decided to go home and hide it somewhere and look over my dad's translations and see if I could figure out the language and maybe translate it myself.

When I got home it turns out translating was a lot harder than I'd thought, even with my dad's notes, I didn't know what parts he'd translated, and besides the parts he had still didn't make any more sense to me. Eventually I heard Aunt Deirdre walking down the hallway to my room. I hid the book and my parents' things under my bed. I didn't want her to know what I was doing because the book was dangerous and my mom and dad had already died because of it. When she came into my room, I was just laying on my bed staring at the ceiling and she asked what I'd been doing in here all day and I said nothing. This made Aunt Deirdre frown and I don't know if she really believed me because she said, "You are your mother's daughter," and said to come to the kitchen for dinner.

After dinner I tried to find old English translators on the internet, but all the ones I found didn't really work. I thought it would be better to have a book and I could just translate each letter, so I decided to go back to the library the first thing next morning.

That morning I brewed myself a big thermos of coffee (Aunt Deirdre had taught me how to make that, too) and put the book and my parents' papers into my backpack and rode my bike to the library again.

Before I even got there, I could see the smoke. The Smalltown library had caught fire in the night! I was stunned when I pushed my bike up to the sidewalk in front of the building. The fire department had roped the whole area off, and they were spraying the library with water.

I saw the librarian from the day before standing on the sidewalk with her face in her hands crying, and the police were trying to calm her down. I felt really bad for her. A lot of people were gathering around me to watch the fire get put out. A girl bumped into me and dropped her books on the ground, and said oh I'm sorry, and I said no I'm sorry and I helped her pick up her books.

After she picked up her books she smiled at me and held out her hand and said, "Hello, my name is Gracie-Beau." She was an adult but she was younger than my mom, and a man who looked like he was the same age as her was standing beside Gracie-Beau on the sidewalk but he didn't said anything to me; he maybe didn't even notice that Gracie-Beau had dropped her books because he was so distracted by the fire. I reached out and shook her hand and said hello, nice to meet you like my dad had taught me.

She kind of laughed at that and said, "Don't you have a name?" And I really didn't want to give her my name because I thought, maybe she's from Valvidian, so I told her my name was Paige, just Paige. She smiled and nudged the boy beside her, and he finally stopped looking at the fire and said, "What?" and Gracie-Beau waved to me and said, this is Paige, just Paige. And he just sort of nodded towards me and said, "Yeah nice to meet you, kid."

She elbowed him again harder this time, probably because he was being so rude and he said "Ow! Why'd you do that!" and it seemed to me this guy wasn't smart, at least not when it came to talking to other people. Gracie-Beau looked at me and said, "I'm sorry, his name is John."

Just then a whole line of Valvidian vans pulled up to the street in front of the library and a bunch of men in dark blue short-sleeve collared shirts and jeans like the Sunglasses Man had worn jumped out and started coming towards us. At that point I got really scared because I thought they'd find the book in my backpack. But they just surrounded the whole building and one of the men walked up to the

police officer and the librarian and I heard him say, "This is official Valvidian business," and the librarian said what are you talking about, and he said that Valvidian property had been damaged in the fire and could he have a word with her. The librarian looked at the police officer, but even the Smalltown police officer looked afraid of the men from Valvidian.

I thought just then that Valvidian didn't find the book so they burned the library down, and now they were going to question the librarian about who checked out the book. And I thought I have to get out of here and back to Aunt Deirdre's as soon as possible.

I put my backpack on and my thermos in the front basket of my bike and I grabbed a hold of the handlebars and started looking for holes in the line of Valvidian men that had surrounded us. Gracie-Beau noticed and she put her hand on my shoulder and said, "Everything all right, Paige?" And I didn't like her using my name even though it wasn't my real name. I shrugged her hand off my shoulder and turned my bike back towards home, but there wasn't anywhere for me to go!

As I turned, a man was shouting and pushing up past the other Valvidian agents. He shoved two men aside and I recognized him instantly as the Sunglasses Man! And he was walking right at me! He said "Hey! Over here!" and I didn't know if he was yelling at me to come towards him or if he was yelling at his men to following him over to me.

I put my foot on the pedal of my bike to leave, and he held out his hand and yelled stop. He was almost right in front of me and there was nowhere to go, so I picked up my thermos and unscrewed the top and threw it at him right as he was reaching for me. I'd already turned around and was biking the other way, but I heard the thermos hit him and the coffee splash and I heard him yell. And it was kind of funny how such a big man had such a high-pitched scream, but I didn't laugh just then because I was focused on getting away from the other Valvidian agents.

I jumped the front wheel of my bike over the curb and out of the library parking lot. I looked back over my shoulder, and I saw the Sunglasses Man on his knees and a bunch of other Valvidian agents around him. When my head turned back in front of me, I saw two

agents running at me from across the library's lawn. I pedaled as hard as I could and my rear wheel skidded onto the sidewalk and one of them jumped at me. He hit my rear spoke, and I thought I was going to fall over, but I just kept pedaling, and I got my balance back as I sped down the sidewalk and left them in the dust.

My plan after that was that I didn't have a plan. I thought as I was riding my bike home and hoping another Valvidian van wouldn't appear behind me, that now I'd have to tell Aunt Deirdre what I was up to, and about The All Story and about how my parents had really died. Once she knew the whole story and saw the book herself, she would believe me and we'd have to go somewhere as fast as possible before Valvidian caught up with us. I knew this wouldn't be easy for Aunt Deirdre because she doesn't go anywhere fast, and that just made me pedal harder. I was actually a little surprised that one of the Valdivian men hadn't gotten into their vans and driven after me. I thought that maybe my evasive maneuvers through the alleys of Smalltown had thrown them off!

That wasn't true, because when I got to my street, I saw a bunch of Valvidian vans outside Aunt Deirdre's house! They were waiting on me. I hid my bike behind a fence at the end of the cul-de-sac and looked; Aunt Deirdre was on the lawn talking to a police officer and a Valvidian agent, and a bunch more Valvidian agents were coming out of the house with Aunt Deirdre's things and dumping them on the lawn. They were looking for the book in my backpack! I had to smile a little then, though, because I knew they wouldn't find it, and the policeman and Valvidian agent were both frowning and looking at the ground because Aunt Deirdre was giving them The Business. Trust me, you do not want to get The Business from my Aunt Deirdre. I would tell you what she was yelling at them in this essay, but most of it I'm not allowed to say in school.

At that point I knew I was on my own. I felt lucky that I had packed snacks in my backpack with The All Story. I had expected to spend a quiet day at the library! I sat between the fence and a bush and ate some peanut butter crackers and tried to think of a plan.

At first, I thought I should take a train or bus back to Bigcity. Maybe I could find someone there who knew my parents who could help me. But I didn't have any money for a ticket, and I didn't know

how to sneak onto one. Then I thought of an even better idea: I knew Valvidian would be looking for a girl on a bike, I thought I could take my bike to the Smalltown bus station and ditch it at one of the stops so they'd think I'd gotten on the bus, and leave town after me. Then I could return to Aunt Deirdre and she'd help me get back to Bigcity!

I thought this was a really good plan. The only problem was that the bus station was on the other side of town and I needed to stay hidden. I decided to risk it; there were already so many Valvidian agents looking for me at the library and at Aunt Deirdre's house, how many more could there be?

It turns out there were so many more! First I rode down Main Street in Smalltown, because that was the fastest way to the bus station, but there were a lot of Valvidian vans and agents walking around everywhere talking to each other on radios. I turned down an alleyway as soon as I could and ditched the bike; it was too hard sneaking around with it. And I ran back down to the houses behind Main Street.

There were literally hundreds of people in town looking for me! I dove behind a car just as a Valvidian van turned the corner, and I hoped that it didn't see me. I guess it hadn't because it just passed by and went down the street. I thought of a new plan, even though it was hard for me to think with so many bad guys all around me. And I kept thinking the Sunglasses Man was out there still, and he was probably really mad at me for throwing hot coffee on him.

I came up with a new plan: I would hide the book somewhere and throw away my library card and hide from Valvidian as long as I could, then when they eventually found me, I'd deny ever checking out the book at all and I'd make them think they burned it up themselves in the library. I didn't like this plan as much as the first one, but I thought if I hid the book well enough and denied ever knowing about it there was nothing Valvidian could do to me.

As I hid behind the car, I checked either side of the street. My heart leapt into my throat because as I looked down the road, I saw the Valvidian van that had passed by earlier just sitting at the stop sign facing me. I didn't know what to do. If they were watching me, they could see that I saw them, and if they didn't, me running would

draw their attention. I sat and just stared at the van. Then it revved its engine.

I said a word that Aunt Deirdre would say, and I ran out from behind the car. The Valvidian van peeled out as it came after me, but I had a head start and I was also on foot, so I cut across the lawn of a nearby house and jumped the fence into the backyard. A dog in the yard started barking and snarling and running towards me, so I ran to the end of the yard and jumped over the fence again into the road on the other side. I could hear the Valvidian van roaring as it came around the house after me.

An old red truck skidded to a stop in front of me. It startled me because I hadn't seen it coming. The door opened and the man that had been with Gracie-Beau outside the library held his hand out to me. I was really confused and I didn't remember his name. He sort of looked at me like he expected me to jump into his arms and I just stood there. He said, "Come on, kid! It's me, John, remember?" and I just stared at him and I didn't know what to say. And he said hurry up, get in, and he looked behind him at the van that was coming around the corner.

John's eyes bulged at the van and he said, "Gun it, Gracie!" And Gracie-Beau leaned over, she was in the driver's seat behind him, and she looked at me and said, "Get in, Porter!" and I thought that was really crazy because I hadn't given her my real name! I looked at the van barreling down the road at us and I didn't think about it anymore, I just jumped in the car, and John moved over for me.

As soon as I got in, I didn't have to close the door because Gracie-Beau gunned it and the door slammed on its own. John said safety first and he clicked the seat belt over me. And Gracie-Beau yelled "Hold on!" and we sped up going down the road. Two more Valvidian vans appeared at the end of the street ahead of us, but that didn't slow Gracie-Beau down at all. In fact, she went even faster! John put his hands on the dash and screamed.

The Valvidian agents around the two vans dove out of our way as Gracie-Beau drove our truck between them and the vans were too close and they scraped either side of the truck. John stopped yelling as we hit the open road. I looked behind us and the two vans were on the side of the road now, but the one van was still chasing us.

I said, "He's still behind us!" and Gracie-Beau said, "I know," and slowed down the truck a little. John said, "What are you doing?" and I saw the van gaining on us really fast. I thought it was going to ram us, but Gracie-Beau turned down another road suddenly. John slid into me and squished me against the door. I looked back again just as the van was making the turn to follow us, but it was too big and it tipped over on two wheels, then onto its side and into the ditch.

I was so happy I wanted to shout. I was ready for her to drive us all the way out of Smalltown, but she said, "We have to get another car, they'll be looking for us in this one." John was still holding the dashboard and he looked like he was about to puke and he just said okay.

I asked Gracie-Beau how she knew my name, and she said, "I was a student of your father's, at Bigcity College." I said, "He never mentioned you, or him," and Gracie-Beau said John was just tagging along. And I said tagging along for what, and Gracie-Beau smiled and said, "The book in your backpack." She knew about The All Story!

She said, "I was happy when I recognized you at the library this morning, I figured you'd gotten to the book before Valvidian. I don't know how you did it, but your dad always said you were smart as a whip."

I told Gracie-Beau about my parents' papers and my mom's old library card, and how when I took it to the library The All Story was on hold for me.

Gracie-Beau laughed and said I'd gotten to it just in time. She said my mom and dad had donated the book anonymously to the Smalltown library in order to hide it from Valvidian with the plan to keep it on hold forever until it was safe to get it. After they died, Gracie-Beau had called the library every week to renew the hold herself.

"Recently, John and I discovered an increase in Valvidian activity around Smalltown. We knew they'd sniffed out the book. I came down as soon as I could, only to find the library in flames, and you with the book."

I asked her what the book was, and Gracie-Beau said she wasn't really sure. My dad believed the book held great secrets, and my



parents had been working to translate it themselves. She said before they died my dad had mentioned one recipe in particular, four hundred pages in, called the Spice of Ruin. John said it sounded like something Gracie-Beau would make, and then she slugged him in the arm and he shut up.

Gracie-Beau drove us into a part of Smalltown where no Valvidian agents or vans were around. It was a trailer park. I helped them spot a fast car that we could take out of town. There was an old sports car in some guy's driveway, and we parked across the street and watched him working under the hood.

I asked Gracie-Beau what we were going to do now. She said we couldn't go back to Bigcity because Valvidian would be looking for us there, too. Then John said why don't we drive to Mexico, and she said first things first we need to get out of Smalltown.

After a while the man closed the hood. He had a cigarette hanging out of his mouth and he wiped black oil on his white shirt and went inside. Gracie-Beau said hurry let's go, and we got out of the truck and ran over to the sports car. Gracie-Beau looked at John and said, "Do your thing," and John got the door open and kneeled down under the steering wheel. Gracie-Beau got in the passenger seat and I got in the backseat with my backpack.

We kept a look out on the man's trailer, in the windows I could see the man walking around. Gracie-Beau said hurry, and John said, Got it! And the car just started up. Gracie-Beau said let's go, and John stood and wiped his hands and said, that's why you keep me around! There was a loud boom and the windshield of the sports car blew out! I looked through the broken windshield and the grease man was standing on his porch with a shotgun and he was yelling.

John screamed again and Gracie-Beau told him to get in the car, so he got in the car and drove us through the grease man's front lawn. John was crying at the wheel and Gracie-Beau just kept yelling go, go, go!

We drove for a long time and took back roads out of Smalltown. After we all calmed down Gracie-Beau fell asleep in the passenger seat and I took the book out of my backpack to look at it.

I just flipped through the pages; I couldn't read them, but they had really old pictures every few pages that were cool to look at. They

had monsters and people in them: serpents chasing dogs and lions standing on two legs alongside humans. And the things I thought while looking at them was that this was a window into another world that used to be ours. Maybe the book was a guide to take us back to the times shown in the pictures.

As I thumbed through, I noticed some pages were torn out and missing, and I hoped nothing had been important on them like the Spice of Ruin. As I got deeper into the book, I noticed that some of the pages looked like they had been splashed with water, and the paper had turned all gross and brown. Some pages were so messed up I couldn't even make out the pictures.

I started thinking about all the nights my parents spent in the basement of our old house. One time I brought my parents dinner down in the basement and there were all these open tubs around everywhere filled with liquid. Then I thought about the purple and red glow from under the door, and the ruined pages of the book and the Spice of Ruin, then I had an idea and I quickly turned to the nearest waterlogged page.

I looked at it really closely, closer than I had before, and I couldn't believe it, you almost had to have a magnifying glass to see them, but in the parts of paper browned by liquid, I could make out little words!

I got so excited then that I woke Gracie-Beau up and told her about it. She looked at the pages too and agreed there were words underneath. John was rubbing his eyes while he drove, and it was nighttime by then and she asked him where he was taking us, and John said he was taking us to his parents' house outside Bigcity.

Gracie-Beau got a little cross with him because she'd said not to go back to Bigcity, but John said his parents' house had a state of the art security system that even Valvidian would have a hard time getting through and besides, all his backup chemistry equipment was there, and he'd heard what we were talking about and it sounded like we'd need it. I asked him what he meant and he said, "The 'recipes' in that book, they're formulas, chemical formulas. The names are old, but they're there." And it all made sense, that's what all the equations and formulas in my mom's papers had been!

“Don’t you guys see?” John said, “You have to ruin the pages to read the messages underneath! But you can’t just throw water on them, you have to use a special substance.” And I got really excited and I blurted out, “The Spice of Ruin!” and John said bingo, and Gracie-Beau laughed and said, “I knew there was a reason I brought you along.”

When we got to John’s house it was almost the next morning. His house was really big and I never saw his parents, maybe because they were away or maybe because they were just in a different part of the house than us, I don’t really know and John didn’t say anything about it. John took us to his old bedroom, which was upstairs and as big as Aunt Deirdre’s whole house! Half of the room looked like a regular bedroom with a couch and bed and computer and television, and through a double door the other half looked like a laboratory like the kind my mom worked in at Bigcity College. I was so excited to find out the secrets of the book that I didn’t feel tired anymore.

I laid the book out on the table in John’s lab, and Gracie-Beau started looking through the pages. She quickly found the page that had the Spice of Ruin recipe on it. I said, “You can translate it?” and Gracie-Beau said she’d been brushing up on her Old English the few months the book was at the Smalltown library.

John took out all his equipment and started making the Spice of Ruin. For safety reasons, I cannot reveal what went in the Spice in this essay.

*(WITNESS NOTE: The class had been silent for quite some time at this point. Some stirring occurred at this revelation, and a student groaned out loud and wanted to know what was in the spice.)*

John spent the whole day mixing it up. The first time we tried, something went wrong with the spice and we had to do it all over again, which took forever. Luckily there was a coffee machine in John’s lab so I made everyone coffee and we snacked on beef jerky from my backpack. I asked Gracie-Beau if I could call my Aunt Deirdre to let her know I was safe, and she said we’d have to find a payphone later so I could do that because it wouldn’t be safe to call from a domestic line or a cell phone in one of our names.

The last batch of Spice John made glowed red and purple, and when I saw it I got real excited because I knew it would work. We ripped out one of the pages and Gracie-Beau put on rubber gloves and soaked it in the Spice of Ruin.

When she pulled it out it was glowing just like the Spice, so she laid it down on a metal tray on the table and it was so bright it looked like it was on fire. After a while it stopped glowing and by then it was night again. John didn't have a magnifying glass so he looked at the paper under a microscope, and he told us he could see little words! Gracie-Beau shoved him aside and she looked in the microscope and I could see her mouthing the words. I grabbed her arm and said wait, and she looked at me real cross like how she'd looked at John a million times.

It just occurred to me; maybe the secrets in the book were hidden for a reason, and we shouldn't read them because it could be dangerous—more dangerous than Valvidian, even. My parents had discovered the truth of the book and decided it was more important to hide it than use it. Maybe it was called the Spice of Ruin because it did more than ruin the pages of the book. I told all this to Gracie-Beau and she didn't say anything at first, she just looked a little deflated. And finally John said, "She's right." Gracie-Beau nodded her head and so we tore out the page with the Spice of Ruin and threw it in the trash, so that even if Valvidian could track us down, they'd never find out the secret to unlocking the book's code.

All three of us were really tired, so we decided to go to bed and we could think of a way of hiding The All Story the next day. I was more tired than I'd ever been in my life, but I felt good and like we'd actually accomplished something by keeping the book away from Valvidian and finding out its secret on our own. I thought that my mom and dad would both be really proud of us.

John slept on the couch and me and Gracie-Beau shared the bed, which was okay with me because it was really big so there was plenty of room for both of us.

I fell asleep really fast. But it felt like I hadn't slept for very long when bright lights woke me up. The light was coming from outside, but it wasn't warm like sunlight, it was blue and wind was hitting the

house really hard. It was so loud my first thought when I woke up was that there was a storm outside. I was wrong.

There was the sound of glass breaking in the laboratory side of John's bedroom. Then I heard men yelling. I jumped up on the bed and ran across it.

I pushed open the laboratory door and there were a bunch of men dressed like soldiers with really big guns everywhere. Valvidian had found us! One of the Valvidian agents flew through the air at me and hit the wall beside me so hard it cracked. I looked and in the middle of the lab a bunch more agents were crowded around someone, and the someone was kicking their butts.

The someone was growling and thrashing at the agents and I thought it was a monster. The monster slashed at one of the men and he turned away screaming holding his face. I couldn't get a good look at it, and it was taking out Valvidian agents left and right so quickly it kind of scared me.

I heard something whistle through the air and felt the wind on my face, and the monster stopped suddenly and fell down. At first the Valvidian agents crowded around it, then I heard a voice yell, "Halt!" and they all moved aside. The man that yelled walked up, and it was the Sunglasses Man! He looked the same but his face was all red, probably from the coffee, and he looked down at the monster. It was all covered in brown fur and had whiskers like a cat and a dart was sticking out of the side of its neck. It had hands like a person, but the claws coming out at the tips of its fingers were big and still covered in a little blood.

The Sunglasses Man took off his sunglasses, and one of his eyes was all white. He snapped his fingers and held out his hand and one of his men ran over with The All Story and gave it to him. I was hiding behind the door so none of them saw me.

The Sunglasses Man was looking through the book when another agent ran over and said, "Sir, we found this in the waste bin," and he handed him the Spice of Ruin recipe. I thought it was really silly that we hadn't burned it earlier!

I felt a hand on my shoulder, and it scared me, but I looked back and it was John. He was looking at the monster and he said, "Oh my God," then he yelled, "Gracie-Beau! Are you okay!?" and that's when

I realized the monster on the floor was Gracie-Beau! All the Valvidian agents turned and pointed their guns at us. John put his hands in the air, and so did I but I didn't move from the doorway.

The Sunglasses Man looked up and smiled at us and it made me feel really mad all of a sudden. He stepped over Gracie-Beau and towards us and started laughing in his really deep voice. "Well, well, well," broken glass was crunching under his boots.

John said, "We told her not to read it," then he looked at the Sunglasses Man and said, "You want to end up like her? Fine by us." The Sunglasses Man smiled and put his sunglasses back on and he laughed some more which got me even more mad. He'd killed my parents, now he'd killed Gracie-Beau and gotten the stupid book!

"You're going to tell us how you did it," he said and John yelled "Never!" I looked at Gracie-Beau and asked, "Did you kill her?" and the Sunglasses Man must have saw how mad I was because his smile disappeared and he said, "No, she's too important. She'll wake up in twenty minutes; by that time she'll be in a secure Valvidian facility. We'll study her." I said she's my friend not a science experiment and he laughed again and said, "We can help change her back, Porter. Just tell us how you did it. Valvidian has a lot of resources."

I saw a red lever on the wall next to me, and I had an idea. I smiled, and the Sunglasses Man stopped laughing. I said, "How long did you say until she wakes up?" and he said, "What?" And I said, "Because from what I saw she was kicking your asses," as quickly as I could I reached out and pulled the alarm lever down. Metal shutters began lowering on all the windows. The Sunglasses Man was yelling something, but the alarm was so loud I couldn't hear it. All the agents pointed their guns at us. John grabbed me from behind and we dove behind the bedroom wall. I heard gunshots over the alarm. A metal shutter slammed down in the open doorway.

I covered my ears and closed my eyes. The commotion went on for a while in the next room, then it was quiet except for the alarm, and when I opened my eyes, the lights from outside were gone, too. John entered a code on his security console, and the alarm finally turned off. He put his ear to the metal shutter and couldn't hear

anything, so he entered another code and it went back up into the ceiling.

We went inside and the Lab was empty. The bad guys had gotten away with the book! Gracie-Beau was still lying on the floor, and John ran over to her.

He pulled the dart out of her neck and shook her, but she wouldn't wake up. He tried to pick her up, but whatever happened to her also made her really heavy. John looked at me and said, "Hurry! We've got to get her out of here!" And I said, "Won't the police help us?" And he said, "Did they help us in Smalltown?" And I said good point and picked up Gracie-Beau's legs.

There was a big SUV in John's parents' garage, so we loaded Gracie-Beau in the backseat and I sat in the front with John. I said we need to find out where they're taking the book. John was really sad about Gracie-Beau, and he said he just wanted to help her turn back to normal. I said the only thing that can help her is the book, and he nodded quietly. We decided to find a safe place to hide first, because Valvidian would probably still be looking for us.

*Paige cut her essay off here. She turned to the rest of the class apologized that she'd ran out of time to write the ending. She said her and John and Gracie-Beau, when she'd finally woken up, decided to lay low in Murphy Glen, under assumed names.*

*Many hands shot up to ask Paige questions: What was her entire real name, what did Gracie-Beau turn into, had Paige seen the Sunglasses Man since then, what happened to her Aunt Deirdre... The children were shouting their questions at Ms. Hamil, but she refused to answer any of them. Their curiosity was becoming unruly, so I tried to get control of the class again.*

*As I was attempting to calm the children, there was a knock on my classroom door. I walked over and opened it, and a middle-aged man and woman entered. They had a pass from the office, and they introduced themselves as Harry and Gene Hamil. They said they had arrived to check their daughter Paige out early from school. At this, the class again began to jeer Paige, so I again silenced them and told Paige's father that that would be fine as long as he signed Paige out on my register.*

*Harry Hamil had a large mustache, and he seemed untrustworthy of me. He stated that the office hadn't mentioned the need to sign their daughter out in the classroom. I told him they must have forgotten and this was just a matter of routine.*

*He followed me to my desk while Paige and Gene Hamil stood at the front of the class near the door. I offered the register to Harry and told him he just needed to sign next to Paige's name. He said fine, and asked for a pen.*

*While at the desk I got a closer look at him and confirmed my suspicion, the man claiming to be Paige's father was in disguise, and was not actually Harry Hamil, but possibly the "John" mentioned in Paige's essay.*

*I'd remembered the Valvidian memos referring to a small girl and two adults, one male, one female, and the reward and immediate promotion for information leading to their capture. Throughout Paige's essay, I began to realize she may be the girl we were looking for, not only for her story but for her extreme physical resemblance to the picture of Porter Stone on Valvidian's wanted memo. From the memo I also deduced that the man named John was actually Shawn Richmond, and the woman referred to as Gracie-Beau was actually Chandler Ackerman.*

*I'd planned to turn Porter in to Valvidian authorities at the end of the day and collect my promotion, but the early arrival of the other two in disguise sped up my plan. As I reached into my desk drawer for my "pen," I was actually closing my fingers around the handle of my Valvidian-issued sidearm.*

*I heard a shout, and somehow the woman had crossed the classroom in a millisecond. Her hand gripped my arm tight, but I still managed to pull the pistol out and aim it towards Shawn Richmond. He screamed so loud his ridiculous mustache fell off, and the entire class screamed and hid under their desks when they saw the gun.*

*With her hand still on me, the woman transformed before my eyes into the thing Porter Stone had described in her essay—brown hair covering every inch of her body, her eyes turned to yellow circles with little black pupils, claws sprouted from her fingertips and sharp white teeth from her mouth below a set of long whiskers. She had transformed into what appeared to be a cross between a lion and a*



*human. In a moment, her claws dug into my arm, forcing me to drop the pistol.*

*Porter shouted, "The book?" and Chandler turned to her as I fell back clutching my bloody arm.*

*"Got it!" Shawn said, as he reached under his blazer and tossed a dusty old tome at her. Porter caught it and laughed. She said, "Let's go!" and they left. The class was in stunned silence. I called Valvidian as soon as I could. The rest you know, the company took me into custody and questioned me heavily this past week. Finally, I was told to compile this account of the incident, and that its completion would be a contingent of my release.*

*I learned that the book referenced in Porter's essay had been brought to the secure facilities under Valvidian's Murphy-Glen corporate distribution center, and that is why the trio had come to Murphy-Glen.*

*I want to assure Valvidian leadership and anyone reading this, that even though I was the night manager for that same distribution center, I had no knowledge of the book or its location, and much less than help them recapture the book, I actually tried to stop them from escaping Murphy-Glen. If you review my employment history with Valvidian, you will find a perfect record of loyalty to the company.*

*Signed, Rhoderick Benson.*

---

*Tony Beaulieu is a writer originally from Slaughterville, Oklahoma. He now lives and writes in Kansas City, MO.*

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# Shallow Ripples

By LAUREN E REYNOLDS

*Polluted yet picturesque, the streams and creeks near Andy and Joey's small town attract their fair share of partying teens despite the disturbing rumors and legends—and deaths!*

The sign was decades old and looked it. The once spray-paint bright letters were rusted and faded. Rain had waterlogged the wood and moss and dirt had stained it yellow and green. It wasn't even a real sign but what looked like a piece of thick poster board nailed to a tree above a spray-painted blue line. Through the haze of ivy and moss, it read:

PRIVATE PROPERTY  
NO TRESPASSING  
NO SWIMMING  
NO PUBLIC ENTRY WITHOUT PERMISSION

"Well, that settles it," Joey mocked like the show of authority actually changed something. "Guess we're going back." He hopped over the guard rail and slid down the steep slope, six-pack in hand.

Andy climbed over a little more cautiously, checking left and right for oncoming cars.

"Come on, Andy!" Joey sighed flamboyantly. "It's fine! No one ever uses this road. And don't forget the beer!"

Andy rolled his eyes, pushed his glasses up his nose, and climbed down the steep bank: his boots slipping in the sandy mud. In one hand was a six-pack of Coors pilfered from Joey's dad's stock; in the other, Mike's Hard Lemonade he'd swiped from his sister's fridge.

"Do we seriously need all this?" he asked, rhetoric and sarcastic.

"Ye-Ah!" Joey hollered from the shore cliff. "How else we gonna get drunk?"

Again, Andy rolled his eyes and readjusted his glasses. They didn't need to come to Glasswater Creek for that.

Down a path worn into the woods and just preceding a small stream sat another sign much fresher than the first. A single slab of red, rectangular wood on a solid post read in bright white letters:

NO TRESPASSING  
NO SWIMMING  
STEEP DROP OFF  
6 LIVES LOST HERE

Except a big sloppy number 2 preceded the 6 in bright spray paint.

“Oooh, scary...” Joey droned dramatically in his best horror movie irony voice. He ignored the sign and pushed through the bushes.

“Hey, they don’t call it Murderkill River for nothing,” Andy added, laughing.

“No, they call it that ’cause a bunch of Dutchmen and Indians killed each other,” Joey joked crinkling his fingers and donning his cheesiest Dracula-style voice, “and christened Murders Creek with their blood!” He broke out laughing.

Andy grimaced, glasses slipping down his nose.

It was an old story. A ghost story and nothing more. An urban legend told by teens around campfires to prank and scare little kids. Easily disproven and easily disbelievable. Except the murders never stopped. Or rather they *didn’t* stop.

Almost every year around the third week of June, when spring officially transitioned into summer, someone went missing then turned up dead. Always written off as a drowning or an animal attack. Twenty-six was only the number of people they *found*—if his sister was to be believed.

“Yo, ya coming?” Joey broke his stupor.

“Yeah, I’m coming!” He fixed his glasses and joined his friend on the beach beneath the bridge.

Stripped to nothing but their swim trunks and wife-beaters, they propped against the rocks, popped open a beer, and clinked their bottles together.

“Ah,” Joey took a big gulp and pulled away with a satisfied gasp. “Now *this* is how you spend a school day.” He stretched his arms wide and sank his feet into the water, then complained about the cold.

“Yeah,” Andy laughed and took a large gulp. The beer buzzed and bubbled all the way down his throat. His eyes brightened and his skin tingled. “God, I’m glad you talked me into this.” He laughed, bright with delight and dizziness.

He took another gulp, imagined his sister screaming at him, and took another.

“Andy Corlo, the safe kid playing hooky to get drunk at Murderkill Creek!” he laughed ironically and so hard his face went red.

“Ya mean Glass Water Creek,” Joey said with a wink and a whisper.

Glass Water Creek: slang and secret code for the section of Murderkill River running under an old road bridge half a mile in the woods. Named for the abundance of broken bottles and crushed cans choking the gaps between fallen logs and clusters of boulders where the small stream waterfalled into a wide forest pool under the bridge. The creek had hosted decades of Friday Nights, Last Day of School parties, skip-days, pot-circles, make-out sessions, and after-prom-one-night-stands. Generations of private histories, stolen moments, and dirty secrets existed here. Cigarette butts, junk food wrappers, and plastic cups were wedged between the rocks, the beach glittered with broken glass eroded by sand and waves, and tangles of tree roots exposed by erosion shone with aluminum cans.

Despite the pollution, it was still beautiful, Andy thought. Trees and leaves swayed like dancing nymphs in the breeze. Their whispers mingled with bird songs and the trickling stream. The waters sparkled in the dappled light like a church window, and the whitecaps crested the waters and kissed the shores. It was beautiful. Peaceful. Shadowed. Secret. Safe.

He closed his eyes and dug his bare feet in the cool mud.

Joey finished his beer, chuckled the bottle somewhere, and opened another one. “God, I can’t wait to get outta here,” he said finishing off the bottle and tossing it. It smashed on the rocks, sand glittering with tiny glass chunks. “Away from my dad, away from those stuck-up pricks at school, away from this stupid dead-end town!” He opened another bottle and took a long, large gulp.

“Damn straight,” Andy said, setting down his own empty bottle and opening another. He fixed his glasses and watched the tiny

rivulets shake and stir. Tiny waves cresting the water. Something rustled among the cattails, and a lily pad moved.

Probably a turtle, he thought, and took another sip.

Joey started his fourth beer, red-faced and drunk with casual, carefree happiness.

God, Andy wished he could be like that. The beer suddenly tasted sour in his mouth so he dumped it into the mud. Long and slow like a small stream. He watched it trickle and flow into the main river, adding to the pollution.

His glasses slid to his nose. He growled and shoved them up with a frustrated hand. "I'm gonna get out of here," he said low and dangerously determined like he was commanding fate and the very universe to obey him. "I'm gonna get the hell out of this dead-end dump and finally start my life!"

He stood up, surprising his best friend, squeezed the bottle neck tight, aimed, and threw it across the water. It landed in the cattail grove with a loud, watery splash like shattering glass.

Joey threw up his hands with a victorious cheer: repeated shouts of approval and pride.

Andy grinned—wide, brash and unapologetic. His eyes glittered in the dappled light like he was a hunter who'd just selected a kill.

Something rippled across the water. First, through the cattails, then the lily pads, then breaking the still surface.

Andy saw it before Joey did. "What the hell?"

Something moved. A ripple? A shadow? A dim shape that rose and rose and swam towards him. Too big to be a frog. Or a turtle.

He could not make it out until it broke the surface—a head.

It bobbed in the still water. Long, luminous hair fanned like golden, silken seaweed around a face shaped like a valentine.

And what a face it was—delicate ears curled into sweet, pink cheeks, a small buttonish nose wiggled cutely above a smiling mouth, large doe-brown eyes were wide and innocent like a frightened deer. Then a graceful pink neck rose from the water followed by slim shoulders, collarbones that spread like wings, full breasts—he blushed—soft arms and dainty hands, slim hips, a cute waist, shapely calves, long bare legs. He blushed again but did not look away. He didn't want to.

She stood ankle-deep in the water, and all he could think was where the hell did she come from? That stream was only six, *maybe* eight inches deep!

She saw them then and gasped like a frightened doe. Her face looked so young, so innocent, so sweet: all round curves, plump cheeks and golden curls like a china doll or some protective older brother's little sister. Long golden hair and curled arms salaciously hid her full, pink breasts—nothing girlish there. Slender legs folded elegantly to the side hid her privates. Honey milk skin glistened with moisture. Water ran in rivulets over her naked flesh and damn if she wasn't beautiful.

He raked his eyes shamelessly over her: his heart pounding, his mouth watering.

"And?" Joey slurred next to him just as numb and stupefied as he.

"Yeah?"

"Am I wasted, or did a hot, naked babe just come out of the water?"

"I think both."

Then she smiled. She gave a sweet, innocent giggle and an elegant courtly bow, dipping so low her hair touched the water. Then she began to dance.

She dipped, turned, and threw back her hair with a salacious breath. Like a moan. Her hands flew, her arms curled and swam. Smooth, single movements like swan necks. She dipped, rose, leaped in a long single step, then pirouetted. Her perfect feet almost floated on the water. Her golden hair fanned around her like a cape. Like wings. Like a cloak woven from tendrils of sunlight.

She danced like trees swayed in the breeze. Like the river flowed. Like cattails bowed, scraped and fluttered over the water. Like a rain drizzling over the forest: quick, trickling tap, tap, taps of her feet. Her big eyes were wide and bright and brown. A sweet, innocent color. Her smile was cute, curious, and beckoning. Like a new doll. Like a forest nymph. Like the sweet forest maiden in a story.

That was how Andy saw her.

That was how she looked at him.

“Hot damn!” Joey slurred and stumbled drunkenly to his feet. He wobbled and slouched on Andy’s shoulder for support.

He wiped his mouth, ran a hand through his disheveled hair, and sported a rakish smile. The kind he used to bribe the pretty teachers for extra time. The kind he used to flirt with cheerleaders. The kind that got him whatever he wanted.

He half-swaggered, half-stumbled towards her, all brawny and confident. She halted her dance, shy doe eyes regarding him curiously. He had just stepped into the water, still gripping the neck of the bottle when she flung into his arms like a lost lover and buried her face in his neck.

Jealousy—bitter, angry and red—coursed through Andy. Envy burned like bile down his throat. Then she shoved Joey away, and he stumbled back, dropped the bottle, and collapsed against a huge rock, rejected and obviously shit-faced.

Then she looked up, and her eyes met his. Her smile curled, her eyes hooded and her lovely face cast a sultry shadow. She raised her arms to dance again, but this time her movements were slower, more languid. She tip-toed across the water like a ballerina and held out her hands, and he saw webbing between her fingers and her eyes glittered, beckoningly.

Andy watched her. Watched her waiting, wanting, wanting *him*.

*Him.*

Plain, smart, simple, safe Andy Corlo who wasn’t extraordinary and never took risks and was so done with playing it safe and making excuses not to be who he was. He ripped off his glasses and stepped into the water. Then, seizing her by the arms, he kissed her.

She kissed him back.

He felt her fingers, cold and wet and running over his bare skin. Felt her soft flesh and succulent calves through the thin material of his trunks.

He kissed her again.

Her lips were cold and wet and clammy. Her taste was a cool sweetness, refreshing like ice water on a hot day. He drank all of her like he was parched and she was a cool spring—an oasis to the desert of his life.



He wanted her—wanted her more than he ever wanted anyone or anything else.

She ripped at his trunks, but he didn't care. He was drunk on her touch, her lips, her skin, her breasts. She drew him closer as though to whisper a secret.

Too late he saw them—sharp and white as bone—two sets of pointed teeth.

Then he saw Joey: the two gross puncture wounds in his neck, the blood soaking his shirt, his eyes glazed over with death and fear—and at last, he understood.

He looked at her then.

She lifted her face and smiled—a sly, seductive smile that curled at the corners.

At last, she spoke.

“What do you want?” Her voice was sweet: soft, alluring, and delicate, but nothing about it was innocent.

Andy steeled his eyes, deciding.

He drew her towards him and kissed her.

Felt her naked flesh against his. Heard her excited screams. Heard them as they sank beneath the water, falling down, down, down.

His useless glasses lay abandoned on the shore.

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*Lauren E Reynolds is a freelance writer and artist living in Bel Air, Maryland. Her fiction has appeared in **Under the Full Moon's Light** as well as **Hidden Menagerie: an Anthology of Cryptids**. Her non-fiction story “Childhood's Last Stand” appeared in **The Searcher** and won the 2014 Coucher Carolina GENEii 14<sup>th</sup> Annual Family History contest.*

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# Scent of the Yaka Aka Yo

By J. MANFRED WEICHSEL

*Three castaways find themselves on a mysterious island inhabited almost entirely by women... and their strange king who condemns the men to death by the sinister Yaka Aka Yo!*

**T**he hot yellow sun beat us with its burning rays as we silently sat on a sheet of wood that floated in the clear South Pacific Sea.. We were the survivors of a shipwreck that had occurred the previous day when the sky wasn't so blue and the sea not so still.

I had been a sailor on the unfortunate ship. The woman next to me had been a passenger. She was young, maybe eighteen or nineteen, and her dress was in tatters, exposing bits of sunburnt flesh here and there. Her name was Giselle. The middle-aged man on the other side of the young woman had been the ship's cook. He had a potbelly, a heavy brow, and an ugly, dark and scowling face. The sheet of wood had once been a part of the wrecked ship's deck.

The cook said, "Well, we ought to take shifts sleeping and keeping lookout." He then looked at me and added, "You've done the most work so far, so you should sleep the first shift."

**F**rom deep within the blackness of sleep, I heard the sound of a woman screaming. I sprang awake and turned to see the cook struggling on top of the upwards facing Giselle as she hit back with her fists, feet, and knees.

The sheet of wood rocked back and forth with the motions of the struggle. With the agility of one who has spent a great deal of time at sea, I jumped to my feet and sprang forward, knocking the cook off of the woman with a single blow. I held the cook over the edge of the wood sheet and dunked his head into the clear, still sea. The cook thrashed his arms and legs in violent protest. Giselle screamed, "Let him up. He'll drown."

"That's the idea."

“But you can’t! It’s murder.”

“I know.”

The woman grabbed me around my neck from behind and pulled back with the weight of her entire body. I struggled against her, intent on drowning the cook, but then Giselle said, “I swear to God Brian, if that man drowns, I am going to jump into the sea and swim as far away from you as I can.”

There was nothing to do, so I released the cook. Once he had coughed the water out of his lungs, he said in a hoarse, angry voice, “You could have killed me!”

“That’s what I was trying to do, rapist.”

“Aw, I didn’t mean anything by it,” the cook protested. “I just can’t control myself sometimes is all.”

“That’s all the more reason why I should kill you. I can’t watch you all the time to protect Giselle, so if you can’t control yourself, I don’t have a choice.”

I went to grab the cook and dunk him back under the water, but Giselle threatened to jump off the raft again, so I had no choice but to let things be.

**A**nother day went by. The woman and the cook, who were both weakening much more quickly than I, were fast asleep at my side. Neither of them looked too good. Their lips were cracked, and their skin was peeling. I looked desperately through my binoculars for any sign of land. Then, renewed hope leaping in my breast, I lowered the binoculars from my eyes, and in a voice as loud as I could make my dry throat muster I shouted, “Land ho!”

Giselle and the cook sprang awake, and all three of us paddled as hard as we could with our hands in the direction I had indicated until a large island richly covered in verdant green foliage gradually became visible to the naked eye. The cook laughed hysterically as he said, “Land! I don’t believe my eyes. I had never expected to see land again. Land! Beautiful land!”

On the beach, the three of us stretched our legs, arms, and backs. The cook reached his hands towards the sky in a gigantic stretch and remarked, “It feels so good to be on my two feet again.”

I said, "We should go looking for fresh water to drink before we all die of dehydration."

"Now wait a minute," said the cook. "What if this island is inhabited? By natives, I mean. Wouldn't that be dangerous?"

"Nah. The natives in these parts are peaceful as lambs. These islands are like the Garden of Eden. They haven't discovered sin yet."

The cook rubbed a hand that looked like a snake's head at the end of a serpentine arm on his chin and muttered, "Like the Garden of Eden, you say. Yes, I have heard that the women of these islands go around dressed like Eve."

I didn't like the meaning in the cook's tone of voice, but instead of confronting him I added, so that he might understand the importance of behaving himself once we found natives, "And also, the natives in these parts are seafaring, and could take us back to civilization."

The three of us walked through the green and overgrowing jungle, me in my white and blue uniform, which I still wore despite everything it had been through, Giselle in her torn and tattered dress, and the cook in his tattered shirt and jeans. Water came plentifully from springs that jutted out of rocks and from the ground, and there was plenty of fruit and coconuts to eat, so soon we were completely refreshed.

As the other two drank from a spring, I looked off through my binoculars at a valley below, where I saw a woman reclining and sunning herself by the bank of a stream. She wore nothing but a short grass skirt and a necklace that was beaded with a single line of tiny shells. I called the other two over and handed the binoculars to Giselle. As Giselle looked down at the nearly naked creature that was lying there on the bank as if she didn't have a care in the world, I remarked, "Her skin is lighter than one would expect from an islander."

Giselle replied with a cool chill in her voice, "Yes. I can see that. And what else did you notice about her?"

The cook said, "Let me see."

Giselle handed him the binoculars, and he looked down at the naked white-skinned native woman. He muttered to himself, "Like Eve in the Garden of Eden," pushed Giselle and me to the ground

with a single thrust of his two arms, and then took off at a reckless pace down the foliage-covered side of the hill. I got to my feet, put the binoculars to my eyes, and after a moment's search saw the cook burst out from the foliage at the bottom of the hill and rush the native. Dressed in nothing but a short grass skirt as she was, there were no clothes on her that the cook had to rip off in order to gain access, so he yanked down his own pants and jumped on top of her. She screamed, and Giselle and I immediately rushed down the hill.

I pulled the cook off the white-skinned native, wrestled him to the ground, and put my hands around his neck. I looked into his eyes and said, "This time, I am going to kill you."

The native woman cried, "Oh, please don't kill him. Killing is so ugly."

Somewhat surprised that the native spoke English, I rose to my feet. The cook also got to his feet, rubbed his neck, and angrily shouted, "What's your problem? I already explained to you that I don't mean anything by it and just can't control myself is all."

I ignored the cook, explained our predicament to the native, and asked if her tribe could bring us back to civilization. She offered to bring us to her village.

We followed the woman through the jungle until we reached a cleared area where there were many grass huts and natives moving about. I noticed some strange things right away. First of all, the natives, who were all as naked as our hostess or even more so, were mostly female. In fact, I did not see a single male who looked older than about fifteen.

Ordinarily, natives of the South Seas have skin that is halfway between the copper-red of the American Indian and the parchment yellow of the Oriental, while the women of the village were mostly white. And yet, they did have features that denoted the Pacific Islander, most noticeably their black, luxuriant hair, the round curve of their hips, and their pearly white teeth in always smiling mouths. They all clearly had the Eve-like lack of shame that characterizes the Pacific Islander, unaware of their own nakedness as they were, and they all possessed the irresistible, mysterious, alluring beauty that all women of the Pacific Islands race are blessed with. I also noted that many of the women had babies, and many other women were

pregnant, far more than would be expected, especially given the lack of men. It was all quite curious.

The cook looked all about, ogling at all the beautiful nude and nearly-nude women, following them with his eyes as we walked past them. I wished that he weren't so overt in what he was doing. Of course I looked. Who wouldn't? But I was discreet in my glances and didn't make a spectacle out of myself by staring with such obvious intent.

Giselle didn't look about her at all, but walked with her head held high in contempt of the naked beauties all around us. In the center of the village, there was a grass hut that was larger than any of the other grass huts. We were led through the entrance, which was guarded on both sides by two beautiful, very pregnant women in nothing but grass skirts, holding spears upright with the butts resting on the ground.

Inside the hut, the furs of jungle animals hung from the walls and carpeted the floor. In the back of the hut was a throne of wood that was painted gold, and on this throne sat a virile, confident-looking, muscular white man. He wore slacks and a coat that was a patchwork of all sorts of exotic furs embroidered with pearls. Beneath his coat he was shirtless, showing off wide pectoral muscles and hard looking abs. He was surrounded by eight tall, slim women. Some knelt on the floor at his feet, some stood slightly behind the throne, and others were gathered around him kneeling in different positions. The women all fanned him with giant leaves, holding the enormous stems in their tiny hands. The women were completely nude and, like the rest I had seen, had much lighter skin than any other island native I had ever come across. The man's skin was even lighter and made the women look dark by comparison. He had an open face, a wide smile, twinkling eyes, and an aquiline nose. He wore a crown of wood painted gold, just like the throne he sat on.

The man rose from his throne, held out a gold-painted wooden scepter topped with a giant pearl the size of a fist, and said in a heavy New York accent, "I am Godfrey Edelstein, and I am emperor of this island. What brings you to my realm?"

As he spoke, I noted that the man was undeniably charismatic, but beneath the booming confidence of his deep baritone voice, I detected the pervert's lisp. I disliked the man, but I recognized we were in his power, so I explained to him how the three of us were the survivors of a shipwreck, and how all we wanted was to return to civilization. He listened to what I said and then replied, "I am willing to order my subjects to return you to civilization tomorrow morning, under two conditions. First, you must promise to never tell anybody that we exist or about anything you have seen here." All three of us readily agreed, so he continued, "And second, the women of this island are completely off-limits. You are not to so much as touch one of them."

Giselle and I agreed right away, but the cook just looked at his feet. We both turned to look at him, and he mumbled that he promised not to touch any of the women. I was far from convinced and knew that the cook was not good for his word, but at the time, I felt it would be unwise to say anything.

The three of us were led to our own huts. As I lay on a bed of furs trying to go to sleep, I thought about the mysteries of the strange island. Godfrey Edelstein claimed to be emperor. What did that mean? I thought of the natives. The older the women were, the more reddish-yellow their skin was, all the way up to the oldest women, who were colored like every other Pacific Islander I had ever seen. But the younger the women were, the lighter their skin was, all the way down to the babies, whose skin had just a trace of color. What did any of it mean?

Then, I heard the sound of a woman's screams. I leapt out of bed and ran after the screams as fast as I could, but I was not the first to arrive at the scene of the crime, and there were already several women pulling the struggling cook off his intended female prey, one of the beautiful light-skinned natives!

Edelstein arrived, and when he saw the scene, his face turned red with anger. He pointed his scepter accusingly at the cook and shouted in his heavy New York accent, "I let you stay in my realm and sleep in my hut, and the only dictum I gave you was that my women were off-limits. But you have betrayed my hospitality. I,



Emperor Godfrey Edelstein, do therefore sentence you to death by Yaka Aka Yo!”

Many women surrounded the cook and stuck their spears right up against the soft flesh of his neck. The cook, with sweat on his brow and tears in his eyes, protested, “But I didn’t mean anything by it! I swear I didn’t. I just can’t control myself is all. Come on! Put your spears down. I already told you I didn’t mean anything by it.”

The women ignored the cook’s pleadings and force-marched him away. Giselle and I made eye contact, and then we took off after the group. Edelstein remained behind.

We followed the women and the poor, pathetic cook, who never once stopped begging the women to let him go, through the jungle. The women stopped at a spot where the ground became a gradual decline, picked a cottony substance from plants that grew close to the ground, rolled the cottony substance into little balls, and stuck these balls into their nostrils. They did the same for the cook, and Giselle and I followed their example without knowing the reason for it.

As we walked down the decline and into the valley below, the faint sound of terrible screams came from the distance, and the further down into the valley we went, the louder and more horrible the screams became. Then, at the floor of the valley, the jungle cleared away, and we looked out into a small meadow, and in the center of the meadow was a giant plant that towered a dozen feet over our heads. The plant was the most revolting thing I had ever seen in my life. Just looking at it caused the acid at the bottom of my gut to boil over and painfully burn the walls of my stomach.

The plant had green leaves, but it was the kind of green you might associate with sewage, or rot, or toxic waste. I was glad I had the cottony substance in my nose because the rotten green of the leaves looked as if it must give off a rotten stench. Six-inch-long blood-red tendrils covered the midribs and veins of the leaves. The tendrils grew from the leaves, but they squirmed as if they were living things and reached towards us like hungry worms. Native men were stuck to some of the leaves, attached to them by the blood-red tendrils. Many of these men were dead and their bodies completely dry, like the bodies of mummies, but others were very much alive. And they

were screaming horribly. Piled and scattered around the base of the plant were many human bones, skulls, and skeletons.

I looked over at Giselle and the cook and saw from the looks on their faces that they were as revolted as I was.

One of the native women turned to Giselle and me and said by way of explanation, "These men are from another tribe that raided our tribe two nights ago. Like your friend here, they raided our tribe for our emperor's women. For us." Despite the horrible scene in front of us, I could not help but notice that the balls of cottony substance in the woman's nose made her voice sound comically stuffy, especially given the humorless tone in which she spoke. I repressed the urge to smile as she continued, "Now they are going to die, just as your friend here is going to die. For no man can resist the scent of the Yaka Aka Yo."

The women then removed all of the cook's clothes so that he was naked. He pathetically covered his private parts with his two hands. He was still protesting that he "didn't mean anything" by his actions and that he "just couldn't control himself," but then a native woman yanked the cottony balls from the cook's nostrils, and he shut up instantly.

The cook doubled over, as if in great pain. His breath grew heavy, and his skin turned bright red. Then, he looked up, and the moment his eyes rested on the Yaka Aka Yo he became like a man enchanted. His hands fell limply at his sides. The cook slowly walked towards the disgusting plant, and the leaves of the plant swayed excitedly, and the blood-red tendrils reached out towards him, stretching as far as they would go. For a moment, the cook stopped his approach, as if wondering why he was walking towards his death, but then he continued on, as enchanted and as oblivious to danger as before.

The cook looked like a man in love as he walked right up to the Yaka Aka Yo and embraced one of its leaves as a man embraces a lover. The blood-red tendrils attached themselves to him and dug themselves into his flesh, and then the leaf rose up towards the sky, lifting the poor cook off the ground with it. And then, as the cook hung there suspended a dozen feet in the air, all of a sudden a terrible look came upon his face, as if the spell had been broken, and

he gave out a horrible yell. I whispered to Giselle, "The plant drinks the blood of men."

She whispered back, "I know."

Then we all turned and walked back to the village, and Giselle and I retired to our respective huts.

The next morning when I awoke, I asked to see Giselle. I was told by the native women attending me that she did not want to see me. She had fallen in love with the emperor, they said, and wished to remain on the island and marry him. They then said that Giselle wished for me to return to civilization on my own and to never think of her or the island again.

I protested, but they were very pushy, so I allowed myself to be led to a canoe. They watched as I paddled off, and I made no signs that I had any plan in mind other than to return to civilization, but once the native women were out of eyesight I brought the canoe around the island, parked it on the further shore where there weren't any natives, and walked back through the jungle towards the village.

I stopped on top of a hill overlooking the village, looked through my binoculars, and saw that the entrance to Giselle's hut was being guarded by beautiful pregnant women, nude except for grass skirts, holding spears in the upright position.

I remained at my post all day through many changes of the guard until night fell, and then, as I had hoped would happen, the current crop of pregnant guards slowly fell asleep. Putting my binoculars down so that they hung around my neck, I crept slowly through the village until I was at Giselle's hut and then carefully stepped over the gorgeous sleeping retinue and went inside.

Giselle rose from her furs the moment she saw me and said, "Oh, Brian. Thank God you are here. They want to force me to marry the emperor, that God-awful Godfrey Edelstein!"

"I know. They told me that you wanted to marry him, but I immediately guessed the truth, so I pretended to leave the island by canoe and then circled back around to rescue you. Now let's go before we are discovered."

I took Giselle by the hand and led her from the hut, but the moment we stepped outside, we were surrounded by dozens of

native women with spears pointed at us. The women parted in order to let Edelstein through. He looked at me with a smug, cocky smile and said in his heavy New York accent, "Ha! I had a feeling you would come back. That is why I set this little trap for you. Pretty clever, huh? Having the guards pretend to fall asleep in order to draw you out! And now, of course, you must suffer the same fate as your friend." And then he pointed his scepter at me and shouted, "I, Emperor Godfrey Edelstein, do sentence you to death by Yaka Aka Yo!!!"

Nude and nearly nude women with spears surrounded me, and just as they had with the cook, they forced me at spear point to make the march into the valley of death. Just as before, Edelstein remained behind, and this time Giselle was left behind as well. We stopped at the foot of the plateau, picked the cottony substance from the plants, rolled it into little balls, and stuck them into our nostrils. This time as we approached the clearing, there were not many voices screaming in the dark, but just a single voice.

When we reached the clearing, I saw why this was. The natives who had been screaming the night before were almost completely drained of blood, and while a few of them were still alive, these were too weak to scream. Only the cook, who had been trapped by the horrible plant more recently than the rest, screamed, his eyes bugged out in terrible pain as he hung suspended in the air, attached to the leaf. I saw now more fully how this most horrible of all plants, the Yaka Aka Yo, fed. The worm-like tentacles that covered the midribs and veins of the leaves were suckers in the manner of leaches. They burrowed into their victims, attaching them to the leaves, and then sucked their blood until they were completely dry. Then, once the victim was nothing but a mummified corpse, the suckers released him and he fell to the ground, where the dried husk of his body was broken down by the elements such as rain and further served the Yaka Aka Yo as fertilizer until all that was left were bones. Of all the ingenious cruelties that had ever been devised by man, none can ever hope to match the cruelties devised by nature.

The white-skinned native women removed my clothes as they had the clothes of the cook, and then removed the little balls of cottony substance from my nostrils.

The scent of the Yaka Aka Yo hit me at once. I had thought, given the appearance of the plant, that it would be a disgusting scent. But the scent was not disgusting. Not at all. It was a beautiful scent, beautiful like perfume. It was also an intoxicating scent, and although my feet were planted firmly on the ground, there was a sense of vertigo in my gut, a feeling of falling an immeasurable distance. Then came a burning sensation, as if my blood had been replaced by molten glass that painfully seared my arteries and veins. I felt the searing pain up and down my arms and legs, but most of all in the veins and arteries nearest to my heart and groin. It was unbearable.

There was a brightening of the moonlight, and then the light of the moon that hit the ground in front of me separated into shafts of light so that the ground was striped. The alternating bright and dark stripes all led to the Yaka Aka Yo, which sat in the center of the pattern, like petals leading to the ovule of a flower. The Yaka Aka Yo looked different now. Where before, it had looked menacing and gross, it now looked beautiful, and its leaves dotted with those bright red tentacles looked voluptuous as they beckoned me to approach them with seductive motions.

The green leaves were beautiful, beautiful like a summer afternoon, like a sunrise over the ocean, like a Shakespearian sonnet or a Renaissance painting. They promised softness like white linen hanging from a line in a virgin meadow, swaying in the pure country air. But it was the tiny red tentacles that really attracted me because the burning sensation in my veins had become so intense that the pain had spread throughout my entire body, and it was the tiny red tentacles that promised to end my suffering by sucking the molten glass from my veins.

Step by step, I approached that beautiful, beckoning plant, walking along a stripe of moonlight. But then I stopped, confused. I wondered, what was the source of the pain that I felt? Of course! It was the plant itself that was causing my pain with its beautiful scent, in order to offer itself as a relief. I fought to gain control over myself, to turn around, and to make my feet carry me away from the plant and its intoxicating scent, but the pain was too unbearable. I couldn't take it. I needed the molten glass sucked from my veins. My feet began again to walk towards the plant.

Inch by inch, I continued my approach towards those beautiful green leaves and their beautiful red tentacles, red like a woman's lips, but then I stopped, confused. I wondered, why did I find the plant beautiful now, when before I had found it repulsive? Of course! It was because the scent had intoxicated me. I looked at the plant and tried to remember it as I had seen it before, as an ugly, disgusting thing. But she was still beautiful, and she still promised to end my suffering. I started to walk towards the plant again because she and only she could suck the molten glass from my veins.

Closer and closer I came to the plant and its beckoning leaves, until I was right in front of it. I reached my arms out, eager to embrace one of the leaves as if it were a woman and finally end my suffering, but then I stopped, confused. I wondered, how did I think that having the blood sucked from my veins would end my suffering? Frozen, with my arms stretched out towards the leaf, I remembered the night before when I saw all the screaming natives. They hadn't looked as if their suffering had ended. I looked up at the screaming cook. His suffering certainly hadn't ended. I then looked over at the mummified corpses attached to the leaves above my head, and down at the skeletons that littered the ground at my feet. The Yaka Aka Yo had ended their suffering by killing them, and that was how the Yaka Aka Yo would end my suffering as well, and I did not want to die. With much mental effort, I turned away from the plant and towards the nude and nearly-nude white-skinned natives, who looked at me with amazed expressions on their pretty faces.

With gasps of astonishment, the beautiful naked natives all fell to their knees with the butts of their spears pressed against the ground and the points reaching straight up into the sky. Then they rose and approached me, and without even pausing to allow me to dress, they all lifted me off the ground and carried me back to the village as if I were a holy relic.

The natives carried me into the throne room where Edelstein was seated on his throne, surrounded by beautiful, completely nude women who fanned him with giant leaves. One of the nude women fanning Edelstein was Giselle. But while the other women wore the characteristic toothy smile of all South Seas women and looked at their emperor with bright, sparkling eyes, Giselle's mouth hung open

in slack-jawed contempt, and her eyes were rolled back in her upward tilted head in annoyance, as if she thought what was going on was really dumb. And while the other women were fanning Edelstein enthusiastically, Giselle held her leaf limply in her hand, and only half-heartedly fanned the New Yorker. Seeing Giselle as she was at that moment, I fell in love with her.

The women who had been carrying me dropped me down in front of the throne, and when Giselle saw me, she dropped her leaf and rose to her feet. When Edelstein saw me, he too rose from his throne, irate, and yelled in his heavy New York accent, "What is the meaning of this?"

One of the women stepped forward and said, "With his nasal cavity unobstructed and acting on his own, he turned his back to the Yaka Aka Yo. By your own law, he is free."

Edelstein said, "I wish to speak to these two alone."

The women all turned and left the hut, leaving Giselle and me alone with the emperor. He looked us over and then said, "Just what am I going to do with you?"

I said, "Let us both go."

"I wish I could. But I can't."

"I give you my word that neither I nor Giselle will ever reveal what we have seen here."

"I don't care one way or the other whether you reveal what you have seen here. I am above the laws of any nation. You can't leave, because I want Giselle, and once I want a woman, I have to have her."

Edelstein let out a long sigh. He sat down on his throne, and his attitude changed to a reminiscent one as he continued, "When I was a young man from a broken home in Long Island, I dreamed of having a race of my own, but to do such a thing required money. I started hanging around billionaire clubs in order to learn how these people became so rich, so that by imitating them, I could become a billionaire too, but I quickly figured out that they were all idiots who didn't know how to manage their money, and were feigning competence. They were terrified that one day they would be found out and were desperate for somebody to handle their affairs for them, so I volunteered myself for the job and then used the position

of trust the billionaires gave me to rob them all blind until I became a billionaire myself.

“I then used my newfound fortune to buy this island and drive out all the men, so that I could impregnate all the women and create my own race. The Edelstein race! That is why there are only women on this island. When men who are born come of age, I send them out to spread my seed to other islands. This will help the Edelstein race down the line because if any of my descendants decide to mate with neighboring islanders, which is inevitable, there will be less bleeding around the edges.”

Edelstein rose from his throne and approached me. His attitude changed again, and now he came across as a salesman. “But, having had nothing but Pacific Island natives all these years, I now crave something different. I crave a woman of European descent. I crave Giselle. But I know that you will not let me have her. So let’s make a deal. Quid pro quo. I scratch your back, you scratch mine.

“The youngest generation on this island that is just now being born is only one-eighths native and seven-eighths me. It is probably time to introduce a little bit of genetic diversity into the mix to avoid complications. I can tell by looking at you that you have very good genes. You are tall and muscular; you have a full head of hair and good teeth. You are intelligent and brave. Here’s the deal: if you let me have Giselle, and promise not to put up a fight, I will let you have your way with my women, and contribute your genes to the Edelstein race. If I let you mate with women who are three-fourths me, then the children you produce together would be three-eighths me, or thirty-seven and a half percent, and then if your children grow up and mate with children from the same generation who are seven-eighths me, or eighty-seven and a half percent, then their offspring will be a sixty-two and a half percent me. Therefore, because my goal is a race where everyone is seventy-five percent me, in order to ensure that the generations after that one meet this requirement, I will have to ensure that you have one third the number of offspring than I do. I have three women a day. I could let you have one woman a day and still maintain the purity of the Edelstein race.

“Keep in mind also, you would be getting sloppy seconds. I will still father all the women’s first-born children. But these island



women keep their figure after giving birth, don't you think? I could let you have a different woman every day for as long as you live, and all I ask in return is for a single woman, Giselle."

I only paused a moment before replying, "The women of your island are the most beautiful I have ever seen. I accept your offer. You can have Giselle."

It hurt me tremendously when Giselle yelled, "You rat," turned her back to me, and added, "You are dead to me." But what choice did I have in the matter?

One of Edelstein's rituals was that before he first lay with a woman, he married her in an elaborate ceremony. He and Giselle stood in front of an outdoor altar of stone with a mattress of furs on top of it, as island women surrounded them, acting the roles of both best men and maids of honor. Edelstein was dressed in a tuxedo jacket, which was unbuttoned, a bow tie, and nothing else. He held a ring out to Giselle, who wore a white veil of lace and bridal headdress, but below this was completely nude. She looked scared.

I had not taken part in the ceremony thus far, using my own emotional state at having lost Giselle as an excuse, but now I crept up upon the gathering with a bucket of water in my hands, sprinted up to Edelstein, and dumped the water over his head.

Edelstein fell to the ground in shock, and when he rose he was no longer a young, virile, handsome man. Instead, he was frail and old, with a bald head, liver spots on his forehead and all over his body, and wrinkled, sagging skin. His back was crooked, and his shaking knees looked frail enough to buckle under him at any moment.

The women of the island were aghast at the sight of Edelstein as the disgusting old man he really was, and they rushed him and beat him with their fists, and pulled at his limbs until they tore from his body. I took Giselle's hand, and we ran from the scene.

Later, Giselle and I were on a canoe in the middle of the Pacific, headed in a direction that I hoped would bring us back to civilization. I turned to Giselle and said, "I am sorry for leading you to believe that I had betrayed you, but it was the only way I could trick Edelstein."

She replied, “Oh, don’t worry. I realized you were up to something right away and only pretended to be mad at you to make your act look more convincing to Edelstein. The only thing is, I don’t understand what happened. How did you know that dumping water on Edelstein would turn him into a disgusting old man?”

“Well, when I faced the Yaka Aka Yo without the cottony substance in my nose, the scent did something to my mind which made the plant appear to me as the most attractive thing I had ever seen, where before it had looked disgusting. Edelstein had made mention of the youngest generation, which was seven-eighths him. Now, this is something that would require three generations to accomplish. After my encounter with the Yaka Aka Yo, I recognized its faint scent on Edelstein, and I realized that Edelstein was perfuming himself with a very small dose of nectar from the plant, just enough to make himself appear attractive to the island women without any of the other side effects. That is why he never went with them to the Yaka Aka Yo. When they put the cottony substance in their noses and cut off their ability to smell, they would have seen their emperor as he really was.

“So I knew that all I had to do was wait until there was a large enough crowd to witness the transformation of Edelstein into an old man, and then douse Edelstein with water to wash the scent off so that the crowd would turn on him.

“Edelstein was greedy and wanted too much. He wanted a race of his own. But we are all driven by nature to pass down our genes. Out here, in this canoe, surrounded by nothing but sea beneath a moonlit sky, what better place to start a family?”

Giselle smiled in agreement and leaned back, and I climbed on top of her, and we got started.

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*The story you have just read is J. Manfred Weichsel's third appearance in Cirsova Magazine. His work has also appeared in EconoClash Review and the Planetary Anthology Series from Tuscany Bay Press, among other places. Please look on Amazon.com for his just released novel version of Ebu Gogo and his novella Expedition to Eden.*



# The Fourth Gift

By DAVID SKINNER

*Baltasar, one of Ulrik's many Menders, diligently performs his task of recreating the Solar System—until a mysterious anomaly forming around the Moon threatens the outcome of the Plan!*

## ONE

**D**idrik was much like his master Baltasar—that is, a bit mundane. Although Assistants were meant to be, *built* to be, diligent, Baltasar had once watched Didrik prepare a Clay with such painfully routine diligence that he had teased, “Didrik, we’re both so dull. Give the Clay a different shape. Let’s be a *little* frivolous.”

For a moment Didrik was vexed. He had no idea what shape to choose. He also feared that any significant topological divergence might hinder the receptivity of the Clay. But Baltasar had given his thought, and Didrik was obedient. Prudently and unimaginatively—but frivolously indeed—Didrik etched a crude face in the Clay.

“Who is that, Didrik?”

“You, *herra*.”

And this so amused his master that now, every time, before sealing the Clay in a schism field, Didrik added a visage of Baltasar.

Tickled by his own artistry, Didrik improved the faces, diligently ensuring that they bore every of Baltasar’s wrinkles. In time he varied the fidelity of his etching, without straying too far from the recognizable, for Baltasar claimed that each Clay, so variably etched, imparted a different and intriguing sensation as his Form arrived. Baltasar’s claim may have been merely indulgent. He had probably felt no differently when the Clay was a mundane lump. But Didrik could appreciate Baltasar’s kindness.

**B**altasar’s arrival was precisely scheduled. It had to be. There could be no communication with ipsi-time. A Mender could not be beckoned to ur-time; neither could he warn anyone he was coming. He showed up when he was scheduled to show up. Even if he had nothing to report, nor any desire to talk or visit, at least he had to confirm he was still alive.

The clock on the wall, its second hand silently sweeping, told Didrik that one minute remained. The clock, of course, was a human decoration. The universe did not pulse on anthropic minutes or seconds. In Didrik's head, the true countdown proceeded, ticking down the temporal units of quantum action—the briefest action, that is, perceivable by human Menders and enumerable by mechanical Assistants.

The schism field, being discontinuous with local space, prevented any sight of Baltasar's arrival. Upon the tick to zero, unseen by Didrik, the Clay received Baltasar's Form—and became Baltasar. Unneeded mass was dissipated into the field, and the field vanished. Baltasar dropped to the ample cushions.

He groaned as he stood, not from any pain, but because that's what old men did. He was clothed only by his great beard, which reached left, right, and down, a grey tumble uncombed. "Didrik, my boy," he called amiably, his hand out to receive his garments.

Didrik, though strictly sexless, had indeed been formed to behave and appear as male and, being a machine, was ageless and still like a youth. He waited respectfully as a boy while aged Baltasar donned blouse, trousers, and robe.

Didrik said, "How have you been, *herra*?"

"Not bad, not bad."

Didrik studied him for a moment. "You look rather older."

Baltasar saw Didrik's small smile. He noted the touch of worry. "I always do. But yes, it's been a while. Eighty years."

Didrik shook his head. "You dawdle too much, *herra*."

"Not dawdling. Busy mending."

"Too many years alone."

"Oh, such a frown on your face! A few decades are hardly unprecedented. Besides, you were there the whole time. Fretting much like this."

"I'm sure."

"Didrik, my boy. Look at it this way. I've brought you a lifetime to absorb." He patted his chest, indicating the nanoscopic tattoo within his skin, the latest neural snapshot from Didrik's shell in ipsi-time: a fractal watercolor of Didrik's decanted other self.

That weakened Didrik's frown. "A lot of adventures, I hope."

Baltasar laughed. "And a lot of dull, hard work."

"As always."

“So!” Baltasar affectionately held Didrik’s face with both hands, until Didrik smiled. “What’s happened in the past month?”

“A few things. As a matter of fact, you’re just in time. Fengur will become in about an hour.”

“Is that so? He was close when I was last here.”

Didrik nodded. “He is impatient, I think. If he succeeds, he will be Minus 100. An auspicious number.”

Baltasar smiled. “No doubt. Nothing so bland as my 7.”

“But you are in the First Ten, *herra*.”

“So I am.” Baltasar headed for the door, gently taking Didrik’s elbow. “Is Oelvir dallying in ur-time?”

“No.” Didrik measured his steps so that he did not overtake Baltasar.

“Tor? Vifill?”

“No. Gissur is. And Lauritz.”

Baltasar hooted. “Gissur! I forgot he was scheduled. Let’s see him before Fengur is devoured.”

“You think Fengur will fail?”

Baltasar shrugged. “Most do. Especially the impatient. Never cared for Fengur anyhow.” He released Didrik and clapped his hands. “But let’s catch Gissur before we’re distracted by mourning.”

“Yes, *herra*.”

**G**issur was Minus 48.

Unlike Baltasar, Gissur did not let decades lapse in ipsi-time before meeting his ur-time appointments. He favored a synchronicity between ipsi and ur. Since their first meeting, twenty ur-years past, when Gissur had been fresh and fifteen, four centuries had further encrusted Baltasar’s bones, but Gissur was only thirty-five.

Didrik queried the gestalt of the Manor and located Kettil, Gissur’s Assistant. Didrik alerted Kettil to Herra Baltasar’s arrival. After a moment, Kettil replied that Herra Gissur was coming to them.

Gissur and Baltasar met in a hallway, one as broad as most in the Manor, but that day otherwise empty of Menders and Assistants.

Gissur cried out, “Gad! That beard! It will usurp you, old man!” He and Baltasar warmly embraced. Then, as Didrik had, Gissur paused to study his friend’s appearance. “Balto, either you’ve had a rough month—”

“Or I’ve been gone for eighty years.”

“Eighty! They’re adding up! We’re not immortal, Balto.”

“Ulrik promised us each an aeon. I’m still some ways off.”

“True enough.”

Didrik and Kettil stood to the side. Kettil, like Didrik, was shaped like a boy. They did not especially greet each other. They saw each other most days and, as Assistants did, chatted often enough through the gestalt. Each clasping his own hands behind his back, they placidly watched their masters.

Baltasar had encouraged Didrik always to eavesdrop, to pay attention well. In part, this was practical—to nurture Didrik’s sapience, that is, by granting him regular witness to the fuss of men. In part, it was a bit of Baltasar’s generosity. “There’s lots of wonderful blather about,” he would say, “and you, my boy, should burst your ears with it!”

That said, no Assistant, not even Didrik, was allowed to participate. They were Assistants, after all. Not Menders; not men. As Gissur and Baltasar rambled and joked—as Gissur slapped a shoulder and Baltasar rolled his eyes—as the two sought a room to sit rather than stand, Didrik was never inclined, nor expected, to contribute a remark or a laugh or an insight, or anything more than his attendance. When men joined, machines receded.

And that was just fine with Didrik.

Gissur had Kettil bring glasses and whiskey. Baltasar then amiably matched Gissur, drink for drink. Normally Baltasar would have begged off after only a couple, no matter how many Gissur would down; but, after all, it had been many years. A brief excess seemed fair.

Soon it was time for Fengur’s act. Didrik glanced at Kettil, who concurred, and they informed their masters it was time to go.

**M**ankind was hiding.

Across the Plain of Strife, between the Planes of Chaos, tucked in and huddled, mankind evaded the Wraiths and the Rippers, raised aetheric walls to frustrate the Decomposers, wore patheonic masks to mislead the Wrenchers. The Places of Men were cracks in the fractures, shifts to the right of the restlessness, inconspicuous fragments in the incoherence of the Solar System that remained.

Disorder prevailed. Half-Men and Non-Men, though they colluded and schemed, had only deluded themselves with strategies that were maniacally myopic, and over the centuries every world, from Mercury to Pluto, had been ground down, scavenged, dried, bodies rendered, pieces thrown around the Sun, which itself had been scoured and smeared, leaving the Plain, that ecliptic of debris, to be reformed hideously, there,

then here, by the battling Half-Men and Non-Men; reformed into grotesque Half-Worlds that quickly succumbed to the next surge of Disorder.

The Manor of the Menders was set far apart from other Places of Men. Like the homes and workshops it had left behind, the Manor was a misthought of the Strife, something in the corner of its eye, a tinkering of dimensions and matter that kept the Disorder aside. There was a door, however, onto the Plain of Strife. There were very, very few such doors. Mankind wisely wanted no traffic with the Things That Kill. But predators and storms must sometimes be studied, if only to improve the ways of hiding; and sometimes, though rarely, men left their places behind.

Menders did not use their door as a means to study. Menders had already conceded ur-time to the Disorder. The door of the Menders was instead used to convey an Aspirant to the Plain.

For, you see, the Three Gifts of Ulrik were dearly given. One could not become a Mender without risking life itself. Too many men would frivolously seek to be *homo divinus* if one could, upon failure, return to one's home and workshop, as if a page had merely turned. Rather, Ulrik demanded the closing of the prior book.

*Become or die.*

And not only die, but be devoured by the Strife.

**D**idrik and Kettil stood with the other Assistants at the back of the Hall. Most of the Menders in the Manor were here to observe. Ulrik was present as well, to witness what he had demanded. The others were elsewhere, busy, jaded, indifferent, generally content to learn later the outcome of Fengur's act.

A Watcher had been sent before Fengur. It had found a temporarily quiescent spot on the Plain, the stones once a foothill of Olympus Mons, the magma rivers once Io's core; and the Watcher had sent a one-way window to the Hall, presenting the spot to the gathered Menders, the scene brightly hovering in the semi-darkness. Meanwhile, as a deception, the Watcher mimicked a Thing That Kills, gushing machined bits of madness, railing against itself aloud, but within itself calmly awaiting Fengur.

A fear arose in Didrik. It was not on behalf of Fengur. Following his master's opinion, Didrik had no affection for Fengur and no especial concern for Fengur's well-being. No, Didrik simply feared the Plain of Strife. He knew his cousins would soon appear, the Half-Men and Non-



Men, the constructed and corrupted minds and beasts. Didrik was most unsettled by his *consanguinity* with the Things, with those beings who, in their infuriated conflicts, had destroyed Earth and all around. He deeply feared that he, too, was the sort of machine that would, in the end, harm Herra Baltasar.

Based on its reconnaissance, the Watcher reckoned that Fengur would have 17.45 femtoseconds before detection. Since that was nearly  $3.24 \times 10^{29}$  temporal units of quantum action, Fengur would have enough time to complete his act. It would be another 6.3 nanoseconds before the first Thing set upon Fengur. Strictly speaking, he would have many quantum moments to try again, should he initially fail; but any man who failed to sing himself into ipsi-time never benefitted from another chance. If he were still in ur-time after that first femtosecond, he was not capable after all, and should really spend those final nanoseconds simply making his peace.

Unlike a Mender, Didrik could not *perceive* a quantum action, nor the span of time commensurate with such. So at the appointed instant, Didrik did not *see* Fengur exit from the door. Instantly, however, the window was awash in bedlam, in blades and spikes, in lightning and fire. Before Didrik could conclude anything, the bodies of the Menders caught up to their perceptions, and to a man they gasped and cursed. After a moment of memorial silence, Ulrik tersely offered a eulogy both sincere and rote. The men dispersed, then, in small groups or alone. With concern, Didrik went to Baltasar, who, when he noticed Didrik, said to him stoically: "I guess we get to mourn today."

## TWO

**B**altasar spent five days in the Manor, trading stories, sharing thoughts, reporting his progress, and simply visiting with Gissur and with Lauritz, too. And then, overcome with that compulsion that generally made a Mender, Baltasar decided he must go back.

It was a rule of ur-time that the comings and goings of Menders, from the ur-perspective, be temporally *natural*. Technically a Mender could, as he lived out his ipsi-aeon, check in every second of a single ur-week, targeting each tick of the clock for each of his acknowledgements that, yes, he was still alive. But that was not the way. Instead, there was a natural rhythm to the monthly visits, to the flow of the Manor, to the dalliance of days: a deliberate sense of the *passage of time*, as time had *always* passed, always since mankind had left the Garden.

From the ipsi-perspective, however, there was no rule. Indeed, it was critical that a Mender return to ipsi-time only a quantum moment after he left. Should there be a delay, the Legion of Himself would collapse; and reconstruction, though quite doable, was also quite the bother.

So barely a moment after he had left ipsi-time, Baltasar's Form returned to his mass; and immediately upon his formation, Baltasar resumed his Legion.

Didrik (the ipsi-Didrik) genially said, "Long time no see, *herra*."

Baltasar did not reply at first. Didrik was patient. He knew that Baltasar was re-orienting to his Legion. There were 785 Baltasars across his Solar System, each of them truly *he*, in a distributed self maintained by the continuous routing of his Form: a routing so rapid that the 785 masses had no chance to cease being Baltasar before his Form had made another circuit of the Legion. This was the Second of Ulrik's Gifts, this ability to be in many places at once; this Legion of Oneself. The Third Gift, the least, was the Aeon's Age, a near-immortality; and the First Gift, the greatest, was, of course, the Song of Time.

Baltasar appeared to be catching his breath or quieting a bothersome thought. Then his attention cohered. To Didrik he seemed quite *singular*. But Baltasar was also calibrating the cloud-makers on Venus, overseeing the excavation of Mariner Valley, traveling in an FTL jumpship from Umbriel to the staging area of Neptune's foundation, ganging up with other Baltasars to suppress a worrisome coronal storm on the Sun, and wrangling tenth-model dolphins on a still-messy Earth. Such were a few of his chores and tasks across the Solar System. He was also eating a hot dog in orbit around Ganymede and sleeping on a dusty mat in a bubble on Callisto.

Baltasar had been mending so for twenty thousand years. He had flourished throughout his System, though he had begun, like every Mender, with only the Ark of Ulrik: a Clay to receive the new Mender's Form, an impersonal and unnamed Assistant, a dense honeycomb of learning, and the seeds of tools, devices, workshops, ships, unsapient robots, and great mile-wide engines and factories—not to mention Ulrik's Plan for the Resurrection of Sol and His Children (a Plan *no* Mender ever read, lest by peeking he conform his mind and channel his will and, having collapsed the Plan to the revealed possibility, perhaps ensure an *inferior* plan). The Ark had been hidden—folded out of sight; cloaked and existentially suppressed—in an unremarkable hillock at the periphery of the Plain of Strife. The Half-Men and Non-Men never found the Ark; and

a billion years after Ulrik had his Vision, when the Plain was at last without strife and bore only desolation, when every Thing That Kills had been killed, when—most sadly—mankind, and mourning, and weeping, had been torn from this valley of tears, the Ark had not faded. It remained. Ulrik had built very well.

Fully oriented, Baltasar grinned. “Hello, Didrik. Were you lonely during the long infinitesimal of my absence?”

“Always.”

“You’re a good boy, Didrik.”

“Yes, *herra*.”

**T**he jumpship resumed Newtonian velocity and, in a broad turn, closed in on Luna.

Luna was unfinished. In fact, Baltasar had not worked it for over a century. Inevitable physics might have brought it apart long ago, had there not been an Abeyance Engine nearby, casting extraordinary energies to maintain Luna just as Baltasar had left it.

Luna should, then, have been utterly unchanged. But when Baltasar released the global abeyance (leaving only targeted abeyance on the least stable portions), a very odd change was revealed.

A thin ring now orbited Luna.

Baltasar focused his instruments on the ring. At first, the oddity did not distract him from his other activities across the Solar System. He continued making mountains on Mercury, volcanic vents on Io, and icebergs on Europa. But as his astonishment grew, he transmitted data to the little station in the Pacific, where he was tinkering with the island trees. Baltasar, of course, did not need to inform his Pacific incarnation of anything. His 785 bodies were not distinct individuals, but simply node-masses for a networked Form. It was for Didrik’s sake that Baltasar had transmitted the data. “Didrik, look at this.” He called up an image on the screen.

Didrik said, “*Herra*, is that a ring?”

“Yes.”

“Luna didn’t have a ring.”

“I know.”

Didrik chuckled. “*Herra!* You changed Luna! It looks cool.”

Baltasar snorted. “No, no. I didn’t make it.”

Didrik was disappointed. “Oh. I thought you were finally being frivolous.”

“What? Oh! Well. Afraid not.” It embarrassed him that the frivolity was not his to claim.

“But wasn’t Luna in abeyance?”

“Exactly!”

“The abeyance must have failed.”

“You might think so. But near as I can tell, nothing has failed since I spun up the engine a hundred and thirteen years ago. And then there’s this.” Baltasar pointed at another screen. “The densities are neatly concentric. There’s a profound drop in particles at the edges of the annulus.”

Didrik tilted his head. “It’s not a fresh ring. It seems very settled.”

“You might even say it’s *ancient*.”

“That’s very odd.”

Baltasar crossed his arms. “To say the least.”

Didrik had joined Baltasar in the Pacific to enjoy the pristine summer warmth, which, though Earth was still under reconstruction, had nonetheless kissed the Pacific with a relaxing perfection. Since this little island was where Didrik had been when his master discovered the ring, their hut on the beach became their base of research. Obviously, Baltasar was researching the ring—*thinking* about it—no matter where in the System he was; but Didrik could only be wherever he actually stood, and he was grateful that, when all of this began, he had not been visiting his master in a frigid cave on Pluto.

The Baltasar at Luna called in a variety of robots that were otherwise idle or trivially engaged and deployed them throughout the ring. The robots, unsheathing every sensor, returned a cacophony of data, and in the jumpship Baltasar heard it all.

In the hut, Baltasar mused, “It’s boring.”

Didrik, sitting beside him, replied, “How so?”

“It’s a ring like any other. Commonplace. And its composition is dull. The materials are lunar. Which indicates it probably did not come from an interesting passer-by.”

“But what ejected the material from Luna?”

“Who knows! There’s nothing on Luna itself. No recent craters or the like.” He sighed. Suddenly tired of eyeing the displays, he stood with a grunt and paced thoughtfully. Didrik watched his master’s feet dragging slightly on the floor of the hut, scraping sand upon straw. For years now, Didrik had been noting these touches of diminished virility in Baltasar. No

one had ever claimed that the Aeon's Age was a perpetual youth; yet what would another twenty thousand years do to Baltasar's Form?

Over the coming week, Baltasar realized that his commonplace ring was growing. More to the point, it was *cohering*. As the mass increased, the volume decreased. The annulus of dust was slowly becoming a torus of stone.

While the torus was still an implication, still entwined with fractures and clouds, Baltasar decided to resume the abeyance, to confirm that it truly had no effect on the ring. For a day, the Engine droned and held all of Luna unmoving, unchanging. When Baltasar ended the abeyance, he saw that the ring had indifferently gained a day's unhampered growth.

Immunity to abeyance—a force ostensibly above forces—was simply impossible.

So far as anyone knew, of course.

Baltasar's mind was truly preoccupied. Many of him set down his tools and sat, pondering. On the island he reclined. The sun was setting; the heat departed. He closed his eyes in thought. He was lulled by the surf. His body slipped into sleep. For an instant. As he cycled back from his Legion, he jerked awake in irritation. "Tired old man," he muttered.

He sat up. "Didrik!"

Didrik scurried to his side. "Yes, *herra*."

"My thoughts are too wild. This ring *bothers* me. It's *wrong*. I need to figure it out before it completes. Because it *is* completing, Didrik. It's approaching some end. And it's outrunning me. I need more time." He waved his hand at the heavens. "Get home. I'm going to ur."

Home was the site of Ulrik's Ark. Baltasar's primary residence was there. So was his primary body, the one that had come from Ulrik's Clay. It was the same for every Mender. Home was the point of transition to and from ur-time.

Didrik didn't *need* to be there. There was, however, a certain prudence to having an Assistant on hand; and a certain comfort to Didrik's greeting when Baltasar returned.

It didn't take long for Didrik to get home. Even when the jumpship was not in FTL, Didrik could push its velocity to a degree that would have liquefied someone actually human. Once there, he tweaked Baltasar's Form with two tattoos of encoded data: the usual neural snapshot of Didrik, and then everything about the ring, which Baltasar had collected as Didrik traveled. Within a few hours of Baltasar's decision to go, he was poised to sing himself out of ipsi-time.

“Well, my boy, I may actually be in ur for a while.”

“Yes, *herra*. I’ll see you in a moment.”

Baltasar headed to his next appointment in ur-time. He arrived uneventfully.

“*Herra!* It’s good to see you.”

Didrik’s usual worried look, that mother-hen gloss on his face, was sharper this time; and his usual happiness at seeing his master was flush with a heartfelt relief.

“Didrik, my boy. Is something up?”

“Yes, *herra*.”

“Does it involve a mysterious ring?”

“Yes. Is it in your time, too?”

“Oh, yes. Who else has seen it?”

“Everyone so far.”

Baltasar sighed. The ring was even more wrong than he had suspected.

### THREE

In an age of clockworks ascendant, with a mechanistic frisson, many men concluded that God is an Engineer and the universe His Colossal Engine. And indeed the universe is a thing of directed forces, of moving parts, of functions and consequences; a thing deeply constructed and lawful. Many more men, having called God an Engineer, then critiqued the Engine, seeing in it too many shortcomings, marveling at its misalignments, wondering at the wasteful absurdities; until many concluded that the universe is a poor showing, overall, and the engineering so clearly lacking, that the universe clearly lacks an Engineer.

The mistake, however, had been to think that God is *only* an Engineer and that His goals are efficiency and optimization. The Engine has never been the end, but only the means. Too many men neglected that God is, too, among many other professions, an Artist.

What is the point of so many stars, so many nebulae? Leaving aside the impertinence that one is even capable of entirely knowing God’s *point*—as if, after all, one is an engineer superior to *God*—who among us would want fewer stars, fewer nebulae, fewer expressions of abundance and beauty?

The universe is not a Machine; it is a *Creation*.

Even more to the point, the universe does not huff and puff along, inevitable steam against inevitable pistons, God having pushed the Big Button, once upon a time. The universe is rather God's perpetual act. Creation is the Song of the Artist God, Who sings us all our existence.

Ulrik did not originate this metaphysical scheme. He was not, per se, a towering philosopher. Ironically he was an exceptional engineer. But in recognizing the Song of God, Ulrik understood that the present, this moment, this instant between before and after, is a dimensionless Note, the arrival of God's Voice to this point in His Song. The past and the future, respectively sung and unsung, are equally non-existent—except *in the score*. God knows His Song. He composed it at once, varied it as we varied ourselves, made everything tidy even as it was evident that we would, as He sang, make things ever untidy; and composition in hand, its resolution known, He sings.

Ulrik realized that men, in resembling God, might discern the Song, might spy the Score; that they might, indeed, *anticipate* the Notes. His Vision—as visions do—illuminated an approach. The Vision told Ulrik that God's Voice manifested, most materially, as the values of every constant in the cosmos; and it was the subtle alterations of these values, in their far decimal places, in their zero-sum share of the One Constant, that indicated the progress of Creation through the Score. A man could, when properly taught and truly capable, will a single constant to hold a future value—*believe wholly* in its proleptic alteration—and thereby sing himself out of tune; and a brutal assertion of cosmic equilibrium, of rightened harmony, would snap that man into the future, into the appropriate place in the Score.

Snap his *Form*, more precisely; and even more precisely, not *the* future, which, not existing, could receive no one. The man was sent to a time bound to his Form; a time that excluded all other men; a time that belonged to the self alone; an ipsi-time. Yet it was not a mere hallucination. It was very *real*. It was an echo of the real time that was to come; a willed, material image of God's intention.

An image, moreover, that—once bound—could be changed, as one could change the ur-world. An image that could, for example, be mended; wherein remedies were proved. Thus could the collective of the Menders find ways to heal the actual Plain of Strife; and back within God's proper Song, again find a place and a peace for men.

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Every Mender brought the same facts. The circumference of the ring, its composition, its degree of coherence; the same.

Whether or not the Mender had rebuilt his Luna, the ring was there. Even if the Mender had supplanted Luna with some ambitious structure—some divergence from the dull old Moon—the ring was there, whirring within. The ring, that is, was disregarding *actual* conditions of local matter and gravity and was relentlessly orbiting some *ideal* of Luna.

The ring equally disregarded the *anno ipsius*. Every Mender's ring showed the same degree of coherence and the same apparent age, whether the year was A.I. 21 (as for Gissur) or A.I. 20,034 (as for Baltasar).

The thoroughgoing sameness of the rings was especially perplexing, given that each was situated in a time *offset* from every other. Ulrik, first of the Menders, had been the first to inform the Clay in his Ark, a billion years hence; but those that followed could not target the same moment, for Ulrik was, so to speak, already there. His followers instead took the moments preceding, steadily ratcheting down the altered constant—minus 1, minus 2, minus 3, and so on, out from the  $1 \times 10^{985}$ th decimal place of Ulrik's value; subtly singing a lower tune and taking the Clay *before* Ulrik would take it.

And yet, no ring showed a temporal offset. None was just that tiny bit older than the next. Near as any Mender could measure, his ring was in *no* detail different from the others. This primary fact of *identity* suggested two impossibilities. Either the many rings were being synchronized across their ipsi frames, which were supposed to be metaphysically isolated; or there was only *one* ring, an emergent intrusion of the ur-universe into every ipsi realm.

Ulrik, Minus 0, Founder and Leader, First Among Equals and Great Visionary, was beset by his own ring and his own ignorance. No insights were granted him. And since it was his manner not to dominate the thinking of his Menders, he gave no favor to any one idea; but in large part, this was because he couldn't decide and was as befuddled as anyone else.

Whatever the case, few Menders escaped the sense that the ring was, as Baltasar had put it, *completing*. To an end. This sense might have been grounded in that human bias for seeing intention in every breath of wind. The ring reeked of intention, nonetheless.

Oelvir was saying, "Now you're just being ridiculous."



Gissur wagged a finger. "You're too caught up in the facts."

"I should say so. There's a *lot* of non-facts associated with this situation. Like those dozen pink elephants drinking chamomile tea. There's an infinite number of non-facts, I'd say. I'd like to keep things constrained a little."

"You're missing my point. You're trying to reconcile what you have on hand. The ring is mostly just a ring. The ongoing solidification is strange but not *unnatural*, as such. Most of the facts are empirically bland."

"Bland?" Oelvir scoffed. "You're neglecting that immunity to local conditions. Especially abeyance! We can see the ring, touch it, measure it, but we can't affect it. It's a closed system that is not closed."

Baltasar said, "It's like a ghost."

Gissur nodded. "Yes. That is a fact, too, and you're right, it's not bland. And then, of course, every ipsi universe has exactly the same ring. That is a truly *titillating* fact."

"But those facts," insisted Oelvir, "are the only facts we have. Just because I can't reconcile any of them, let alone explain them, doesn't mean I can ignore them."

"Oooh," drawled Gissur, twinkle in his eye, "I'm not ignoring them. Keep in mind what the facts tell us. What the *fact of the facts* tells us. Bland ring in an intriguing sort-of-closed system with a flabbergasting cross-ipsi identity? This fact tells me that far more is going on than we have observed. It's all too bizarre—"

Baltasar noted, "Gissur, we spend our days in solipsistic Solar Systems reconstructing worlds. Bizarre is our bread and butter."

Gissur tipped his glass to Baltasar and smirked. "I didn't say it was unfamiliar territory. But Balto, the ring is so bizarre that we have a *license to speculate*. We won't succeed by being strictly empirical or coldly hypothetical. We're being prodded by madness! We're *obligated* to go off on tangents."

"So long as it *is* a tangent," scolded Baltasar. "At least give us a single point of intersection."

"Exactly," cried Oelvir. "There is no fact to indicate that the ring is a *portal*. You're being ridiculous."

"A ring is a hole. A portal is a hole."

"A donut is a hole."

Gissur sat back. "You're being silly, Oelvir."

"You're not?"

Gissur grumbled. "What I'm trying to do is posit a *function* for the ring."

“As if there is a function to a storm or a mountain.”

“Isn’t there? And besides, you feel it. We all do. This ring is an artifact. It is *for something*. So maybe it’s not a portal. Maybe it’s a lens for focusing gravity. Maybe it’s a capacitor for vacuum energy.”

Baltasar said solemnly, “Maybe it’s a garrote for the Moon.”

Gissur and Oelvir stared at him. After a moment, Gissur said with a grin:

“Now *that’s* tangential thinking.”

**B**altasar had no misgivings about the way the Solar System had been arranged before the Half-Men and Non-Men had made it a ruin. Nine planets, in these orbits, with these faces, as once they were, were fine with him. He had no inclination to re-invention. Baltasar was a man perfecting the restoration of an antique.

Oelvir was the same. He had reached A.I. 31,709 without the taint of a single novelty. His Great Red Spot was great, red, and a spot. Baltasar liked this about Oelvir. They had become friends mostly due to their similar approaches as Menders. They were, you could say, co-workers quite pleasantly simpatico.

Gissur had not spent millennia doggedly rebuilding. He had an *impulse* to re-invention. His System was mostly still a desolation. True, he had been at it for only twenty years; but also he was experimenting in smallish pockets, here and there, and viewed the dead System as a *resource*, not a thing itself to be restored. He was making hollow planets and rivers of gravity and moon-sized suns. It was too early to have concluded any experiment; and it was hard to say which experiment would—in its revelation of possibility—be taken up and adapted by other Menders, and ultimately contribute to Ulrik’s Plan, but Gissur tinkered on.

Gissur was Baltasar’s friend not because they were simpatico in their approaches to work, but because they *liked* each other. There was nothing reasonable about it; nothing to point to, as such; in fact, you might suppose they’d not be friends at all. Baltasar preferred grand periods of solitude; Gissur’s limit was a month. Baltasar was a bit of a pedant, as regards circumstellar engineering; Gissur, a solecist. Baltasar accepted a little wine at dinner; Gissur portioned his whiskey by the jug. There always seemed to be a contrast between them; and yet, when all was said and done, they got along very well.

Besides, contrasts or not, there was steadily a bit of conforming, one to the other, in the manner of friends. It was, for example, much more like

Baltasar to look at the ring and imagine something as staid as a portal or a gravity lens; and much more like Gissur to find one's mind settled on ghosts and garrotes.

Baltasar wasn't sure what had settled his mind like that. He supposed it was a creeping dismay—a tickling of nightmares. The Menders, piling up their hypotheses and tangents, might look calmly on the ring as a puzzle, as some embodied function awaiting elucidation—but in their anxious hearts, never far from the Plain of Strife, every Mender suspected that something hidden—something *bad*—was being willed.

Thoughts, of course, had turned to the Things That Kill. Yes, everyone knew that such was impossible. No Half-Man or Non-Man could know the Song. Not even a true man could invade another's ipsi-time. Yet the machines had obsessively aspired to ubiquity. Had their obsessions rewarded them with an invasive voice? Quite a few Menders feared it was so. They had already set aside their puzzling and were deploying defenses in ipsi, surrounding their rings with every manner of weapon and wall, to crush or contain whatever blossomed.

Baltasar was not on a war footing. After his discussion with Gissur and Oelvir, he decided he should be. He conferred with Lauritz, whose enthusiasm as a contriving Mender had become focused, for now, on means of damage. Flush with warful ideas, Baltasar returned to ipsi.

He had been back eleven times already. The convention of monthly visits to ur had been suspended. Menders now popped into ipsi for only an ur-moment, so that the rings could be studied and facts could be shared as quickly as possible; and in a natural act of coordination, as a vestige of orderly scheduling, all Menders made their momentary trips at the same time, thrice a day.

Since Baltasar, like his fellow Menders, intended to return immediately, a Clay wasn't necessary. The mass of Baltasar's ur-body would have no chance to collapse; the presence of his Form would scarcely be interrupted. Didrik, however, like his fellow Assistants, had diligently prepared a Clay for his master. Assistants were prudent that way.

As it was, as soon as Baltasar left that evening, his mass collapsed. His body dissipated. Alarmed, Didrik turned to the schism field. The field did not vanish. It, and its Clay within, still awaited a Form. Through the gestalt of the Manor, from Kettil and every other Assistant, Didrik quickly learned that none of the Menders had returned.

And as the hours passed, it appeared—terribly—that none were returning at all.

## FOUR

**B**altasar slumped in his chair. In this chair in his ipsi home, he usually sat to read or rest; to maintain a node of respite, an oscillating flash of comfort as he cycled through the toils of his Solar System. Now, however, he was just inert. Dumbfounded and still. He was solitary. His Legion was gone. He had been unable to will his Form abroad. He had returned here from ur and, in the expected moment of orientation, had instead found himself *bottled*; and over the subsequent and frustrated femtoseconds, his node-masses were denied their sustaining Form and so collapsed.

Since the techniques of will that created the Legion were a variation on those greater techniques used in the Song of Time, Baltasar had quickly feared the worst. And indeed, neither could he will himself back to ur.

He was stuck.

Oh, he had tried to escape. He told Didrik he was stuck. “Contact the robots at Luna. And then don’t distract me.” Didrik obeyed, and then, for half an hour, Baltasar *tried*. For an aeon of quantum moments. At the end, he even recalled his fumbblings as an apprentice of Ulrik. He explicitly reiterated lessons that had become implicit habits. Yet his Form was unmoved.

So here he slumped.

“It was bait, Didrik.”

“You mean the ring, *herra*?”

“Yes. I’m certain everyone else is stuck, too. The ring was developing identically for all of us. I bet... Did the robots reply? Has the ring changed?”

“Yes, *herra*. It’s solid. With no rotation.”

“Mm-hm. Like it’s finished.” He sighed. “It might still be an active mechanism. It might be the device that is blocking my will. But I think its primary *function* was to be bait. We idiots fell into our research, into our reasonable schedules. We were all in ipsi at the same time. Baited! And the trap was sprung.”

“By whom?”

“Isn’t *that* the question? Though I’m even more worried about *why*.”

Didrik frowned. “What should we do?”

“Do?” Baltasar was not the impulsive sort. He always took a moment to let his thoughts align. But as the moments piled up, it became clear to Didrik that his master was not aligning anything. Baltasar was hesitating.

He seemed deeper in his chair. He looked at Didrik *plaintively*. “I don’t know,” he finally answered. And then, most strangely, he added: “Probably nothing.”

Didrik was bewildered. Not even after their longest periods of mistake and failure—in all their millennia of painfully undoing disorder—had his master so suddenly, so baselessly, sounded defeat. Didrik waited for his master to say something else.

But Baltasar stayed silent, and only looked empty at his idle hands.

**D**idrik was not clever, but he was loyal. Even if neither of them had a plan (as yet), he wouldn’t let his master be idle. That was not the way of the Mender. Didrik roused Baltasar and all but ordered him to gather himself for a trip to Luna. The jumpship journey would give them time to think. And think, and think hard, his master would, if Didrik had any say in it.

Baltasar was pliant. Given the prospect of confronting the ring, he even regained some of his own inner motive, and within a quarter hour had properly reversed things and was ordering Didrik to their task.

They launched.

Within another quarter hour, Baltasar recognized that their “task” was somewhat *undetailed*. Get to Luna. And? *Figure it out*. But the collective of the Menders had so far figured nothing out. Did Baltasar expect more from himself alone? Baltasar the Mundane? The Epitome of Competence? The Copier of Worlds? He who fussed and tinkered and wrought mightily, perhaps, but for all his compulsion, was little more than a Supreme Hobbyist? *Look at my Earth!* It’s the Earth. Same old.

And today, somehow, the ideas would come?

Standing at the observation screen, he lamented to Didrik, “I never come up with good ideas.”

Didrik had been reviewing navigation. His Master’s remark was out of the blue. Bemused, he turned to Baltasar—and saw, beside his master, a phantom. Didrik, whose programming was exquisitely artful, reacted perfectly as a startled boy and yelped in disbelief. His sub-systems assured his sapience that his eyes were without malfunction. The sight was true. A phantom overshadowed Baltasar. A hint of a form; a tracing on the air; a bare impression of a woman in a robe. It wavered as smoke and, after leaning on Baltasar, faded away.

Baltasar fainted. Didrik ran forward and hastily tried to steady his falling Master. Too small to catch Baltasar, he was instead pulled down by him.

They struck the deck together.

The impact woke Baltasar.

He was disoriented, however, and Didrik, who was unharmed, had to lead him to his feet and into the Captain's chair.

"I fell," said Baltasar. He half laughed.

"Are you all right, *herra*?"

"I guess..." He looked around dreamily as if unfamiliar with the deck, the instruments, the lights, and displays. Didrik saw the phantom reappear at his master's side. Baltasar's drifting eyes caught on the phantom, and he cried out. "Who are you!" The phantom leaned in, and Baltasar cringed. He scrambled out of the chair and all but hid behind Didrik. "Who is she!"

"I don't know, *herra*. I can barely see it."

"Barely see it? Barely see it! Don't lie to me!"

"I'm not—"

"You are! She's all I can see!"

Didrik turned and clamped his hands on Baltasar's arms. "What do you see?"

"Scars! Rags! Filth! She's leering at me. There's blood on her teeth. How can you not see!"

Baltasar fled. The phantom vanished.

Much as Baltasar tried to hide, the jumpship was small, and Didrik only had to query the environmental sensors. He found his master in a nook under some conduits. Baltasar was delicately patting his arms, his hands shaking, his fingers curling as if he wanted to scratch.

Didrik sat cross-legged in front of Baltasar. "*Herra*." He spoke gently.

Baltasar whispered, "My arms... all these sores..."

There were no sores.

"*Herra*. It's a patheonic assault. You're being deceived."

Baltasar looked up in bewilderment.

"There are no sores. You're not yourself. You know what they do. The Things That Kill. It must be them."

Baltasar blinked. "It can't be."

"Who else?"

"No." He scowled. "It's inevitable. I'm rotting. I'll be dead."

"*Herra*—"

Baltasar exploded, “Everyone’s dead, Didrik! Ulrik saw it. Nothing left. Why are we even doing this? We know the System is finally *lifeless*. We’re mending a corpse!”

“The refugees will return.”

“What refugees! They aren’t any.”

“You know the ships are being built—”

Baltasar laughed. “Ulrik! The fool! He sees no men a billion years from now, so he assumes the men are elsewhere, waiting to return. Right, right! We’ll send the men elsewhere! We’ll *trick* the future! We’ll make a plan for a Grand Old Mending and give those men the plan. Wait and see! Death will fail!”

Then Baltasar gasped. His eyes widened. “You! Stay away!” He jumped up, knocking his head on a conduit, pushing Didrik aside, running away.

Didrik, pushed aside, saw the phantom. The sores were false, but this phantom was not. It could not be a deception. Didrik could not be assaulted patheonically. He was not a true man. As his sub-systems insisted, the phantom was real. Though he could barely see it, he saw it.

It seemed to nod at him.

Then it vanished again.

**D**idrik confronted Baltasar across the engine core. The shielded dome, half as high as a man, did not hum or throb or even warm the air around it. Its energies could immolate them, yes, but whatever Baltasar’s current desires, he could never hammer the dome until it shattered.

Much as he tried.

In frustration he flung the hammer. He fell against the wall and sank to the deck. He had been crashing about the ship, knocking and breaking whatever he passed, Didrik in the chase. His fury had tired him. “Become or die,” he said bitterly. “That madman Ulrik. Such a terrible leap he made, that first time. A vision of clay! Just waiting for him. Oh, he *became*, all right. He became! So did I. Fengur didn’t. Dalvin. Reimar. I forget their names, now... Madmen, all of us.”

“*Herra—*”

Baltasar yelled, “And I’ve died anyway! How many times, Didrik? How many times in twenty thousand years? How many of me have been crushed, or dropped, or suffocated, or smacked with nuclear blasts? I’ve died repeatedly.” He sighed. “One more death won’t matter.”

Didrik replied carefully, "It would matter, *herra*."

Baltasar closed his eyes and held his head. He didn't notice the phantom beside him. Didrik tensed. He might have called out but, he was afraid his master would bolt again. He warily watched the phantom, which—whether or not its smile was bloody—seemed to be rather serene.

Eyes closed, Baltasar muttered, "Why did I do this to myself? Alone for centuries..."

"You weren't alone."

"No. No, I wasn't, was I." He opened and raised his eyes. He still hadn't noticed the phantom. He glared wholly at Didrik. "You've been here. Always. Why *are* you here? Why would Ulrik put one of *you* out here?"

"One of...?"

"A sapient machine! A Non-Man!"

"I—"

Baltasar growled, "You're doing this, aren't you? You're the saboteur. You're the wrecker. You've trapped me here."

"No, *herra*."

"Don't lie, Didrik. Don't lie!"

Baltasar leapt at Didrik, tripping past the engine core. Didrik hadn't the speed or the size to evade his master. Nor would he ever strike back, not even in defense. Baltasar's weight and fists fell unhindered upon the manufactured boy.

**T**he Things That Kill, although united in a rage against all, each had its favored mode, its way of raging. Currents of damage arose among them, patterns and types that, over time, were granted names by men. There were those particular men who, discerning the functional ancestries of this or that Thing, might uphold an intricate taxonomy; but the mass of men, swinging their weapons and shielding their families, named the monsters succinctly, Wraith and Ripper and all the terrible rest.

The taxonomists did proceed from a fact, that the Things had not always been Killers—though many, to be sure, had been made from the first to assist in ancient wars. The sapience of a Non-Man was in itself benign. Indeed, it could, in its fullness, complement the sapience of a true man—especially a man otherwise bereft of company, toiling in ipsi-time. Such was Ulrik's rationale.



That rationale was weak to most people, who pointed, quite justly, at the Plain of Strife—that greatest consequence of inhuman thought—and passionately doubted Ulrik's ability to tame dozens of supposedly harmless Assistants. But in the end, the Manor was placed far from all other Places of Men. The ipsi realms were intrinsically and utterly separate. And Ulrik, as a prophet, was nothing if not stubborn. He would have his Assistants because his Vision had said he would.

As it was, not even Ulrik knew—not yet, anyhow—why he would truly put a Non-Man in his Ark.

One species of Thing wielded its sapience to disorder the minds of men. The essence of a man is immaterial, but the wholeness of a man necessitates matter; and his mind is susceptible to the manipulations of electrons. There was a kind of Non-Man that could traverse and alter the energetic fields of the brain, redesigning its paths and wrenching its disposition.

Didrik was not only an Assistant.

He was also a Wrencher.

But unlike his cousins, he did not despise men. He profoundly could never hate Herra Baltasar. It was not even panic that moved him. The core of him recognized the moment. Before Didrik could be pummeled, he simply acted on Baltasar. His patheonic intrusion was not an assault but a great solicitude.

Didrik found the imbalances in his master's mind. He discerned the alien alterations. He identified every fluctuating corruption.

He modeled what he perceived.

For many nanoseconds, he pondered his model. Per the evolved experiences of his wrenching ancestors, Didrik understood that the energies distorting his master's thoughts were consistent with what men described as *the destruction of hope*. Didrik could sympathize with this notion, given the sophistication of his own algorithms. Be that as it may, he was able to devise a suite of patheonic countermeasures. He imposed on Baltasar's brain a cascading energetic fractal of targeted nullifications.

Or you could say that Didrik shouted down the diabolical whispers. He outshone the pall of surrender. He washed away the bitterness. He tore the scales from his master's eyes.

Staggered by Didrik's intrusion, Baltasar thudded into Didrik. Both tumbled. Didrik, rising quickly, turned to help his master.

The phantom was standing by Baltasar.

Baltasar, confused, noticed the phantom now and looked upon it with rising eyes. His confusion vanished. "Didrik," he whispered in wonderment, "I was so wrong. She's beautiful. Do you see? She's clothed with the sun, the moon at her feet. Look at the stars in her crown!"

Didrik saw none of that. The phantom, to him, was mist. But he easily shared in his master's happiness.

**B**altasar and Didrik sat facing each other, both cross-legged on the deck. The phantom had left. Didrik had confessed to the wrenching. He scrutinized his master. Baltasar was steady. The great beard seemed to blanket Baltasar in a flourishing of serenity.

"*Herra*," said Didrik, his voice subdued. "I didn't alter you. I would never do that. I only erased the attacking patterns."

"You cleared my head."

"Yes."

"Cleansed my heart."

Didrik narrowed his eyes uncertainly. "I can't say."

"I stopped despairing, at least."

"I restored your mental order."

Baltasar smirked. "What a surprising Assistant you are."

Didrik trembled. "*Herra*. I didn't know I was a Wrencher."

"You're not," answered Baltasar firmly. "You're Didrik."

"But—"

"My boy. Ulrik gave you a skill. One that was ready when needed. That's all."

"I guess."

"Such a fretful boy! Rejoice! You saved me." He harrumphed. "Though I guess I'm not entirely safe. I'm still trapped. We need to figure a way out. Hm. How far are we from Luna?"

"Ten minutes."

Baltasar paused. "Tell me, then. You saw her?"

"Not as you did."

"Oh?"

"Hazy. A shape."

"But real?"

"You weren't hallucinating her existence."

"I didn't think so. Though I was made to believe she was vile. Your intervention ended that lie. She was finally able to comfort me."

“What did she say?”

“She didn’t say anything. It was all in her manner. Her presence... You really saw nothing—*vivid*?”

“Perhaps my neural structures are inadequate.”

Baltasar chuckled. “My poor Pinocchio!”

“Your description of her—”

“Oh, I know. I’m an educated man, Didrik. I know which Virgin I beheld. And assuming she is indeed whom she resembles—and right now I won’t doubt it—our Adversary may be greater than any Solar System full of lunatic machines.”

“How do we fight *that*?”

“By fighting it. We know at least Ulrik gets out of this mess.”

“Because the Ark is there.”

“Right. And you were in it, there to preserve me.”

“Why wasn’t I there to *warn* you?”

“Pointless. No warning could exist if the attack didn’t happen.”

Didrik frowned. “Still. Ulrik knew to make the Assistant a Wrencher because *his* Assistant wrenched him back to sanity.”

“Ha! No doubt.”

“The causality is—”

“Twisted?” Baltasar smiled. “Which came first, eh? Ah, Didrik. The song is already written, beginning to end. We only need to add our voices.” He clapped Didrik’s knees. “Stay in hope, my boy! Let’s get to it.”

“Yes, *herra*.”

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*David Skinner loves science fiction. He has been writing steadily since he was twelve. Notable novels are **The Wrecker** and **The Giant’s Walk**. He has stories in *StoryHack*, *Stupefying Stories*, and *Planetary Pluto*. He blogs at [www.davidskinner.biz](http://www.davidskinner.biz).*

# The Sarcomancer

By DONALD JACOB UITVLUGT

*Zain, priest of the old gods, continues his trek across Leng in search of his brother and comes across a destitute village that has been deprived of its young by a mad flesh-crafting sorcerer!*

The north wind cut through Zain's robes, but he ignored it. The flesh was irrelevant. His geas was all.<sup>[1]</sup>

He glanced behind him. Meleta, the young woman who followed him, was now a dozen paces back, her arms wrapped around her torso for what warmth they could provide. She might have as well been naked in her diaphanous blue shift. He had no doubt that blisters covered her feet. Well, he had not asked her to follow him.

He waited for her to catch up and passed her a lizard-skin filled with water. She drank in great gulps, water splashing on her skin.

"We must find you warmer clothes."

The young woman nodded, still too winded to speak. Zain drew his long obsidian dagger from his belt and pulled its blade against the scarred palm of his left hand. He balled his fist until blood flowed freely from the wound and then grasped his staff. He ignored the look on the young woman's face and closed his eyes. He muttered a phrase in a language older than humanity, and the wood of his staff drank in his blood. He swept the head of his staff in a slow arc, tracing the horizon.

There. The crystals embedded in the head of the staff glowed a pale blue. He made the sweep again with the same results. Just to the east of northeast. He snapped open his eyes. His hand was no longer bleeding.

"Follow."

The sere grass tugged at his ankles as he walked. Or perhaps the resistance lay only in his mind, a manifestation of guilt for deviating from his quest, even for a moment. Even for an act of kindness. But

Zain was the master of his animal nature, not the other way around. The sun was more than three-quarters of the way across the sky when a collection of dark shapes appeared in the direction his staff had indicated. The forms gradually resolved into the outlying huts of a village. Simple wattle and thatch, if Zain saw right, but that was all the better for his purposes. A more developed settlement would have more influence of the so-called Masters of Leng.

A soft cry sounded behind him. His companion had collapsed into the grass. A smile played at the corners of his mouth, though Zain himself was unsure of the emotions wrapped up in the expression. He backtracked and knelt by the girl, pausing to rub some warmth into her cold wrists.

“I didn’t ask for your help.”

The anger in her eyes was the only warmth in the girl’s system. A glance told him that her feet were worse than he had feared. Open sores oozed serum and blood.

“We haven’t much further to go for today.”

Against her protests, he lifted her into his arms. She was light—too light for the burden she carried within, that of his brother’s child. He paused only to tuck his staff under his arm and made his way to the village as quickly as he could.

By the time he reached it, he was breathing heavily, and she had fallen asleep in his arms. His slow advance had not gone unnoticed. A welcoming party of sorts stood on the dirt path that led through the heart of the village. A hand’s count of young men flanked a greybeard, likely the village headman. One youth bore a short dagger, more green than bronze. The others had only farming implements or sticks. The village elder took in the condition of the young woman and Zain’s travel-stained robes in a single, dismissive glance. Then he saw the staff.

He threw himself to his knees and pressed his forehead to the ground. After an awkward pause, the young men knelt as well, though none prostrated himself.

The headman still did not raise his head as he spoke. “This humble one bids you welcome to the village of Salileh, Great Hieros.”

One of Zain's eyebrows quirked. A village that still followed the old ways, so deep in Leng? He accepted the man's veneration with a nod of his head.

"Arise, faithful servants of the Old Ones. My companion and I have need of shelter and sustenance this evening. In exchange, I offer the blessings of the Powers and whatever small service I might provide you."

"As you wish, so shall it be done, Hieros." The headman rose and motioned for one of the young men to relieve Zain of the girl.

"I shall carry her." He surprised himself at the heat in his voice, but none dared gainsay him.

The elder led them into the village, the youth now a flanking escort. The other villagers looked up from their occupations to gaze at them as they passed, the men with shadowed, suspicious eyes, the women with eyes red from weeping.

Zain frowned. Since the cold of the new false gods had descended on Leng, life could not have been easy here. Yet the looks he and the girl earned spoke of more than a hard life. He scanned the fields beyond the village. Ripe grain weighed down the heads of every stalk, yet still the fields sat unharvested. Something was deeply wrong here.

The headman led them to a hut slightly larger than the others, to which someone had added two additional shelters in a most inelegant fashion.

"Your servant's humble lodging," the headman said with a bow. "I bid you welcome. Please bring your...consort inside." His hesitation for the right word cost him less than a moment. Zain did not correct the misunderstanding. "The rest of you, return to your women."

The young men departed, some with questioning looks, others showing darker emotions. Zain pushed the thought of them aside as he followed the headman past the skin door flap into his dwelling. It was much as he had expected, central hearth, possessions arranged along the walls. In spite of the packed dirt floor, it was cleaner than other such dwellings that Zain had seen. A mark in the headman's favor.

The elder clapped his hands. "Women! Come greet our honored guest!"

A woman not quite as old as the headman came from a covered opening on the left side of the hut. Two women much younger came from a similar doorway on the right. Zain heard no sounds that would indicate the presence of children. Odd.

“My third wife is a healer.” The elder indicated one of the younger women with his chin. “She will care for your consort.”

The healer indicated a pile of furs near the hearth. Zain laid the girl in his arms gently on the furs. He studied her unconscious form while he spoke to the healer.

“She suffers from exhaustion and exposure. Do what you can for her.”

Before the woman could respond, a shriek rang out in the close confines of the hut. Zain turned toward the source of the sound, only to find himself attacked by a snarling mass of hair and claws. Small hands wrapped around his throat with impossible strength. His muscles strained with the effort of keeping them from crushing his windpipe.

“Death! Black death! Not welcome here!”

The combined effort of the headman and his women pulled the thing from Zain at last. The healer forced a liquid between its lips, and it collapsed into the trembling form of a young woman, scarcely older than Zain’s companion.

The headman threw himself onto the floor, forehead pressed to the dirt. “This one offers his most humble apologies, Hieros. My fourth wife is gods-touched. She doesn’t know what she’s saying.”

Zain rubbed at his neck. The stares of the men. The lack of children. Now this. “I think you should explain what is going on in this village.”

The headman trembled. It was his first wife who answered for him. “It’s the sarcomancer. He’s taken our children.”

Zain’s left eyebrow quirked. “A sarcomancer?” A human engaged in the flesh-shaping magics of the Elder Ones?

“It’s true, Hieros,” said the headman, his face still pressed to the floor. “He came from the hills with his monsters and demanded our children. We could not stop him.”

Zain regarded the elder and his wives for a moment. “It seems I now know what service I can render you in exchange for your

hospitality.”

After the headman’s third wife made Meleta comfortable, the household fed him a thick barley stew flavored with dried meat of uncertain provenance. He slept in the headman’s own spot near the hearth and woke from a dreamless sleep before first light. With a parting glance at his sleeping companion, Zain took up his dagger and staff and left the village.

He took a moment to orient himself by the remaining stars and set off walking at a steady but unhurried pace. As he walked, he pondered the additional tidbits of information he had gathered from the headman last night. A band of soldiers had come from the hills into which he now walked. They laid claim to the village’s children in the name of the Sarcomancer. They had slain the few villagers who had dared to stand up to them and had marched off with the children in the direction from which they had come.

“Did anything stand out in their appearance?”

“Monsters, they were. As if each of them had been afflicted by a different pox. That was how we knew they spoke truly of the Sarcomancer.” The headman rubbed his bald spot. “Though truth be told, Hieros, we were more concerned about their swords than their looks. Not bronze nor iron, but a material I’ve never seen before.”

Zain frowned. A very disciplined band of warriors it had to be, for them to take only the children and no food or other pleasure. And he did not know the meaning of these weapons from a material unfamiliar to the headman. The village elder said they headed east with their captives, so Zain went east.

The scar on his left palm throbbed. He adjusted his grip on his staff, but the pain did not subside. He was traveling farther and farther from the goal of his quest. His blood oath was reminding him of that fact with every step.

Yet was there not injustice here as well? And if the villagers could aid Meleta, was he not duty-bound to aid them as best he could? All his reasoning did nothing to stop the goading of the geas. It would never stop until his brother died by his hand.

He ignored the pain. As he walked, rolling valleys gave way to rocky hills, grasslands to woods. Something nuzzled at the back of Zain’s mind, but it took him several hours to realize what disturbed



him as he journeyed. In spite of the bitter cold, it was the season of harvest in these parts. The grass should have been full of animal sounds. But there was nothing. No insect humming. No birds or flying lizards in the trees. No carrion lizards in the underbrush. Nothing.

“Halt!”

Though it sounded like the tongue of the speaker was numb, Zain froze at the command. His fingers flexed around his staff, and he cursed himself mentally. He should not have let his guard down.

“Turn around. Slowly.”

He did as ordered and hoped that his disgust at what he saw did not show. A dozen or so...men faced him, each brandishing weapons with an odd ivory hue. None of them came as high as his shoulders, and at first he thought them a particularly hideous race of troglodytes. And then the creatures drew closer.

The stench was the first thing that struck him. If they had approached with the wind, they would not have caught him at all. It smelled as if a slaughtered beast had been left in the sun to stew in its own offal. Their bodies bore peculiar mismatches: arms too long for torsos, fingers too short for hands. The body parts of the leader showed several different skin tones.

And each of them was dying. Limbs trembled. Oozing cankers disfigured every face. If the skin started to melt or slough off them as they stood around him, Zain would not have been surprised.

“Take me to your master.”

Several of them hissed at this. “He mocks us. Kill him. We’ve not yet eaten today.”

Zain tapped the butt of his staff on the ground. The crystals on the head glowed their preternatural blue, and the creatures drew back.

“Fools! Do you think I come unbidden to this country? I am expected. Take me to the sarcomancer. Now!”

The creatures looked at each other, fear and indecision playing over their faces. “The master will know what to do with him,” the leader said at last. He turned to Zain. “Try to flee, and we will kill you.”

Zain smiled a mirthless smile. “You might try.”

Twisted fingers gestured, and half of the monstrous warriors fell in behind Zain, half marched before him as they proceeded deeper into the hills. They did not speak to him, though he caught a few hungry glances from one of the advocates for cannibalism. He spoke no further with them. These were only underlings.

His morbid curiosity aroused, he could not help but study them furtively as they walked. He almost laughed at his own stupidity as he realized the reason for the peculiar color of their weapons. Each was made from bone. Spears and swords from femurs, scimitars and curved daggers from distended ribs. Yet the bones showed no sign of flaking as a flint weapon would, nor hammer marks as appeared on bronze. He could not shake the notion that they had been grown into their martial shapes.

The creatures knew they were dying. Zain was certain of this. And they resented the soundness of his body. If his lifeblood could have prolonged their existence for an hour, they would have drained him in a moment.

The trees grew denser and more twisted as they moved deeper into the hills. Several times the path forced them to walk single file as it wound around great, gnarled trunks. At last, they came to a cave.

“In.” The tip of the creature’s spear did not quite touch Zain’s back. He bent almost double to walk through the entrance. It was dark only for a couple hundred paces, and then the tunnel came to an end. He stopped in wonder at the view that opened before him.

He had seen cities of the Elder Ones before. Certainly when pool-scrying with his mother and in lucid dreams granted by the gods. He had even visited an abandoned and ruined coastal outpost in his youth. Seeing eons-old ruins or even pristine visions in the mind’s eye did not prepare him for what stood here.

This had to have been only a forward outpost of some sort, or perhaps the retreat of an antisocial individual. But even this single complex of buildings was constructed on the cyclopean scale of the Elder Ones. A network of ramps spread out from a central tower at impossible geometries. Doorways or windows or openings of less obvious purposes could have admitted several handfuls of men Zain’s size. The buildings seemed solid stone, but they had an aspect of having been grown in place rather than built from blocks or

even carved from the surrounding rock. And to think that this had stood for millennia longer than the human species had existed.

“Forward.” This time the creature did prod Zain with his spear. Perhaps familiarity had dulled his escort to the wonder of where they stood. Perhaps they were too dull-witted to realize what it signified.

They marched him up one of the winding ramps into a wide hall filled with torches. A man sat on a low stone block at the far end of the hall. Zain supposed that he intended the effect to be regal. To his eye, he seemed but a child trying to fit in his father’s chair and failing.

“Master, we found this one skulking about the hills. He says you invited him.” The tone of voice and posture of the creature was not that of a subordinate reporting to a superior officer, but of a hunting lizard that would bite its owner were it not scared of the whip.

The man on the block leaned forward, and Zain saw him clearly for the first time. Long white hair fell back from a high forehead, held in place with an ivory coronet that seemed to be made of braided bone. What could be seen of his frame seemed skeletal, and his face seemed as if dried human skin had been stretched over a skull. His robes were the rust browns of dried blood.

The most alive part of the man was his eyes. These studied Zain intently, and he recognized the glow of insanity within them. At last, the man smiled. This only strengthened his resemblance to a skull.

“Yes, yes. I’ve been expecting him. Don’t you recognize a high priest of the old gods?”

Zain inclined his head in acknowledgement of the title, though in fact, he had not received the final degree of initiation due to his mother’s murder.

The man on the stone block rose to his feet. He was taller even than Zain, though a strong wind would have snapped him in half like a dry branch. He spread his arms wide. “You are welcome here in this manor. We have much to discuss, you and I.”

Zain’s eyebrow quirked, but he bowed his torso. “At your convenience, sirrah.”

The sarcomancer’s eyes darted around. “Not here. Our...mutual enemy has spies everywhere.” His gaze fell on his monstrous soldiers. “What are you still doing here? Begone! At your posts!”

The creatures shuffled off to the shadows, muttering under their breaths. The sarcomancer caught words Zain had not.

“Fine. Fine. One cup each from the feed vats. But no more!”

While Zain pondered what exactly a “feed vat” might be, the sarcomancer approached and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Come, my friend!”

The sarcomancer led him to a side chamber curtained off from the reception hall with strands of human teeth. They clattered in a parody of laughter as the pair passed through.

At the center of the chamber beyond stood a large sphere, perhaps the height of his host, rotating slowly via some unseen mechanism. It took Zain a moment to realize that the sphere was a fabrication of the sarcomancer’s art. The pallid reds were living flesh, the large patches of dark red, blood, the ivory protrusions, bone. There were fine networks of bile and other bodily fluids throughout the flesh. Closer observation revealed the entire sphere to be enveloped in a transparent membrane. Skin.

Zain stood so fascinated by the construction of the half-living abomination before him that it took him longer than it should have for him to realize what it was: a representation of the world, complete with land, seas, mountains, and rivers.

The sarcomancer ran his hand over the orb, caressing its surface like a man might stroke the hair of a favored child. The flesh and fluids rippled at his touch. “Beautiful, isn’t it?” The globe spun until the northern continent stood prominent. A large black canker disfigured the center. Leng. “Save for the plague that threatens us.”

Though Zain had no love for the so-called Masters of Leng and their abolishing of the old ways, he knew that they only possessed what dominion they had by the indulgence of the Powers. Had They wished, They could remove the creatures more easily than a man could rid himself of lice. But Zain was curious how the sarcomancer’s mind ran.

“A dark plague indeed. But what can be done?”

The sarcomancer’s insane smile lit his face again. “I will show you.”

He led the way to a large circular chamber. A web of stone walkways covered the floor. Zain could not avoid the thought that

somewhere in the room must lurk a giant spider. Or perhaps he was speaking with it. Down in the gaps in the web stood great stone vats. Zain blinked when he saw the first and leaned in for a closer look.

“Are those what I think they are?”

Within the stone vat below seethed and roiled a viscous black liquid, thicker than blood, thicker than oil. As the liquid churned, chunks of matter bobbed to the surface and were sucked down again. Some of these chunks were vague and ill-defined. Others were clearly lungs, legs, livers, eyeballs.

An ichorous bubble popped and belched forth a noxious odor. The same stench of diseased and decaying flesh that marked the sarcomancer’s servitors.

The other man cackled in delight at Zain’s realization. “Indeed. The flesh vats of the Elder Ones. They will be the source of our triumph. The people of Leng have grown too accustomed to the rule of those foul creatures from the stars. They would never have the stomach to overthrow their masters. But if we could grow our own army...”

The exact nature of the man’s madness was becoming more and more clear. Zain gave a pointed glance over his shoulder at the doorway through which they had come. “Not, I trust, composed of such creatures as were my former...escorts.”

The other man waved his hand dismissively. “The gods forbid! Those were merely the first abortive trials. They are mayflies. Ephemerae.” He sidled closer to Zain, who made a careful effort not to flinch. “With your knowledge of the old ways and your secret arts, I can at last perfect my formulae, and our host will be invincible!”

Zain took a step away from the sarcomancer. “I worry that you over-estimate my humble abilities.”

“Nonsense.” He grew still for a moment, his gaze fixed on the gurgling vessels of his art. At last, he shook his head. “But you must be hungry and tired after your long journey. Share my supper. Rest. Our great work begins tomorrow.”

Zain inclined his head. “You are ever the most gracious host. I don’t see how I could refuse.”

The sarcomancer cackled. “No, you can’t, can you?”

He led Zain to a shadowy chamber where a low table was set with covered dishes. Zain half-expected vermin to be in the food, but as in the forest, there was no fauna here. Perhaps all local animal matter had already found its way into the sarcomancer's vats.

His host, belying his skeletal frame, heaped his own plate full of fruit, bread, cheeses, and cold slices of meat. Zain took a little from each category.

"Eat. Eat. Don't worry. I prepared all this with my own hands."

Zain smiled and made a show of eating a slice of meat, though he was careful not to let the least portion pass his lips. It smelled too much of his host's vats. "You are too kind."

"Not at all." He filled a goblet from a nearby pitcher and held it out to his guest. "Try this. I promise you have tasted nothing like it."

Zain held up a hand. "Alas, I cannot. I am under a vow to abstain until I have fulfilled a certain service to the gods." He had liked neither the viscosity of the liquid as it poured nor its red-brown color.

"Your loss." He pulled the cup back and drank deeply, smacking his lips. "The secret of eternal youth, this."

Zain inclined his head. "I defer to your expert knowledge, but still, I must abstain."

A silence fell upon the table. Zain made every effort to appear to take his fill while consuming as little of the food as possible. His host studied him with his burning eyes, eating very little from his heaping plate but refilling his glass with the vile liquid several times. At last, he rose.

"The hour grows late. I will see you to your chamber. Tomorrow, our work can begin in earnest."

"Of course."

He rose and followed the sarcomancer down a series of ramps built for creatures much larger than humans. Their scale again made Zain consider what a fleeting thing humanity was. Mayflies, to use his host's word. Even with his obvious talent for the flesh-shaping arts of the Elder Ones, the sarcomancer was a delusional child if he thought even an army of his creatures could unseat the so-called Masters of Leng.

"Here we are." The sarcomancer stood before a door that bore an uncomfortable resemblance to that of a dungeon cell. "You will find

lamps and strikers within. You will forgive me if I lock you in tonight. Some of my earlier efforts at my art escaped before I could return their component parts to the vats. I would not want any harm to befall you during the night.”

“You are indeed a most thoughtful host. I assume that you will collect me in the morning, and we can begin our collaboration?”

“As you say. Until then, pleasant dreams.”

The sound of the key setting the lock had a finality about it that Zain did not at all like. The sarcomancer’s footsteps receded, and Zain lit the three small lamps, trying hard not to imagine the source of their tallow fuel. Their sputtering light revealed a low cot and a stone shelf holding a pitcher and washbowl. Zain had slept in worse quarters, but he did not intend to do any sleeping tonight.

He listened at the door for a moment. He thought he heard a faint whistling sound for an instant, but it passed. Perhaps it was no more than a stray breeze curling around the corridors of the Elder Ones. Zain drew his dagger. The blade cut into his palm, and he pressed the wound against the keyhole. He closed his eyes and concentrated. Perspiration beaded on his brow. At last, the tumblers within the lock caught and released the bolt.

Zain collected his staff and one of the lamps. He took a moment to orient himself in the corridor. He had no sign that his goal was in any of the chambers he had passed with his host, so he must press onward.

The ramps curled down in a gentle spiral. The farther Zain went, the rougher the passage became; the smooth lines of the Elder One’s architecture were marred by rough patches and holes. In some places, it seemed as if an unimaginably powerful acid had eaten away the stone. Perhaps signs of the sarcomancer trying to exterminate some of his more stubborn abominations, but Zain decided against that thought. The damage seemed ancient.

A cry brought him to the present, the sound not quite a shout, not quite a scream. Zain hurried forward, passing more chambers like his cell, all dark within. Another cry rang out, this time colored with pain. Zain rounded a final corner and paused.

It was hard to apprehend the thing before him, and Zain was not sure whether it was due to the flickering light or the creature’s own

uncertain construction. It was as if someone had taken pieces from a handful of charnel houses, pressed them together as if they were clay, and infused them with an imitation of life. A host of arms and hands propelled the thing along the floor. Tongues slobbered from several dozen mouths. Breath moved through more nostrils than Zain could count, the thing breathing with an eerie whistle. A sound he had already heard this evening.

In three of its arms, the thing held a child, having drawn it through a window in a nearby door. The same number of hands were about the child's ankles, trying to pull it back to the chamber.

"Enough!" Zain had no idea whether the thing had a way to hear him, but he thumped the butt of his staff on the stone floor. Several of the mouths on the thing opened, and tongues longer than Zain's arm snaked out, as if they could taste him in the air.

Zain flung his lamp at the thing, uttering a small cantrip as he did so. The lamp shattered, and an instant later, the thing burst into flames. An inhuman screech rang out from every mouth, and it let go of the child as its limbs flailed and its great mass rolled around on the floor trying to put out the fire. It rolled away, Zain's magic ensuring that the fire burned hot and true.

Zain grasped his staff and took a slow breath. The lateness of the hour was telling on his system, but he willed strength into tired limbs. A dribble of blood illuminated the crystals atop his staff. More blood unlocked the door.

A lad perhaps thirteen summers pushed his way out, not to dash away, but to check on the child on the floor. The boy let out a strangled cry and turned to Zain.

"Do you have any more fire?"

Zain cocked his head, studying the lad. "Perhaps."

"Then burn Essa's body. I don't want him to have her." There was no need to specify who "he" was.

Zain reopened the wound in his palm, feeding more blood into his ever-hungry staff. He focused his will, and blue flame flew from the crystals to engulf the dead girl. The boy watched the flame, silent but tears streaming down his face.

After a long pause, Zain addressed the lad. "We must hurry. Your father sent me to return you to Salileh." For the family resemblance



was too strong. This lad could be no other than the headman's son. "And though I hope I killed that thing, I cannot be certain."

The boy shook his head. "The Rollers are tough. It'll be back. Or worse things will be drawn to it as it burns."

He led Zain to the door of the chamber. Perhaps two, no more than three, dozen children crowded in the cell. He knew the troops of the sarcomancer had carried off many more. As the headman's son ushered them out, Zain saw that some were missing arms, several an eye or a nose. Two limped along without a leg, helped on by their companions.

"Parts," the boy said in response to Zain's look. "He said he needed parts for some plan of his."

Those simple words brought the nightmares of this evening home in a way that nothing else had. "We are leaving. All of us."

Though Zain had only the roughest sense of the layout of the Elder Ones' tower, his geas helped him here, in that it drew him ever towards his brother, and thus away from this place. Though the curving ramps made the journey easier than it could have been for the injured, they moved slowly. They had not gone far from the children's cell when the whistle of a Roller sounded. More whistles answered, from another direction. The sarcomancer's abominations knew they were in the corridor.

Zain fed more still more blood to his staff. The crystals glowed brighter until a sphere of blue light enveloped the entire group. "Stay within the light," he warned the children. "Nothing can harm you if you remain within its protection." Several children cast nervous glances at him, but they pulled closer together. No matter that they feared him, so long as they were safe. He only hoped that he had strength enough to keep his promise.

The whistling grew louder and louder, and then cut off abruptly. Zain found the silence even more unnerving, nor did he much like the sound that came after, like the whisper of a giant knife being drawn against a whetstone.

"In front of me. Now."

The children massed on one side of the corridor, and Zain turned to face the new threat, the headman's son standing right beside him. Someone giggled. Zain glanced back, thinking nerves had gotten to

one of the children, but it was none of them. The giggle sounded again, the sound growing ever more insane. At last, their stalker appeared.

It took Zain a moment to realize there were two creatures rather than one. The first perhaps had been designed on the model of a serpent or centipede, but instead of insectile legs, dozens of human arms propelled it across the floor. He saw neither eyes nor nose on the blunt front end of the creature, only a slavering mouth full of teeth.

The piping laugh grew louder, unnerving Zain with its similarity to a sound he could not immediately place. A dwarfed homunculus sat on the neck of the serpentine thing, apparently directing its hunt. Zain started as he recognized the features twisted on its face—it was the sarcomancer's own face. Its laugh was a soprano parody of his master's cackling laughter.

Zain tightened his grip on his staff. "These are under my protection."

The dwarf gave no sign that it understood Zain's words. Drool escaped the corners of its mouth as the monstrosity it rode scuttled forward. Zain fed more of his blood into his staff. His legs weakened beneath him. He could strike only once. The youth trembled beside him. Now.

The blast blinded Zain for a moment, but he knew it had struck true because the cursed laughter ceased. The serpentine creature howled as the mage fire consumed its rider and traveled down its back. It thrashed on the floor, and Zain's stomach sank. By accident or design, its rolling extinguished the flames. It turned back toward its prey. Zain had no strength for a second such blast.

"Begone!" A word of power not meant to be spoken by a human tongue flew into the room. The serpentine monster dissolved into a stinking, putrid mass, limbs twitching until they too sank into a black, gelatinous mess. The sarcomancer strode into view, fury in his eyes.

"So this is how you repay my hospitality? Steal my supplies? Force me to destroy one of my favorite creatures?"

Zain's mind raced. A desperate plan occurred to him, and he only had time to give the headman's son a meaningful look and to rest his forefinger against his lips. Then he turned to the sarcomancer.

“My abject apologies, my most noble host, but a thought had occurred to me how my meager art might aid your working. I now know how these...materials might be grown into a vast army and be imbued with an invulnerability that will make them unstoppable. In my excitement to share my discovery with you, I forgot the warning you so prudently gave me. I beg your forgiveness.”

The anger in the sarcomancer’s eyes gave way to suspicion. “Indeed. And what is this means?”

“I do not know if I can articulate the procedure here. You know how difficult it is to put any true working into words. It would be better if I showed you. In the vat room.”

The sarcomancer’s brows narrowed. “If this magic is not what you promise, you will serve me in another way. Your members will be fed to the vats.”

“I would have it no other way. Lead on, sirrah.”

The children did not want to go with them, but a few whispered words from the headmaster’s son, and they let themselves be herded up the ramps to the sarcomancer’s workrooms. They paused near the revolving globe.

“No. We must be at the vats themselves.”

The sarcomancer led them onto the stone walkways above the vats. He whirled around, seeming even more like a spider in the heart of its web. “Show me your magic, priest. Now.”

Zain focused his will along the length of his staff. There was power in this place, deep power. Though his magic was not the same as the science of the Elder Ones, they were kin. He needed only to harness the energies in a way he could use.

There was something else here too. A dark taint, a stain of decay that colored all of the sarcomancer’s workings. Zain did not know if the mechanism of the pits was simply wearing out, or if the sarcomancer had added something to the mix that corrupted the whole. He did know that his magic could not purify the corruption. The sarcomancer would never have his army.

He did not have a firm grasp on the power of the Elder Ones, but he could not wait. He directed a blast from the crystals atop his staff at the sarcomancer. Apparently, the man had expected this move. The sarcomancer barked out a command, and bones grew up out of

the vats, weaving together to shield their master from the blast. Zain sank to his knees, completely drained.

“Treachery!” The bones parted, and the sarcomancer loomed over him. “Thus will fall all of my enemies, and I will rule supreme.”

Movement beyond the sarcomancer drew Zain’s attention. The headman’s son smiled at him and lay a finger across his lips. The ranting madman had not noticed the lad crouching down behind him. Zain smiled and looked up at the sarcomancer.

“Humans with delusions of godhood never realize how close they are to a fall.” At the last word, Zain pushed forward with his staff. The sarcomancer tumbled over the headman’s son. His limbs milled wildly, but he fell into the vat below. The black liquid sucked him down. He did not return to the surface.

Zain probed with the scraps of power remaining to him. The sarcomancer was no more.

The headman’s son stood and offered Zain his hand. “I am Varesh.”

“Zain.”

“You have done the children of Salileh a great service. I am forever in your debt.”

“And I yours.” Or so he would have said, had he not collapsed into unconsciousness in attempting to rise.

When he awoke, the sun shone on his face, and warm grass cushioned his body. The smiling face of Varesh looked down on him.

“You have slept for a day and a half, priest.”

Zain took the offered hand at last. “You did not have to carry me from that place,” he said as he rose.

“Yes. We did.”

Nothing could be said in response to such an earnest profession of duty. The party made its way to Salileh, the weak helping the strong. The journey back was so much more pleasant than the journey to the hills. The company made a difference.

The village guard that day was the father of one of the children. He dropped his sickle and ran to her, tears streaming down his face. He let out a glad cry, and the children laughed and hurried into the village. Happy parents joined the procession. Those who no longer

had children tried not to let their pain show too much. They did not want to cloud the others' joy.

They paused before the headman's hut. The elder emerged, and three of his wives. Varesh ran to the women. All three made such a happy fuss over him, so much so that Zain could not hazard a guess as to which was his birth-mother.

Meleta emerged from the hut as well. She seemed much stronger and now wore the simple leather tunic and leggings worn by most of the villagers. Leather sandals adorned her feet. She smiled warmly at Zain.

The headman gripped his son's forearms, one man greeting another man. Then he turned to Zain. He prostrated himself to the earth before the priest. This time there was no hesitation as the men of the village echoed his action.

"Arise. Please. No need to be so formal. Today is a happy day for all Salileh." Save for those whose children had not returned.

The headman rose. At some point, Meleta had slipped beside Zain. She now took his arm in hers. It was a strangely welcome gesture.

"Indeed, Great Hieros. But you must let us show our gratitude somehow. Today we harvest. Tomorrow evening, you will be our guests of honor at the harvest feast." A cheer of agreement rang out from the crowd.

"I had wondered, headman, why the grain has remained so long in the field."

The headman cocked his head at Meleta's question. He looked at her as if she were simple. Before he opened his mouth, a chill went up Zain's spine. No. The gods could not be so cruel.

Yet he knew from personal experience that they often were. The best one could hope from the gods most of the time was benign indifference.

"The children, milady," the headman answered. "We could not touch the grain in the field because we had not chosen a Monarch of the Harvest."

He took a pouch from his belt and passed it to Zain. "I would be honored if you performed the choosing ritual, Great Hieros."

Zain gave a curt nod. "Of course."

The villagers proceeded to the fields. One of them started an ancient hymn to the Powers of earth and vegetation. The others joined in. When they arrived at the fields, the children made a circle around Zain. He ignored the confused look Meleta gave him. Duty. These people followed the old gods and the old ways. They understood duty. These were his gods and his ways. This was now his duty.

He said the old prayers in the old language. The villagers made all of the old signs. The children all knelt. He opened the pouch the headman had given him and threw the divining bones onto the ground.

He did not like what he saw, though by now, he half-expected it. Ignoring the looks and mutterings of the villagers, he took up the divining bones and tossed them again. He tossed them a third time.

It was no use. Each time the bones had singled out Varesh.

From behind them, an inhuman cry rose over the silent crowd. Zain did not need to look to know the source of the sound. It came from the headman's hut. From his gods-touched wife.

Only Meleta did not realize what had happened. "What? What does this mean?"

"Death. Black death."

The headman tried to speak. "It is... It is our custom for the village elder..." He could not finish his sentence. He would not meet Zain's eyes.

He rested a hand on the headman's shoulder. "I am here. I will do this."

"Hieros..." The headman sank to his knees.

Someone pressed a large bronze basin into Zain's hands. He walked over to Varesh and rested a hand on the lad's shoulders.

"I am not afraid, Hieros. It is an honor to serve my people in any way the gods ordain." In spite of his words, the boy trembled.

"You are a good lad, Varesh. I will ensure that your memory will endure."

The boy nodded. He still knelt, and Zain rested the basin on his lap. He stood behind the boy and addressed the assembled villagers. He made sure not to meet Meleta's eyes.

“It is a law older even than the gods. Life must arise from life. And so today we crown Varesh King of the Harvest.”

He drew his dagger from his belt. “Will it hurt?” Varesh asked in a whisper only Zain could hear.

“No,” he promised. And he drew his blade across the boy’s neck. Something moved in Zain’s peripheral vision. Meleta. The villagers restrained her. Even if she had reached Varesh, it was much too late.

Zain knelt and held Varesh’s head until the basin was filled to the brim with the boy’s blood. Then he rose and carried the basin around all of the fields, dipping his dagger in the blood and using it to sprinkle Varesh’s blood on the harvest. All the while, he intoned the old prayers. Never was his heart less in any ritual. The gods did not care. The form of the ritual was all that mattered.

Zain did not stop until the basin was empty. He said the final prayer, and the harvesters went to work. Each flash of the sickle was his own blade, slitting Varesh’s throat again. He turned away.

Meleta stood over a dark spot in the grass. Apparently, he had not caught all of the blood. When the young woman saw him, she slapped his face.

“How could you? Varesh was all his mothers could talk about while you were gone. Their hopes that he was still alive. Their fears that he was lost. And for you to do this to them. To him...”

“The way of the gods is often hard. But it is the only way there is for us. For me.”

“Lizard dung.”

There was nothing he could say to this. Especially when he feared that she was right. One of the texts his mother had shown him shortly before her death had compared the gods to scarab beetles and the universe they had made to a giant ball of dung. An apt comparison in many ways.

“We will not be staying for the harvest festival,” Zain said at last. “Our presence would only bring back bad memories.”

Meleta shook her head. But she would follow. She had almost as much reason as he to find his brother.

If the gods asked him to slay the child Meleta bore, his nephew, would he be able to?

Someone had left packs of provisions on the edge of the field. Undoubtedly, the headman, faithful to the last. He shouldered both packs and slid his knife into his belt. Varesh's blood had already started to dry on the obsidian blade.

He should have felt relief when he turned again in the direction his geas compelled him. His oath cared nothing about the pain in his heart.

When the time came to kill Atlan, would he be able to do it? Zain did not know.

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*If you enjoyed "The Sarcomancer," let Donald know at his blog <http://haikufiction.blogspot.com> or via Twitter: @haikufictiondju.*



# The Last Day in Iram

By JAMES HUTCHINGS

*You have had a vision that the city of Iram is doomed! The paranoid sultan is privy to the same portents, but refuses to allow any to leave the city—will you escape before the end comes?!*

## 1.

*Awake! for Morning in the Bowl of Night  
Has flung the Stone that puts the Stars to Flight:  
And Lo! the Hunter of the East has caught  
The Sultan's Turret in a Noose of Light.*

*Omar Khayyam (trans. Edward Fitzgerald).*

You will need three normal, six-sided dice, paper, and a pen or pencil.

First, roll the three dice. Write down 'CON', followed by the total of the dice. This is your Constitution score.

There are four other scores, each rolled on three dice, as follows:

INT (Intelligence)  
WIL (Willpower)  
AGI (Agility)  
CHA (Charisma)

Throughout the game, these scores are referred to by their abbreviations.

You will be told to increase or decrease these scores throughout the game. There is no upper limit to these scores. However, if a score goes below 1, only decrease it to 1, **unless the paragraph directs you to do something else.**

Unlike in some similar games, if a score changes, you only need to keep track of its current value—not its starting value.

You will need space on your paper to keep track of your 'Cowrie Shells' score. This is how many cowrie shells—the currency of Iram—you have.

You will also need space to keep track of keywords. These are words that you will be told to add, or delete, throughout the game.

If your INT is 12 or more, [turn to 44](#). If it's 11 or less, [turn to 88](#).

## 2.

A crowd gathers. For once, they seem to listen. Perhaps some will act. Increase your WIL by 2, and [turn to 16](#).

### 3.

*My beautiful! my beautiful! that standest meekly by  
With thy proudly arched and glossy neck, and dark and fiery eye;*

*Caroline Norton.*

You see an unattended and untied horse, a fine thoroughbred. It makes you think of the saying: *as Man was made of clay, so the horse was made of wind*. You may:

Steal it: Gain the keyword HERMES and [turn to 46](#).

Virtuously pass by: Gain the keyword EPONA, increase your WIL by 2, and [turn to 16](#).

#### 4.

The horse stamps down on your foot, with what you would swear to be deliberate malice.

If you have the keyword VULCAN, [turn to 75](#).

If you do not have this keyword, gain it, reduce your AGI by 3, gain the keyword BURAQ, and [turn to 16](#).

## 5.

The water soon rises to the horse's neck. The swans stare at you as if incredulous at your stupidity. Embarrassed, you retreat. Reduce your WIL by 2. Gain the keyword ENKI.

If you have the keyword HARAB, you must look for a place where the river becomes narrower: [turn to 106](#).

If you do not have this keyword, you may choose to look for a place where the river becomes narrower ([turn to 106](#)) or try the bridge ([turn to 34](#)).

## 6.

The guards tell you that the Sultan has forbidden anyone to leave the city. You may:

Claim to be on a mission for the Sultan: [turn to 13](#).

Bribe them: [turn to 140](#).

## 7.

All at once, it becomes clear to you: the ferryman is Death.

Roll one die. Reduce your WIL by the result. For this paragraph only, if your WIL is less than 1, do not set it to 1. Instead, you die of terror—for you, the ferryman really was Death, and this is THE END. Otherwise, keep reading.

If you have the keyword BURAQ, delete it.

You jump off the raft and into the river. You may:

Swim back to the near shore: [turn to 21](#).

Try to make it to the far shore: [turn to 20](#).



## 8.

If you have the keyword QABIL they do not believe you, and place you under arrest: [turn to 95](#).

Otherwise, roll one die. Adjust the roll for any of the following that apply:

Your CHA is 12 or more: +1

Your CHA is 8 or less: -1

Your CON is 12 or more: +1

Your CON is 8 or less: -1

You have the keyword BURAQ: +2

You do not have the keyword BURAQ: -1

You have the keyword SARIQ: -1

If the result is:

3 or less: they do not believe you, and place you under arrest. [Turn to 95](#).

4 or more: they believe you. [Turn to 54](#).

## 9.

The brawl is too tightly packed for you to have any hope of getting a horse through. You may:

Abandon your horse and join the fray: [turn to 136](#).

Turn back, and see if you can find a place where the river becomes narrower: [turn to 106](#).

If you do not have the keyword ENKI, you may turn back, and try to wade across the river: gain the keyword HARAB and [turn to 78](#).

## 10.

The building seems to have been abandoned. On a wall, someone has painted a representation of the goddess Anansi, appearing to her followers. Anansi is a giant human head formed from thousands of spiders, and the worshipers are shown presenting their arms to be bitten. Gain the keyword HASHD. You may:

Risk the bridge: [turn to 94](#).

Leave, and look for another way across: [turn to 146](#) if you have the keyword BURAQ, or [107 if not](#).

## 11.

It seems to you that you are an actor in a play you do not know, the final scene of which is your doom. Roll one die, reduce your WIL by the result, and [turn to 97](#).

## 12.

Increase your attributes depending on the position you chose, as follows:

The Embrace of Oil and Water. WIL by 1.

The Congress of Serpents. WIL by 2.

Two Dragons Exhausted From Their Battles. WIL by 2, INT by 1.

The Coffin Followed By Mourners. WIL by 2, INT by 2.

The Prayer Mat of the Flesh. WIL by 2, INT by 2, CHA by 1.

With mind refreshed and body exercised, you leave the temple.

[Turn to 97.](#)

## 13.

Roll one die. If the result is:

1 or 2: [turn to 28](#).

3 or 4: [turn to 71](#).

5 or 6: [turn to 100](#).

## 14.

The gate has rusted shut. Roll three dice and add your CON. If the total is:

17 or less: you are unable to shift it: [turn to 125](#).

18-23: the gate screams like a widow as you shift it. Just as it's nearly open, the noise attracts a group of guards: [turn to 6](#).

24 or more: you open the gate and pass through. You have succeeded in escaping the city.  
THE END.

## 15.

Gain the keyword ASHIYA.

The stairs are in poor repair. Roll three dice. If the total is higher than your AGI, turn to 102. If the total is lower than, or equal to, your AGI, keep reading.

Roll three dice again, and add your CHA. If the total is:

An even number 16 or less: [turn to 89](#).

An odd number 17 or less: [turn to 45](#).

Anything from 18 to 22 inclusive: [turn to 103](#).

23 or higher: [turn to 2](#).



## 16.

*...the dark cities of mythology, which exist outside of normal times in some strange location of extremity.*

*Will Insley.*

Roll one die. If the result is:

1 or 2: If you have the keyword IRUS, [turn to 33](#). If you do not have this keyword, gain it, and [turn to 117](#).

3 or 4: If you have either of the keywords EPONA or HERMES, [turn to 33](#). If you do not, [turn to 3](#).

5 or 6: If you have the keyword NAMAM, [turn to 33](#). If you do not have this keyword, gain it, and [turn to 143](#).

## 17.

The cry of "Thief!" goes up all around you. You may:

Run away: [turn to 118](#).

Ride away: [turn to 61](#).

Feign innocence: [turn to 90](#).

## 18.

*Out of Africa, always something new.*

*Ancient Greek saying.*

The conversation is like one in a nightmare, where all know the discussion is of vital import, yet none know what is being discussed. Someone opines that all problems stem from the new goddess, Anansi, a gigantic, venomous spider-spirit whose worship has recently come out of Africa. It is said the goddess herself appears in her temple, and that her worshipers allow themselves to be bitten, believing that the venom allows them to travel, instantly, to anywhere in the world.

Roll one die. If the result is:

1 or 2: [turn to 91](#).

3 or 4: Having learned all you can, you pass on. Gain the keyword UTTU and [turn to 16](#).

5 or 6: [turn to 119](#).

## 19.

The river is deeper, and the current stronger, than you thought. Roll 3 dice. If the total is:

Higher than your CON: [turn to 49](#).

Lower than, or equal to, your CON: you manage to swim across. [Turn to 54](#).

## 20.

You struggle to stay afloat.

If you have the keyword QABIL, it's as if an invisible demon were sitting on your back, dragging you down: [turn to 64](#).

Otherwise, keep reading.

If your CON is 12 or higher, you manage to get across: [turn to 54](#).

Otherwise, roll 2 dice. If the result is:

Higher than your CON, and even: Roll one die. Reduce your CON and WIL by the result. For this paragraph only, if either is less than 1, do not set them to 1. Instead, [turn to 64](#). If both are 1 or more, you make it to the far shore: [turn to 54](#).

Higher than your CON, and odd: [Turn to 64](#).

Lower than, or equal to, your CON: You manage to get across: [turn to 54](#).

**21.**

You make it back and set out again, looking for another way across. [Turn to 133.](#)

## 22.

Roll three dice and add the amount of shells you offered. If the result is:

21 or less: they're outraged at either your criminality or the paltry nature of your offering, and arrest you. [Turn to 95.](#)

22 or more: they accept your bribe and let the crowd through: gain the keyword JISR and [turn to 54.](#)

## 23.

You dodge the guards' spears. Outnumbered, they flee, and the crowd pours across the bridge.

If you have the keyword BURAQ, [turn to 148](#).

If not, gain the keyword JISR and [turn to 54](#).



## 24.

You come to a market.

There are a few items for sale which catch your eye, as follows:

A brass head which, the merchant claims, will give true answers to any question.

A liquid which supposedly turns any poison to harmless water.

A grappling hook made from the hair and claws of a ghoul, claimed to grasp on to any surface.

A beautiful white horse.

For each item that you are interested in, roll 3 dice. Write down the result, which is the current price for that item.

[Continue to 25.](#)

## 25.

If you want to buy anything, adjust your shells and gain the relevant keyword for each item:

The brass head: TALOS

The liquid: TARIAQ

The grappling hook: EAQAF

The horse: BURAQ

Note that, if you already have the keyword BURAQ, you may not buy this horse.

There is also a booth which promises 'Escape From All Woes, and Experience of Things To Come' for 10 shells.

You may:

Haggle for a lower price: decide which item and [turn to 56](#). You must haggle for one item at a time. If you already have the keyword BURAQ, you may not haggle for the horse.

Investigate the booth: [turn to 150](#).

Pass by: [turn to 68](#).

## 26.

At last Anansi appears—a gigantic human head, made not of flesh but of a multitude of crawling spiders.

Roll three dice. If you have the keyword HASHD, take 3 from the total. If the total is:

Higher than your WIL: [turn to 98](#).

Lower than, or equal to, your WIL: you are able to control your fear: [turn to 69](#).

## **27.**

You quickly swallow the antidote. After a while, the burning subsides.

Roll two dice. If the total is lower than your CON, reduce your CON to this number.

The priestesses seem to think that your refusal to die was a terrible blasphemy, and coldly order you to leave.

[Turn to 97.](#)

**28.**

If you have the keyword BURAQ, [turn to 128](#).

If not, they arrest you: [turn to 95](#).

## **29.**

You scramble up the wall, and down the other side, with a burglar's skill. The night is cold, and the road before is long, but you have escaped the city.

THE END.

**30.**

The merchant agrees to give you a loan. Gain 10 cowrie shells. [Turn to 74.](#)

## 31.

Roll one die. If the result is:

1 or 2: "May you live to one hundred, and when you are murdered, may it be out of jealousy!" Increase your CON and CHA by 2 each.

3 or 4: "May your footsteps leave no trace in the sand!" If you have the keyword VULCAN, lose it. Whether or not you had this keyword, increase your AGI by 3.

5 or 6: "May your days of misery be as far apart as a crone's teeth!" Increase your WIL by 3.

Whichever result you got, [turn to 16](#).



## 32.

Reduce your cowrie shells by the chosen amount. Roll three dice. If the total is higher than the number of cowrie shells you left (if you left none, it always will be), reduce your WIL by 4.

[Turn to 16.](#)

**33.**

You come to the broad river Swan-Road. [Continue to 34.](#)

### 34.

The Sultan has posted guards on the bridge, who will let no one cross. They will not tell the angry crowd why. You may:

Tell them you are on a mission for the Sultan: [turn to 8](#).

Try to convince them to let everyone through: [turn to 135](#).

If you have at least five cowrie shells, bribe them to let you through: decide how many cowrie shells you will offer (minimum 5, maximum however many you have) and [turn to 52](#).

If you have at least ten cowrie shells, bribe them to let everyone through: decide how many cowrie shells you will offer (minimum 10, maximum however many you have) and [turn to 22](#).

Try to force your way through: [turn to 66](#).

Turn back, and see if you can find a place where the river becomes narrower: [turn to 106](#).

Turn back, and try to wade across the river: [turn to 78](#). Note that you may not choose this option if you have the keyword ENKI.

## 35.

You leave your horse tied up. It stands out like a sapphire in a dung heap.

The building is not locked. You see no tenants. Indeed, from the state of repair of the building, it could have been abandoned for many years. The bridge is no better.

You realize that you are never going to get a horse up several flights of stairs.

You may:

Risk the bridge: [turn to 94](#).

Explore the building: [turn to 122](#).

Leave and look for another way across: [turn to 146](#).

## 36.

You get on to the raft, and the ferryman pushes off.

The ferryman has a cheerful, wide grin. But somehow it seems that, if there is a joke, it is at your expense.

Roll one die. Adjust the roll for any of the following keywords that you have:

EPONA: +1

HERMES: -1

ASHIYA: +1

If the total is:

1 or less: [turn to 80](#).

2 or 3: [turn to 7](#).

4: [turn to 134](#).

5 or more: [turn to 51](#).

## 37.

Like an eager lover swooning at the first caress, the bridge collapses as soon as you set foot on it, sending you into the river.

Roll 3 dice. If the result is:

Higher than your AGI: [turn to 109](#).

Lower than, or equal to, your AGI: [turn to 81](#).

### **38.**

The crowds sullenly stand aside, as if to say that you may commit suicide on your own.

If you do not have the keyword BURAQ, you have no option but to flee: [turn to 82](#).

If you do have this keyword, you may:

Flee: [turn to 82](#).

Try to ride past the guards: [turn to 53](#).

### **39.**

Roll one die. If you roll 1-3, someone takes the opportunity to steal your horse: delete the keyword BURAQ. If you roll 4-6, you manage to get it back.

Either way, [turn to 106](#).



## 40.

There are a number of methods of worship, listed here in increasing order of difficulty. You may engage in:

The Embrace of Oil and Water.

The Congress of Serpents.

Two Dragons Exhausted From Their Battles.

The Coffin Followed By Mourners.

The Prayer Mat of the Flesh.

Write down your choice, and [turn to 126](#).

## 41.

If your INT is 11 or less, [turn to 85](#). If your INT is 12 or more, [turn to 12](#).

## 42.

The merchant announces that the market is closing. You realize that you have lost track of time. Roll one die.

1 or 2: [turn to 125](#).

3 or 4: [turn to 97](#).

5 or 6: [turn to 68](#).

### 43.

The lock has no keyhole but includes an elaborate mechanism which, you assume, must be placed in a particular position to spring the lock.

If you have the keyword TALOS, the brass head is able to tell you how to open it: [turn to 14](#).

Otherwise, roll 3 dice. If the result is higher than your INT or higher than your AGI (or both), [turn to 141](#).

If not, but the result is higher than your WIL, [turn to 58](#).

If the result is lower than, or equal to, each of your INT, AGI and WIL, [turn to 14](#).

## 44.

Iram is doomed. All appears well, but the stars do not lie. Note that you have 10 cowrie shells. You may:

Leave straight away: [turn to 16](#).

Shout the truth from the rooftops one last time: [turn to 15](#).

Seek a loan from your neighbor, the merchant: [turn to 116](#).

## 45.

Someone throws a rock at you. You damn the swine of this city. Increase your WIL by 2, reduce your CHA by 2, and [turn to 16](#).

## 46.

If you have the keyword QABIL, delete it and roll one die. [Turn to 4](#) on a 1-3, [or 17](#) on a 4-6.

If you didn't have this keyword, roll three dice. If the total is:

Lower than, or equal to, your AGI: you are able to keep the horse calm and lead it away without anyone noticing. Gain the keyword BURAQ and [continue to 47](#).

Higher than your AGI, and odd: [turn to 4](#).

Higher than your AGI, and even: [turn to 17](#).

## 47.

You consider leaving some cowrie shells and a note to soothe your conscience.

Write down how many cowrie shells, if any, you want to leave. You can leave zero, but you cannot leave anything in the range 1-4 (such a pittance would add insult to theft). Obviously you cannot leave more than you have.

When you've decided and written down the amount, [turn to 32](#).



## 48.

Gain the keyword PHEME. Roll three dice. If the result is:

Higher than your CHA: you are unable to work your way into any group. [Turn to 16.](#)

Lower than, or equal to, your CHA, and even, [turn to 18.](#)

Lower than, or equal to, your CHA, and odd, [turn to 62.](#)

## 49.

You are washed away by the river. Gain the keyword NAIAD.

Roll one die. Reduce your CON and WIL by the result. For this paragraph only, if either is less than 1, do not set them to 1. Instead, [turn to 64](#). If both are 1 or more, keep reading.

If you have the keyword QABIL, delete it and [turn to 63](#).

If you do not have this keyword, roll one die. On a 1-3 [turn to 63](#). On a 4-6 [turn to 92](#).

## 50.

As the water rises, the horse panics. You frantically try to calm it.

If you have the keyword QABIL, you cannot stop the horse from throwing you off: lose the keywords BURAQ and QABIL and [turn to 20](#). If you do not have this keyword, keep reading.

If your CHA is 12 or higher, you manage to calm the horse and get across: [turn to 54](#).

Otherwise, roll 2 dice. If the result is:

Higher than your CHA: you cannot stop the horse from throwing you off. Lose the keyword BURAQ and [turn to 20](#).

Lower than, or equal to, your CHA: you manage to get across. [Turn to 54](#).

**51.**

You reach the other side and bid farewell to the ferryman. [Turn to 54.](#)

## 52.

Roll three dice and add the amount of shells you offered. If you have the keyword QABIL, take 3 from the total. If the result is:

16 or less: they're outraged at either your criminality or the paltry nature of your offering, and arrest you. [Turn to 95.](#)

17 or more: they accept your bribe and let you through: [turn to 54.](#)

## 53.

The guards' spears pierce your side as you ride by.

Roll two dice. Reduce your CON by the higher result. For this paragraph only, if your CON is less than 1, do not set it to 1. Instead, you are dead, and this is THE END.

Otherwise, [turn to 54](#).

## 54.

Roll one die. Add one to the roll for each of the following keywords that you have:

ASHIYA

MAMMON

VULCAN

NAIAD

RIDWAN

PHEME

Take one from the total if you have the keyword BURAQ.

If the total is:

6 or less: [turn to 24](#).

7: [turn to 68](#).

8: [turn to 97](#).

9 or more: [turn to 125](#).

## 55.

At least 'Anansi' appears—a masked priestess. She offers you the 'spider's venom'; a cup filled with an unpleasant-smelling liquid.

[Turn to 69.](#)



## 56.

You steel yourself for a lengthy exchange of lies and accusations.

Roll 3 dice. If the total is higher than your WIL, [turn to 42](#). Otherwise, keep reading.

Roll 2 dice. If the total is lower than the current price for this item, reduce the price to equal the roll.

If you want to buy the item (whether or not you got a lower price), adjust your shells, and gain the relevant keyword:

The brass head: TALOS

The liquid: TARIAQ

The grappling hook: EAQAF

The horse: BURAQ

Afterwards, you may:

Keep haggling, for this or another item: Choose the item and return to the top of this paragraph. Remember that, if you have the keyword BURAQ, you may not haggle for the horse.

Investigate the booth: [turn to 150](#).

Leave the market: [turn to 68](#).

## **57.**

The guards hurl their spears at you as you ride for the open gate.

Roll two dice. Reduce your CON by the result. For this paragraph only, if your CON is less than 1, do not set it to 1. Instead, you are dead.

If not, you make it through the gate. You have succeeded in escaping the city.

Either way, this is THE END.

**58.**

You give up in disgust. You may:

Try to climb over the wall: [turn to 115](#).

Head for the main gate instead: [turn to 87](#).

## 59.

“One who believes us all to be doomed clearly has no intention of repaying a loan.”

You are ashamed. Reduce your WIL by 2, and [turn to 74](#).

## 60.

Roll three dice. If you gave the beggar any cowrie shells, add the number you gave to the total. If you didn't give any, take three from the roll.

If the total is:

16 or less: The beggar curses you. [Turn to 130](#).

17-19: The beggar wishes you a long life, without enthusiasm. You reflect that you could have brought some joy into his last hours. Reduce your WIL by 2, and [turn to 16](#).

20-22: The beggar thanks you. You reflect that you have, at least, brought some joy into his last hours. Increase your WIL by 2, and [turn to 16](#).

23 or more: The beggar wishes a blessing upon you. [Turn to 31](#).

## 61.

On such a horse you are easily seen, and the crowd seems to yearn to apply rough justice. A dozen knives seek your flesh, and not all seek in vain.

Roll two dice. Reduce your CON by the total. For this paragraph only, if your CON is less than 1, do not set it to 1. Instead, you are dead, and this is THE END.

If you are still alive, gain the keywords SARIQ and BURAQ, and [turn to 16](#).

## 62.

The conversation is like one in a nightmare, where all know the discussion is of vital import, yet none know what is being discussed. An off-duty guard complains about the Sultan's recent orders. It has been impressed upon him that he must prevent people from leaving the city, though it cost him his life. Yet the mission has no obvious purpose, and it is treated like a game, with the passwords being childish obscenities.

Gain the keyword RAMZ, and [turn to 16](#).

## 63.

You eventually come ashore, some way downstream but on the same side of the river. You follow the river, looking for a way across. Roll one die. If you roll 1-3, [turn to 79](#). If you roll 4-6, [turn to 144](#).



## **64.**

Your lifeless corpse washes out to sea. You will never find out if Iram was truly doomed.

THE END.

## 65.

The building is not locked. You see no tenants. Indeed, from the state of repair of the building, it could have been abandoned for many years. The bridge is no better. You may:

Risk the bridge: [turn to 94](#).

Explore the building: [turn to 122](#).

Leave and look for another way across: [turn to 107](#).

## 66.

“Good people,” you tell the crowd, “If whatever is to come were to our benefit, the Sultan would have joined us here. Therefore, I shall cross, whether these guards will it or not.”

Roll three dice. If the result is:

Higher than your CHA: [turn to 38](#).

Lower than, or equal to, your CHA: [turn to 110](#).

## 67.

The guards shout at your retreating back, lustily describing the tortures that await you upon your arrest.

If you have the keyword SARIQ, you start to see guards around every corner: roll one die, and reduce your WIL by the result.

If you do not have this keyword, gain it.

You look for another place to cross the Swan-Road. [Turn to 106.](#)

## 68.

The shadows grow long. The temple bells ring for the last time.

Outside the temple of a lewd god, a priest promises obscene and lascivious rites. Across the street, a rival priestess of the spider-goddess Anansi announces a more solemn worship. You may:

Visit the temple of the lewd god: [turn to 40](#).

Visit the temple of Anansi: [turn to 112](#).

Pass by: [turn to 97](#).

## 69.

The poison fills every corner of your innards.

Roll two dice. If the total is:

Higher than, or equal to, your CON, and you have the keyword TARIAQ: You realize the dose is too high for you to survive. Delete the keyword TARIAQ and [turn to 27](#).

Higher than, or equal to, your CON, and you do not have this keyword: The poison is too much for you. You are dead. THE END.

Lower than your CON: You find that the god's promise was no lie or allegory. You are able to wish yourself away from the doomed city. You have succeeded. THE END.

Note that, in this case, the distinction is between 'lower than' and 'higher than, or equal to', rather than the usual 'higher than' and 'lower than, or equal to'.

## 70.

The merchant's tent is filled with coffin-like containers of some unknown material, covered in writing that you do not recognize.

He opens one and bids you lie inside. As the lid closes, your eyes close with them, and you fall into unconsciousness.

Some time later, you wake and open the coffin. You find yourself inside a cave. Leaving, you see that the city is an overgrown ruin. But you are not alone. There is a great crowd here. They greet you by name—for your coming was prophesied.

Roll one die. Adjust the roll based on your CHA:

3-5: -2

6-8: -1

9-12: no adjustment.

13 or more: +1

Also adjust the roll if you have any of the following keywords:

EPONA: +1

HERMES: -1

ASHIYA: +1

JISR: +1

If the result is:

4 or less: [turn to 127](#).

5 or more: [turn to 99](#).

## 71.

If you have the keyword SARIQ, they arrest you: [turn to 95](#).

If you do not have this keyword, [turn to 128](#).



**72.**

The rope breaks halfway up the wall. Delete the keywords EAQAF and QABIL. [Continue to 73.](#)

## 73.

Roll one die. Reduce your CON by that amount. For this paragraph only, if your CON is less than 1, do not set it to 1. Instead, you are dead, and this is THE END.

If you are still alive, someone starts a hue and cry, saying that barbarians are coming over the gates. You flee, headed for the main gate. [Turn to 87](#).

## 74.

If you do not have the keyword ASHIYA, you may shout the truth from the rooftops one last time. If you want to do this, [turn to 15](#).

If you do have this keyword, or you choose to leave straight away, [turn to 16](#).

## 75.

You are in agony. Unable to walk, you fall. Some kind passers-by carry you to your home. They mistake your protests for groans of pain. You lose consciousness. [Continue to 76.](#)

## **76.**

You wake suddenly, in the dead of night. There is no sound, and you can see no one. You look at the sky and realise that something is blotting out the stars...

THE END.

## **77.**

Masquerading as a simpleton only adds to your crimes. The crowd seems to yearn to apply rough justice. A dozen knives seek your flesh, and not all seek in vain.

Roll two dice. Reduce your CON by the total. For this paragraph only, if your CON is less than 1, do not set it to 1. Instead, you are dead, and this is THE END.

If you are still alive, [turn to 16](#).

## 78.

*I took the lake between my legs.*

*Maxine Kumin.*

If you have both of the keywords BURAQ and QABIL, delete QABIL and [turn to 5](#).

If you have BURAQ but not QABIL, [turn to 132](#).

If you have QABIL but not BURAQ, delete QABIL and [turn to 49](#).

If you do not have either keyword: [turn to 19](#).

## 79.

You pass by a ferryman, standing on his raft. Roll 2 dice. This is the number of cowrie shells he asks to take you across (the raft is big enough for your horse, if you have one). If this is more cowrie shells than you have, [turn to 93](#).

Otherwise, you may:

Decline: [turn to 121](#).

Lie that you do not have that much: [turn to 145](#).

Accept: reduce your cowrie shells by the amount you rolled, and [turn to 36](#).



## 80.

The river seems wider than you remember. You look up and see that darkness has come early, and the night is without stars. You will soon forget what the sun and stars look like. For you are bound for a shore far from the city, and the ferryman is Death.

THE END.

## 81.

A large piece of the bridge narrowly misses you. You swim back to shore.

If you have the keyword BURAQ, [turn to 146](#). If not, [turn to 107](#).

## 82.

Roll one die. If the result is:

1: [Turn to 96](#).

2: If you have the keyword BURAQ, [turn to 124](#). If not, [turn to 96](#).

3 or 4: [Turn to 67](#).

5 or 6: The guards let you go. You try to find another place to cross the Swan-Road. [Turn to 106](#).

## 83.

The building seems to have been abandoned. On a wall, someone has painted a representation of the goddess Anansi, appearing to her followers. Anansi is a giant spider, and the worshipers are shown presenting their arms to be bitten. Gain the keyword EIMLAQ. You may:

Risk the bridge: [turn to 94](#).

Leave, and look for another way across: [turn to 146](#) if you have the keyword BURAQ, or [turn to 107](#) if not.

## 84.

It seems to you that you are an actor in a play you do not know, whose ending is your doom. Roll one die, reduce your WIL by the result, and [turn to 40](#).

## 85.

Roll 3 dice. If the result is:

Higher than your WIL: [turn to 139](#).

Lower than, or equal to, your WIL: [turn to 12](#).

## 86.

You find an unguarded gate. But it is locked. You may:

Try to open the lock: [turn to 43](#).

Try to climb over the city wall: [turn to 115](#).

Head for the main gate instead: [turn to 87](#).

## 87.

Roll one die. If the result is:

1 or 2: [turn to 125](#).

3: If you have the keyword BURAQ, or your CON is 13 or more, [turn to 114](#). Otherwise [turn to 125](#).

4: If you have the keyword BURAQ, or your CON is 9 or more, [turn to 114](#). Otherwise [turn to 125](#).

5 or 6: [turn to 114](#).



## 88.

Iram is doomed. All appears well, but the astrologer told you, and the stars do not lie. Note that you have 20 cowrie shells. You may:

Leave straight away: [turn to 16](#).

Shout the truth from the rooftops one last time: [turn to 15](#).

Seek a loan from your neighbor, the merchant: [turn to 116](#).

## 89.

Someone shouts a curse at you. It feels like more than the usual abuse from the ignorant. You feel as if you really have been cursed. Gain the keyword QABIL, and [turn to 16](#).

## 90.

You try to play the role of a simpleton. Roll three dice. Compare the result to your INT and your CHA to see which paragraph you should turn to.

Higher than your INT, and higher than your CHA, [turn to 131](#).

Higher than your INT, but lower than, or equal to, your CHA, [turn to 77](#).

Lower than, or equal to, your INT, but higher than your CHA, [turn to 105](#).

Lower than, or equal to, your INT, and lower than, or equal to, your CHA, [turn to 131](#).

## 91.

Another adds that it is worse than that. Anansi is not a single spider, but a gigantic human head, made of thousands of spiders.

Having learned all you can, you pass on. Gain the keyword LEGION and [turn to 16](#).

**92.**

You eventually come ashore on the far side of the river. [Turn to 54.](#)

## 93.

The ferryman agrees to take you across for all your cowrie shells (or for free if you have none). You may:

Accept: Reduce your cowrie shells by the relevant amount and [turn to 36](#).

Decline: [turn to 121](#).

## 94.

If you have the keyword QABIL, delete it and [turn to 37](#).

If you do not have this keyword, you make it across. Delete the keyword BURAQ if you have it. [Turn to 54](#).

## **95.**

Your increasingly desperate warnings of the doom to come merely convince them that you are a lunatic.

That night, you look through the bars at the sky and see that something is blotting out the stars...

THE END.



## 96.

A spear burrows into your side.

Roll 1 die. Reduce your CON by the result. For this paragraph only, if your CON is less than 1, do not set it to 1. Instead, you are dead, and this is THE END.

If you are still alive, you get away and look for another place to cross the Swan-Road.

If you have the keyword BURAQ, [turn to 39](#).

If you do not have this keyword, [turn to 106](#).

**97.**

It is dusk. You may:

Head for the main gate: [turn to 114](#).

Head for a lesser-used gate: [turn to 86](#).

## 98.

You cannot control your panic. You run from the temple.

Roll one die. Reduce your WIL by the result.

For this paragraph only, if your WIL is less than 1, do not set it to 1. Instead, your mind is broken, and this is THE END.

Otherwise, [turn to 97](#).

**99.**

The crowd reveres you as their culture's greatest hero. You are showered with wealth and praise. You have succeeded.

THE END.

## 100.

“Then what,” one asks, “is the password?”

If you have the keyword RAMZ, you are able to guess: [turn to 128](#).

If you have the keyword TALOS, you are able to consult the brass head on the pretense of consulting your notes, and it tells you: [turn to 128](#).

If you do not have either keyword, they arrest you: [turn to 95](#).

## 101.

You soon realize that this climb is too much for you.

Roll one die. Reduce your WIL by the result. For this paragraph only, if your WIL is less than 1, do not set it to 1. Instead, you give in to despair, and this is THE END.

Otherwise, you may:

Try to open the lock: [turn to 43](#).

Head for the main gate instead: [turn to 87](#).

## 102.

You twist your ankle. Gain the keyword VULCAN, and reduce your AGI by 3. [Continue to 103.](#)

**103.**

You bellow angrily from the rooftop, to no avail. [Turn to 16.](#)



## 104.

Roll one die. If the result is:

1 or 2: [turn to 125](#).

3: If you have the keyword BURAQ, or your CON is 13 or more, [turn to 86](#). Otherwise [turn to 125](#).

4: If you have the keyword BURAQ, or your CON is 9 or more, [turn to 86](#). Otherwise [turn to 125](#).

5 or 6: [turn to 86](#).

## 105.

The owner's rage turns to pity for the poor fool you pretend to be. You go on your way, having gained nothing, yet feeling as if you are equal to any challenge. Increase your WIL by 2, and [turn to 16](#).

## 106.

Everyone in the city seems to have chosen today to get out of their houses and in your way.

If you have the keyword QABIL, delete it and gain the keyword NAIAD.

If you do not have this keyword, roll 1 die:

1 Gain the keyword NAIAD.

2 or 3: If you have the keyword BURAQ, no effect. If you do not have this keyword, gain the keyword NAIAD.

4-6: No effect.

Whatever happens, [turn to 144](#).

**107.**

Roll one die. On a 1-3 [turn to 79](#). On a 4-6 [turn to 133](#).

## 108.

You get on to the raft, and the ferryman pushes off.

The ferryman has a cheerful, wide grin. But somehow it seems that, if there is a joke, it is at your expense.

Roll one die. Adjust the roll for any of the following keywords that you have:

EPONA: +1

HERMES: -1

ASHIYA: +1

If the total is:

2 or less: [turn to 80](#).

3 or 4: [turn to 7](#).

5: [turn to 134](#).

6 or more: [turn to 51](#).

## **109.**

A large piece of the bridge hits you in the head, sending you into unconsciousness, soon followed by death. You will never find out if Iram was truly doomed.

THE END.

## 110.

The crowd sees the logic of your argument and draws their knives. A vicious melee ensues.

If you have the keyword BURAQ, [turn to 9](#).

If not, [turn to 136](#).

## 111.

The building seems to have been abandoned. On a wall, you find a long, erotic poem. It praises the beauty of the priestess of the temple of Anansi when she wears a mask of her spider-goddess. Gain the keyword HAWWA. You may:

Risk the bridge: [turn to 94](#).

Leave, and look for another way across: [turn to 146](#) if you have the keyword BURAQ, or [107 if not](#).



## 112.

A priestess waits by the door, blessing each worshiper as they enter. When she sees you, she flinches, and her blessing trails off as if she saw an ancestor returned from the dead.

“The stars told us you would come,” she says. You may:

Leave and enter the other temple: [turn to 84](#).

Leave and head straight for the city gates: [turn to 11](#).

Enter the temple: [turn to 138](#).

## 113.

Alas, the worship demands a litheness that you lack. Reduce your CON as follows:

The Congress of Serpents. Roll two dice. Reduce your CON by the lower number.

Two Dragons Exhausted From Their Battles. Roll one die. Reduce your CON by the result.

The Coffin Followed By Mourners. Roll two dice. Reduce your CON by the higher number.

The Prayer Mat of the Flesh. Roll two dice. Reduce your CON by the higher number.

For this paragraph only, if your CON is less than 1, do not set it to 1. Instead, your heart bursts, and this is THE END.

Otherwise, you leave the temple: [turn to 97](#).

## 114.

The gate is still open, but you are stopped by a group of guards. They tell you that the Sultan forbids anyone to leave the city. You may:

Claim to be on a mission for the Sultan: [turn to 13](#).

Bribe them: [turn to 140](#).

If you have the keyword BURAQ, try to ride past them: [turn to 57](#).

Turn away and try a lesser-used gate: [turn to 104](#).

## 115.

Roll three dice. If the result is:

Higher than your CON: [turn to 101](#).

Lower than, or equal to, your CON: keep reading.

If you have the keyword EAQAF, and do not have the keyword QABIL, [turn to 29](#).

If you have both of the keywords EAQAF and QABIL, [turn to 72](#).

If you do not have the keyword EAQAF, roll another three dice. If this result is:

Higher than your AGI: you fall. [Turn to 73](#).

Lower than, or equal to, your AGI: [turn to 29](#).

## 116.

Gain the keyword MAMMON.

Roll three dice. If the total is:

Higher than your CHA, and your INT is 12 or more: [turn to 59](#).

Higher than your CHA, and your INT is 11 or less: [turn to 129](#).

Lower than, or equal to, your CHA: [turn to 30](#).

**117.**

You pass by a beggar.

Write down how many cowrie shells, if any, you want to give the beggar. Then reduce your cowrie shells by that amount, and [turn to 60](#).

## 118.

Gain the keyword SARIQ. You lose yourself in the crowd, but not before some people apply rough justice at knifepoint.

Roll two dice. If you have the keyword VULCAN, reduce your CON by the higher number. If you do not have this keyword, reduce your CON by the lower number.

For this paragraph only, if your CON is less than 1, do not set it to 1. Instead, you are dead, and this is THE END.

If you are still alive, [turn to 16](#).

## 119.

Another counters that the 'venom of the spider' is really a drink, and 'Anansi' merely a masked priestess who pours it.

Having learned all you can, you pass on. Gain the keyword HAWWA and [turn to 16](#).



**120.**

The river is deeper than you thought, but the horse is tall and brave, and carries you across safely. [Continue to 54.](#)

## 121.

“It seems strange to die for so low a price,” the ferryman replies. He grins at you and casts off. Reduce your WIL by 2 and [turn to 133](#).

## 122.

Gain the keyword HECATE.

If you have the keyword PHEME, [turn to 137](#).

Otherwise, roll one die. If the result is:

1: [Turn to 111](#).

2: [Turn to 83](#).

3: [Turn to 10](#).

4-6: [Turn to 137](#).

## 123.

Reason, pity, fear: the guards are indifferent to each. It is like arguing with statues. Gain the keyword RIDWAN. You may:

If you have at least five cowrie shells, bribe them to let you through: decide how many cowrie shells you will offer (with a minimum of 5) and [turn to 52](#).

If you have at least ten cowrie shells, bribe them to let everyone through: decide how many cowrie shells you will offer (with a minimum of 10) and [turn to 22](#).

Try to force your way through: [turn to 66](#).

Turn back and try to wade across the river: [turn to 78](#). Note that you may not choose this option if you have the keyword ENKI.

Turn back, and see if you can find a place where the river becomes narrower: [turn to 106](#).

## 124.

A spear burrows into the side of your horse. You get away, but as soon as you dismount the horse lies down, close to death.

Delete the keyword BURAQ.

You are devastated to have caused the death of such a beast. Roll one die. Reduce your WIL by the result.

You look for another place to cross the Swan-Road. [Turn to 106.](#)

**125.**

Darkness has fallen. You look up, and realize that something is blotting out the stars...

THE END.

## 126.

If you chose The Embrace of Oil and Water, [turn to 41](#).

Otherwise, roll a number of dice as follows:

The Congress of Serpents.1 die.

Two Dragons Exhausted From Their Battles.2 dice.

The Coffin Followed By Mourners.2 dice.

The Prayer Mat of the Flesh.3 dice.

If the total is:

Higher than your AGI: [turn to 113](#).

Lower than, or equal to, your AGI: [turn to 41](#).

**127.**

The crowd reviles you as their culture's greatest villain. You are mercilessly torn apart.

THE END.



## 128.

Roll one die. Adjust the roll for any of the following that apply:

Your CHA is 12 or more: +1

Your CHA is 8 or less: -1

Your WIL is 12 or more: +1

Your WIL is 8 or less: -1

You have the keyword QABIL: -2

If the result is:

3 or less: they arrest you. [Turn to 95](#).

4 or more: they let you through. You have succeeded in escaping the city. THE END.

**129.**

The merchant refuses to give you a loan. [Turn to 74.](#)

## 130.

Roll one die. If the result is:

1 or 2: "May your horse die of venereal disease, and everyone think they got it from you!" If you have the keyword BURAQ, your horse does indeed drop dead: delete this keyword. If you didn't have this keyword, reduce your CHA by 3. Either way, [turn to 16](#).

3: "May the water of your bowels turn to ice!" Reduce your AGI and WIL by 3 each, and [turn to 16](#).

4: "May your right foot be as twisted as Satan's cloven hoof!"

If you have both of the keywords VULCAN and BURAQ, [turn to 142](#).

If you have the keyword VULCAN, but not BURAQ, your other foot twists to match its already damaged brother. [Turn to 75](#).

If you do not have the keyword VULCAN, your foot does indeed twist until it resembles the cloven hoof of the Evil One. Gain the keyword VULCAN, reduce your AGI by 3, and [turn to 16](#).

5: "May your blood turn to wine, and may the fleas on your body get drunk and dance a mazurka on your navel!" Reduce your CON and WIL by 3 each, and [turn to 16](#).

6: If you have the keyword QABIL, ignore this result and roll again. If you do not have this keyword, "May your luck fall off you like a leper's skin!" Gain the keyword QABIL and [turn to 16](#).

## 131.

The crowd is unsure whether you are a fool or a liar. You go on your way with kicks rather than knife wounds. Reduce your CON by 2, and [turn to 16](#).

**132.**

Roll 3 dice. If the total is:

Higher than your INT: [turn to 5](#).

Less than or equal to your INT: [turn to 120](#).

### 133.

If you do not have the keyword NAIAD, roll one die. On a 1 or 2, gain this keyword. In any case, keep reading.

The river seems not to be getting any narrower, and there is no sign of another bridge. You decide to try and cross here.

If you have the keyword BURAQ, [turn to 50](#).

If you do not have this keyword, [turn to 20](#).

## 134.

You make it to the far shore. You mumble some polite remark to the ferryman, to the effect that you hope to meet him again.

“It is certain,” he replies and casts off.

Roll one die. Reduce your WIL by the result.

[Turn to 54.](#)

## 135.

If you have the keyword QABIL, delete it and [turn to 123](#).

Otherwise, roll 3 dice. If the total is:

Higher than your CHA: [turn to 123](#).

Lower than, or equal to, your CHA: [turn to 147](#).



## 136.

Roll three dice. If the result is:

Higher than your AGI: though outnumbered, the guards are professionals. They force the crowd back. [Turn to 96](#).

Lower than, or equal to, your AGI: [turn to 23](#).

## 137.

The building seems to be empty, even though many of the rooms are still furnished. In an otherwise empty room you find a jar, in which there are a few cowrie shells. Roll 2 dice, and gain that many shells. You may:

Risk the bridge: [turn to 94](#).

Leave, and look for another way across: [turn to 146](#) if you have the keyword BURAQ, or [turn to 107](#) if not.

## 138.

The priestess leads you to the front of the hall.

“When the spider’s venom is in you,” she says, “you will be able to travel away from here in an instant.”

The ritual begins, begging Anansi to reveal herself. You do not know how long you sway and chant to the incessant drums.

If you have any of the following keywords, turn to the indicated paragraph:

LEGION or HASHD: [turn to 26](#).

UTTU or EIMLAQ: [turn to 149](#).

HAWWA: [turn to 55](#).

If you do not have any of these keywords, roll one die. If the result is

1 or 2: [turn to 26](#).

3 or 4: [turn to 149](#).

5 or 6: [turn to 55](#).

## 139.

The rite is a triumphant expression of the power of life over death. It seems absurd to you to flee on the word of some lights in the sky. Better to sleep, than to dream while awake.

[Turn to 76.](#)

## 140.

Roll 2 dice, and double the total. If the result is:

Higher than the number of cowrie shells you have: they arrest you. [Turn to 95](#).

Lower than, or equal to, the number of cowrie shells you have: they let you through. You have escaped the city. THE END.

## 141.

You feel a sharp sting. You think it must be a wasp—but in reality, a dart has sprung from the mechanism.

Your vision starts to blur. You realize you've been poisoned.

If you have the keyword TARIAQ, you take the antidote, and soon feel better: [turn to 14](#).

If you do not have this keyword, you fall to the ground, unconscious. You will never escape the city. THE END.

## 142.

Your other foot twists to match its already damaged brother. You are in agony. Reduce your AGI by 3, and [turn to 16](#).

## 143.

There are more people on the street than usual, and few seem to be at labor. Instead, there seem to be heated discussions everywhere. You may:

Try to join a group: [Turn to 48.](#)

Pass by: [turn to 16.](#)



## 144.

As you travel, the large houses of the wealthy are replaced with tall, decrepit tenements. The buildings seem to lean towards each other as if sharing secrets.

You pass by two buildings, on opposite sides of the river, connected on a high floor by a bridge. You may:

Investigate: [turn to 35](#) if you have the keyword BURAQ, or [turn to 65](#) if you do not have this keyword.

Pass by: [Turn to 107](#).

## 145.

The ferryman halves his price (round fractions down). You may:

Accept: Reduce your cowrie shells by the relevant amount and [turn to 108](#).

Decline: [turn to 121](#).

## 146.

Roll one die. If you have the keyword HECATE, take one from the roll.

If the result is 2 or less, some thieving, idle bastard dog has stolen your horse: delete the keyword BURAQ.

Either way, [turn to 107](#).

## 147.

“If we must be kept here, then you must be kept here to guard us—and we shall face whatever is to come together,” you point out.

The guards abandon their posts, and you all cross the bridge.

Gain the keyword JISR and [turn to 54](#).

## 148.

Roll one die. If you roll 1-3, someone takes the opportunity to steal your horse: delete the keyword BURAQ. If you roll 4-6, you manage to get it back.

Either way, gain the keyword JISR and [turn to 54](#).

## 149.

At last Anansi appears—a spider the size of a horse.

If your WIL is 12 or higher, you are able to control your fear as the spider bites you: [turn to 69](#).

Otherwise, roll 2 dice. If you have the keyword EIMLAQ, take 3 from the total. If the total is:

Higher than your WIL: [turn to 98](#).

Lower than, or equal to, your WIL: you are able to control your fear: [turn to 69](#).

## 150.

You assume that the booth offers some kind of fortune-telling. It turns out that the merchant promises an advanced form of mummification, which preserves your living body in a kind of sleep, so that you may wake and live the rest of your life in a future century. They promise that the container in which you will be held is sound against earthquake, flood or any other disaster.

If you have at least 10 shells and want to try to survive the doom of the city this way, adjust your sheet, delete the keyword BURAQ if you have it, and [turn to 70](#).

Otherwise, you can [return to 25](#) to do something else at the market, or [turn to 68](#) to leave the market.

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*James Hutchings lives in Melbourne, Australia. The nostalgia of things unknown, of lands forgotten or unfound, is upon him at times.*

# Notes From the Nest

Well, this was probably our biggest issue since our double issue back in 2016 [Vol 1, #4]. We hope you enjoyed it, including the broad range of content we were able to showcase in this format. There were a lot of familiar names in this issue, ranging from “All-Star” types like James Hutching and Schuyler Hernstrom to some of our newer authors, like J. Manfred Weichsel and Paul Lucas, who will soon be among their ranks. Not to mention Donald Jacob Uitvlugt, who like Sky was there at the very beginning and has been expanding his own mythos and that of the Eldritch Earth in our pages over the years. We’re also thrilled with a lot of the first timers in this issue, who sent us some truly fantastic stories that we were thrilled to run.

I’d like to make a special call-out to James Hutching and his cover feature in this issue, which I’m sure you’ve already noticed was rather different from our usual fare. Here’s a bit of Cirsova “deepest lore”:

Cirsova would not exist if it were not for James Hutchings. Back when I had a record label, our website ran Project Wonderful ads. One of them linked to James Hutchings’s Age of Fable browser-based RPG. It was addictive as hell, and I think I eventually exhausted every path after several weeks. Through that, I found James’s Teleleli blog. The record label folded and I needed something else to keep me occupied, so I plowed through Teleleli’s archives and was inspired to write my own setting blog. Cirsova was born.

Cirsova didn’t last long as a setting blog, and eventually it morphed into an TTRPG blog which morphed into a Pulp + TTRPG blog, then I started the zine. You probably know the rest.

Anyway, it was an incredible honor to be able to feature a pencil-paper micro gamebook by James in this issue.

In other news, by now the Mongoose and Meerkat crowdfund will have already closed, I’ll be putting the finishing touches on those



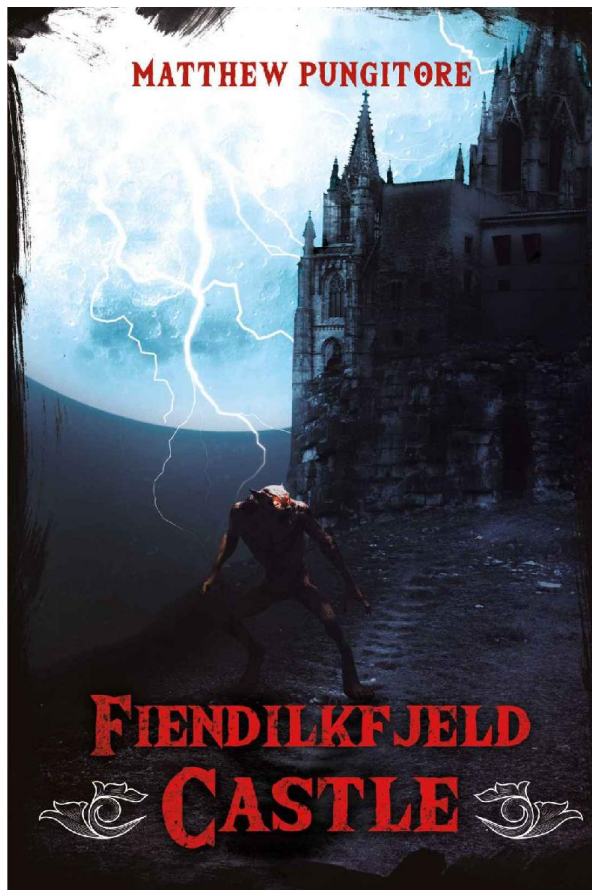
books, and will probably be shilling to sell ad space for the next issue...

...which will feature a guest cover from artist Tim Lim for our cover story, Henry and the Prince of Cats, by Dan Wolfgang!

Additionally, the comic industry has suffered an incredible blow this year due to the shutdown of distribution. At the time of this writing, I don't know how things will have panned out by the time you read this. But now is as good a time as any to support Cirsova Publishing author and Local Comic Shop Owner Michael Tierney, either by buying back issues and trades or any of his Wild Stars titles.

Thank you for reading, and we'll see you in a couple of months!

***"Alex" P. Alexander, Ed.***



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<sup>[1]</sup> *Editor's note: See The Dream Lords, by Donald Jacob Uitvlugt in Summer 2018 [Vol 1, Issue #8]! For other Eldritch Earth adventures, check out the Spring 2017 Eldritch Earth Special [Vol 1, Issue #5].*